



The Uniform Project reimagined: An introduction to sustainable fashion for undergraduate students

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In May 2009, Sheen Matheiken started the Uniform Project with one little black dress worn over 365 days (“How it all began”). She challenged herself to wear the same outfit every day for one year and style is differently every day as well. Her philanthropic endeavor raised \$100,000 for the *Akanksha Foundation*, a non-profit organization providing education to underprivileged children in India. Matheiken also received overwhelming media attention, 2-million visits to her website, countless features on television, and a TED Talk in Dubai. By all measures her project was an admirable success. Matheiken’s project lends itself nicely larger conversation about ethical and sustainable fashion, examining overconsumption and waste in Western society. The average American generates 84 pounds of textile waste per year (Ross & Morgan, 2015) much of that coming from the improper and unsustainable disposal of clothing. Simultaneously, the fast fashion industry grew 20% since 2015 and is projected to continue to grow exponentially as more companies adapt to a faster production model (State of Fashion, 2018). The immediate display of what’s available and fast fashion company’s ability to recreate and sell within a short window provides access to consumer to do just that, over consume. Closets are overgrown, stocked with garments, price tags still attached, unworn, and forgotten. This presents the guiding research question for this project; how often do we wear the clothes in our closets?

The reimagined uniform project was offered in the Spring of 2018 and 2019 during an introductory-level fashion merchandising course. This is the first time most students are exposed to concepts surrounding sustainable fashion. They come with many ideas about what ethical fashion is (or is not) and those ideas are discussed within a class session to separate fact from fiction. Student responses are typically consumer focused including upcycling and recycling clothing, sharing or swapping clothing, donating to and buying from thrift or second-hand stores, buying higher quality items, and only buying when necessary. In both semesters the Professor introduced the idea of buying less or fewer items specifically, students mentioned concepts close to, but not exactly that. Initially in both semesters, students rebuff this idea because something new is always needed. Students then move forward with a shared definition of sustainability, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Commission, 1987). Using this definition students discuss ways in which we can create ethically and sustain responsibly within the fashion industry.

With the stage set for the project, the students then watch Matheiken’s promotional video for reference. The reimagined uniform project parameters reflect the original Uniform Project (2009), but are adapted for a semester-long course. Students are required to select and wear the same outfit for 5 sequential days, 1.4% of the total time Matheiken wore her outfit. The project requirements include a photo and reflective journal, documenting their experiences over the 5-day period. Students submit a minimum of 5 full-body photos and 7 journal entries (photos and journals from each day and an opening

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and closing journal entry for the project in its entirety). Journal entry prompts are provided for the students to aid in their reflective writing: 1. How are you feeling each day about the clothing? 2. Has anyone asked you what you are doing (has anyone noticed)? 3. Do you feel a strong urge to explain yourself upon entering a new group of people? 4. What do you notice about not having to select from your closet each morning? 5. Do you find wearing the same thing every day more or less stressful? 6. How do you feel about having so many different clothing options – does it give you pause? 7. Do you think you will alter your buying habits in the future based on this project? 8. Other thoughts/feelings/concerns? Students are graded on “Quality of Journal Entries,” “Sufficient Photo Journal Evidence,” and “Writing Mechanics.” A total of 35 (n=35) students participated in the project over the two semesters, submitting 245 journal entries and 175 photos.

There are several thematic writing patterns that emerged from the student journals stress/anxiety, embarrassment, discomfort, feeling “dirty,” acceptance, and realization. Students almost always express an initial stress or anxiety surrounding the project as they are unsure about wearing the same clothing repetitively. Stress or anxiety is typically associated with not wanting to be seen in the same outfit or feeling regretful about the outfit selected. One student noted “The feeling of this day was overall like an outcast...I was feeling the urge to change and start this assignment again the next day.” Embarrassment tends to be more projected than realized, where the student is defining the situation. Often worrying about who remembers what they wore the day before, students typically express relief that no one asked why they were in the same clothes. A student wrote in the second journal, “On the second day, I am already nervous, and I think that everyone is staring and thinking, “Omg she wore that yesterday.” I know that is probably not the case because I could not tell you what my roommate even wore yesterday.” Discomfort is mentioned most frequently in days 3, 4, and 5 when the student is growing weary of the assignment. A student wrote “The conjunction of having a cold and not yet washing my outfit made me feel gross and unhygienic. The previous two days had primarily positive outcomes in relation to how I felt about this project, but today was more negative. I found myself wanting to be able to wear something different and make decisions towards varying outfit options.” Similarly, discomfort is linked to feeling unclean in their “uniforms.” The final two themes acceptance and realization generally come together for a majority of the students at the end of the project. Students begin to examine the amount of clothing they have in their closets. For example, a student shared, “This project helped with strengthening my appreciation for the clothing that I do have. It encouraged me to purchase more quality items over quantity and to actually wear those items interchangeably more.” Between the two semesters in the 245 journal entries no students expressed or implied regret for the participation in this project. More often students are relieved at the end, but walk away with a tangible understanding of sustainability and how it directly applies to the fashion and apparel industry. The outcomes of this project are largely positive as students demonstrably grow in their knowledge and understanding of sustainability in the fashion industry.

The goal of this project is help lower-level fashion students gain exposure to sustainability concepts early on in their fashion education. The longer term goal is that they will apply this knowledge

to future course work to improve sustainability in the fashion industry on a larger scale. The population of students enrolled in this course was an obvious limitation for this study. Between both semesters the project was offered students were primarily (95%) white, female, upper-middle class, traditionally aged college students, which provides little diversity of insight or experience within their journals. Future iterations of the project can be offered in a diverse array of classes and at a variety of college campuses. Longitudinal data can be collected to examine if early sustainability education has a lasting impact on students throughout their undergraduate careers. The ultimate goal being improved sustainability practices within the fashion industry.

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