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### Intimacy in Accessories

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## Intimacy in Accessories

### Abstract

This paper presents a study of three older women and their needs defining accessories, to understand the relationships between them and their favorite objects, and to clarify why they choose to wear them. The women were asked to showcase the accessories in their own home; thus the objects became enablers of conversations about personal life experiences of significance, which complemented the thrust of the study. This explorative study generated important information about why the women wear what they do. The home setting furthermore indulged a free way of anecdotal conversation and served the study with intimate details and rich stories. The findings showed that these accessories are objects with unique personal qualities and choice; this is obviously beyond their functional and material existence. These findings are of interest to the wearable health technology community as they discover possible factors to take into consideration when designing such for the older age group and traditionally designed within a biomedical model.

### Keywords

*Accessories, Older Age Group, Wearable Health Technology*

### INTRODUCTION

The starting point for this research paper is to understand why older women wear what they do and what constitutes their reasons for choice. Investigating current trends in wearable health technology, wearability and fit to personal style, tend to prevail over technological aspects in the consumer's mind, as people perceive wearable devices as personal accessories (Intel, 2015). As an accessory is a personal object, it relates to the wearer functionally, conceptually and aesthetically (Genova, 2013). Thus the categories of accessories extend far beyond the world of fashion (Sicard, 2005), to be concepts of ultimate extension of the body as objects, which help define our psychological, social and cultural contours (Trebitch, 2005). Assuming that accessories are not solely linked to a definition of either jewellery or fashion, they are seen as representatives of the self - *a visual adjective* (Polhemus, 2005).

The aim of the paper is to identify accessories means and possibilities to be indicators for possible creation of wearable health devices. These types of devices are traditionally designed within a biomedical model (Bush, 2015) eliminating an understanding of personal values attached to the accessories. Other studies suggest that between 50% and 56% of wearable and assistive technologies are abandoned by the user and that 15% of these are never used after purchase (Hocking, 1999). This is critical, as remote healthcare monitoring in home environments are proposed as sustainable and cost-effective healthcare solutions, to future societal challenges (Jamal Deen, 2015). Indeed, social care or rehabilitation may be built around the use and functionality of these devices as a healthcare strategy (Dalke, 2016). As both the healthcare monitoring and accessories are worn close to the body, the accessory is an interesting object to investigate.

Exploring the nature of these types of accessories, accessory design students from the Design School Kolding in Denmark were briefed and then asked to go out and visit three women, aged 60-68 years, in the women's homes. The social interaction generated conversations about the women's favourite accessories: jewellery, a functional accessory and a clothing accessory, to clarify and enhance knowledge about why the women wear what they do. This objective will be investigated through related work to contextualize the accessory's narratives, followed by sections of the study

approach, method and the empirical material. An analysis and discussion of the findings will be concluded in the end, followed by a short section on future product development and relevant work.

## Accessory Narratives

With a focus on jewellery, Ahde-Deal's study of women and jewellery was found to be an inspiration in clarifying personal values of existing accessories. She states that wearing personal jewellery provokes experienced emotions – namely valued past times, and that the jewellery pieces are carriers of tangible memories (Ahde-Deal & Koskinen, 2010). Tanderup (2014) argues that jewellery design carries social and cultural values as a potential to fashion an identity for the wearer. In a practice-centred light, Wallace designs digital jewellery, combining contemporary jewellery and personal emotional significance (2007). She unfolds narratives of personal values, and reflects these back into design practice of new artefacts for among others, people with dementia (Wallace et al., 2013). Her findings point to personal preferences, beauty, enchantment and wellbeing, to indulge empathic design approaches.

Kettley, Walker and Townsend use archaeological and anthropology methods to investigate historical garment pieces (in this study understood as functional and clothing accessories), to understand the historical culture of garments care and construction, as possibilities of embedding technology to emphasize health and wellbeing, for vulnerable users (2015). Their project is interesting as it breaks the concept of garment up into relational parts that may support new dress practices with e.g. wearable health technology. Thus theorizing new knowledge of garment accessories fosters discussions of the physicality of future wearable health technology devices.

To examine the nature of accessories as an indicator for possible creation of wearable health technology, their current state of wearing accessories is of relevance. This is the case in Silina and Haddadi's study of 187 wearables at the market or at various stages of development and research, in which they conclude, "*As wearables are entering the domain of fashion, it is not uncommon to see criticism of their unfashionable aesthetics and gadgetry that do not necessarily consider consumer preferences and a need to create desire for wearable objects*" (2015). In their analysis they furthermore cover a lack of accessory-like wearables in the healthcare sector, to be disappointing as patients in their daily life use the devices (Ibid.).

The mentioned researchers show that in the realm of the accessory, perspectives as narratives, identity and empathy is found relevant, when designing future wearable health technology. It is therefore of relevance to understand such perspectives, as well as how to discover them.

## An Empathic Design Approach

To identify empathy in design, several scholars have coined the term empathic design, in an effort to be better at understanding users, their situation, and feelings (Koskinen et al., 2003; Kouprie & Visser, 2009; Postma et al. 2012). Investigating how the relationship between the wearer and their accessories can function as drivers to discover possible factors to take into consideration when designing wearable health technology, "*Empathic design is a research approach that is directed towards building creative understanding of users and their everyday life's for new product development*" (Postma et al., 2012:60).

Initiating this deep engagement is a key to leveraging the potential for participation and co-learning (Wallace et al., 2013). This point led to the organisation of the study, in terms of the numbers of women, who participated. The fact that three persons agreed to take part in the study generated a close personal relationship between the lead author and the individual women. Due to the relative number of women, the level of managing several participants was limited, and made room for the study to fit into the daily schedules of the women. This fact encouraged the maintenance of giving individual attention to each participant, and thereby their successful engagement throughout the study.

The study draws on ethnographic methods developed by Klepp and Bjerck (2014). In what they call 'The Wardrobe Study' they have researched dress objects that people favour and consequently keep in their wardrobes for a long period of time. These approaches and methods connect social science

with design research (in line with Koskinen et al. 2012), to generate the ‘accessory showcase’ on which to base the study’s empirical material.

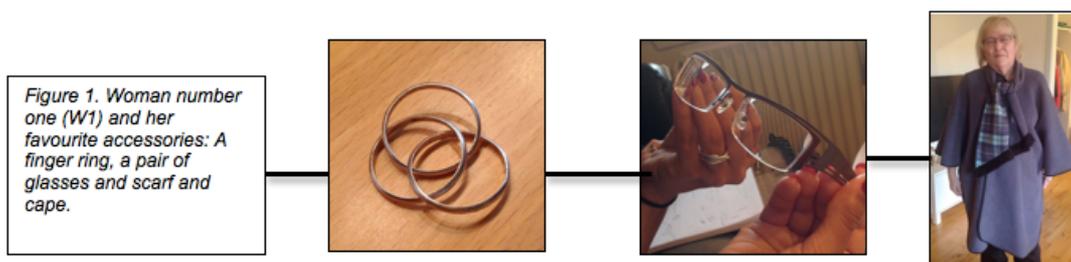
## The Accessory Showcase

The first aim of the study was to establish contacts of relational character between the lead author, the accessory design students and the women. The connection between the lead author and the women were made at a local activity centre, where a short introduction to the project was given. After this, two phone calls secured the women agreement to a date and time. The women agreed to let the accessory design students visit them in their own home, as a showcase for their accessories. A consent form explained that it was solely up to the women, what stories they wanted to tell. They all signed and agreed to audio recordings of the conversations and to having their photos taken. To help the accessory design students facilitate the conversations, the lead author had framed 10 questions as a guideline for them to lean on if the conversation suddenly needed input or a new direction. They were furthermore told to divide their team and give each other certain roles; one to focus on the conversation - keeping eye contact and being constantly present; another to give photo-document the accessories as well as taking photos of the women wearing them; and a third to keep focus on the audio recording of the dialogue. To capture the empirical material of the conversations and to facilitate a calm and comfortable atmosphere, the accessory design students got prepared for the dialogues to keep these in continuous flows.

## Empirical Material

After the accessory design students visited the women, transcribed the material and wrote their reflections they handed over the empirical material - three audio recordings, three transcriptions in Danish of the audio recordings, several pictures of the women and their accessories, and 11 reports of the students’ reflections. The written empirical material was afterwards translated into English by the lead author. Especially the readings of the student’s reflections were of great impact when analysing the audio recordings. This finding is supported by the work of Larsen and Sproedt (2013) who argue that social interactions are paramount in understanding the exploration, and grasping of criteria for innovation in practice – which can be argued also being the case when designing future wearable health technology.

The category of an accessory may take many recognisable forms and functions (e.g. hats, umbrellas, socks, scarfs etc.) thus the lead author divided the focus of the study into three categories of accessories: jewellery, functional accessory and clothing accessory. These categories should help both the accessory design students and the women to navigate in their selection of favourites, as well as differentiate the many types of accessories to unify an understanding of the varying meanings. The jewellery category is interesting because the women are wearing something that is not functional. The functional accessory category was guided with examples of objects that have a second layer added to them i.e. glasses, hearing aids etc. thus this category is objects that assist the wearer in some way. The category is chosen to reflect on functionality and not only aesthetic means of the objects. The last category is clothing accessories, chosen to include other tactile qualities to the exploration and to expand the meaning of material values. Below are the three women and their three favourite accessories:





## Analysis

The study's qualitative analysis is driven by points of astonishment (Brinkmann, 2014) and enchantment (Wallace et al. 2013), also pronounced as abductive reasoning, as it concerns a relationship between a *situation* and an *inquiry* (Brinkmann, 2014). In this case, the situation is the conversations with the women in their own homes. The inquiry is to understand why they choose what they wear. Listening through the audio recordings to analyse qualitative research material is similar to Revsbæk and Tanggaard's method of 'analysing in the present' (2015). This method concerns paying attention to the way the women talk about their favourite accessories, as well as what they are saying, to convey diverse significance, as well as contribute to a sensitive understanding, tone of voice, laughter and tempo of speech. Some of the stories included either sad or happy characters, which led to different types of astonishment and enchantment during the conversations between the women and the accessory design students.

Capturing such empirical material makes the listener aware of incidents of astonishment and/or enchantment, used as navigation points for locating existential meanings for the listeners' individual and collective understanding (Brinkmann, 2014). This way of treating empirical material draws the attention to focus on the particularities of what the women say about their favourite accessories, for creating new insight that at the same time also recognizes the similarities (Larsen and Sproedt, 2013). If the analysis was only given on behalf of the transcriptions of the interviews, to be black letters on white paper, the information would have been impersonal, without speech and sounds, to evoke sensory understanding of the women's heartfelt stories. Listening to the sounds of the recordings made the experience feel whole - to be 'tactile' when the lead author could hear the women or the accessory design students grasp the accessories or wear them, and 'visual' when listening to what happened in the room during the conversations. This was the case with coffee cups and tableware, as the women, as a friendly gesture served coffee for the accessory design students.

The transcribed material of the interviews, as well as the accessory design student's own reflections of the social interactions further supported the analysis. This insight gave the lead author the opportunity to not only listen to the words, but also to justify the experiences on behalf of the student's reflections. This supported the parts of the conversation that were chosen to be of relevance. Brinkmann (2014) refers to this analytical method as a way to *stumble* to allow us to be sensitive to the material. He states that there are many things to stumble upon in this world e.g. books, art and everyday episodes that usually are not simple given, as data, but, at certain times, they may cause us to stumble – and thereby become data (Ibid: 724). This approach led to the below structure for the empirical material to be localized in three categories: 'The Story behind', 'Embedded values' and 'Storage'. These categories explain the different accessories in vertical lines, and were chosen for their astonishing or enchanting character. Horizontally, the three categories of accessories frame the relationship between the women and their chosen objects.

Informant/Accessory	Favourite jewellery	Favourite functional accessory	Favourite clothing accessory
<b>(W1) 60 years of age</b>	A silver finger ring	A pair of glasses	A woollen scarf and cape
Story behind	<i>"I got the ring for my 40 year birthday. My nephew picked it, while we where at a market place. He suggested his parents to buy it for me, as he said – This ring shows that there is strong connection in our family."</i>	<i>"I have had glasses since I was seven, so for me I cant see a thing without them. I bought these at a time when I had a little money. I like that they are light and thin and have this special look. It should be you who wear the glasses. Not the glasses that wears you!"</i>	<i>"I got it as a present from my former Scottish colleagues, whom I worked with in London, when I was younger."</i>
Embedded values	<i>"It is not made of expensive materials, and the design is very simple, but there are many great feelings and memories in it. I wear jewellery I think suits my clothes and mood."</i>	<i>"I am very happy for these. They seem as a part of me, and it's hardly that I recognise them. I feel comfortable when I wear them, and I like the small details and colours of the design."</i>	<i>"I worked in London for some time. My scarf together with the cape represents memories from the good times I had there, the nice and fine quality it is made of and the persons I met. They are like family to me. Also it is nice to wear. When I wear it, it makes me happy, and it is a part of me as well of my life. That's fun to think of."</i>
Storage	<i>"I keep them here (at the sofa table) or in a drawer nearby my wardrobe."</i>	<i>"I wear them all the time, and when not, when I sleep, I keep them very close to my bed."</i>	<i>"I keep the scarf and cape in my wardrobe. Its to valuable to me, to have them hanging on the rack in my entree."</i>
<b>(W2) 67 years of age</b>	A gold necklace with a gold heart	A backpack made of cork	A jacket of wool fabric
Story behind	<i>"I got the necklace in 1967, from my former boyfriend, now deceased husband. I was living abroad, and got it when visiting my home as my mother was becoming ill. A little later she died, and the necklace became related with the troubled time, where he was a great support. I have almost worn it ever since I got it."</i>	<i>"I bought the backpack on a trip to Portugal with my grandson. He always wanted to come with my husband and I, when we should out travelling Unfortunately we missed it, so my grandson and I took a trip together last autumn."</i>	<i>"I worked at a nursing home for 18 years. And there are just some residents you remember more than others. One of them was a particular lady, who did not come along that well with the other residents. So to engage her in other activities we sat up a loom at a distant area for her to weave on. She made the fabric for this jacket. And the jacket is made especially for me."</i>

Embedded values	<p><i>"It has to be around my neck and has become a part of me. It would be loosing a part of myself, loosing the necklace."</i></p>	<p><i>"It makes me very unique. It is more fashionable than my regular backpacks. It's also of high value to me, as it makes me think of our journey and the good memories from the trip. It is not a piece everyone wears. That does also mean something and the reason why I bought it. It gives me joy and identity – I like to posses things no one else have."</i></p>	<p><i>"I love it. It is my colours and a pleasure every time I wear it. It is very valuable to me as it's a piece no one else has. It is a nice feeling wearing it as it is made after my size. That's very unique!"</i></p>
Storage	<p><i>"My children would see it as very strange if I stopped wearing it. I therefore wear it all the time."</i></p>	<p><i>"I have worn many backpacks. This one I take good care of, and do not use that often. I keep it in my wardrobe."</i></p>	<p><i>"It hangs together with my other precious items in my wardrobe."</i></p>
(W3) 68 years of age	A gold bracelet	An iPhone in a leather cover	A woollen skirt
Story behind	<p><i>"I got the bracelet as a gift from my husband the morning after our wedding. The style of it runs in the family as my mother in law also got a bracelet in that design for her wedding. I wear it every day, even when I do my gymnastics."</i></p>	<p><i>"At first I was sceptic. Then my daughters convinced me to buy it. I can quickly communicate via images from my two daughters and their children. I can always reach it, look up interesting questions, find my way and follow the weather report. I simply can't live without it!"</i></p>	<p><i>"I bought it on sale. It is a skirt made of 45% wool and 55% polyester. Event though I have had for 15 years it is still very suitable. It is classy without being boring. It's festive without making too much noise."</i></p>
Embedded values	<p><i>"I use my bracelet a lot and it has become a part of me. I am not even able to think of, what would happen if I lost it. It is a very emotional piece for me!"</i></p>	<p><i>"I carry it everywhere. It is so clever, and counts my steps. It is like a person to me and I am very happy about it!"</i></p>	<p><i>"It's a simple thing, but a great part of my identity, as it suits almost every style of dressing. I have had it since the 90es and the material combination makes it still look beautiful. I can be whoever I want to be in it, and that's a great quality for me. I like to dress up. People do not wear nice clothes anymore. The skirt is a part of my image. I wear it often and it's suitable for every style!"</i></p>
Storage	<p><i>"I have a polish cloth in both my trolley and my drawer. I clean the jewellery I wear every day and keep them in small cotton bags. I hide them different places in my house from day to day. You can never be to secure these</i></p>	<p><i>"I normally do not have the phone more than an arm length away from me. That is it's natural place. When I am out, it's in my purse. When I sleep, it's at my bedside table."</i></p>	<p><i>"It hangs in my wardrobe."</i></p>

	<i>days!"</i>		
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**Table 1: The analytical framework to define the women’s relationship to their accessories, and why they wear them.**

**Favourite Jewellery**

Common for all the women was that they got emotional to different degrees while recollecting stories about their favourite jewellery. Stories were started without hesitation, even though the content was a sad experience when it happened. This was the case with W2, who started in a very eager tone, explaining about her necklace, but after a while shed a tear, because of her lost husband. The Individual stories are constructed of memories - memories the women share even with accessory design students who they had only known for a couple of hours.

The chosen jewelleries were made of precious metals, as silver and gold. Though, W1 explains that her ring was not expensive, as this was bought at a market place. But what is of value to her is that it was her nephew that picked it for her, as a symbol of the tight relationship they have in their family. W1’s finger ring therefore becomes a mediator to other people of her meaningful and valuable memories. This insight fostered the understanding of the objects emotional as well as material value.

**Favourite functional accessory**

Similarly, strong feelings are connected to the women’s functional accessories. In W2’s case her backpack is of high value to her, because the material characteristics, which is cork. She explains that the backpack makes her feel unique and special. She connects the choice of her favourite object, with a story about her latest trip to Portugal. Her grandson always wanted to go with her and her husband, but never made it, as W2’s husband unfortunately died a couple of years ago. After this episode, W2 and her grandson decided to travel together to Portugal. The backpack therefore becomes a symbol of the shared experiences they had travelling together to Portugal, as well as representing W2 as a unique and special person.

In W3’s case an iPhone is her favourite functional accessory, as it easily connects her to her loved ones: her daughters and their children. What is of special interest is that W3 characterise her iPhone as an integrated part of her. She says that it is like a person to her, and that she does not keep it more than an arm length away from her and carries it wherever she goes. Also W2 express that her functional accessory, a pair of glasses is an essential part of her, and W1 and W3 almost characterise their choices with bodily features. This gives the functional accessories unique qualities, beyond their functional and material existence.

**Favourite clothing accessory**

W1’s scarf and cape are picked because of a story about her former work relations. W2 shares a story about a resident at her former workplace, who wove the fabric for her jacket. Wearing it reminds her of the time working at the nursing home. In both cases the accessories are related to W1 and W2’s former job positions, and therefore become symbols of their identity at that time. W3’s explanation of her favourite clothing accessory has also something to do with this, as she expresses that her skirt is a great part of her identity. She reasons that this is due to the many suits the skirt can be part of, festive or ordinary occasions and that it is classy in its look. Another noteworthy point of the clothing accessories is the material in all three cases wool. W2’s jacket is 20 years old and W3’s skirt is 15 years old, and the women still use them a lot. Their common material gives a certain longevity quality to the objects, and W1, W2 and W3 mention this value to be the reason why the objects are chosen to be their favourite clothing accessories.

**Student reflections**

One of the accessory design students reflected that since the interviews with W3 were undertaken in her own home it seemed to create a free way of conversation. It made it natural for the accessory design students to ask for personal details about her accessories. This experience established stories

of intimate character. The women had all different cultural preferences, backgrounds and history, and yet there is a similar connection between them, the chosen accessories and their personal values. The accessories' embedded feelings are all linked to personal experiences of significance, and thereby related to the women's identity hence their image of themselves. A student meant that the reason why the women chose certain objects instead of others was the importance of the accessory's specific value attributions. For example, during the interview with W3 one student noticed that she touched her favourite jewellery a lot while talking about it, and lit up when recalling some of the memories.

When discussing why the women chose these objects, one could assume that they are remembrances of both positive and negative experiences of significance for the wearer. Another student framed this in her reflection of the interview with W1 that her personal accessories tell stories about her and remind others of who she is. A third student claimed that the relation between W2 and her accessories was that they represent her – who she was, who she is and whom she wants to be.

## **Discussion**

Handling this sensitive information needs empathic understanding pointing to the sensual and emotional aspects of the relationship between the women, their accessories and the accessory design students. This became clear, when several of the accessory design students concluded within their reflections, how they were taken by surprise at the openness and willing contributions from the women sharing their inner feelings, memories and personal stories.

The objective of this paper is to understand why the women wear what they do. A relevant note to this is the feeling the accessory design students had of the women's 'lived' life and their everyday life. In this situation, the accessories became enablers for the women to articulate experiences of significance for themselves. According to Ahde-Deal people are wearing particular objects in order to feel closeness to earlier experiences and to people related to those (2013). This was also the case with W2's jewellery, as her husband gave her the item at a time when her mother was very ill. W2 furthermore states that her children would find it very unnatural and strange if she stopped wearing it. The jewellery therefore allows W2 to keep her memories in a physical object to be close to her, as an articulator of the relationship to her lost ones, her mother and husband. With an ambition to incorporate these inner emotions as aesthetic preferences, engaging directly with the women in their own home appeared to be a unique situation. Another finding is the understanding of older women as social individuals. As referred to in the introduction, studies have shown that there is a high rate of rejection of wearable and assistive technologies. The ability to understand personal values can be an approach to deal with this situation in a different way.

Looking at the different categories, W1's finger ring, W2's backpack or W3's skirt is of significance. For example, W1 describes how her finger ring symbolises the strong relationship she has with her nephew and family. W2 explains how her backpack makes her feel unique and special. W3 were raised in a family without a mother, and therefore having a concerned father, who was led to believe that no one had understood the fact that his daughter did not have a mother. W3 explains that she thinks this is the reason why it is important for her to look well dressed. She expresses her feelings about her skirt that is classy and still looks beautiful even after 15 years of wear. It furthermore makes her be whoever she wants to be, with a note that no one wears nice clothes anymore – to mean, that W3 feels special wearing the skirt. The skirt's qualities become a symbol of her personal values and are therefore of importance to her. The finger ring, the backpack and the skirt might seem ordinary to some, but for the possessors they have character of relational, social and cultural status. In this case the shared stories and consent from the women, to work with the intimate material, the experience fosters personal engagement between the women, the accessory design students and the lead author. The observation of the accessory showcase gave both the authors astonishing and enchanting moments, due to the women's different emotional stories, as well as the accessory design student's personal reflections.

## **Possible impact on the design of future health wearables**

Wallace advocates that empathic engagement between the makers, supports this point and user, combined with a strong relationship, is fundamental for constructing technologies of deep personal significance (Wright et al. 2008). Her point, as well as this study's findings addresses important

prospects for design projects and methodologies of design and manufacture of wearable health technology. One idea could be to let designers engage with the user group in their social settings to kick-start a design project. This will give insight into which values are important, when engaging with other people socially, and opens up for reflection of how to bring a language of universality into the design process. In this study, next step could be to engage with the same three women in other types of social settings than their home e.g. in the local activity centre.

Silina and Haddadi claim that it is disappointing to see that the healthcare market sector is not benefitting from accessories as a form factor for the devices that are used by patients in their everyday life (2015). With the scenario of future care, the wearable health technology market should employ designers with understanding of empathic as well as an accessory way of thinking. In fact, all design activity surrounding sensitive or vulnerable people especially in the healthcare field needs to be fully understood (Dalke, 2011). Observation of interaction with products is key here rather than designer prescribed ideas and solutions. According to several scholars' multidisciplinary collaborations is a necessity when designing future wearable health technology (Toeters et al., 2013; Silina and Haddadi, 2015; Kettley et al., 2015). For example, Kettley et al. (2015) believe that a participatory design approach, exploring wearable technology, vulnerable user groups, and historical language of dress, combine new design perspectives for wearables. The authors of this paper suggest that both older adults and accessory designers should be invited to join such collaborations. This study indicates that accessories that are used have a personal significance for the wearer – a fact that might impact the design of future wearable health technology, as current devices are often abandoned. Instead, designers of future wearable health technology should be emphasizing the accessory's deep relational, social and cultural capacities. To engage in such projects, the designers' empathic understanding of the user, as well as understanding sensibilities in material knowledge and practice is key.

It is therefore found necessary to understand the relational, social and cultural aspects of the accessory's role, to empathise designing for that person, to uncover such important life factors.

## Conclusion

The accessories, as well as the stories, gave the conversations astonishing and enchanting moments, which fed the experience with rich material. These incidents characterise the nature of the accessory to be an object that:

- Carries the wearers identity
- Is embedded with personal and emotional stories
- Is a symbol of experiences of significance to the wearer
- Tells stories about the wearer, and reminds others of whom the wearer is
- Can be seen as an integrated part of the wearer
- Has bodily qualities
- Is of emotional, memorable and material value to the wearer

These findings discover that the accessory is an object that not only defines the wearers psychological, social and cultural contours – it is also a relational object, due to the fact that we are social creatures. The showcased accessories and their embedded feelings are all linked to personal experiences, and thereby related to the women's identity hence their image of themselves. This clarify that the accessory is a representation of the women, who they were, who they are and whom they want to be.

This insight gives the accessory unique qualities beyond its functional and material existence. Such factors are therefore suggested to take into consideration when designing wearable health technology, for the home setting in general, and older women in particular.

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