



“Intelligent Shopping”: A Historical Exploration of Clothing Consumption Practices, 1922–1968

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Recent literature in sustainable fashion practices has pointed out the need to explore consumer behavior at the macro-level: how do cultures and institutions foster or impede consumption norms? What underlying factors support unsustainable practices and allow them to persist or change (e.g., Mukendi et al., 2020)? To seek answers for these questions, one approach is to observe how clothing practices have changed throughout history. Historical analysis has gained attention in the field of consumption studies as it allows researchers to discover patterns of change and establish links between these changes (Smith & Lux, 1993). As historical analysis can generate “new perspective, sources of data, and theoretical concepts” (McCracken, 1987, p. 139), it can provide researchers with unique opportunities to investigate consumption patterns and augment the limits of what is possible through social science experiments (Strasser, 2003). By employing a historical analysis approach, the present study aims to explore how clothing consumption practices have changed throughout time, focusing on social and cultural factors. In particular, we analyze home economics textbooks focused on apparel in order to obtain a greater understanding of the factors that influenced clothing consumption in the United States between the 1920s and 1960s.

A systematic study of the advice within these textbooks can help us understand how contemporary patterns of clothing consumption came to be as they are, and in which directions they may possibly change. In the context of sustainable fashion, it can help us explain how more or less sustainable practices are established and diffused over time, and what factors allow these practices to persist (Shove, 2003). While some studies exist on how home economics curriculum can be aligned with modern notions of sustainability (e.g., Sibbel, 2003; Norum 2018), this current study seeks a deeper understanding of consumer behavior and the forces behind it in order to provide more pathways for future research that look for connections that may be otherwise overlooked.

During its prime, home economics became synonymous with consumer expertise in the United States. The choice to use home economics textbooks stems from the fact that such documents are relatively unambiguous, providing detailed instructions on how readers should consume clothing through what was considered to be unbiased, scientific information meant to resolve consumer issues (Goldstein, 2018, p. 281-282). While home economics textbooks may or may not represent the reality of how consumers actually behaved, they do reflect widely adopted perceptions that can be seen as a foundation for studying clothing consumption norms from a broader perspective. Since home economics in the twentieth century served a role in guiding the United States’ transition into modern consumer culture, research into the extent of their impact and how it can be applied to today’s systems warrants more attention.

This current study selects the practice of shopping as an entry point for conducting a content analysis of four clothing textbooks published between 1922 and 1968. We selected these particular textbooks based on the reputation of the authors within the field of family and consumer sciences and having a strong emphasis on shopping practices. The four specific periods examined in this study (1922, 1937, 1949, and 1968) reflect significant socio-cultural changes in United States history, including the impacts of world wars, economic booms and depressions, advancements in clothing production and textiles, and numerous changes in women's roles and American consumer culture at large.

We employ social practice theory (SPT) as a guiding theoretical lens for our content analysis. SPT challenges traditional notions around individual decision-making by studying the assemblages of social practices that impact daily life (e.g., Shove & Warde, 2002), focusing attention on the social and collective organization of practices that influence individuals' perceptions, interpretations, and actions. For our conceptual framework, we use Shove et al. (2012)'s approach to SPT, which traces changes in everyday practices by breaking them down into three types of elements: materials (including objects and infrastructures), competencies (including situational understandings and practical know-how), and meanings (including embodied understandings of the social significance of the practice and past experiences of participation). By applying this approach to the analytical reading of home economics textbooks on clothing, we explore common consumption practices to investigate how and when these practices changed over time based on variations in these three types of elements. In addition, we configured and linked commonalities among textbooks in order to determine what can be inferred from their linkages (Shove et al., 2012).

Through this investigation, we discovered that there were three key themes that could be traced through each textbook: clothing quality, consumer responsibility, and consumer education. A closer look at the materials, meanings, and competences that are related to these themes in each textbook indicated that consumer behavior norms were relative to the quantity/quality of products available and moral associations of what it meant to be a "good" consumer during each period. Instead of being linked to changes in lifestyles and fashion trends, the findings of our analysis indicate that changes in clothing consumption has been strongly influenced by shifting ideas around responsibility to one's family and the nation, as well as ideas of how money should be saved or spent in relation to broader economic systems.

Our analysis illustrates the complexity of consumption practices and the importance of considering how linkages between materials, meanings, and competences impact consumer behavior. By applying SPT to historical data, our findings suggest potential ways in which sustainable change can be explored through linkages instead of focusing efforts on singular elements in order to help modern consumers avoid issues like waste resulting from cheap clothing and overconsumption. Furthermore, the most common elements found among these textbooks are related to the importance of consumer education and emphasizing one's responsibility to others, thus suggesting strong entry points for modern sustainability initiatives.

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