Evolution of Laundry

What, why and how we launder

ABSTRACT

This report seeks to understand laundry habits and the factors that shape how we clean our clothes. To do this the report tracks key moments in the historical evolution of laundry from the 1600's to the present day, showing how ideas of cleanliness and laundry practices have adapted alongside changes in technologies, materials, and social norms. Laundry detergent advertising has also had a powerful influence on laundering and section two details key themes from an analysis of 60 ads from the 1950's to the present day. The final section examines efforts made by researchers to understand everyday laundry routines alongside the social and psychological drivers of over-washing. In the context of, a lack of progress in reducing the environmental impacts of laundry in recent decades, the final section asks what can be done to disrupt and re-shape our laundry habits. To address this challenge, a laundry attitudes and habits survey has been developed, alongside three communications briefs that are designed to encourage shifts in social norms and routines.

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Introduction

In today's carbon-constrained world, our households are increasingly subject to environmental regulation and intervention. Evidence has shown that our current laundry habits – the way we clean clothes – has great impact on the environment, not only in terms of the energy and water use, but also from the leaching of toxic chemicals from synthetic detergents and the shedding of microplastics from washing machines (Bain, Beton, Schultze, Mudgal, & Dowling, 2009) (Napper & Thompson, 2016). Action has, so far, focused mainly on raising consumer awareness and attempts to nudge behaviour towards more environmentally friendly decisions. This, however, is an incomplete picture, by promoting normative ideas of 'no-wash' or 'turn-to-30' environmental interventions have not only been ineffective in reducing energy use for washing clothes (Yates & Evans, 2016), they have ignored that people's laundry habits are also shaped by other factors beyond individual psychology and isolated behaviours. These wider influences include cultural understandings, social conventions and the material constraints of everyday household life. To highlight these latter factors, this report takes a closer look at the complex cultural evolution of our laundry practices in relation to cleanliness.

Historical Evolution of Laundry Practices

Laundry and cleanliness: a holistic, cultural perspective

Developing a cultural understanding of laundry begins with recognising that any discussion about cleaning clothes always involves a conversation about cleanliness. This cleanliness relates not only to cleanliness of physical bodies but also, as Peter Ward points out, an "*engagement with the self and its social relations*" (2019, p.3). This section is split into four periods (Figure 1) that explore the historical roots of the specific social meanings and cultural understandings of cleanliness that underpin our most ingrained and thoughtless laundry habits.

Early modern period 1600-1700s	1800s-1900	1950 - 2000s	2000s - Present Day

Figure 1: The historical evolution of laundry practices in this section of the report is organised into four time periods

1600s-1700s

Clean clothes: exclusive and laborious

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, laundering happened infrequently because it was an exclusive privilege. Only the rich could afford clean clothes because they owned substantial country houses, and could pay someone else to do the washing, whether by their own laundry maids or washerwomen (Hardyment, 1988). This also meant that clean clothes were marker of high social status throughout Europe and North America (Ward, 2019).

Old ways of doing laundry involved time-consuming physical labour. Seventeenth century records show how exhausting laundry can be: sorting, soaping, lathering, boiling, washing, rinsing, bleaching, beating, starching, wringing, drying, hanging, ironing (see Holme 1688 cited in (North, 2020)). An eighteenth-century household diary described laundry as occurring once in a month (North, 2020). Laundry often took at least week to complete, its lengthy and tedious qualities would remain relatively unchanged for the next two hundred years.

Clean clothes as part of a bigger task of image management

What being clean means is socially determined, often tied with norms of self-presentation. For example, in the seventeenth century, the relationship between clean clothes and bodies would alarm many people today. During that period, the idea of clean clothes replaced the need for bodily cleaning. Clothes were changed and washed far more often than having a bath. Unlike today's society where "coming out as an infrequent showerer" (even for environmental reasons) is considered socially risky (Welin, 2024), changing into clean clothes without cleaning one's body was the norm. While items like undergarments and jackets were changed as often as resources permitted, their wearers' bodies would go without washing (in water) for long periods of time. Not only was it considered okay to not bathe, according to Peter Ward, when people did take a bath, it was usually under "duress" (Ward, 2019, p. 12). For instance, Elisabeth Pepys forced her husband, the famous English naval diarist Samuel Pepys, to take a bath by refusing sex until he did. Even then, Pepys waited three days before he caved in (Ward, 2019).

Samuel Pepys was the son of a tailor and a washerwoman. He had a keen interest in how he looked and what others thought of him (Avidon, 2024), so his clothes were probably washed regularly. Fashion had a powerful influence on how much stock members of refined society, like Pepys, placed in laundry – cleaning clothes needed to support the rules of image management.

Underwear and the look of whiteness

The privileged place of white clothes as symbols of clean laundry was an accident of history. It all began with underwear. Underwear was commonly referred to as 'linen' and included white items such as undershirts, collars, cuffs, briefs, stockings, petticoats and corsets. Over time, underwear stopped being hidden away and became a fashionable part of one's overall look. Back then, underwear only came in one colour – white – which in turn stood for clean bodies, as they were seen to replace bathing. "*White collars and cuffs crept out from beneath doublets, white linen undershirts burst forth at the neck and peered through openings in jackets and cloaks. As visible linen grew more ostentatious, as its whiteness became more highly prized…it also proclaimed the unsoiled state of the body beneath the linen*" (Ward, 2019, p. 85).

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1800s-1900s

Industrial cotton: ready-made and ready to launder

A world without ready-made clothes seems unthinkable today but 150 years ago, it was the norm. Until the seventeenth century, clothes were either made by a professional tailor, or a home seamstress, often having non-washable reinforcements (Hardyment, 1988) (North, 2020). People did not own many garments to warrant frequent changes of clothes. According to Sven Berkert (2014), this changed during the late eighteenth century when the Western world's colonial traders discovered cotton. Beautiful calico designs from India charmed traders and moreover, cotton was much easier to clean than wool, linen and other delicate fabrics. Soon, Britain began manufacturing cotton textiles in earnest. Mechanical inventions like power looms, automated mule spindles and weaving machines increased cotton manufacturing productivity and lowered labour costs dramatically (Berkert, 2014). By the mid nineteenth century, there were just over a hundred cotton mills in Manchester, Britain's industrial centre for cotton (Berkert, 2014). "*Cotton fabrics became ever more fashionable as their changing designs mattered increasingly to the self-presentation of middle-class consumers*" (Berkert, 2014, p.74).

Industrial capitalism changed clothes manufacturing radically and led to a rapid increase in quantities of affordable cotton clothing. A new, more democratic fashion system emerged among the middle classes, who no longer looked to aristocrats for stylistic reference. As Ward (2019) explains, "*departmental stores led the way, selling inexpensive ready-to-wear, and more easily cared-for variations of stylish clothes to the lower-middle and working class customers*" (2019, p.184). Clothes ownership rocketed, changing from a few shirts per year to hundreds of garments. According to the charity Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP), the average UK adult today keeps upwards of 118 items of clothes in their wardrobes (WRAP, 2022).

The rise of Big Detergent

Alongside the rapid expansion of the market for ready-made cotton clothing, a vast soap industry also developed. The Industrial Age brought steam power, mechanisation and increased productivity to soap manufacturing processes. Costs of entry into the soap making business were low and during the nineteenth century, the number of small soap businesses and producers grew dramatically. Making soap follows a relatively straightforward formula, combining fat with alkali over gentle heat, to yield soap and glycerine. Early forms of domestic soap used vegetable fats (e.g. olive, rape or hempseed) and obtained alkali from ashes of organic matter (North, 2020). Soap is precipitated adding salt and cooling the resulting mixture. This chemistry is known as saponification and the science behind it was not widely disseminated and understood until the early 1800s. When saponification became more widely understood as a science, innovations in physics and chemistry enabled the key ingredients like alkalis to be manufactured at scale. Reduced reliance on organic matter allowed for greater replicability, measurability and predictability in soap making expanding the range of laundry products to the present day (Figure 2) (Ward, 2019).

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From as early as 1920, Lever Brothers controlled over 70 percent of Britain's soap manufacturing (Ward, 2019). Not long after P&G introduced Tide in 1947, their first all-purpose synthetic detergent, the sale of detergents in Britain grew 50 percent between 1950 and 1961, comprising mostly of brands from Lever Brothers and P&G (Fletcher, 2008). In the 1950s, synthetics accounted for over half of the American market for laundry washing products. By the mid-1960s, synthetics had taken over all soap powders in Europe. Today, Unilever and P&G remain the top two leaders in household and personal care markets (Forbes, 2022).

2000's-Present Day

Search, Smell and Science

There have been several notable laundry product innovations since 2000, either addressing consumers environmental needs or their need for even greater levels of cleanliness (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Examples showing the evolution of laundry products including the first laundry powder Persil (Schwarcz, 2022)**; first Laundry liquid - Ariel** (The Cleaning Collective, 2024)**; first laundry sheets; first laundry cleaner - Dettol** (Bamford, 2013)**; first laundry odour remover – Dr Beckman**

Taking into account search interest, we gain a picture of how these needs have changed over time. Notably after 2010, we see an increase in search interest in laundry (Figure 3). Other notable search terms that grew during this period are 'laundry basket' and 'laundry cleanser' (anti-bacterial additives for laundry) (Google Trends, n.d). There is a considerable growth trend for laundry related search showing an increasing interest in laundry products and information over the years.

Figure 3: Number of searches for 'laundry' since 2014 *(Google Trends, n.d)*

In 2009, Persil advertised its efforts to reduce their impact on the environment. This environmental messaging differed from its peers and was the earliest example we found of detergent producers responding to global concerns about climate change. Current consumer interest in this topic is reflected in the fact that "*68% of people believe businesses that do not act now to combat climate change will be failing their employees and customers: people expect advertisers to act for sustainability*" (Reboul, 2022). This may be why we are currently seeing rising search interest in 'laundry sheets' (Figure 6), which are an innovation in the delivery of detergent that removes plastic altogether, in exchange for a dissolvable 'sheet', for example, *Dip* founded in 2022 is a business using this new format.

Covid gives germs top-of-mind awareness

Studies have shown how Covid lockdowns changed daily routines and habits such as increasing time spent on housework such as cleaning (Tipoe E, 2021). Prior to the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 concern about 'germs' was not top of mind for most of the population, with ritual of handwashing having been in decline since after WWII when the baby boomers "*rebelled against the rules imposed by their parents' and grandparents*" (Fleming, 2020). As a result of the pandemic "*25% more people wash their hands for the recommended time*" compared to pre-pandemic in the UK (Citron Hygiene, 2022). If handwashing habits are considered as a barometer of cleanliness habits, then the recent increase in handwashing rates may indicate that this will be the case for other cleaning habits.

We can see, through research into various search terms and associated online content that there was a shift in attitudes towards 'germs'. Searches for the following terms relating to germs, laundry cleanser and advice on frequency of washing bed sheets, duvets and pillows all peaked during the pandemic and have remained elevated in the years following, suggesting a significant cultural shift in attitudes and habits (Google Trends, n.d).

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Germaphobia in a confessional society

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental health condition linked to compulsive behaviours, often stigmatised and misrepresented. However, social visibility and perhaps acceptance of OCD in the 21st century has improved, likely due to it being spoken about more in the media. For example, in 2006, David Beckham publicly revealed his struggle with OCD which can manifest as debilitating dependency on cleanliness rituals (Frith, 2006). According to Popsugar (2024), a viral Tiktok video of a son showing all the house rules put in place by his "extreme germaphobe mum" has sparked curiosity in contamination OCD (Plante, 2024). Contamination OCD, which is defined as the fear of becoming unclean, has been given prominence online, driving popularity in terms 'germaphobe' and 'germaphobia' being used to self-identify or label loved ones online. Search data shows a significant number of people looking to understand the meaning of the term germophobia along with OCD, presumably to try and self-diagnose, as there are several online diagnostic tests. Social media and internet communication technologies have encouraged a culture of sharing everyday life, routines and thoughts with strangers such that sociologists have argued that we now live in a '*confessional society*' (Bauman, 2002, p.161). Contamination OCD, or germaphobia, appears to be something people are willing to publicly 'confess' to. Well-known celebrities, such as Donald Trump and Toni Braxton are also 'coming out' as germophobes (Figure 4), further driving conversations about germophobic behaviours which often include housework and cleaning.

The confessional nature of social media platforms has encouraged self-labelling, open conversation and discussion of contamination OCD among users. Such posts acts as feedback for algorithm platforms, further intensifying the visibility of content to do with germaphobia or germs. This might explain the increased searches in the late 2010s for more information about 'germaphobia'.

A number of well-known celebrities, such as Donald Trump are 'coming out' as germophobes, further influencing people's quest to self-diagnose and adopt similar habits (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Famous Germophobes: Howie Mandel, Naomi Campbell, Cameron Diaz, Donald Trump, Howard Hughes, Madonna, David Beckham, Gwyneth Paltrow, Jennifer Lawrence, Mr Burns from The Simpsons.

Clearly cleanliness is important in avoiding infection, but there is a "*fine line between caution and an excessive, irrational preoccupation with germs and disease*" which can lead to anxiety, depression and mental illness**,** social isolation, fear of public places and disrupt significant relationships (Karasu, 2024). Across multiple social media channels, we can see a spread of posts that confess to being a 'germophobe' within conversations about associated household habits and routines, including laundry habits. Figure 5 shows an online chat in which one user appears to proudly declare that he/she specifically washes all clothes after wearing them only once.

Figure *5*: Germophobic laundry comments on social media (Instagram & Tiktok) in 2024

Marketing further product innovations: laundry cleansers

With increased top-of-mind awareness of invisible contamination pathogens and public conversations about germaphobia, there are market opportunities in new categories of laundry products that promise to 'cleanse' our clothes of bacteria and viruses. One example of this are laundry cleansers, which are claimed to be needed especially if one is using lower washing temperatures. As you can see there was minimal interest in these products that first came to market when Dettol launched the first of such products in 2013 (Bamford, 2013)*.* There was a large spike in interest in laundry cleanser during the pandemic, reaching a high not yet seen again (Figure 4). We later learnt that the Covid-19 virus is mostly airborne, meaning that this excessive washing was most likely not that impactful, the jury is still out as to how long viruses can even stay on clothes (Caporuscio, 2022).

However, interest in cleansers remains higher than in the pre-Covid-19 period (Figure 6) the very existence of these products could be seen to be driving the rise in germophobia. Self-proclaimed germophobes can be seen on TikTok demonstrating how they have separate indoor and outdoor clothes, cleaning the washing machine itself before each use, as well as, using a laundry cleanser as part of their routines.
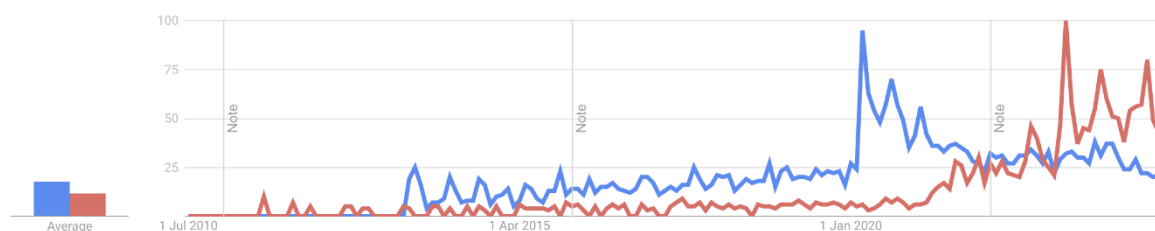
Interest over time ⑦

Figure 6: Number of searches for laundry cleanser (blue) versus laundry sheets (red) *(Google Trends, n.d)*

Present day: Social

An insight report by Longfield and Claydon (2022) identifies the rapid adoption of digitised services and product sales linked to Covid-19, leading to a growth of digital communities and influencer marketing. These factors made it possible, and acceptable, to order many items via subscription, and several brands in the laundry industry have benefited from this business model, such as, Smol which launched in 2018 as a direct-to-consumer (DTC) laundry detergent. A key point of difference between Big Laundry and more recent startups, like Smol, Tallow and Ash, Dip, and Kair, to mention a few, is that these startups lean more heavily on social media marketing.

Tallow and Ash is a good example of a highly successful DTC start-up brand, with a USP of providing better smelling and more skin safe products (Tallow & Ash, 2023). The marketing and advertising success that Tallow and Ash has seen can largely be attributed to its activity on social media platforms. Big detergent brands like Persil, Ariel, Comfort and Vanish do own accounts on social platforms like TikTok, but followership is low compared to previously mentioned cleaning influencers (Vanish has most followers at 2,884). In an article for Forbes, Kate She describes why influencer marketing resonates with new audiences: "*If they back your product, they're going to create content that resonates with them in a way that actually drives conversions better than your brand's marketing team—mostly because audiences are too smart for fake sales pitches anymore.*" (She, 2023). Notably, although we see startups transition to new media channels to advertise their laundry, they are still leveraging consistent techniques used previously and currently by Big Laundry advertising. Art direction used more recently still maintains the established tropes of pristine homes, bright whites, 'science-y' formulas, and attention-grabbing fragrances. There may be some introduction of more colourful homes and clothing, however advertising in this period still regularly contrasts dirty action environments with aspirational, pristinely clean laundry environments. In social media content, we can see content creators depicting their home laundry environments in a curated and clean manner as well, perpetuating the same tropes.

The Power of Advertising & Marketing

Is the cure in the poison?

Despite over a decade of 'low-temperature laundry' advertising campaigns in the UK and in Europe, energy use for domestic laundering continued to rise (Yates & Evans, 2016) (Electrolux, 2021). In contrast, advertising campaigns for laundry detergents have proven to be highly successful in driving demand, including the most toxic and harmful ones. This section turns to detergent advertising to ask: is the cure in the poison? Are there insights about detergent advertising's success that could also be leveraged by those who conversely want to de-escalate current laundry culture? If there are specific principles and tactics that have shaped current laundry demand, might they also help drive positive changes in the way we do laundry?

Research questions

A chorus of studies have argued that the rapid growth of Big Detergent was a result of advertising (Fletcher, 2008) (Ward, 2019) (Jack, 2018). In a 1951 speech, the chairman of Unilever remarked on advertising's importance in maintaining the consumer demand for the company's products (Unilever, 1951). This section takes a closer look at detergent advertising from the 1950s to 2000s, focusing on the following questions:

- What were the qualities of detergent advertising during the Big Detergent's boom?
  What messages and meanings did the ads convey?
  What sort of techniques, appeals, tactics and rhetorical devices were deployed by detergent ads?
- What factors influenced the way Big Detergent (and their ad agencies) shaped these ads?
- To what extent did detergent advertising represent or leveraged cultural aspects of social change and domestic life to intensify laundry practices?

Methodology: Multimodal discourse analysis

This study uses Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) multimodal discourse analysis to analyse detergent ads from 1950s to 2000s. Using this approach, detergent ads are broken down and we examine how their different elements and features (such as visuals, sound, text/script) cohere to create meanings related to the social order and environment: agency, identity, social semiotics, knowledge and power. In other words: how do detergent advertisers talk about and represent laundry cleanliness in these ads? What rhetorical devices and tactics are deployed to sell detergent products and in doing so, what kind(s) of 'laundry culture' or social order of laundry is being encouraged?

To aid the practical implementation of our findings, effort was taken to ensure our analysis is aligned with advertising practitioners' terms of reference. Elements of a 'creative brief' are mapped against Cook's (2001) identification of the different linguistic devices in advertising discourse that includes text, paralanguage, techniques, co-texts, and themes (Table 1).

Table 1: A framework used by the researchers to analyse the ads containing elements of advertising discourse mapped against elements of a typical creative brief.

Elements of detergent ads	Elements of advertising discourse (Cook, 2001)
Brand	Addresser / participants
Art direction, story, production values, mise-en-scene/situation, music (if any)	Situation
Tone of voice, facial expressions	Paralanguage
Target audience	Addressee / participants
Copy, script, tagline/endline	Text
Campaign family or other ads	Co-texts
References or connections to other types of content (e.g. popular dramas, news content, use of TV actors)	Intertexts
Objective/Category	Function / technique / appeal

Sample: from television ads to digital video

We focus on audiovisual formats – television and digital video – because they were (and continue to be) the engine of Big Detergent's market power. Television was also where the bulk of Big Detergent's advertising spend first went. Detergent makers were tv advertising pioneers. Since ITV Granada's opening night in 1956 when a 60-second ad for Unilever's Persil washing powder created by JWT London was broadcasted, the company remained ITV's leading advertiser for nearly three decades (Nixon, 2016) (Henry, 1986).There is also a focus on UK advertising discourse since previous studies have studied other markets (US, Asia, Finland, etc) and because UK-specific cultural insights may differ from other markets. We sampled our ads from two archival collections of laundry advertising, History of Advertising Trust and The Laundry Lab, which collectively hold about 2,500 ads of laundry cleaning agents, and domestic appliances. For the purposes of this study, we excluded appliance advertising although we found detergents and washing machines were often advertised together. Our final data set includes 60 TV adverts of brands (e.g. Persil, Ariel, Daz, Surf, Tide, Comfort, Vanish) from Big Detergent manufacturers Unilever and P&G.

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Summary findings

In Table 2 we outline the key themes that emerged from our analysis, for example, the focus on the visual appearance of clothes 'Whiteness: The optics of laundry' through to the use of testimonials and endorsements 'Social proof / Testimony'.

Table 2: Summary of findings of laundry detergent advertising analysis showing frequency of key themes over time in the sample.

	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s
Whiteness: the 'optics' of laundry	●●●●●●●●	●●●●●●	●●●●	●●●●●●			●	
Judged femininity (housewife, mum)	●●●●●●	●						
Laundry is feminine power				●●●	●			
Tests e.g. window test,	●		●	●●●●●● ●	●		●	
Product demo	●	●				●	●	
Side-by-side comparison		●		●●●●●	●	●	●	
Endorsement by celebs or laundry entertainment	●		●	●●●●	●●●	●●	●	
Social proof /testimony 'ordinary women like Mrs XXX'	●		●●●●	●●●●			●●●●	
Because experts, science and machines	●	●		●●●	●●●	●	●●●	●
Sensory pleasure						●	●	●●●●●● ●
Self-care/mental health								●
Control							●	●●
Lifestyle						●●●●	●●●	●●●●●●

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Persil whiteness: the optics of laundry

Overwhelmingly, detergent advertising from the 1950s until the late 1980s centred on the consumer promise of 'whiteness'. While other secondary product benefits were shown, whiteness remained the primary benefit that overtook the rest. Advertising copy strategies in detergent ads all revolved around hyperbolic variations of this promise of whiteness:

> *'Because Persil washes whiter'*
> *'Persil washes whiter, and it shows'*
> *'Not just white, Persil white'*
> *'New Surf washes shining white'*
> *'There's no whiteness like Surf whiteness'*
> *'Surf gets your whites spotless'*
> *'Blue Daz boils whitest of all'*
> *'Today's way to brilliant whites'*
> *'Omo adds brightness to cleanness and whiteness'*
> *'Fairy Snow forces grey out, forces white in'*

As mentioned earlier, the cultural concern for whiteness in laundry has been noted for centuries. What is new is that modern detergent manufacturers had invested heavily in chemically enhanced whiteness, which required increasing demand for whiteness on a mass scale. From the early twentieth century until today, detergent manufacturers have been one of the largest adopters of optical brighteners or optical bleaches, which are a class of chemical dyes that could enhance the appearance of whiteness by reflecting ultraviolet light so that materials can appear to have a slight glow (Hansard, 1958) (Mustalish, 2000). In 1943, the first optical brightener to be exploited on a large scale was patented by Lever Brothers (Unilever) in the UK. Soon, other industries like paper and plastics followed suit with their own patents for using optical brighteners in their products and altogether, they raised expectations of what is white and "fostered a taste for whiter than white products" (Mustalish, 2000, p. 134).

Exploiting housewives' fear of judgement

Sociologist Beverley Skeggs has shown that historically femininity is frequently judged, and that the judgement made through a middle-class position reads appearance as a value of personhood (Skeggs, 1997). The earliest detergent advertising exploits the fear of this type of judgement by showing their key target audience – middle-class housewives – what whiteness in laundry says to others about their person in the value and quality of their homemaking.

Persil was one of the first to establish this as a distinctive creative strategy in print. Its earlier magazine ads followed a formula that paired the memorable, catchy alliterative copy of 'washes whiter' with visuals that dramatized the side-by-side comparison between 'greyish white' and 'Persil white' by depicting activities of husbands and children where the difference in whites became visibly noticeable and a source of embarrassment (see Figure 7). In television ads, Persil continued this formula. For example, in an ad called 'Mums and Sons', the non-Persil user mother saw that her son's shirt was not as white his school mate Tom and the voiceover narration expressed her discovery: "*well, I've always thought my whites were white, but her Tom's shirt was much whiter, and you could see she saw the difference too. I noticed she had Persil in her basket...*". In another 1950s Persil ad, 'Judged by whiteness', the task of laundry was even more explicitly portrayed as important image management work: "*even though her family may be apart from her, they are still a part of her... being judged by how clean and white she keeps their clothes, Persil is part of her strength and their habits*" (Figure 8).

In a BBC interview Jackie Dickens, vice chairman of ad agency Leo Burnett, explains "*In the 50s being a good wife was important in the eyes of other people, it was very real that if you hung your terry up and they were greyer than the neighbour's next door that this was a sign that you weren't doing your job properly*" (Barker, 1990). Advertising practitioners appreciated how whiteness could become much more than a product benefit by leveraging perceptual models and social meanings. Not unlike seventeenth century's concern for visible whiteness in clothing as a marker of status and social esteem, TV ads constructed whiteness in laundry as powerful symbols of respectability, idealised femininity, connecting detergent brands to specific attitudes and beliefs which their makers believed would help create greater demand for their products. David Bernstein (1986) observes, "*Persil whiteness.' thanks to what television had invested it with, had become what advertising people began to call 'a property' ... a totality by which a brand's values are communicated*" (p. 281).

Women's fear of judgement and middle-class society's voyeuristic and judgemental culture are rich and enduring veins that advertisers can tap into. Research shows that a woman's concern about the public scrutiny of her family's clothes would continue to be an important factor shaping her laundry habits even in the twenty-first century (Pink, 2005).

Figure 7: Side-by-side comparison between greyish white and Persil white in Persil magazine ads (1950) Source: History of Advertising Trust (HAT)

Persil Commercial - 'Mums and sons' (1950s). Source: HAT

Persil Commercial - 'What is a mum?' (1950s) Source: HAT

Surf Commercial - 'Wash Day' (1958) Source: HAT.

Persil Commercial - 'It Shows' (1950s). Source: HAT

Figure 8: Stills from 1950s Persil and Surf television commercials

Raising clean standards: demos, tests and challenges

Cultivating a demand for whiter than white products meant that a high *visual* standard needed to be established. Detergent advertising portrayed their products as meeting these elevated standards by deploying a range of informational, 'seeing is believing' tactics and gimmicks like experts, product demos, reality challenges, and window tests. These advertising tactics, though formulaic and repetitive, were preferred by detergent clients who wanted quick and immediate results. Their advertising agencies, who saw value in cultivating and reinforcing attitudes and norms over the longer term, did not always agree. In the 1950s Sidney Garland, the founder of Garland-Compton, a British agency whose biggest clients included P&G, reminded detergent makers of the need "*to adopt 'state of mind' advertising which would change fundamental attitudes and, over time, habits, but would not deliver the quick results that could be found in the 'do it now' style of advertising*" (Thomas, 2022, p. 378). An early example of the 'do it now' style is Unilever's 1957 Surf ad that was filmed like an on-stage live product challenge and audience demo in Putney, London. A male voiceover introduces 'a team of Surf demonstrators is showing the public how Surf gets things really white' who invites an audience member to stain a new shirt with grease and grime. The on-stage Surf housewives then proceed to boil the shirt live on stage with Surf washing powder for 5 mins and show the shirt restored to its original pristine whiteness.

Laundry 'tests' were a favourite category of tactics in P&G advertising like Daz and Ariel. In the 'window test', one of the most remarkably enduring devices turning up in Big Detergent's advertising over a 30-year period (1950s to 1980s), housewives are shown holding up their laundry against a window to see if it has achieved the correct sort of whiteness and therefore, cleanliness (see Figure 9). In Ariel ads, window tests were often used alongside side-by-side comparisons to further reinforce product superiority. In one 1975 Daz ad, housewife 'Mrs Judith Graham' is shown re-washing already washed tablecloths just to get them as white as the window-tested ones washed with Daz (see Figure 9, top right). In a series of ads that ran for 4 years (1981-1984), a new higher standard called 'close up clean' promoted the new Ariel Automatic washing powder. These used window tests to question (somewhat condescendingly) housewives' satisfaction with their clean laundry. In one 1981 ad we hear a male voiceover interrupting a housewife just as she has finished a wash:

> **Male voiceover**: "Happy with your wash?"
> **Housewife**: "Certainly!" [smiling, direct to camera]
> **Male voiceover:** "what about close up?"
> **Housewife**: [turns and holds up shirt against window] "no, not completely, you can't shift marks like that without boiling and you don't put modern things like Jack's shirt into the boil wash"
> **Male voiceover**: "Exactly! And that's why now there's new Ariel Automatic".

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P&G invested heavily in promoting the widespread acceptance of this raised standard of 'close up clean', casting actresses from popular television shows as the housewives, using BBC radio presenter Jimmy Young to voice the ads and even editing different versions to feature different brands of washing machines in the closing shots.

Figure 9: Stills from 1957 Blue Daz ad 'The Window Test' (top left); 1975 Daz ad 'Window Test – Mrs Judith Graham' (top right); 1981 Daz Automatic ad 'Mrs Hope Walsall' (bottom left); 1985 Ariel Automatic 'Close-up' (bottom right)

Because experts, science and machines

"*This is the Washing Machine Age and the Age of Persil*', declares the male narrator in a 1968 Persil ad. The electric washing machine brought speed, efficiency and dramatically reduced the time taken to complete laundry tasks in households. With the widespread adoption of washing machines in Britain, a council survey showed that the time taken to do a family of five's laundry dropped from 10 hours per week in the early 1900s to about two hours in the 1980s (Ward, 2019). By 2011, Persil advertising was recommending products catered for 30min wash cycles. Today's washing machines offer rapid or quick programmes that bring wash cycles down to under 30 minutes. Personal productivity and product efficiency are values that historically have been encouraged in consumerism because they support innovation in goods and services and help to create a market for the next product iteration. Consumer expectations today for wash cycle efficiency and speed are such that entire online forum threads (e.g. Mumsnet) are dedicated to sharing experiences and tips on how to optimise washing machine settings for different washing needs.
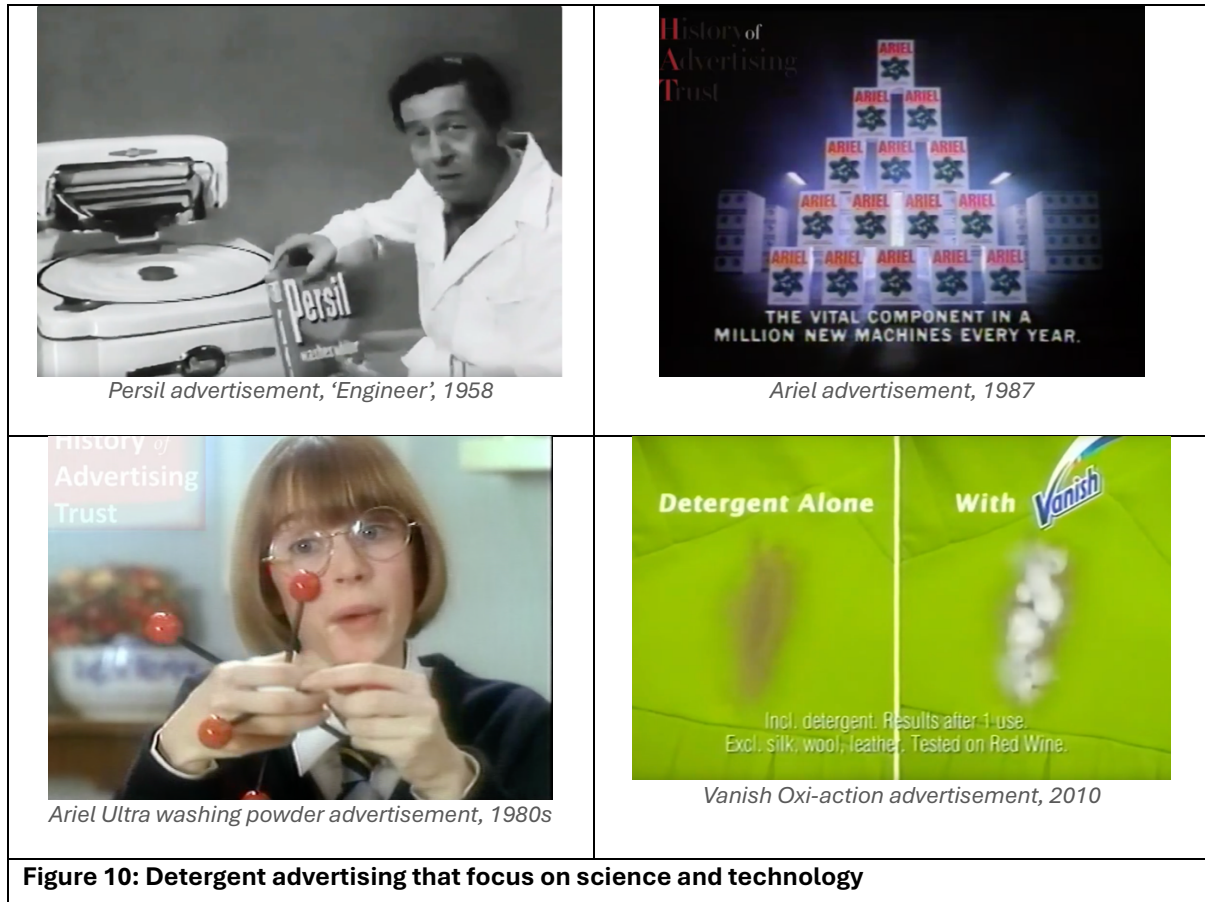
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A British government study in the 1960s showed that detergent product innovation and sales promotion had greater effect on customer decisions than price (Ward, 2019). Because of this, Big Detergent focused their energies on product development and correspondingly, invested heavily in advertising that flaunted these 'unique' or 'break through' detergent ingredients. Ariel was the most successful in this scientific messaging. To strengthen their claims, Ariel ads often mentioned how product advancements complemented to the technical features or technological prowess of washing machines (e.g. Hoover, Servis, Zanussi, Indesit, AEG and Miele). In a 1987 ad featuring an imposing tracking shot of lots of washing machines stacked on top of each other, Ariel even went so far to declare itself an integral machine part, "the vital component in a million new machines every year" (see Figure 10, top right).

At first, the messaging in ads was akin to car mechanics talking to camera about keeping the washing machine parts working smoothly: "*A washing machine is just like any other machine, you gotta treat it right. Of cos a lot depends on what washing powder you use,*" says the 'engineer' in a 1958 Persil ad. Detergent advertising portrayed washing machines 'experts', men dressed in white lab coats or in suits behind desks, to deliver scripts that were aimed at men/husbands who had the purchasing power (see Figure 10, top left). As more and more improvements were made to washing machines and detergents, advertising agencies were tasked to deploy ever more specious 'because science' tactics to recommend products whilst also having to get across a simple message about detergent and laundry. For example, a 1980s Ariel ad recruited the 'science nerd' teenage daughter stereotype to explain to the mother how the washing powder's clever ingredients helped it clean more efficiently, with the addition help of the 'Arielator', the plastic powder dispenser to help with even application of the powder (see Figure 10, bottom right).

The combination of 'scientific' detergent ingredients with 'clever' automatic washing machines portrayed in laundry advertising, meant that laundry was increasingly articulated as an endeavour that required sophisticated technological solutions that work like magic to give ever more refined levels of cleanliness. This was a far cry from the manual days of wringing, beating and boiling clothes. Laundry 'science' was repeatedly visualised for audiences to justify the increasing feature bloat of washing machines and vice versa. The assumption underpinning such advertising was that laundry work should be about chasing the goal of ever-increasing efficiency and convenience. In reality, this technological 'revolution' of detergents and washing machines had diminishing returns as product innovation in detergents and cleaning agents raced against each other, product differences became increasingly minute, the science became increasingly specious. In fact, Big Detergent's relentless drive for (unnecessary) laundry 'science' spectacularly backfired in 1994 when Persil suffered a highly public embarrassment and had to axed its product, Persil Power, which was found to be too powerful and seriously damaged customers' clothing (BBC, 2011).

As shown in a 2010 Vanish 'Oxi-action' stain remover advert, the scientific advancement of laundry products reached a point where detergent alone was no longer sufficient for successful laundering (see Figure 10, bottom right). As explained by Peter Ward (2019):

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"*the development of the automatic washing machine did more to transform the housewife's lot than any other domestic appliance... The automatic washer also developed in tandem with a wide variety of soaps and detergents, cleaning agents adapted to both the demands of the new machines and the requirements of their users. The detergent makers themselves tutored these needs through advertising programmes that promoted their products relentlessly*" (p. 174).

Persil advertisement, 'Engineer', 1958

Ariel advertisement, 1987

Ariel Ultra washing powder advertisement, 1980s

Vanish Oxi-action advertisement, 2010

Figure 10: Detergent advertising that focus on science and technology

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Social proofing detergent choices: women just like you

In the 70s-80s, consumers were faced with an increasing number of detergent products to choose from. Competition between products was so fierce that Big Detergent even advertised against their own products (e.g. Daz Automatic ads advocating existing customers of regular Daz to switch to Automatic). Big Detergent clients increased production budgets to make laundry 'tests' even more ambitious and 'authentic' than before. By taking them out of slick, pristine kitchens into supermarkets and even entire streets, such 'laundry-tests' advertising aimed to be relatable, showing product testers as ordinary women who faced familiar laundry stains (e.g. sons' shirt collars and beetroot stains on tablecloths) and live in similar social class settings as those watching the ads. This technique is a good example of how advertising uses social proof to influence purchase decisions. It removes the cognitive load of having to distinguish between so many similar products by showing what 'ordinary women like you' choose. In 1977, Persil filmed an ad called the 'New Persil Test', about 66 women who live at the address Priory Road, Nottinghamshire, tested the new detergent to see if it washes better than before. The ad had high production values and was shot in the style of a factual news segment. Opening with a shot of the Gedling coalmine pit wheel head, cutting to aerial shots of Priory Road, and then a montage of different women living there, talking directly to an off-screen camera, seemingly unscripted, giving testimonials that the new Persil product washes better than their old product (see Figure 11). The advertising film was also well received by advertising practitioners, winning Persil an industry award for moving image production.

Figure 11: Stills showing different women in a 50-second 1977 Persil TV ad, the 'New Persil Test: Priory Road Nottingham'

So favoured was this "women like you" tactic that nearly a decade later in the late 80s, P&G adopted the same formula with a series of ads for Daz Automatic. Like the Persil Priory Road ads, these ads featured named 'real' women shoppers from all over Britain. The ads' narrative followed this same structure: a Daz rep and a hidden camera person goes to a supermarket in a UK market town like Sidcup or Dartford, approaches a shopper and invites her to try the new Daz product. Cut to the near future the same shopper is then interviewed at home and sharing how impressed she was after trying and want to stick to the new Daz product in future (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Stills of Daz Automatic advertisements (1985-1986)
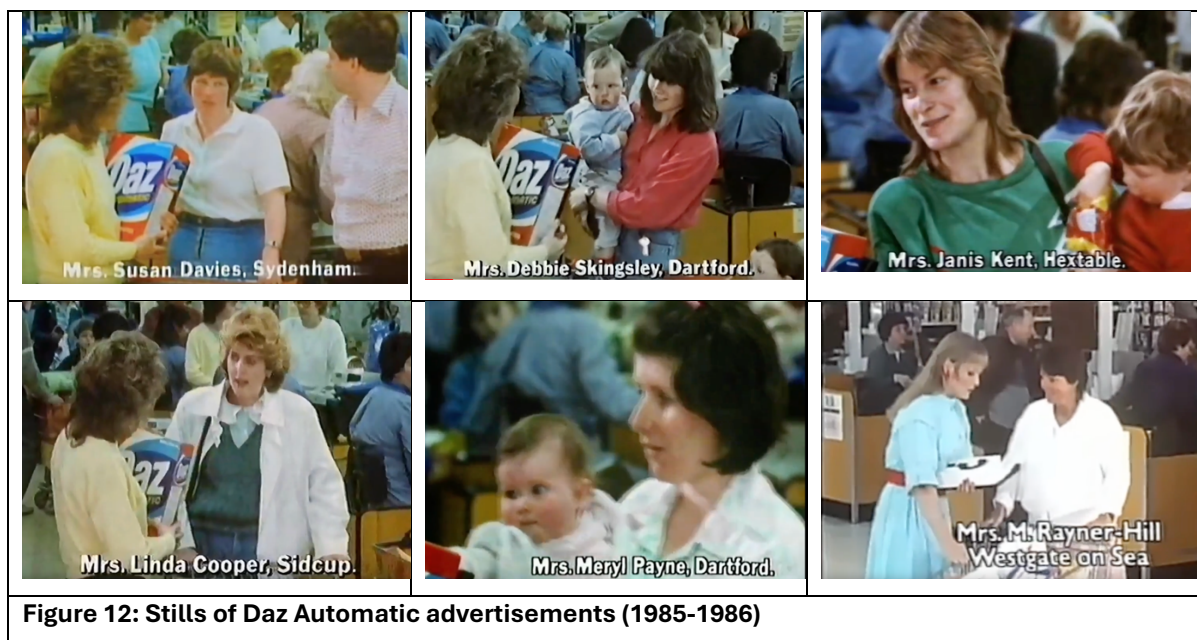
Linking detergent power to new femininities

As Jessamyn Neuhaus (2011) observes, by the late 1970s the traditional housewife figure in advertising started to fade. This was partly in response to the Second-wave feminist movements who took the fight for equality from the ballot box to cultural realms like domesticity and the workplace (Neuhaus, 2011). The seventies also marked the arrival of a new generation of men and women in senior roles in advertising agencies (Henry, 1986), whose own careers and lifestyles could no longer relate to isolated domestic life of the traditional housewife. These decades also saw "*the rapid expansion of professional, office and clerical occupations [that] called for lighter, more comfortable clothes, things that could be changed and laundered frequently*" (Ward, 2019, p. 185).

Big Detergent manufacturers matched the rapid rise of easy-case fabrics and automatic washing machines with fervent product innovation. Unilever made eight major changes to Persil synthetic detergent between 1960s and 1970s (Ward, 2019). Shifts in domestic and work lives meant there were more clothes to wear and more reasons to wash. For women, a new fashion system had emerged, emphasising "youth, informality, and simplicity… it offered buyers choices among alternative social identities and allowed them to express their individuality ((Ward, 2019, p. 185). As the voiceover in a 1982 Surf ad says "*trust today's Surf Automatic and get up and get on doing the things every mother does, and some of the things you want to do*" [our emphasis].

1980s-90s advertising showed women with different dispositions and wardrobes to those in the 50s ads. They are "casually but neatly dressed… these housewife mums aren't befuddled by sunshine in a box and they don't trip out to the clotheslines in an apron and heels" (Neuhaus, 2011, p. 51). Casting wardrobes and hairstyles reflected this. One sees fewer classically feminine dresses in the Big Detergent ads. Instead, housewives are portrayed in modern capsule wardrobes featuring many more separates than before: blazers, trousers, skirts, shirts, blouses, jeans and even sports kits (Figure 13). Brands like Daz featured successful female public figures like TV presenter Janet Ellis and tennis player Christine Truman in their advertising (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Daz advertisement, 1989, featuring TV presenter, Janet Ellis MBE, as interviewer.

Women's fashion in the 80s was typified by what Vogue magazine called "power dressing" - when the economy was booming, many women worked and asserted authority through what they wore (Ramzi, 2024).This was perhaps a paradox for detergent makers who had to mirror this trend in their ads even though their products operated solely in traditional domestic spaces. Detergent advertising evolved alongside these debates about gender, carefully threading the staple housewife figure into new settings and familial dynamics. In the 1980s best-selling author and sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2012) coined the "second shift" to highlight the double burden that women (not men) faced, being primarily responsible for housework and childcare on top of their day jobs. One Daz ad (1989) highlights this second shift through the story of 'Sharron Knox', shown as a bartender working in a pub. Talking directly to camera, she explains she wants to ensure her work blouse looks clean and white and switched to Daz liquid. Shots cut to her doing the laundry, her work blouse appearing among her children's clothes (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Daz advertisement, 1989

Second-wave feminism also challenged the idea that housework is a woman's natural duty and should instead be recognised as an underappreciated and undervalued job, deserving of recognition. Often using humour, Persil advertising scripts and storylines shifted away from the isolated housewife and instead dramatized the emotional dynamic between mothers and their 'ungrateful' children.

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Leveraging cultural wars

Beyond cleaning effectiveness, detergent brands also differentiated themselves on the promise of 'value for money' and found powerful, emotive ways to express this. From 1994-1996, Surf ran a series of detergent ads that featured female characters, Sharon Theodopolopoudos and Tracey Stubbs, from the popular long-running British sitcom *Birds of a Feather* (BOAF) (Figure14). They were scripted to align Surf with working class authenticity (Sharon) and more expensive brands with pretentiousness (Tracey). The ads were designed to be watched like a spin-off sitcom series, starting with the first one where Tracey mockingly questions Sharon's purchase of Surf: "*what's the matter? You a bit short? I pay a bit more for my branded powder, cos it's got stain digesters*". In subsequent ads, Surf invites audiences to mock Tracey's middle-class pretensions and sympathise with Sharon's clever ruse to reveal Tracey's 'true' working-class inclinations towards products with good value, i.e. Surf.

The decision to recruit BOAF characters in detergent advertising was likely strategic. BOAF is a show based in a 'nouveau rich' area in Essex. The show revolves everyday lives of sisters Sharon and Tracey and how they reconcile their previous North London working-class origins with their new move to Chigwell, a 'posh' neighbourhood in Essex. BOAF shows comedic exchanges between them and their neighbours, often engaging in themes of class, sibling rivalry and money concerns. The popularity of BOAF famously helped in creating the Essex Girl stereotype in the 1990s, a type of brash working-class woman in the southern, newly affluent English county whose "*slutty ways, common estuary vowels, fake designer clothes and stupidity featured in countless class-based jokes*" (Biressi and Nunn, 2013, p.40). Snobbery about this stereotype is deliberately played up and then subverted in the Surf ads. In one ad, 'Nuisance Call', Sharon is seen making a crank call to Tracey, using a clothes peg to pinch her nose and imitate an exaggerated 'posh' accent to trick her sister into admitting she secretly uses Surf because it is value for money (see Figure 15).
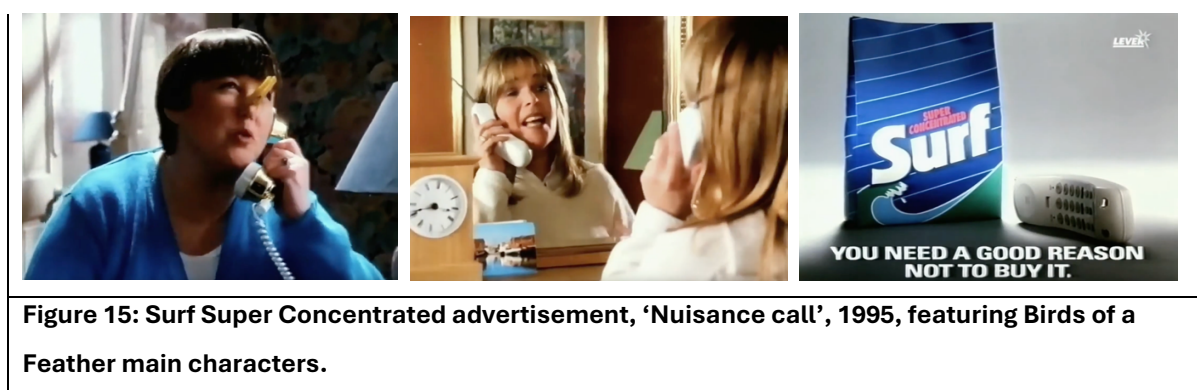

Figure 15: Surf Super Concentrated advertisement, 'Nuisance call', 1995, featuring Birds of a Feather main characters.

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In recruiting BOAF's main characters in its advertising, Surf conveys values of down-to-earth authenticity, resourcefulness and community often associated with working class cultures. Although it is impossible to say whether advertisers like Unilever deliberately stoked cultural wars, this strategy can be effective in further building loyalty and entrenching habits in consumption choices like detergent. In 2020, Surf continues to leverage the Essex Girl stereotype in their 'Perf with Surf' ads, casting reality TV star Dani Dyer, inciting agitated online threads on Mumsnet and Reddit.

The lesson here for eco-friendly detergent products is a cultural one. Although demand for more sustainable products is on the rise, it is worth remembering ethical products are often perceived as premium, elitist and financially out of reach for ordinary people. As additional context, 3.1 million people in the UK are currently affected by hygiene poverty with 2.6 million people struggling to afford to wash their clothes as a result of the cost of living crisis (Big Issue, 2024). Historically, ethical consumption has had an image problem, being seen as "*sanctimonious shopping: a status pursuit for the middle-classes*" (Littler, 2011, p. 34). According to a YouGov poll, globally two-thirds of consumers believe that sustainable products are expensive (Bansal, 2023). To make matters worse, both the working-classes and poorer countries have been made scapegoats of the ecological problems of rampant consumerism as demonstrated in television programmes like "The Devil Wears Primark" (Littler, 2011). How might eco laundry brands recover from this alienation with audiences who reject them based on perceived unjustified expense and unearned superiority? How might eco-detergent brands showcase their alignment with more of the values embodied by Sharon Theodopolopoudos, rather than Tracey Stubbs? Well-chosen brand ambassadors and cultural stories can help showcase how products fit into everyday life and shift perceptions.

Sensory pleasure, self-care, mental health, control & lifestyle

As sustainability became an expected norm for laundry advertising, other brands began to differentiate themselves with messaging that included sustainability, but only as part of a greater storytelling piece. Terms like formula/additive are still used to refer to the science of laundry, as can be seen in Ineos advertisements from 2023. Key techniques remain similar, leveraging testimonials, use of lab-coats, and referencing the science behind laundry to maintain expected points of parity with 'Big Laundry'. As of 2024, pristine laundry rooms and bright whites are still popular visual tools used to setup laundry.

A 2019 news article from The Guardian reported on the rise of 'cleanfluencers' (Mahdawi, 2019). The cultural cache of aspirational cleaning content on social media platforms has led the advent of content trends linked to hashtags such as #cleaningobsessed, #cleanwithme, #monthlyempties, and #dailyreset, on both TikTok and Instagram. These trends have popularised viewership of cleaning rituals of 'cleanfluencers'. Some of the most prominent in the UK currently are 'Mrs Hinch', 'The Queen of Cleaning', Laura Mountford (@lauracleanaholic on TikTok), Bea Elton (@cleanwithbeax on Instagram), Gemma Bray (@theorganisedmum on Instagram). This has opened a door for PR partnerships and paid sponsorships featuring cleaning products used by content creators.

Online and social media advertising emerges as a new channel of influence that enables deeper access into our personal lives. Using content marketing techniques and digitally 'native' ad formats, detergent brands are engaging with audiences at a more micro-level, via more mundane and everyday moments than was previously possible with television advertising. In the social media age, detergent advertising adopts a more intimate strategy, linking their products to discourses of personal self-care, sensory pleasure, mental health, lifestyle and control. According to survey research an overwhelming 90% of Millennials, 85% of GenZ believe brands must be 'real and organic' rather than 'perfect and packaged' (Cassidy, 2017). People are looking for content that is being shared with them by friends and family, and which they believe is truly authentic. Quite simply, brands showing ordinary moments where people are taking control of their own home, by doing laundry tasks, for example, bares the appearance of authenticity. Some brands and influencers now tie the topic of laundry and organisation together, forming a broader category of 'control'. An example of this is a Vanish advert from 2024 on TikTok where we see a brand representative starting their washing machine, then going on to clean their home using the washing machine timer as a dedicated cleaning timer. This advert, one of many popular adverts on Vanish's TikTok account, is an example of social content that makes self-management and control aspirational.

Following lifestyle and aspiration we see brands taking a more personal approach. Table 2 shows a category wide move to leverage pleasurable fragrances as key segments of their advertising messages and product designs, with Tallow and Ash claiming fragrances inspired by popular high-end perfumes. This theme of sensory pleasure appears to be more important amongst start-ups by comparison to 'big detergent'.

In an interview with for the Guardian, Dr Stephanie Baker said, "*The preoccupation with order and self-management flourishes during uncertain times as a self-improvement strategy*," (Mahdawi, 2019). In recent years the UK has faced much uncertainty, from Brexit, to Covid-19, to a change in political leadership in the 2024 general election. Cleanliness and organisational skills have a positive impact on both physical and psychological wellbeing (Ryback, 2016). As such, the rise in popularity of content related to cleaning and laundry could partially be attributed to these themes of control and mental health.

Algorithmic Rabbit Holes and Cleaning ASMR

The success of social trends and content creators seen above is a demonstration of yet another factor at work, specifically Big Tech. In Will Schoder's video essay titled, '*The Attention Economy – how they addict us*' (2016) he discusses how, "*... the economy of attention is the natural economy of cyberspace.*". This is important because it is a discussion of how recommendation algorithms used by TikTok and Instagram are designed to hold our attention for financial gain. Cleaning videos and social cleaning content are a form of visual stimulus that triggers an autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), giving us visual pleasure and helping us to relax when anxious (Selcho, 2022). The combination of these recommendation 'bubbles', to use a more well-known term, our own psychology and the business of content creation, create and perpetuate unrealistic ideals and aspirational standards of cleanliness that could also be a factor in leading us to wash excessively and be unnecessarily clean.

Factors shaping laundry habits

- *Investigating the cultural and psychological factors that made washing more frequently the norm for some.*
- *Understanding societal pressures and stigmas around cleanliness and body odour.*
- *Survey questions gauging current attitudes towards laundry.*

"There is more to laundry and bathing than the removal of dirt"
(Shove, 2003, p. 10)

Method

This review covers insights from academic research and news articles published in the last 20 years examining the factors shaping our laundry habits. The aim of the review was not to cover all the available research and it was not a systematic review, instead the goal was to identify important themes in the literature. Searches were conducted using Google Scholar with queries like "factors laundry habits" and "laundry cultural psychological factors". Initially, a selection of >20 relevant journal papers, conference proceedings, and news articles was made – then the papers were read, annotated, and content synthesised through the writing of the report below.

Introduction

Despite significant improvements in the environmental impact of washing machines with reductions in water and electricity usage per cycle in recent years (European Commission, 2021) — Technological improvements that reduce the impact of domestic laundry have been counteracted by the laundry habits of consumers in high-income countries, who have increased the amount of clothing they own and washing frequencies (Laitala, Klepp, & Boks, 2012). For example, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that wash loads in the UK increased by 9.6% from 6.2 billion to 6.8 billion wash loads per year between 2005 and 2014 (2016). The following sections of the report discuss the factors that could be driving increasing laundering.

Cultural factors: Clean to fresh

Shove. (2003, p. 401) calls laundry a system of systems, meaning that laundry is a complex household system that is comprised of different interdependent ingredients: "*what there is to wash, what washing involves (who does it, with what tools), and when and why it is done*". Focussing on the "*why*", various researchers have identified that changing consumer ideas about what constitutes cleanliness (in part influenced by advertising and manufacturers), have helped shape clothes washing behaviours (Shove, 2003). When washing machines were first introduced, manufacturers redefined 'cleanliness' as 'whiteness', rather than the removal of germs, to change the belief that boiling was needed (Pink, 2005). More recently, the need for washing has changed again, with consumers washing more frequently for 'freshness' of clothes rather than cleanliness (Spencer, Lilley, & Porter, 2015) . As Shove (2003, p. 402) puts it – "*never mind bacteria, dirt, and sweat, washing is also, and increasingly, about turning items that are fusty, musty, or tired into things that are fresh, scented, fluffy, and 'ready' to wear*". Persil's updated 2024 brand positioning in the US market "*That New Clothes Feeling*" (PR Newswire, 2024) and recently released *Wonder Wash* short-cycle product range (Unilever, 2024) reflect this shift towards seeing clothes cleaning as a fast, frequent, refresh aimed at enhancing the look and feel of clothes, over simply removing dirt and stains. As Jack's (2017) research in Sweden confirms, our approach to washing is becoming more about habit and convenience, quickly throwing things in the washing machine, and less about addressing any build-up of visible dirt.

Social conventions: Better safe than sorry

Social conventions around laundry are currently being hotly debated and experimented with online via the grassroots "No Wash" and "Low Wash" movements (Welin, 2024). At the same time, researchers have identified social conventions around hygiene and cleanliness (acquired through transgenerational forms of learning and heavily influenced by the advertising) as powerful influencers of our everyday laundry habits (Jack, 2013; Sahakian *et al.*, 2021). A process described as, a ratcheting upwards of cleanliness expectations and then normalisation of resource intensive washing patterns to meet those standards (Shove, 2003). To explore this issue Jack's (2013) study in Australia challenged 31 people to wear the same pair of jeans for three months without washing them. In interviews afterwards, discussing their regular laundry routines, the researcher identified, beyond obvious motivators for washing clothes like, habit, convenience, family, and status — at a higher level, certain hidden conventions were, indeed, highly influential on laundry behaviors. Jack (2013, p. 415) suggests it was almost like "*participants were reading from an invisible script, community censorship, and the self-interpretation of community expectations*". These collective conventions were hard to define, as they were only on the edge of participants' awareness – like unspoken signals that set standards on cleanliness. Social conventions reported in Jack's (2013) study and others in Europe include:

- Unacceptability of wearing the same clothes to the workplace for more than one day (Sahakian, et al., 2021).

- Fear of clothes smelling and other people picking up on odor (Jack, 2013). Conversely, clean clothes should smell like laundry products (Yates & Evans, 2016).

- Using duration of wear to assess cleanliness of clothing rather than soiling, leading to habitual washing (Sahakian, et al., 2021).

- Expectations around appearance of clothes, for example 'whites should be white' as a common sentiment (Sahakian, et al., 2021).

- Conventions around wash temperatures for certain materials, for example, bedlinens, towels, and baby clothes being washed at 60° (Miilunpalo & Räisänen, R, 2019).

- Conventions around laundry look and feel: towels should be soft fluffy; linen smelling fresh; and clothes non-creased (Mylan & Southerton, 2018)

Often these 'rules' around cleanliness and social acceptability are quite blurry which leads people to be hyper-vigilant and self-auditing of personal cleanliness (Jack, 2013). In other words, the ambiguity of social conventions around odor and appearance, mean that we are over cautious – adopting a 'better safe than sorry' approach – that could explain excessive washing.

Behaviours: Search and sniff

An interview study with 19 participants in the UK describes our laundry behaviours at an individual and household level (Mylan & Southerton, 2018). Echoing a survey in 2013 that showed women perform 'all' or 'most of' the laundry in couple households (Scott & Clery, 2013), all but two of the participants, were women. Managing laundry activities was defined by this group as a 'never-ending cycle' that centred on *co-ordination* with household employment schedules and other external events. Respondents combined doing a washing cycle with other domestic chores, for example, cooking a meal. Coordinating laundry with other mundane tasks was a way to manage personal schedules and create opportunities to free up time for leisure. Interestingly, a range of household objects, or signs, acted as 'barometers' for when washing could be done — "*dirty laundry baskets, sports bags, bedroom chairs, radiators and door frames were sites for anticipating and managing flows of clothing"* (Mylan & Southerton, 2018, p. 1141). The procedures for selecting items as ready for washing, were described by one participant as a process of "*search and sniff*" and the majority used rules of thumb around *smell*, *appearance* and *feel,* alongside frequency and longevity of use, to decide when to wash. Sweat and proximity to the body i.e. sportwear and underwear was an exception to the rule, as these items were mostly washed after one wear. *Making up a load* was also common practice, with items swept up into a wash, even if they were not yet ready, to fill up the washing machine. The Mylan and Southerton (2018) study clearly shows how laundry is strongly interconnected with social roles, layout / materials of the home, and external activities like paid and unpaid work times, school timetables and routinised leisure activities. These findings suggest that efforts to reduce the eco impact of laundry, need to move beyond laundry products and washing machines, to consider how these broader contextual factors could provide opportunities.

Psychology: Disgust beats eco ideals

Klint et al's (2024) recent research in Sweden, sought to uncover the deeper psychological factors that drive excessive laundering. They identified that underlying a need to wash clothing frequently is a high sensitivity to disgust. Disgust is something we all experience and is defined as an evolutionarily conditioned emotion originally designed to protect us from diseases. However, since pathogens are invisible to the human eye, we focus on the potential presence of infectious agents through superficial visual, auditory and olfactory cues (Klint, Peters, & Johanson, 2024). In the context of laundry, this means the presence of stains and odours triggers disgust as an emotional response. A second emotional driver of excessive laundry habits was *shame* — A high sensitivity to the fear of social stigma for wearing unclean clothes among friends and colleagues motivated people to wash more frequently. Finally, the study also uncovered how, again, a high sensitivity to deviations from the current *cleanliness norms* (societal normalisation of what it means to be clean and how laundering should be done) also led to more frequent washing.

Interestingly, these three psychological constructs were associated with frequent use of washing machines even among those who cared about their carbon footprint. Meaning that, the risk of societal pushback often takes priority over more abstract intentions, such as, reducing emissions (Niranjan, 2024). Therefore, to reduce the environmental impact of laundering, it may be better to target the preceding decisions that slowly generate the need to wash, rather than the act of running the washing machine (Klint, Peters, & Johanson, 2024). This is particularly important as laundry routines are a prime example of an everyday habit that hides an environmentally taxing practice (Jack, 2013). We are often not thinking about laundry as a process of consuming water, energy, and chemicals as we go about the weekly routine of cleaning our clothes. In this context, the authors argue that instead of asking "*how do we get people to wash less?*" and "*how do we do it in a more environmentally friendly way?*" we should be asking "*how do we get people to generate less laundry, specifically laundry that needs to be cleaned by a washing machine?*" (Chalmbers University of Technology, 2024). The study argues efforts should be made to extend the use of clothes between washes by desensitising feelings of disgust (Klint, Peters, & Johanson, 2024). This might be achieved through messaging about how normal it is to re-wear things, or about how little dirt or germs clothes typically pick up (Niranjan, 2024).

Future laundry research survey

This section outlines a survey designed to further explore and validate the cultural meanings associated with cleanliness, household laundry routines, and social conventions identified in this report. To further explore people's everyday laundry habits on the ground the survey comprises of three sections: Perceptions of Cleanliness and Hygiene; Routines and Habits; Social Standards and Influences. Table 3 below includes a set of proposed survey questions for each category. Rather than a representative sample, we suggest a purposeful sampling method is used to focus on households with high laundry volumes, or other high impact groups. It is advisable to run a pilot survey with a small sample group and then use their feedback to refine the wording, flow, and clarity of the questions.

Table 3: Laundry Habits Survey: Based on the report findings the authors have outlined a set of survey questions to explore further routinised laundry habits.

Perceptions of Cleanliness and Hygiene	
How often do you think clothing should be washed after being worn?	(a) After every use (b) After 2–3 wears (c) After more than 3 wears (d) It depends on the activity/occasion
How often do you rewash clothes because they just need a refresh?	(a) Never (b) Once a week (c) 2-3 times a week (d) Always
What signposts that a garment is clean to you?	(a) The fact it's been through a wash cycle (b) The smell of the garment (c) The look of the garment (d) Other (please specify)
Why is "clean" clothing important to you and your household?	(Open text field)
Routines and Habits	
In your household, who usually decides when laundry needs to be done?	(a) I decide on my own (b) A family member (e.g., partner, parent) decides (c) It's a shared decision (d) It follows a routine/schedule (e) Other (please specify)

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How often do you do laundry each week?	(a) Once a week or less (b) 2–3 times a week (c) 4–5 times a week (d) Daily (e) Other (please specify)
What most influences when you do your laundry?	(a) Work schedules (b) Full laundry baskets (c) Running out of clothes (d) Enough dirty clothes for a full washing load (e) Specific day(s) of the week (f) Other? Please state
What activities create most demand for clean clothes in your household?	(a) Adults going to work (b) Children going to school or college (c) Social events (d) Sports and leisure activities (e) Other? Please state
What item of clothing never, or rarely, gets washed?	Open text field – Answers can be shown via word cloud
Social Conventions and Influences	
To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Wearing the same clothes more than once without washing is unhygienic"	(Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly agree)
How would you feel if someone noticed you were wearing the same clothes two days in a row?	(a) Not concerned (b) Slightly concerned (c) Moderately concerned (d) Very concerned
What are the main reasons you might rewash clothes that you think could be worn again?	(Select all that apply) (a) I'm worried others will notice I've worn it before (b) I prefer the "just-washed" smell (c) It's part of my routine (d) Habit (e) Pressure from family members (f) Other (please specify)

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What factors have had an effect on your laundry habits in recent years?	(a) Wanting to save time (b) Wanting to save energy (c) Wanting to save environment (d) Wanting to save money (e) Washing machine or detergent changed (f) Other? Please state
What do you think are the social expectations in your community, or among your friends, regarding how often laundry should be done?	(Open-ended question)

Conclusions

To understand what, why and how we launder, our report traces a cultural history of cleanliness and the cleaning industry in the Western world. Our findings conclude that this has been a mixed picture of change and continuity. Some of our preoccupation with cleanliness as self-presentation and our concerns for looking good persist, as drivers of today's laundry habits, whilst social pressures related to group status and identity continue to be expressed in various ways. How we do laundry has changed dramatically in terms of frequency, duration and techniques, which has been exacerbated by long-cultivated expectations for efficiency and productivity, and the result of industrial capitalism giving us unprecedented availability and access to affordable clothes. Unabated competition for market share between Big Detergent brands alongside the development of washing machine technology and laundry-related infrastructures, has meant that our modern laundry system is bloated with a surfeit of unnecessary, even pointless, features, ingredients, and 'scientific' techniques. The prominence of the symbolism of whiteness as a proxy for cleanliness has been replaced by other embodied, sensory criteria such as smell and emotions. Social norms regarding who is, and should be, responsible for laundry work continues to be women. Shifting social and cultural expectations and norms of femininity over the decades has been a rich vein that have both fed and been reinforced by detergent advertising's tactics and messages. While the Covid pandemic increased cleaning habits/routines and public sensitivity to germs (or dirty conditions that encourage germs), social media and internet technologies have enabled increased public visibility of how we navigate 'germ fears' and helped more laundry products to insert themselves into deeply personal conversations about mental health and self-care.

Creating New Normals

Current efforts to reduce the environmental impacts of household consumption that only focus on individual attitudes and behaviour change through more/better information, environmental appeals, or techno-efficiency measures, are not having impact at the scale needed to meet the challenges we face (Ho, 2015) (Sahakian, et al., 2021). Instead of focussing on individuals, social practice researchers argue that to reduce the eco impact of laundry, we need to focus on collectively shared elements of laundry work for biggest impact (Shove, 2003) (Godin, Laakso, & Sahakian, 2020) (Sahakian, et al., 2021). Using Shove's model (Figure 16) that means fostering adaptations in three inter-connected areas that make up our everyday laundry routines:

- *Materials:* Products and technologies that enable and constrain certain ways of doing the laundry.
- *Knowledge & Skills:* Skills, know-how, and techniques you need to perform laundry which are socially learned and passed on (e.g. from family, peers, or media).
- *Meanings:* Cultural beliefs, social norms, and values attached to laundry practice (e.g., the idea that it's unprofessional to re-wear clothes to work).

Evolution of Laundry

The most recent research on shifting laundry habits aims to call into question, or disrupt, our habits, to enable more sustainable routines, forms of know-how, conventions and expectations to take hold across our daily life. In this spirit, we have developed three communication briefs, outlined in the next section, that are designed to kick-start creative campaigns that could build on this existing research.

Figure 16: Adapted from Shove (2003) this diagram shows how laundry can be viewed as routine practice made up of three combined elements.

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Creative Briefs

Redefining Clean: Challenging Cultural Cleanliness Norms

Creative Brief 1	Client	Task
	Ecover	Redefine clean. Get people to ditch 'perfectly clean' clothes. Champion clean *enough* clothes.

Why is this brief here
Decades of promoting ever-increasing standards of cleanliness have got us into a culture of over-washing, and meeting unattainable and unsustainable levels of clean in our laundry.

Those who don't meet the 'right levels' of cleanliness in clothing or who embrace different laundry norms face social stigma or judgement.

How do we challenge puritanical cultures of 'cleanism' in laundry or flip that around, encourage 'dirtier' clothing culture? How can we get people talking about laundry standards and shifting habits? How can we creatively shift our perceptions of what "clean" means, by challenging the norm that clothes must be freshly washed after each wear. The campaign should promote the idea that cleanliness is about freshness and care, not constant laundering.

Who are we trying to influence.
Young people who are in the process of habit formation who may frequently wash clothes due to social expectations (e.g., wanting to appear well-groomed) or habit.

Insight
Many people wash clothes out of routine or due to invisible social pressures, setting themselves unrealistic and unsustainable standards of what is 'perfectly clean'. However, research has shown that often 'clean enough' is not only better for the planet it's also no worse than 'perfectly clean'.

Key message
Ditch perfectly clean clothes, embrace clean enough clothes.

What do we want them to do as a result of this communication?
Discuss laundry standards in their peer and family groups experiment with washing less. Share what 'clean enough' means and how it challenges perfectly clean laundry standards.

How do we expect communications to work towards achieving this?
By making visible social standards and conventions

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Channels	Deadline
TBC	TBC

Thought starters:
1. Can we showcase or even celebrate unorthodox laundry habits and rhythms?
2. Start a dirtier wardrobe movement, 'some things are better dirty'
2. Ecover could champion the 'germophile'
   - Find famous/influencer germophiles to counteract the growing number of celebrities coming out as germophobes.

Hack Laundry: Build Communities of Laundry Hackers

Creative Brief 2	Client	Task
	Ecover	Build laundry hackers communities

Why is this brief here
How can we hack laundry to make it better for everyone and for the planet? Laundry knowledge and skills are not just individual capabilities, but socially shared know-how, habits, and practical understandings that evolve over time. How do we change our collective understanding of what doing the laundry effectively looks like. There are lots of simple tricks and tips out there that help you 'wash' clothes (e.g. spot clean, airing, sunning, etc) without frequent washing loads – not only less resource intensive but also convenient, fast and fun - what are they?

Who are we trying to influence
Fashionistas or people who like fashion and have lots of clothes.

Insight
People who love fashion also care about sustainability, but they do not have the knowledge or time to research the environmental cost of frequent washing and find out how they can change? They are busy but they are also social and thrive on networks – they love tips and hacks, especially if they are fun and easy.

Key message and tone-of-voice
Hack your laundry, share your hacks. TOV should be fun, engaging, not worthy or earnest about saving the planet.

What do we want them to do as a result of this communication?
Break the cycle of washing clothes in a resource intensive way and start to experiment with new ways of doing the washing.

How do we expect communications to work towards achieving this?
By getting people to trial alternative approaches and see that their clothes are still acceptably clean.

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Channels	Deadline
TBC	TBC

Thought starters

1. Ecover's launch its own washing frequency/number of wears guidelines.
    o Ideally on the box.
    o A washing frequency sticker for washing machines.
    o Could combine with a handy laundry symbols guide chart

2. Champion the floor-drobe and the 'chair-drobe'. The place where clothes go before they go back into; the wardrobe, the chest of drawers or the laundry basket.

3. Become the guru of clothes care advice providing alternatives to constant washing:
    o Hang up your clothes to air them.
    o Spot wash individual stains and re-wear.
    o Put clothes away again if they are not in need of washing

Workplace Fresh: Rethinking Office Clothing

Creative Brief 3	Client	Task
	Ecover	Make repeating clothes in the office cool.

Why is this brief here
Challenge the workplace expectation that a different outfit should be worn every day at the office. How do we make wearing the same clothes at work a cool thing to do? In some occupations such as nursing, uniforms are standard, and they would be more efficient to launder. Can we reimagine uniforms for more workplaces? How can we reduce the social pressure to over-launder and promoting a more relaxed, sustainable approach to office clothing.

Who are we trying to influence
Office workers and employers, especially those in professional environments with strict dress codes or unspoken expectations about maintaining an impeccable appearance. Professionals who feel pressure to have different outfits every day of the work week.

Insight
In many workplaces, employees feel pressured to wear freshly washed clothing daily, even if the clothes aren't dirty, due to norms about professionalism, hygiene, and appearance. There are unwritten rules about appearing in a variety of different clothes each day in the workplace. This creates a cycle of frequent washing, driven by social expectations rather than actual cleanliness needs.

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Key message
"Professional doesn't have to mean constant change". Encourage both employees and employers to shift their focus from freshly laundered clothes to maintaining a polished appearance through good garment care, mindful re-wearing, and flexible dress codes.

What do we want them to do as a result of this communication?
Normalise more sustainable wardrobe practices.

How do we expect communications to work towards achieving this?
By making wearing the same clothes cool and getting people to trial wearing stuff to work more frequently.

Channels	Deadline
TBC	TBC

Thought starters:
Adapt the current 'WEAR MORE, WASTE LESS, WASH RIGHT' messaging to '**WEAR MORE, WASH LESS**' as a clear message to own the idea of thinking twice before laundering.

1. Champion emerging trends, leveraging fashion categories like 'basics' in a way that informs and helps reduce over-washing.

2. Identify prominent figures to collaborate and corroborate your messaging.

3. Help make work preparedness less stressful, with help forms of professional dress.

4. Lobby for clearer clothing 'number of wears' labelling.
    o To include symbols for recommended washing frequency created by Ecover

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