Critical Report on the Process of Digitising and Datafying a Wardrobe Collection

This report reflects on the process of collecting, digitising, and datafying a personal wardrobe of mine, consiting of 20 clothing items. The aim was to transform material garments into a structured dataset that could serve as both descriptive and analytical record. The exercise demonstrated how everyday objects acquire new meaning when translated into data, and how curatorial choices shape the outcome. It also offered an opportunity to connect practical steps with theories of classification, metadata, and the social construction of data.

The process began with selecting 20 representative garments. I chose a diverse range to capture variation in type, colour, and use. Each item was entered into a Excel spreadsheet, which became the central tool of digitisation. I defined a set of variables to structure the collection. Objective attributes included garment type, colour, size, age, and brand. Subjective or contextual ones included where I would wear the item (e.g., at home, at school, in public, or at a party) and when I might wear it (e.g., "when I want to show off"). I also noted whether the garment was new or second-hand, adding a dimension of consumption and value.

Unlike museum cataloguing, which often requires precise measurement or photographic evidence, my process relied on visual inspection and translation into categories. This highlighted how datafication is not just the capture of qualities but their interpretation and abstraction into a system of variables.

The choice of variables was itself a curatorial act. Conventional categories like type, size, and colour echo fashion catalogues, while personal ones such as "when I need to dress up" foreground my own lived experience. At the same time, I excluded attributes like fabric texture, durability, or purchase price. These omissions reveal a bias toward visible and social dimensions rather than technical or economic ones. The dataset therefore presents not a neutral account but a portrait shaped by perspective, emphasising taste, identity, and context of use over material specification.

Reflecting critically on these design decisions, it becomes clear how central they were to shaping the dataset. By including variables linked to personal contexts of use, I oriented the collection toward subjective meaning-making rather than standardisation. This makes the dataset less interoperable with commercial or institutional catalogues but richer in capturing affective and situational dimensions of clothing.

My decisions about what to include and exclude established the boundaries of what the dataset could reveal. For example, by omitting purchase price I removed an economic perspective, while by privileging brand and colour I tied garments to cultural and aesthetic markers. The dataset thus reflects my priorities as much as the garments themselves, foregrounding social performance and identity over material or financial considerations.

This aligns with the idea that datasets are never transparent windows onto reality but selective representations. My decision to include subjective categories transforms garments into markers of social behaviour, while choices about what to omit illustrate the exclusions built into the system. In this sense, the dataset not only describes clothing but expresses a worldview.

Two theoretical perspectives are particularly useful here. First, the literature on classification shows that categories are cultural constructs that embed values and exclusions. Jacqueline Wernimont argues that quantification is an interpretive practice of world-making (Wernimont, 2021), while Robert Kitchin insists that data is not simply given but actively generated, or capta (Kitchin, 2022). My category "where will I wear this?" exemplifies this: it would not appear in a commercial clothing database, but it makes sense for my personal use. Classification thus not only organises information but shapes what can be seen and what remains invisible.

Second, scholarship on metadata clarifies how meaning is structured. In my dataset, colour or size can be treated as data, while categories like "new/second-hand" or "when worn" function as metadata, framing interpretation. Amelia Acker emphasises that metadata are never neutral descriptors but carry institutional, cultural, and ideological values that shape how collections can be accessed, interpreted, and controlled (Acker, 2021). This highlights that the distinction between data and metadata is not fixed: what counts as primary or secondary depends on purpose, context, and the worldview embedded in the system. These insights emphasise that decisions about variables and formats are not technical details but central to knowledge production.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that digitising objects is not a neutral process of recording but an interpretive act. The dataset is shaped by curatorial decisions, personal framing, and the affordances of the spreadsheet tool. Everyday garments become data points embedded in cultural and social meaning, confirming the view of data practices as affective and material forces.

References:

Kitchin, Rob. 2022. "Critical Data Studies." In The Data Revolution: Big Data, Open Data, Data Infrastructures and Their Consequences, 21–41. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Acker, Amelia. 2021. "Metadata." In Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data, edited by Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho, Annie Ring, Catherine D'Ignazio, and Kristin Veel, 321–29. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Wernimont, Jacqueline. 2021. "Quantification." In Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data, edited by Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho, Annie Ring, Catherine D'Ignazio, and Kristin Veel, 427–31. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.