The successes and limitations of Appalachian secondhand clothing businesses operating as sustainable fashion enterprises

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The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) delineates Appalachia as an expansive, mostly rural region in the eastern United States encompassing 423 counties spanning from southern New York state to northern Mississippi (ARC, 2023). The region has experienced a multitude of challenges in the 20th and 21st centuries. It lags behind on many indicators of health and well-being, even when compared to other rural areas of the United States (ARC, 2023). Frequently discussed in conversations on extractive economies, poverty, addiction, cultural conservatism, and poor educational outcomes, Appalachia is perhaps one of the last places one would expect sustainable fashion initiatives to thrive. Advocates have been trying to steer Appalachia away from coal and fossil fuels and toward green investments (Sullivan & Horowitch, 2022), but large-scale opportunities have been slow to materialize. Many community leaders have shifted away from enticing modern industry to come to the region, focusing instead on fostering and developing small enterprises deeply rooted in Appalachia as a distinct *place* (Davis, 2011). Stephens and Partridge (2011) argued Appalachia has a strong entrepreneurial ethos. Thus, micro, and small businesses will be central to any shift the region makes towards a more sustainable (fashion) future. Secondhand clothing retailers are businesses that can identify unique apparel and give garments a second life. Such enterprises could contribute to a broader shift towards renewable practices in the Appalachian region (Stephens, et al., 2013). Aside from contributing to domestic organic agriculture via fibersheds (Affiliate Directory, 2023) and emerging opportunities for reshoring textile and apparel industries in Appalachia (Price, 2017) the region has a strong secondhand clothing retail industry. Thus, it offers the conditions in which to study sustainable initiatives in the context of second-hand retail practices (Ferraro, et al., 2016). Our research seeks to better understand the experiences and motivations of secondhand fashion small business owners operating with a sustainable fashion ethos, contextualizing their experiences within the specific geographic region of Appalachia. We argue the narratives of these individuals offer insights into the opportunities and limitations of operating rural, sustainability-based small businesses in communities with complex historical and socio-economic contexts that may undermine or complicate sustainable fashion initiatives.

We engaged a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2017) in the study of sustainability-oriented secondhand fashion small business in Appalachia to explore the successes and limitations of these entrepreneurial activities as determined by the individuals running them. Phenomenology allowed for in-depth investigations of the human experience from the participants’ points of view and allowed participants to present their life situations in their own words (Creswell, 2017). Secondhand retail locations that 1) conducted their business in Appalachia; 2) were privately owned and operated; 3) conducted at least a portion of their business in a brick-and-mortar location; and 4) actively engaged in the promotion of fashion sustainability were considered for inclusion in this study. Stores that met these specifications were located through search engines, social media (Facebook and Instagram), Google Maps, and snowball sampling. There were 131 retail locations identified throughout the entire Appalachian region. After reaching out to 116 locations, we were able to secure interviews with nine vintage-prominent stores, and one consignment-prominent store. The participants were spread across all five subregions throughout Appalachia.

Pedersen and Netter’s (2015) business model perspective was used for identifying prospects and challenges of small business ownership. This aided in discovering prominent themes of expressed by Appalachian secondhand small business owners. They showed *ingenuity* adapting toward rural markets. These included the use of business incubators, running a mobile fashion truck, and sponsoring local events in their store to bring in members of the community. They pride themselves on *local sourcing*. They want their products to come from Appalachia to be sold to other Appalachians. The store owners love that local vintage clothing comes with *stories* of its past life and is important to its value. One informant stated, “It's cool to be able to tell people that…these were Elsie's clothes, and she was a local lady, and she was a bit of a spitfire.” They research their items so they can pass on the stories that many of this clothing tells. The community is welcoming with *local**collaboration* common. Another business owner spoke of the incubator they established sharing, “we have also helped some previous customers [open their business] in our incubator.” They do not see other stores as competition, but an opportunity to work along with them to provide the best products for their community.

Despite its history, coal mining is still seen by many in the region as a family tradition that needs to be maintained regardless of large changes in energy markets with sustainability as a threat to their livelihood (Guilford, 2017). These store owners believe that *education* of customers is key toward bringing Appalachians closer to the importance of sustainability. They actively try to show the importance of well-made vintage clothing, often emphasizing “Made in America” products, in particular. They understand that by extending a garment’s life they are contributing to a more sustainable fashion system (Shuck, 2014). Our informants are pleased with younger Appalachians awareness of growing sustainability concerns. However, they also want to break free of Appalachian stereotypes. As one informant shared, “The stereotypes of poverty in Appalachia [make] those that live there actually shun secondhand clothing. To them, shopping secondhand is a sign of financial struggle.” Regardless, the Appalachian secondhand fashion entrepreneurs we spoke with are happy to be part of this area and their communities, helping to challenge this perspective through their work. Setbacks with their business were met with perseverance and resourcefulness to keep their business in operation. They navigated Appalachia as a complex space of new opportunity and entrenched barriers for sustainable development. Many opted to establish their brick-and-mortar stores in struggling downtown districts, helping to revive these areas, but this also put them in close proximity to other, more contested spaces serving the community like methadone clinics and services for the unhoused. Obtaining their products locally allows them to spend time with their clientele and learn the history behind the clothing they receive but they also sold products below market value at prices local customers can afford, cutting into potential profit the entrepreneur might find in the secondhand digital marketplace. They help other members of their community start their own business and even share part of their retail space. Ultimately, we found these businesses serve not just an economic but a social role in their communities, particularly as touchpoints for sustainability discourses in everyday life.

Even though sustainability initiatives have been complicated through politicization in rural regions heavily dependent on coal mining employment, this does not stop these entrepreneurs from trying to spread its message. They have hope that Appalachia can steer away from fossil fuels in the future. They have been fortunate to witness the progress of sustainable mindfulness with their younger clientele and are actively contributing to greater connection to sustainability through direct engagement with their communities. Our research reinforces the importance of small businesses to a more sustainable Appalachian future, particularly as alternative spaces – away from formal political forums – for sustainable community development.

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