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Fashion

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Edited by

Damayanthie Eluwawalage

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Post-Purchase Consumer Behaviour, Sustainability and Its Influence on Fashion Identity

Ruth Marciniak and Marwa Gad Mohsen

Abstract

The chapter aims to explore how sustainability may be used as a form of self-expression, and whether it can endow individuals with an identity associated with ethical consumption at the post purchase consumption stage. Exploratory research was undertaken to investigate sustaining decisions and sustainability practices. It draws upon Jacoby et al's disposition model to explore factors extrinsic and intrinsic to the product in relation to fashion clothing sustainability and identity formation.¹ Mixed qualitative methods were employed. The study's findings indicate that clothing and fashion post-purchase sustainability relates to high level of involvement with the clothing and fashion item together with product attributes, benefits and situational factors relating to the product. A conclusion of the study is that an expressed ethical identity does not mean that individuals will behave in an ethical manner. Rather, other identities emerged relevant to the individuals self concept and image.

Key Words: Sustainability, identity, ethical consumption, clothing and fashion, female consumers.

1. Introduction

The impetus for this chapter stemmed from both increased academic interest in ethical consumption together with media awareness of consumers' desire for a more sustainable way of living.² Ethical consumption can be defined as a mechanism through which social values are considered as part of economic decisions in purchase of goods and services.³ Ethical consumption can also be about sustainability in that ethical or moral decisions are made about sustaining the environment. To this end, various theoretical models have been presented in academic literature that explains sustainability.

Sustainability has become a key issue in fashion where it is standard practice for UK clothing retailers to develop corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies.⁴ In addition, a growing consumer interest in the environment and the well-being of societies has led to the emergence of the notion of the ethical consumer.⁵ It depicts *socially conscious consumers* wherein 'moral principles and standards guide individual or group behaviour as they obtain, use, and dispose of goods and services'.⁶ Increasing opportunities have become available for consumers to engage in the purchase of ethical fashion, accordingly, within consumer behaviour literature, ethical consumption behaviours at the acquisition stage have been amply

examined.⁷ In addition, there is an emerging body of literature on ethical consumption and disposition.⁸

More recently, the relationship between ethical consumption and self-identity has been explored by Connelly and Prothero wherein, being green is identified as being one aspect of an individual's self-identity.⁹ Shaw and Shui's work support this as they view ethical obligation and self-identity as key elements in motivating ethical consumption practices.¹⁰ However, as they point out, an expressed ethical identity does not guarantee that an individual will make an ethical choice.

Taking this forward, there is scant research on post-consumption behaviour with regard to *sustainability and self-identity*. Literature establishes that acquisitions serve to extend the self, that is, have symbolic value and thereby function to reinforce self-identity.¹¹ Whilst Albinsson and Perera extend research on relationships, values, and self-concept in consumers' disposition behaviours by arguing that 'the self concept in consumer disposition behaviours is also prominent in consumer disposition decisions', the premise of the present study is that the self-concept may also be prominent in consumer sustainability decisions i.e. factors symbiotic with self-concept may be associated with why fashion items are sustained or held on to.¹²

This study aims to explore factors at the backdrop of sustaining behaviours in post-purchase consumption of clothing and fashion and how these link to various self-identities. It looks for answers to the question: do we hold on to clothing because we are ethical consumers and should not discard hence expressing some kind of ethical identity or, alternatively, do we hold on to fashion items to express ourselves in other ways, for instance through a fashion identity wherein we hold on to designer clothes or a creative identity expressed through refashioning/reshaping items?

Towards this end, an empirical research is undertaken drawing upon Jacoby et al.'s factors proposed as related to disposal decisions; these include level of involvement and self-concept comprising psychological factors of the decision maker, product attributes and benefits constituting product-related factors, as well as exploring situational factors.¹³

2. Literature Review

The concept of sustainability supports a society in meeting its economic and social needs without causing damage to the environment, which is the antithesis of consumerism, identified by Hume as 'the effects of gathering and purchasing material possessions to increase happiness and social position'.¹⁴ However, despite corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives within the fashion industry, fast fashion retailers invigorate their products on a frequent basis through the provision of new styles; in doing so, they successfully stimulate demand, increasing the number of purchases made and, as a direct consequence, contributes to an increased landfill.¹⁵

In part, a reaction to this is an increased growth of interest in social responsibility in the apparel and clothing industry manifest in clothes producers getting involved in various eco-conscious initiatives along the supply chain to improve their consciousness of their responsibility to the environment as well as to encourage eco-conscious consumption by consumers.¹⁶ Motives for basing consumption decisions on moral ideologies can be understood to be consumers acting as part of a collective effort to, for example, save the environment, but also as Kozinets and Handelman identify as a complex emotional expression of a person's individuality.¹⁷ However, a growing body of knowledge postulates that whilst consumers are aware of ethical and environment problems related to purchasing of fashion products, such awareness does not have much influence on their actions. Hence contradictions arise wherein consumers may exhibit interest in sustainable consumption and purchase, which does not necessarily translate into actionable behaviour.¹⁸

Furthermore, it is established within literature that acquisitions serve to extend the self through offering a symbolic value and a self-identity and disposing of possessions may embody disposing or 'letting go' of a self that no longer operates an individual's self-concept.¹⁹ Yet, limited research has been undertaken in terms of exploring the relationship between self-identity and sustainability in post-purchase consumption.

3. Conceptual Model

Various models have been drawn upon to explore disposition in consumer behaviour. Joung and Park-Poaps applied Theory of Reasoned Action to explore subject norms of family and friends on clothing disposal behaviours; Ture drew on Appadurai's concept of value to illustrate how disposition can transfer and create value by facilitating exchanges among consumers; and Albinsson and Perera developed a framework of voluntary disposition to explore the importance of relationships, values, and self-concept in consumers' disposition behaviours.²⁰ Philips and Segó's work also examined identity; however, their work was limited to exploring personality types (packrats and purgers).²¹

Moreover, whilst self-concept and identity are acknowledged as part of Albinsson and Perera's framework, their work does not take into account the product itself that is being disposed, that is, its attributes and benefits, which, along with characteristics of the individual, are identified in Jacoby et al.'s work on disposition decisions.²² Hence, disposal behaviour was selected to provide the theoretical underpinnings of this study; this is given that by utilising factors that influence disposal, the study can uncover their relationship to sustaining behaviours and self-identities.

Firstly, psychological factors of the decision maker include attitudes in terms of cognitions and affects, image, identity and involvement, all of which can effectively be communicated via clothing and fashion.²³ In all, clothing is a

publicly visible product wherein involvement with it is based on individual consumer needs, values and interests.²⁴ Therefore, the level of product involvement is central to understanding consumer decision-making behaviour and an understanding of a person's relationship with their possessions, with an extreme relationship being when the individual's possession is a central part of their lives.²⁵

Secondly, factors intrinsic to the product include both product attributes and product benefits, which affect the disposal of goods. With regards to fashion brands, Bain and Moutino indicate that the brands that are perceived to have positive attributes are more likely to be purchased.²⁶ In turn, perceived product attributes may influence disposal behaviour. For example, as in the case with organic food, organic cotton products may be perceived to be of higher quality and therefore retained for longer periods by the owner. Park and Sullivan point out that an examination solely of product attributes neglects consideration of the psychological benefits that can be obtained from products.²⁷ Puth, Mostert and Ewing define benefits as what consumers seek when purchasing a product, that is, end states or values that consumers wish to achieve.²⁸

Thirdly, situational factors are factors that are extrinsic to the product and include circumstances surrounding the purchase or use of the product.

4. Methodology

The research takes on an exploratory design that aims to probe a small sample of respondents to achieve in-depth insights. The researchers used a purposive criterion-based sampling procedure to select a target sample of females ranging in age from 21 to 65 years in the UK.²⁹ Data collection consisted of fourteen in-depth interviews; one expert paired-interview and one focus group. Data collection along the three methods was undertaken concurrently and data was analysed as it was being collected. The interview guide and focus group guides were designed based on the variables identified in Jacoby's et al.'s model. Thematic analysis was used to bring out the key themes and their supportive quotes.³⁰

Based on the individual narratives and the group interactions, themes emerged that were pieced together to form a comprehensive image of the collective experience. By studying the themes in relation to existing literature, an understanding of the key factors and variables at play was established and the researchers could build a valid argument backed by the patterns and themes identified in the empirical findings.

5. Results

Findings are presented here, organised by grouping of factors relating to level of product involvement; product attributes and benefits and; situational factors concerned with the product.

A. Characteristics of the Individual: Level of Product Involvement

As consumers themselves, experts in the paired-interview reflected on their high involvement/interest in fashion as a reason why they would be reluctant to dispose of items of clothes. As experts, fashion and clothing is important to their self-identity. This was evident from one of the expert respondents who held on to designer clothes despite them no longer having any functional use; for example: ‘I bought an Armani suit in 1997 and I still keep it though it does not suit me anymore and I do not wear it’.³¹ Explicitly highlighting involvement with the clothing item itself rather than in its being *in-fashion*. In contrast, the non-expert respondents exhibited a different influence of level of involvement. From the analysis of their responses, it could be argued that a high level of interest in fashion cycles would lead to a propensity to dispose of clothes if they fall out of fashion.

Level of product involvement was also manifest in some of the respondents’ interest in re-fashioning items. In general, there was interest in using and wearing things made with their own hands or refashioning through, for example, the addition of accessories, For example:

If I buy something from Primark with buttons, I will change the buttons. I can sew.... I am interested in crafts. I don’t do it always for fashion. I do it to be different.³²

Reasons for refashioning, as indicated in the quote above, were as a form of creative self-expression rather than any ethical reasons. In turn, creative expression serves to stimulate a desire to hold on to the clothing item. Some of them indicated a ‘make do and mend mentality’, that is, if it is still ‘OK’ then keep it. Again, this behaviour was not due to environmental reasons. Rather, it was a mentality formed through upbringing and an expression of the respondents’ family identity, as evident in the following quote from one respondent: ‘I was brought up in a household that was quite puritanical. You wear clothes until they wear out and I adhere to that’.³³

B. Intrinsic Factors: Product Attributes and Benefits

Quality as a product attribute played an important role in sustaining behaviour. In addition, other attributes were perceived as more desirable than association with ethical practices. For example: ‘I care more about how clothes look and the price. I don’t really think about where it was made’.³⁴ Rather, other concerns, such as money, took a higher priority, for example, ‘I don’t have enough money for concerns’.³⁵ Whilst respondents in the focus group indicated that they did have ‘a responsibility to shop ethically’, they admitted that this was not always manifest in their behaviour. For example, in terms of realising sustainability through second-hand purchase of garments, opinions of the focus group converged on the theme that ‘We don’t buy second hand because we don’t like the idea of someone else

having worn our clothes'.³⁶ Such a perspective highlights the importance of *own self-concept* and clothing as a medium expressing it.

In terms of fashion as an attribute, as indicated above, respondents who expressed a keen interest and were highly involved in clothes and fashion, reported that they disposed of items out of fashion. However, alternatively, others indicated that there are always reasons to keep such items in case the fashion returned: 'I would not get rid of something if it was out of fashion if I really love it'.³⁷

Product attributes of style, fit and suitability also influenced some respondents' decision to keep hold of their clothes. For example:

An age thing is going on...the older you are the comfortable you are with something that would work for you. You don't follow the catwalks; for example, a maxi dress may look beautiful on an 18 year old but on a 40 year old it is so ironic.³⁸

This quote suggests that, for some consumers these attributes take precedent over fashion attributes. Yet, what is evident, all of these factors, along with product benefits such as comfort, which was frequently cited as a reason for keeping on to particular items of clothing, contribute to an individual's self worth, self image and identity. Further examples included: 'I tend to think of clothes as armour plating at work',³⁹ 'I have got power dressing clothes',⁴⁰ 'Clothes are important to my self-image',⁴¹ 'Probably not the brands but certain colours, shapes and cuts that I like to wear'.⁴²

C. Situational Factors: Circumstances of Acquisition

Attachment to possessions was a commonly cited reason for holding on to clothing and fashion. For example: 'Even if worn out, I can't possibly dispose of it, I would keep it for its sentimental sense to me';⁴³ 'Hand me downs from family have brought me sentimental satisfaction'.⁴⁴ Such attachments serve to express the respondent's identity in terms of anchoring their self-concept.⁴⁵ Furthermore, a common theme among all respondents was that whether a reasonably priced or expensive item is purchased to use in attending an event, the intention was usually to keep and re-use it.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Clothing and fashion are complex domains. Fashion plays a major role in decisions regarding consumption, and as with ethical consumption, serves to *mark* an individual's personal identity.⁴⁶ They function as being highly effective in communicating to others and reinforcing to ourselves a sense of self, which as Ekstrom and Salomonson point out, influence some people to discard clothes, or alternatively, hold on to them.⁴⁷ In addition, individuals have both symbolic associations and emotional attachments with their clothing, which can promote the

decision to keep clothes.⁴⁸ Relationships with clothing can be long-term and the attachments strong, perhaps more so than any other consumer product. In addition, clothing as a category of consumer goods has high potential for sustainability, that is, through reuse, refashioning and recycling.⁴⁹

The research explored the link between post-purchase ethical fashion consumption and associated self-identities communicated. The findings of the study indicate that, with regards to individual decision maker's characteristics, the following factors contribute to sustaining of fashion and clothing items: a high level of interest in/involvement with the item, investing creatively in the garment through refashioning, and a personal trait manifest in a make do and mend mentality developed via family upbringing. Product attributes and benefits that influence an individual to hold on to clothes include: the quality of the clothing; its ability to express the identity of the wearer; design, suitability, fit and style; comfort; and the extent to which the individual likes the clothing item regardless of whether it is in fashion or not.

Finally, a situational factor that impacts on an individual's decision to sustain a piece of clothing is the circumstances around the possession, that is, the emotional, sentimental or nostalgic value of the item. None of the results presented in the chapter indicate that sustaining behaviours were a consequence of ethical consumption decisions. Hence, what is evident is that sustainable behaviours contribute to a distinct identity, for examples: for individuals highly involved in fashion – a fashion identity; for those influenced by their upbringing – a family identity; and for those interested in forging their own self-concept through refashioning – a creative identity. However, an ethical identity driven by ethical consumption did not emerge as the gap between attitudes towards ethical consumption and action continued to stand out. Findings support the work of Belk and also Lastovicka and Fernandez in that personal identity is often expressed through possessions.⁵⁰

The commonly researched consumption process embraces acquisition, inventory and discard, thereby making the assumption that goods are ultimately discarded.⁵¹ The contribution this chapter makes is in exploring the notion of sustaining, holding on to clothes, as opposed to disposal. As the notion of sustaining clothes coincides with ethical sustainability issues and identity formation, this exploratory study opens up ideas for more descriptive future research.

The research limitations relate to the small sample size used and its sample being limited to only females. Further to this, additional situational factors could have been explored including lifestyle, age, education and wider referent group influence beyond the family. These can be taken forward in future research.

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³³ Respondent, Bernadette, Lawyer.

³⁴ Respondent, focus group undergraduate student.

³⁵ Respondent, focus group undergraduate student.

³⁶ Respondent, focus group undergraduate student.

³⁷ Respondent, Company Director.

³⁸ Respondent, Fashion Expert.

³⁹ Respondent, Bernadette, Lawyer.

⁴⁰ Respondent, Hospital Consultant.

⁴¹ Respondent, Clerical Assistant.

⁴² Respondent, Elena, postgraduate student,

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Ruth Marciniak is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader for MBA Luxury Brand Management at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU London). Her research interests are clothing and fashion, strategy and digital marketing.

Marwa Gad Mohsen is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at University of Worcester. Her specialist areas are in ‘time and temporality’ in consumer behaviour, organic food decision-making, innovation adoption, sustainable and disposal behaviours, ageing consumers and CCI in services marketing.

Fashion, Tyranny and Revelation endeavours to explore the consumption, governance, potency and patronage of attire in the context of social, socio-economic and fashion philosophies. Clothes, nutriment and habitation unexceptionally and uniformly were regarded as a fundamental human necessity and requisite; whilst attire was primarily acknowledged as an elementary utilitarian requirement, due to its sociological and economic significance. *Fashion, Tyranny and Revelation* represents a new departure in the study of dress, concerning the rationale behind individual and collective clothing demeanours in our existing society.

Damayanthe Eluwawalage, PhD, MPHA, historian, and Private Pilot earned her doctorate from Edith Cowan University in Australia. She is an Assistant Professor at the College of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics at the University of Wisconsin - Stout, United States.

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