

Understanding Consumers' Motives for and Reflections upon Participation in a Brand-Initiated Product Challenge: The wool& 100 Day Dress Challenge

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Keywords: wardrobe challenge, voluntary simplicity, fashion minimalism, motives

In recent years, forms of consumption have emerged that aim to reduce environmental and social impacts of excessive fashion consumption (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Limited research has examined voluntary simplicity/fashion minimalism practices as they relate to apparel consumption. This work suggests that participating in Challenges designed to limit apparel consumption may contribute to participants' enhanced creativity (Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015), re-evaluation of their consumption patterns, and increased feelings of personal empowerment (Kidd et al., 2020). The present study builds upon this work by exploring female-identifying consumers' experiences of engaging with the wool& 100 Day Dress Challenge, including their motives for and reflections upon their participation in the Challenge and the brand's social media communities. The wool& 100 Day Dress Challenge invites consumers to wear the same wool& dress for 100 consecutive days in exchange for a \$100 brand gift card (wool&, 2022). To date, there is limited understanding of consumers' participation in brand-initiated wardrobe challenges and how participating in the social media brand communities (SMBC) impacts the experience of those challenges. Thus, our work extends prior work (a) by exploring participation in a brand-sponsored Challenge that involves financial gain (i.e., that may not be motivated solely by altruism) and the wearing of a single garment everyday (i.e., rather than fashion minimalism, in general), (b) by examining the role of participation in the SMBC on participants' experiences of the Challenge, and (c) by considering the lived experience of participating in a Challenge designed to minimize apparel consumption beyond the conclusion of the Challenge. To inform our work, we looked to self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2008) to understand different types of motivational factors on consumers' behavior related to the purchase and use of wool& dress and their participation in wool&'s 100 Day Dress Challenge and the wool& brand communities.

Participants included 12 female-identifying consumers engaged in the wool& 100 Day Dress Challenge. Participants took part in three semi-structured interviews: one interview mid-challenge (i.e., between days 40-60 of the Challenge), one interview within 20 days post-Challenge, and one interview at least 50 days post-Challenge. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 57 years ($x = 41.6$), identified as White/Caucasian, lived in diverse regions of the US, participated in the Challenge across various seasons, and worked in varied face-to-face and hybrid/remote positions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed using constant comparison processes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Participants identified six key motives for participating in the 100-Day Dress Challenge. First, many participants expressed that, through their engagement in the Challenge, they sought to minimize "decision fatigue" and "mental clutter" associated with complex decision-making about what to wear each day. Second, numerous participants articulated that their participation

was prompted by a desire to be more sustainable in their consumption patterns, such as through the development of a capsule wardrobe; some perceived the purchase of their wool& dress as a foundation for creating this capsule. Third, selected participants were motivated by the benefits of wearing and caring for merino wool clothing (e.g., comfort in varied climates, antimicrobial properties lessening need for frequent laundering). Fourth, some participants were drawn in by the appeal of engaging in the Challenge due to their competitive nature. Fifth, other participants were motivated by the monetary incentive of the \$100 gift card offered by wool& to those successfully completing the Challenge. This was especially common among those for whom wool& clothing was an “investment.” Finally, some participants were prompted to participate in the Challenge because they thought wool& clothing could help make them feel “comfortable” in their bodies or because their bodies were going through a transition, and they needed to make a fresh start in their wardrobe.

Participants also articulated varied motives for participating in the wool& social media communities and shared that they frequently engaged in this social media group for the utilitarian purpose of gaining tips and information about styling options, product care, and product attributes (e.g., sizing, fit). Others sought affective/emotional social support, including feedback on their appearances and motivation to begin or continue their Challenge. Some participants spoke about the rewards of sharing such support with others, serving as a “cheerleader” to motivate them in their Challenge journeys. A handful of participants decided to participate for the reward of connecting with others from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In reflecting upon their wool& Challenge journeys, participants identified five key “lessons learned.” First, numerous participants noted that they became more mindful/intentional/conscious in their consumption patterns (clothing and otherwise), researching brands and clothing and buying more sustainable products. Second, several participants adopted a consumption pattern of minimalism, whittling down all objects in their lives to what “brought them value,” sometimes recognizing that reducing decision fatigue freed up mental energy to pursue other creative activities. Third, some participants re-thought dress, adopting a “uniform” approach to dressing or recognizing that people did not pay that much attention to what others were wearing. Fourth, some participants engaged in a cost-benefit analysis when purchasing future clothing. And, finally, participants concluded that they wanted to “live” or “clarify” their values (i.e., sustainability), which they felt engaging with wool& products allowed them to do.

Lastly, participants articulated how participating in the Challenge and wool& social media communities shaped their feelings about their selves, bodies, and appearances. Most commonly, participants shared how their engagement in the Challenge supported positive self- and body-related feelings (e.g., through taking photos of the self or wearing form-fitting dresses that normalized their appearances, by receiving compliments from others in the social media group, by seeing diverse body imagery in the social media group). Participation in the Challenge did prompt negative feelings about the self and body for a few participants, such as when one picked a Challenge dress that highlighted a body feature that a participant did not like or when taking the daily Challenge photo exacerbated feelings of body dissatisfaction.

The present work is the first to explore consumers’ experiences related to their participation in a brand-initiated challenge. Findings demonstrated that consumer motivations for participating in wool& 100-Day Dress Challenge were prompted by their desire to practice sustainable clothing consumption, reduce decision-making fatigue, learn more about merino

wool fiber and care, feel accomplished by participating in the challenge, receive financial incentive, and feel comfortable with their bodies. Similar to prior work, participation in the challenge helped consumers learn new knowledge and skills like making mindful clothing consumption decisions (Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015), engaging in creative problem solving (e.g., spot cleaning, accessorizing), and recognizing that not all people focus on what others are wearing. Findings also demonstrate wool&'s SMBC as an important consumer engagement tool that provided an opportunity for consumers to connect with other consumers participating in the challenge and share thoughts related to product, brand, and build a community of support (Baldus et al., 2015 Dwivedi et al., 2021). The sample consisted of mostly Caucasian consumers, which was a limitation. Future research can expand the sample to include more ethnic diversity.

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