

Exploring Sustainable Fashion Habits among First-year College Students: A Wardrobe Study

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Background and purpose: As apparel production doubled over the last 20 years, consumers have decreased their apparel utilization by 36% (Cook & Gover, 2020), driven by a fast fashion culture that encourages consumers to frequently acquire cheap, low-quality garments that are used only for a short period (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Young people are often implicated as a population driving the consumption of fast fashion (Ahmad & Decombe, 2022). Apparel is important for this population as they develop their identity (Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017). As social influences are prominent in young adults' development, they are easily susceptible to fashion trends (Van Wel, F., 1994). Research has demonstrated how this population frequently acquires and quickly disposes of fashion goods, leading to excess waste (Joung, 2014; Rosely et al., 2023). On the other hand, Generation Z have grown distrustful of fast fashion retailers due to ethical concerns regarding apparel manufacturing (e.g., child labor and environmental contamination) and have expressed disdain for fast fashion products because of their lack of quality and uniqueness. Generation Z has recently begun displaying sustainable fashion practices such as donating and selling goods, buying secondhand, altering products, repairing damaged items, and buying higher quality clothes that will ensure a longer lifespan (Manley et al., 2023; Palmgren & Zylfijaj, 2022; Masserini et al., 2024). Using apparel more actively and for longer are fundamental behaviors that support product longevity and sustainable apparel consumption (Vesterinen & Syrjälä 2022), and the emerging youth generation appears to be more amenable to balancing their expressive desires with planetary limits, though less is known about how this plays out in the wardrobe.

The purpose of this wardrobe study was to characterize the wardrobe of first-year college students to better understand the expressive and functional pressures and practices that young people engage in to shape and maintain their apparel. First-year college students have recently changed their social position from high school to university, making a more concrete shift into adulthood, which is commonly attended by changes in appearance management (Prins, 2022; Arnett, 2000; Brown, 2024). Focusing on young college students as research subjects provides valuable insights into consumption behavior as a significant identity shift occurs, offering opportunities to inform strategies for promoting sustainable consumption practices. Investigating this demographic using wardrobe methodology allowed a deeper examination of post-purchase behaviors, including disposal habits.

Methods: Wardrobe methodologies focus on a qualitative inquiry about the materiality of apparel and the social practices associated with using and managing wardrobes (Fletcher & Grimstad Klepp, 2017). This approach involves gathering context about people and their apparel beyond the point of purchase, including visual, tactile, and verbal data. This study sought insights into the wardrobe experiences of first-year college students, including changes in their

wardrobe and challenges related to sustainable apparel consumption. The researchers developed an interview protocol based on previous literature, categorized into four sections: before coming to college, the residence hall move-in experience, their current situation, and future plans. Questions covered topics such as packing for college, organization of the wardrobe in a shared dorm, external and internal factors impacting apparel habits, and future wardrobe goals.

Researchers recruited potential participants by distributing physical flyers on a large university campus in the Southwest. Seventy-two students responded to the call and were screened for participation, identifying 42 who qualified with two primary criteria: attending their first year of college and living in a residence hall. These participants were sent an email to review consent information for the study, and seven participants agreed to an in-depth interview (e.g., 1.5-2 hours). During the interviews, participants were asked to bring images of their closets and key garments to facilitate discussion about their wardrobe and practices. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using an AI platform. Participants were given a \$20 gift card to show their appreciation for their participation. Data analysis was conducted through a peer debriefing among three researchers who developed a coding rubric. Then, the final coding of the qualitative data was completed by one researcher using Nvivo 14, qualitative data analysis software.

Findings: Participants described their wardrobe as a combination of comfort, self-expression, and budget-conscious choices. Comfort was a top priority due to early waking times and navigating the campus terrain. Seasonal transitions on a walkable campus were considered when choosing apparel. Statement pieces were also important for emotional expression and a reflection of personality. Limited finances resulted in affordable purchases with strict budgets in mind. Participants were asked to discuss wardrobe changes in the transition from high school to college. Social and idol influence, gender, and sexuality expression were significant factors. Friends and idols on social media influenced fashion interests, styling, and purchases. As students gained confidence, they expressed their gender identity through clothes and dressed to attract those they wished to attract. Participants described various practices related to sustainable apparel consumption (e.g., fast fashion avoidance, donating and selling clothing, thrifting, etc.). Participants frequently chose to repair or alter their clothes rather than discard them. Recycling options such as donation and selling were preferred over landfills when disposing of apparel. Thrift stores and second-hand shops were popular among students for their affordability, sustainability, and unique findings. Shopping in physical stores allows for a more conscious decision-making process regarding apparel items' fit, style, and texture. There was an evident indifference for fast fashion retailers, which strongly influenced their engagement in these practices they used to preserve their apparel.

Discussion and Implications: This study provides insight into the wardrobes of Generation Z consumers, including the key influences that inspire expressive changes during their identity development into adulthood and the wardrobe practices in which they regularly engage to preserve their apparel. Participants in this study displayed different attitudes toward sustainability (e.g., buying second-hand, repairing items, altering garments) that promote a more environmentally conscious approach to fashion consumption (Manley et al., 2023; Palmgren & Zylfijaj, 2022; Masserini et al., 2024). This study highlights how young people are taking an

active role in sustainability by extending the lifespan of their apparel and avoiding the fashion waste cycle. These findings indicate that this new generation of consumers may be more invested in reversing the damage caused by fast fashion than engaging in overconsumption. Interestingly, this generation also perceives that their expressive goals and desire for individuality, such as gender and sexuality communication, cannot be achieved via fast fashion. These insights have important implications for fast fashion marketers, who may experience declining sales if they are not responsive to these attitudinal changes and practices within their primary customer base.

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