

Understanding Sustainable Apparel Consumers: An Empirical Investigation of a Consumer Typology

Elena Karpova, Nancy Hodges, and Annie Williams
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Key words: sustainable apparel consumption, typology, affluents, minimalists, thrifters, antifashion

Researchers and businesses have been working on reducing the textile and apparel industry's detrimental impact on the environment (Lehmann et al., 2019). According to Berg et al. (2020), focusing on the sustainable apparel consumer can reduce the industry's carbon footprint by 21 percent. Previous research has explored how sustainable apparel consumers differ from other consumers (e.g., Chang & Watchravesringkan, 2018; Kim & Jin, 2019; Rahman & Koszewska, 2020), as well as examined consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchase of sustainable or ethical apparel (e.g., Joy et al., 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Sadachar et al., 2016; Watson & Yan, 2013). In these studies, sustainable apparel consumers were treated as a homogenous group. This implies that all consumers who take into consideration their ecological footprint when acquiring and using clothes have the same goals, needs, and wants. To address the research gap, Karpova and Bayat (2021) theorized that sustainable apparel consumers can be classified into four groups based on (a) how much they spend on clothing, and (b) the importance of appearance. Using the two factors, the authors proposed the following four groups of sustainable consumers:

- **Classy Affluent:** *high* spending on clothing, which is viewed as *very important*;
- **Minimalist:** fairly *high* spending on clothing, which is viewed as *rather unimportant*;
- **Chic Thrifter:** *low* spending on clothing yet it is viewed as *very important*;
- **Antifashion:** *low* spending on clothing, which is viewed as *absolutely unimportant*.

Because the authors used secondary data to develop the typology, it was not fully explored to allow a systematic understanding of the complexities that drive consumption in each of the four sustainable consumer groups. Thus, the **purpose of this study** was to explore the differences and similarities between the four conceptualized types of sustainable apparel consumers with respect to their consumption priorities and daily practices to satisfy their needs and wants while minimizing the resulting environmental impact. Understanding the drivers of sustainable apparel consumption will allow companies to better meet the diverse needs of apparel consumers who seek to reduce their footprint.

Method. We employed an interpretive approach (Hodges, 2011) to explore the nuances of the sustainable apparel practices of the four types of consumers (Karpova & Bayat, 2021). After the research was approved by an Institutional Review Board, we collected data through in-depth individual interviews with participants representing the four types of sustainable apparel consumers. We used theoretical sampling (Mason, 1996) to screen and select participants based on the four types of sustainable consumers and continued interviewing until saturation was reached (Hodges, 2011). The final sample included 26 participants, who were mostly women (73%), ranging in age from 18 to 65 with an average age of 37.

An interview protocol was used to ensure a systematic data collection. Participants shared their everyday apparel acquisition, use, care, and disposal practices and rationale behind these choices. They engaged in deep personal reflections on how and why they make decisions about which clothes to acquire where and when; important and unimportant factors for selecting what to wear every day, and other consumption choices. Data were initially analyzed to confirm the four conceptualized groups of sustainable consumers. Subsequently, data were coded for categories to identify additional dimensions to describe and distinguish between the four groups. To define each emerging dimension, the data points were constantly compared, abstracted, and integrated within and across the four groups to further explore and delineate each type of sustainable consumer (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Spiggle, 1994).

Results. Comparing and contrasting the four groups of sustainable apparel consumers resulted in a holistic understanding of differences and similarities in their clothing priorities and daily practices. The **Classy Affluents** are “interested in style and see dressing as a form of personal expression.” They are willing to spend \$200 to \$700 on “eye-catching,” truly “unique, beautiful” clothes. Their closets are full of timeless items peppered with statement pieces, which they wear to stand out from the crowd. They view clothing as an art and treasure to invest in and cherish. Affluents’ apparel purchases are limited and well-planned. Examples of preferred brands include Eileen Fisher, Hackwith Designs, Ace and Jig, and various artisan designers as well as secondhand luxury brands. These consumers are very thoughtful and deliberate when choosing what to wear every day to showcase their impeccable taste.

The **Functional Minimalists** prefer to “dress very simply” because they “don’t really like a whole lot of attention.” They “don’t just go shopping for fun” and often are “only buying because the previous article that [they] used kind of on a functional basis has failed.” Many believe that “utilitarian clothes are just more comfortable.” Thus, they prefer durable, quality clothing that is long lasting, choosing function over style. Minimalists use their wallets to support ethical companies and tend to spend around \$70 to \$100 on a garment, favoring brands

such as Patagonia, REI, and Title 9. They buy these brands new and used when available. These consumers put little effort and time to get dressed every day.

The **Chic Thrifters** derive hedonic pleasure from the act of shopping and are thrilled to find preloved “gems.” Because they’re interested in shopping, and used clothing is inexpensive, many report buying items that they “don’t need.” The thrifters “don’t care about the brand,” but instead are “drawn to...exciting clothes.” They are not concerned about how clothes are made as they view secondhand shopping as sustainable in and of itself. The thrifters usually spend no more than \$20 on an item, shopping secondhand via thrift and vintage stores as well as acquiring their clothing through online platforms such as Depop and eBay. These consumers are very careful in styling their daily outfits as they consider clothing to reflect their changing mood and evolving identity. They use clothes to express their “unique, interesting, fun” personalities.

The **Antifashion Environmentalist’s** wardrobe consists of “comfort driven...very basic items” that allow them to “just fade [into] the background.” For them, “look, or style...what’s so called ‘fashion,’ doesn’t matter.” These consumers “hate shopping” and tend to “just get something at Target” when they are there “for other stuff.” They focus on durable, long-lasting garments to demonstrate their commitment to sustainable consumption. They do not care about brands and prefer shopping at thrift stores, Target, or Amazon, spending no more than \$30 on an item. Their main concern is to be appropriate enough (i.e., clean) for society; beyond this, they tend to mindlessly “rotate through” several “basics” in their closet.

Conclusions. The research results corroborated and extended the a priori typology of sustainable apparel consumers. Based on a systematic exploration of the four groups and a nuanced understanding of their differences and similarities, we proposed several important dimensions of clothing acquisition and use to further distinguish and solidify each consumer type: acquisition and spending patterns; retail and brand orientation; preference for unique or basic clothing; clothing as an extension of self; and hedonic vs. utilitarian values. Application of these dimensions to the typology provided further support for the four sustainable consumer types and assisted in formulating law-like propositions (Hunt, 2002). The propositions can guide theory development and be used in practice to better serve sustainable apparel consumers. It is important to test these propositions using a large consumer sample in future research.

The research was partially supported by the Virtual Collaboratory for Sustainable Business Practices at UNCG, funded by the VF Corporation Foundation

References:

Berg et al. (2020). *Fashion on climate: How the fashion industry can urgently act to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions*. McKinsey & Company and Global Fashion Agenda.

- <https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/industries/retail/our%20insights/fashion%20on%20climate/fashion-on-climate-full-report.pdf>
- Chang, H. J., & Watchravesringkan, K. T. (2018). Who are sustainably minded apparel shoppers? An investigation to the influencing factors of sustainable apparel consumption. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 46(2), 148-162. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-10-2016-0176>
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.
- Hodges, N. (2011). Qualitative research: A discussion of frequently articulated qualms (FAQs). *Family & Consumer Research Journal*, 40(1), 90-92. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1552-3934.2011.02091.x>
- Hunt, S. D. (2002). *Foundations of Marketing Theory: Toward a General Theory of Marketing*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Joy, A., Sherry, J. F., Venkatesh, A., Wang, J., & Chan, R. (2012). Fast fashion, sustainability and the ethical appeal of luxury brands. *Fashion Theory*, 16(3), 273-296.
- Karpova, E. & Bayat, F. (2021). An Application of Grounded Theory to Develop a Typology of Sustainable Apparel Consumers. ITAA Proceedings. <https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/itaa/issues/>
- Kim, G., & Jin, B. E. (2019). Older female consumers' environmentally sustainable apparel consumption. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 23(4), 487-503. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-04-2019-0068>
- Lehmann, M., Aricia, G., Boger, S., Martinez-Pardo, C., Kreuger, F., Schneider, M., Carrière-Pradal, B., & Schou, D. (2019). *Pulse of the Fashion Industry*. Global Fashion Agenda, Boston Consulting Group and Sustainable Apparel Coalition. <https://www.globalfashionagenda.com/publications-and-policy/pulse-of-the-industry/>
- Mason, J. (1996). *Qualitative Researching*. Sage.
- McNeill, L., & Moore, R. (2015). Sustainable fashion consumption and the fast fashion conundrum: Fashionable consumers and attitudes to sustainability in clothing choice. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39, 212-222.
- Rahman, O., & Koszewska, M. (2020). A study of consumer choice between sustainable and non-sustainable apparel cues in Poland. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 24(2), 213-234. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-11-2019-0258>
- Sadachar, A., Feng, F., & Karpova, E., Manchiraju, S. (2016). Environmentally responsible apparel consumption behavior among U.S. students. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 7(2), 76-88.
- Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3), 491-503.
- Watson, M. & Yan, R. N. (2013). An exploratory study of the decision processes of fast vs slow fashion consumers. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 17(2), 141-159.