The Process of Digitizing and Datafying a Wardrobe Collection

This report reflects on the process of collecting, digitizing, and datafying a personal wardrobe of mine, consisting 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, color, and use. Each item was entered into an Excel spreadsheet, which became the central tool of digitization. I defined a set of variables to structure the collection. Objective attributes included garment type, color, 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 color resembles 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 in my own curation toward visible and social dimensions, rather than technical or economic ones.

The dataset therefore does not present a neutral account, but a portrait shaped by perspective, emphasizing taste, identity, and context of use over material specification. Reflecting on these decisions shows how central they were in shaping the dataset. By including personal context-of-use variables, I was not recording neutral attributes but constructing a meaning-rich view of my wardrobe that foregrounds identity and affective use rather than standardized description. This makes the dataset less interoperable with commercial or institutional catalogues but richer in capturing affective and situational dimensions of clothing (Wernimont, 2021).

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

This aligns with the idea that datasets are never transparent, but selective representations. My decision to include subjective categories transforms garments into markers of social behavior, 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.

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 organizes information but shapes what can be seen and what remains invisible.

Second, scholarship on metadata clarifies how meaning is structured. In my dataset, color or size can be treated as data, while categories like "new/second-hand" or "when worn" function as metadata, framing interpretation. Amelia Acker emphasizes 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 emphasize that decisions about variables and formats are not technical details but central to knowledge production. Taken together with the earlier discussion of classification, this reinforces that digitizing objects is not neutral 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, a dynamic clearly visible in the ways my wardrobe becomes reconfigured through digitization.

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