

Understanding the Constraints to Transforming Online Fashion Shopping into a More Sustainable Practice

Spotswood, Fiona; Moraes, Caroline; Kindberg, Tim; Priest, Chris

License:
Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Spotswood, F, Moraes, C, Kindberg, T & Priest, C 2024, Understanding the Constraints to Transforming Online Fashion Shopping into a More Sustainable Practice. in *Consumer Culture Theory Conference Proceedings*. San Diego, CA, pp. 1-4, Consumer Culture Theory 2024, San Diego, United States, 11/07/24.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Understanding the Constraints to Transforming Online Fashion Shopping into a More Sustainable Practice

Fiona Spotswood, University of Bristol, UK
Caroline Moraes, University of Birmingham, UK
Tim Kindberg, Matter2Media
Chris Priest, University of Bristol, UK

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on sustainable fashion marketing shows that dominant corporate interests do little to promote meaningful market transformation (Solér, Baeza & Svärd, 2015). A “logic of sustainability” is “yet to materialize” in fashion (Ertekin, Atik & Murray, 2020:1473). Research further highlights the role that diverse industry stakeholders must play in fostering fashion market change toward sustainability, as “it is not easy for an individual alone to take responsibility for sustainability” (Ertekin & Atik, 2020: 373).

Indeed, mainstream consumer awareness about sustainability is not leading to increased purchases of sustainable fashion. Nevertheless, sustainably-committed consumers persevere and nascent research highlights that their altruistic and biospheric values, alongside the more dominant, egoistic, self-expressive values, underpin ongoing psychological commitment to sustainable fashion consumption (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). Highly committed consumers acknowledge the importance of conscientious clothing use, reuse, and disposal as environmentally preferable to shopping for sustainable but new fashion items (Bly et al., 2015).

However, such research takes a psychological perspective and neglects to consider the growing importance and pervasiveness of online shopping (Guillen-Royo, 2019; Mukendi & Henninger, 2020), irrespective of consumers’ commitment to sustainability. Scant research exists on the experiences of sustainably-oriented fashion consumers who navigate the challenges of fashion shopping online (Connell, 2019). Therefore, we ask *‘how are sustainable online fashion shopping practices attempted and constrained among the most committed sustainably-oriented fashion consumers?’*

We use a practice theories lens (Warde, 2005) and apply Magaudda’s (2011) practice framework to analyze online fashion shopping as comprising performative linkages between three elements: material objects (devices and technology); doings (embodied competences and activities); and meanings (representations and emotions). We focus on how online fashion shopping practice is ‘glued together’ through its internal dynamics, making it resistant to sustainable transformation.

We examine how self-defined, sustainably-oriented consumers perform online fashion shopping. Interpretive analysis drew on data from five unfolding research phases (Figure 1), involving interviews and focus groups with 58 UK participants. Through thematic approach, we engaged in a back-and-forth iterative reading of transcripts, and between theory and transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Figure 1
Research phases and samples.

| Research phase | Sample size | Nature of Research |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Phase 1: Two face-to-face focus groups, Bristol, UK, Feb 2020 | 9 | Explored ‘sustainable orientations’ and how these are enacted in shopping practices |
| Phase 2: Online interviews, May 2020 | 13 | Explored how sustainability is enacted in online shopping. Interviews included a ‘walk through’ of online shopping practice performance, as participants searched for an item of their choice and attempted to make sustainable purchases |
| Phase 3: Online interviews, Aug/Sept 2020 | 15 | Explored online fashion shopping and what would be useful in enable sustainable online shopping |
| Phase 4: Online interviews with international fashion consumer activists, Oct 2022 | 9 | Explored sustainable fashion practices beyond shopping, including researching and information sharing |
| Phase 5: Two face-to-face focus groups with sustainable fashion enthusiasts, Bristol, UK, Dec 2022 - Jan 2023 | 12 | Explored sustainable fashion shopping practices on and offline, and how sustainability can be supported |
| Total number of participants | 58 | |

Findings reveal a continuum of ‘sustainable orientation’ among our participants from generalized concern to extreme commitment, which relates to a continuum of sustainably-oriented reflexivity that destabilizes online shopping and triggers participants’ attempts to adapt the practice.

Core meanings of online fashion shopping (pleasure, excitement, and emotional appeal) are integrated into online fashion shopping performance alongside fashion objects (garment photographs, websites, code) and doings (scrolling, searching, comparing, purchasing; Magaouda, 2011). Participants discussed their love of fashion in passionate terms, and a compulsive urge to buy. However, participants exhibit ongoing reflexive rationalization and monitoring (Giddens, 1979), as they articulate the unsustainability of online shopping and the fashion industry:

“There’s a point when you realize that every single item has been made by someone, somewhere in the world” (Phase5 FG2).

This reflexivity habituates into commitment to sustainability, contesting and destabilizing online fashion shopping. Participants can no longer shop unproblematically or pleasurably:

“I’ve loved to shop, I have hundreds of pairs of shoes, handbags, jewelry, all of it. And then obviously something shifted, and I had to change my habit” (Phase5 FG2).

To restabilize the practice, participants attempt to enact practice adaptation. An important adaptation is how scrolling is done. Scrolling is a central ‘doing’ of normative online fashion shopping: *“I do enjoy the scroll and I will scroll a lot” (Phase5 FG1)*. Scrolling leads to *“an urge to shop”* due to ad appeals.

There are three ways in which scrolling is adapted. First, through the reconfiguration of digital-material spaces that filter products, participants move their scroll to second-hand websites (Vinted or Depop). Second, participants scrolled non-retail sites (Pinterest), reconfiguring online fashion practices around styling not purchase; a viable alternative to material garment consumption (Gupta, Gwozdz & Gentry, 2019). Third, participants extend their normative scrolling to purposeful searching for sustainable versions of desired products:

“I’ll see something come up... and then it says it’s 100% polyester, but (...) then I’ll start going, ‘cotton’, or ‘silk’, or ‘recycled’, or ‘Vinted’, or ‘Wolf and Badger’ or whatever” (Phase5 FG1).

Searching for sustainable alternatives often spills over into researching the fashion industry, involving reading product information, scouring second-hand sites, and accruing knowledge about its consequences. Thus, sustainable online shopping fails to stabilize. Many participants felt overwhelmed and frustrated by their adaptation attempts, unlike intentional attempts at consumer work for leisure (Beverland, Fernandez & Eckhardt, 2024):

“If you want to know my reflections on trying to shop sustainably, I find it frustrating, if I wasn’t so committed, I’d do a 180 in a heartbeat and go, ‘F it, I’m off. I want to shop.”*

Concurrently, increased engagement with sustainable marketing claims on brands’ websites and deeper research about the fashion industry enhances practitioners’ awareness of the complexity of fashion (un)sustainability, furthering frustration:

“I don’t think it’s possible to shop sustainably... I think it’s really complex and the trade-offs are really difficult to navigate as an individual” (Phase2 Participant2).

For some, the struggle to shop online sustainably becomes habituated. Others described being close to surrendering their sustainability concerns. Commonly, participants abandoned online shopping altogether, adding to other rules, *“I do not shop online.”*

Online shopping practice adaptation requires existing digital infrastructures to integrate with alternative sustainability meanings, new tasks, and skills (search and research), and sustainable products. However, this integration is obstructed. The frustrations participants experience mean that sustainable online shopping remains in their discursive consciousness, failing to habituate into the routines that characterize settled practices (Warde, 2005).

Sustainably-oriented participants feel they are juggling two incommensurable ideals:

“You’re always juggling those things, the aesthetic and the sustainability” (Phase5 FG2).

Thus, participants’ intensifying reflexive commitment to sustainability continues to destabilize sustainable online fashion shopping.

This work contributes an original theorization of obstructed practice adaptation, reinforcing the need to transform retail platforms and policies to reconfigure online shopping practices (Geels et al., 2015), of which individual behaviors are the tip of the iceberg. Innovation is needed to support the cultural acceptance of alternative ways of enjoying fashion through aesthetic appreciation and styling rather than unsustainable purchases.

REFERENCES

- Beverland, M.B., Fernandez, K.V., & Eckhardt, G.M. (2024). Consumer Work and Agency in the Analog Revival. *Journal of Consumer Research*, p.ucae003.
- Bly, S., Gwozdz, W., Reisch, L.A. (2015). Exit from the high street: An exploratory study of sustainable fashion consumption pioneers. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39(2), 125–135.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3-26.
- Connell, K.Y.H. (2019). Utilizing political consumerism to challenge the 21st century fast fashion industry. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Consumerism*, 293.
- Ertekin, Z. O., & Atik, D. (2020). Institutional constituents of change for a sustainable fashion system. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 40(3), 362-379.

- Ertekin, Z. O., Atik, D., & Murray, J. B. (2020). The logic of sustainability: Institutional transformation towards a new culture of fashion. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(15-16), 1447-1480.
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Vol. 241). University of California Press.
- Gupta, S., Gwozdz, W., & Gentry, J. (2019). The role of style versus fashion orientation on sustainable apparel consumption. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 39(2), 188-207.
- Jung, J., Kim, S. J., & Kim, K. H. (2020). Sustainable marketing activities of traditional fashion market and brand loyalty. *Journal of Business Research*, 120(1), 294-301.
- Lundblad, L., & Davies, I. A. (2016). The values and motivations behind sustainable fashion consumption. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 15(2), 149-162.
- Magaudda, P. (2011). When materiality 'bites back': Digital music consumption practices in the age of dematerialization. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11(1), 15-36.
- Mukendi, A., & Henninger, C. E. (2020). Exploring the spectrum of fashion rental. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, 24(3), 455-469.
- Solér, C., Baeza, J., & Svärd, C. (2015). Construction of silence on issues of sustainability through branding in the fashion market. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(1-2), 219-246.
- Warde, A. (2005). Consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(2), 131-153.
- Warde, A. (2014). After taste: Culture, consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 14(3), 279-303.