Mass clothing: social change at the local community level

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ABSTRACT

The sustainability discourse in fashion is often dominated by reductionist and eco-efficient approaches, disconnected from the social contexts of people's everyday lives, questions of social justice and the realities of planetary boundaries. These strategies have largely failed to mitigate the fashion industry's overall negative social and environmental impacts. There is a need in the field for a more grounded understanding of how fashion systems function at the everyday level within particular communities and how dominant infrastructures and discourses within these places shape clothing practices.

This paper draws on interdisciplinary theory of social change—including situated knowledges, practice theory, and science and technology studies—and builds on empirical data from the Fashion-in-Residence project, a study of clothing practices in East London. Using ethnographic observation, interviews, participative workshops, and wardrobe audits with over a hundred participants in Poplar and Shoreditch, clothing practices are analysed to present the mechanics of everyday fashion systems based on situated models of social change. It conceptualises the unprecedented availability of cheap clothing in the UK as *mass clothing*, a type of new technology co-evolving with shifting norms around quality and convenience. These shifts fuel increasing consumption but also narratives of resistance to fast fashion.

By centring evidence-based data from specific communities, this paper challenges sustainability policies and industry strategies that overemphasize conscious consumption. It critiques flawed models of rationalist behavioural economics and individualistic, homogenous views of fashion. Instead, the findings lay groundwork for re-imagining sustainable futures rooted in structural changes within local communities and the infrastructures that drive fast fashion. It highlights the urgent need for research into how fashion systems adapt to global shifts and local conditions, offering a vital new area of study that ties sustainability to the lived realities and innovations of communities.

Keywords: Local Communities, Technology, Situated Analysis, Fashion Systems, Fast Fashion

INTRODUCTION

This research addresses the increasing interest in social and ecological transformation within the field of fashion and sustainability. It aligns with a movement within the field to go beyond reformist strategies which have proven inadequate in mitigating the industry's negative planetary impacts (Fletcher, 2016; Ehrenfeld, 2015). Historically the focus of sustainability innovation in this field has been dominated by strategies which rely on greater eco-efficiency and associated technological innovation in production, individualistic approaches of consumer education and choice, and design innovations which do not necessarily factor in larger socio-cultural preferences or the material reality of users. This reveals a significant gap; the need for a more grounded understanding of how fashion systems operate in everyday life and how dominant infrastructures and local discourses shape clothing practices. This paper addresses this gap by applying methods from other disciplines which have been well developed for gaining a *situated view of systems*. These include practice theory (Shove, *et al*., 2012), feminist and situated knowledges of socio-techno systems (Haraway, 1988; Clarke *et al*., 2018 Star 1990), and additional theory from consumer fashion studies (McIntyre, 2021; Buckley and Clark, 2017; Miller and Woodward, 2013).

To address the knowledge gap of applying such theories to fashion, this paper draws on empirical data from Fashion-in-Residence (FIR), a study of East London clothing practices which studies everyday fashion systems and social change (Toth-Fejel, 2019). This paper focuses on one aspect of FIR results, how currently dominant technologies, infrastructures, and discourses shape clothing practices. The unprecedented availability of cheap clothing in the UK is proposed as a new technology of *mass clothing*, co-evolving with changing normative behaviours around quality and convenience. This discussion highlights how these shifts are linked to both increasing consumption but also simultaneously narratives of resistance to fast fashion.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Fast Fashion, overconsumption and eco-efficient strategies

The rise of the fast fashion model in recent decades has led to an unprecedented surge in inexpensive, rapidly updating clothing in the UK, with an associated trend of consumers buying and discarding clothing at rates far higher than in the past (WRAP 2024; Allwood *et al*., 2006). In response, for the last decade, academic and industry led research of sustainability in fashion has focused on reforming the industry, mainly through eco-efficient strategies such as the use of less environmentally damaging materials, waste reduction, and recycling. However, these gains are outweighed by the industry's increasing resource use, waste production, and continued exploitation in supply chains (Fletcher, 2014; Ehrenfeld, 2015). Critics such as Thackara (2015) argue such efforts cannot keep pace with the demands of a model built on perpetual

growth, while Thorpe (2015) highlights how they also fail to address social and psychological issues including the inertia of habit, the appeal of novelty, and social pressures. These challenges highlight the growing call among academics to explore new research directions. Epitomised by the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion (established in 2018) this school of thought envisions that insights from other disciplines are called upon to help develop innovative models and systems that address human needs while fostering thriving ecosystems. (UCRF, no date; Ehrenfeld and Hoffman, 2013).

Another historic failing in this field is the reductionist view taken of fast fashion consumers, often portraying them as in need of education or lacking self-control and therefore blamed for issues resulting from overconsumption (Evans, 2020; Barber, 2021). Industry would prefer to emphasise the importance of individual responsibility, but it could be argued that it is the fashion brands, 'already in a position of power relative to the consumer, [that] has taken a greater hold on power through increased knowledge and greater supervision of the consumer' (Gabriel, 2024, p. 93).

Consumer behaviour and local communities
A critical oversight of eco-efficient approaches is their disproportionate focus on large-scale, global production processes, overlooking the context of the local, defined here as the physical communities and environments where fashion behaviours take place. The local has recently gained interest in fashion studies with Buckley and Clark (2017) noting the historical neglect of a place-based understanding of everyday clothing practices.

In this, fashion studies follow a move in the social sciences to see human behaviours as intimately linked to 'the social norms around us and the infrastructure we live and work in' (Power & Mont, 2010, p. 2575). For instance, research indicates that even individuals motivated to adopt more sustainable practices struggle to maintain such behaviours, when they run counter to the dominant structures and norms of mainstream society (Power & Mont, 2010; McIntyre, 2021). This might include the shops or services which are easily accessible to an area's residents, the local customs around second hand and reuse as well as socio-economic factors like the average amounts of disposable income or time available in local lifestyles. To ignore such considerations is to neglect questions of social justice, distribution, and the lived experiences of communities interacting with fashion systems.

From the field of fashion, McIntyre (2021) uses the lens of affective dissonance to highlight the complexity of clothing practices, as shaped by a 'shifting, affective assemblage' of factors which includes availability, expectations, aspirations, practicality and morality rather than solely a rational process. Similarly, in their study of blue jeans, Miller and Woodward (2013) show that clothing gains meaning through relationships which often take place locally. Linked to this understanding of local

environments, it is useful to look at sociologies that subscribe to a theory of social change where societal norms and structures are reproduced by iterations of daily practices (e.g. Shove, *et al*., 2012). This finds that social change is entangled with existing histories, norms, infrastructures, and cultural references, many of which are linked to local conditions. These must be understood to identify leverage points for social change. The following sections define two social constructs relevant to building such a nuanced knowledge: quality and convenience.

Consumer perceptions of quality and convenience

Quality in fashion is a multifaceted concept, defined as 'the standard or nature of something as measured against other things of a similar kind; the degree of excellence possessed by a thing' (OED, n.d.(a)). Traditionally, the industry has emphasized objective, standardized attributes such as colourfastness, wrinkle resistance, and fabric strength (Kadolph, 1998). For consumers, quality extends beyond intrinsic factors like durability to include extrinsic cues such as brand, price, and reputation (Aakko & Niinimaki, 2022; Swinker & Hines, 2006, in Connor-Crabb & Rigby, 2019). Connor-Crabb and Rigby (2019) further distinguish between pre-use quality measures and the subjective perceptions of quality that develop during use. Studies show that perceptions of quality vary widely—some consumers link it to luxury and craftsmanship, while others deem garments 'good enough' if they meet minimum standards (Aakko and Niinimaki, 2022; Cline, 2012). These perceptions, shaped by experience, expectations, aesthetics, and use, influence how long garments remain in use, one measure of sustainability (Fletcher, 2012; Connor-Crabb & Rigby, 2019). Clothing is often (and increasingly) discarded for non-technical reasons like changing styles or identities (Connor-Crabb & Rigby, 2019; Aakko & Niinimaki, 2022). The recent concept of the 'quality fade' highlights a shift towards prioritizing low prices and fast production over durability, particularly in fast fashion, where reduced durability aligns with lower consumer expectations (Aakko & Niinimaki, 2022; Cline, 2012).

Convenience is broadly defined as 'the quality of facilitating personal ease or comfort, or of saving trouble or effort' (OED, n.d.(b)) and has been researched primarily in the fields of retail, marketing, and business management. Convenience, a powerful driver of global economies, is prioritized in modern consumer culture where time is valued as highly as money, but it also has severe environmental and social costs (Beauchamp & Ponder, 2010; Oka, 2021). From the consumer perspective, convenience in retail is a multi-dimensional concept, including factors like access, search, transaction, and possession (Beauchamp & Ponder, 2010) Retail innovations, such as store chains and online shopping, reflect retailers' focus on making purchasing easier and faster for consumers (Bronnenberg, 2018). In writing about the sociology of consumption, Ritzer describes a 'McDonaldized society', whereby low price, convenience, and lack of alternatives lead the consumer to frequent, in our case, fast fashion stores. He describes this as 'a 'rational choice' -in a society where speed and efficiency are valued, consumers want to be sure that they are getting what they expect, and cost is

an important consideration' (2001, p.63).

Convenience also extends to product design. For example, polyester clothing is marketed as convenient because it is easy to launder and does not require ironing. However, this convenience may be lost by the need for more frequent washing due to increased perspiration (Niinimaki, 2011). Additionally, Shove observes that innovations marketed as *convenient* actually reduce the need for long-term planning rather than genuinely saving time[1]. Convenience, then, is particularly valued in a market-driven society that prizes individuality because people feel more in control of their time and advertising further reinforces this idea of convenience as essential (2021). However, this individual convenience comes at a cost, including a tendency towards more energy and resource-intensive practices (ibid.).

Conclusion

The literature underscores the limits of eco-efficiency in tackling fast fashion's systemic issues, urging interdisciplinary, place-based approaches and that shift from production and individual consumer choice to wider social change. This requires a deeper understanding of the local factors which shape the contexts where fashion behaviours take place. Quality and convenience are defined as useful markers for gauging social norms where meaningful change can occur.

METHODOLOGY

Findings are drawn from the larger Fashion-in-Residence research project which aims to identify elements within local fashion systems that foster sustainability. The questions it asks are mainly qualitative in nature, and therefore a descriptive, interpretive, and context-specific methodology was employed (Dilley, 2002; Urquhart, 2013). Primary research took place in 2017-2019, within two tightly defined geographic areas in East London, each two kilometres square, centred on Shoreditch and Poplar. Quadrats were first introduced in the field as part of Kate Fletcher's Fashion Ecologies Project (Fletcher, 2018). Borrowed from geography and ecology, this method enables a manageable survey of populations and dynamics, to make inferences about patterns within larger systems (Fletcher, 2018).

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[1] For instance, frozen dinners can be reheated in minutes but may necessitate longer trips to large supermarkets instead of local grocers (Shove, 2003.

Fig. 1 Location of the two geographic areas studied (Toth-Fejel, forthcoming).

Methods were designed to study fashion practices and systems in the areas, including the gathering of geographic data, mapping every street and visible business and public space, informal interviews with over one hundred people who lived or worked in the area, extensive interviews and wardrobe analysis with five participants, participative workshops with more than 30 participants and other forms of creative mapping. The data were analysed in two phases, first using a grounded thematic analysis[2] and secondly using situational analysis mapping methods[3].[4]

ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis

Using Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach, detailed coding of the data was conducted (2005). Participant transcripts were manually analysed, highlighting environmentally preferable and overlooked practices, aiming to identify patterns, initial codes, and themes linked to potential social change. The themes highlighted in Table 1 are those which were most strongly associated with *quality* or *convenience*.

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[2] Based on Grounded Theory (Urquhart, 2013; Charmaz, 2005) and Social Practice Theory (Shove, 2010; Shove, *et al.*, 2012).

[3] Based on Clarke, Friese, and Washburn, 2018.

[4] For a more detailed description of methodology, see Toth-Fejel (forthcoming).

Table 1. Themes explicitly relating to quality and convenience developed from the analysis of transcripts

Identified Themes
Different participants reporting contrasting values and practices within their wardrobes, as exemplified by differing definitions of 'quality'.
Participants reporting sourcing clothing from mass production chain stores (Next, Sainsburys, Primark, etc.) due to perceived low price AND high quality.
Clothing practices of participants as a constant *negotiation* of cost, convenience and accessibility.
Practices which save time as a form of convenience.
Time consuming practices which are considered time well-spent.

Through this process, quality and convenience emerged as sensitizing terms[5]. For this reason, both were further incorporated at the Situational Analysis phase, including positional maps to plot the concepts' roles in relation to other elements in the systems studied. An example of the latter can be seen in Figure 2. In this map, the x-axis represents the importance of *quality* in clothing choices, while the y-axis reflects the value placed on *convenience*. The relationship between these terms and subsequent interrogation by existing theory form the basis of the rest of this chapter.

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[5] As per Charmaz and Blumer before her, a sensitizing term refers to a concept that emerges during data analysis, helping researchers interpret data while remaining open to new ideas (Charmaz, 2005).
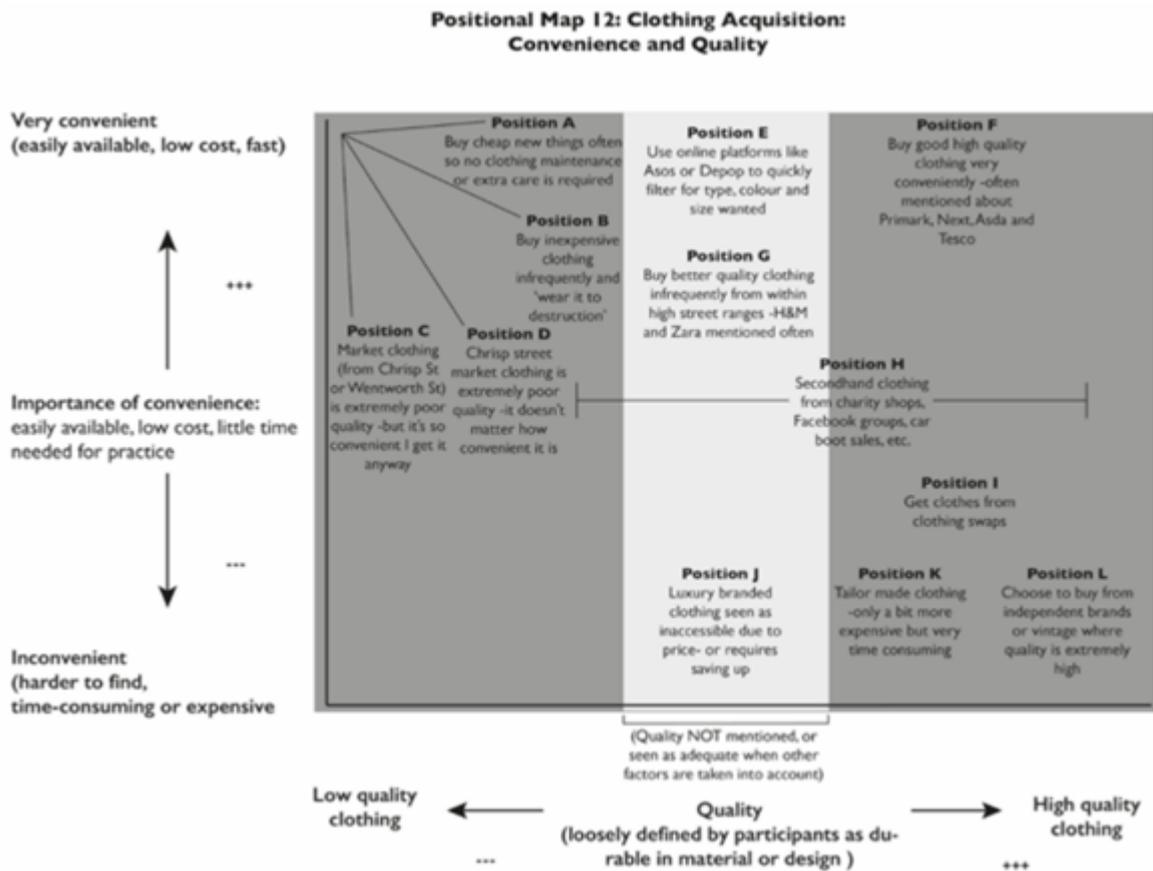
Fig 2. Positional map charting descriptions of quality and convenience from participant transcripts (Toth-Fejel, forthcoming).

Initial results of quality and convenience

In keeping with findings by Connor-Crabb and Rigby (2019), definitions of clothing and practices which constituted convenience and quality proved to be highly relative in participants' accounts. For instance, while some identified H&M clothing as low quality, others considered it superior. For others, quality meant buying from luxury retailers or abroad, while others saw cheap options from jumble sales and supermarkets as high quality, as long as they were intact. This diversity of opinions is seen in the positional map in figure 2. For instance, some participants avoided buying clothing from a local street market due to its perceived low quality or uncleanliness while others described it as high quality or 'good'. The details within such accounts demonstrate how perceptions of quality were not defined in isolation, but in constant negotiation with other factors such as time required to maintain the garment. One example is below:

> Money-wise and quality-wise the market is good [for clothing]… The same material that would cost £10 would cost £15 in Stratford… That's why I buy cheap things, so you can use it for a certain time and then buy new things.

Another participant who regularly bought clothing from the same market said, 'not all the material is good. Some of it is not good for my body and rashes come out -then I don't buy it'. Even this hazard was something they were willing to risk, given that they liked the designs, and found it convenient and inexpensive. The finding here verifies prior studies, that for most participants, quality means 'good enough' – as determined by many shifting factors including style, cost and convenience. Overall, the most commonly mentioned sources for *quality* clothing were M&S, Zara, H&M, Next, Primark, and supermarket brands like Asda, Sainsbury's, and Tesco. This could be considered counterintuitive, given that all are linked to the fast fashion model which is not known for the durability of clothing it produces (Aakko & Niinimaki, 2022; Cline, 2012). This indicates there are other dynamics establishing such normalised practices and expectations around quality and convenience.

These affirm that convenience is multi-dimensional, with consumers making 'logical choices' influenced by retail infrastructures prioritizing accessibility, speed, efficiency, and low cost (Beauchamp & Ponder, 2010; Ritzer, 2001). However, there is a distinction between this and the idea of 'rational choice' motivated by economic interests. As predicted by practice theory, in fashion and clothing choice, preferences are shaped not just by the pure agency of personal preference but also by structural factors like availability, cultural expectations, and income (Shove, *et al*.,, 2012).

Larger material and cultural shifts in priorities
As part of this negotiation, many participants stated that 'quality' was not a logical choice for them to prioritise, for a variety of material and symbolic reasons. At the extreme end of such accounts, one of the wardrobe audit participants said she bought clothing about once a week, from the market near her work, never paying more than £10 for a piece of clothing. She described why these garments could then often only be worn once:

> [Because they are] 'outing clothes'…you can't wear more than once or twice…As long as it looks good on me, I would buy it…Casual day to day, you can repeat your outfits all the time you want to -but when it comes to events, evening parties, things like that, you can't. Social media has spoilt everything now!

There is an irony in this that the more impressive and picture-worthy the outfit, the less able this participant felt she was to wear it a second time. Look and low cost was prioritised more than any definitions of quality.

Another participant said it made no sense to spend more money on quality clothing because then you had to spend more *time* maintaining it, which she noted, as a full-time mum, she did not have enough of:

> That's why I buy cheap things, so you can use it for a certain time and then buy new things…If you buy [nice/expensive] new things you have to take care of it -and you spend *more* time! I don't have that time.

These participants calculated the value of clothes based on their expected usage and the worth of the time they predicted needing to spend on specific clothing practices. These examples can be grouped with previously presented positions (about convenience) to show that *the availability of plentiful cheap clothes* was clearly a factor in many participants' reasoning not to prioritise investing in *quality* clothing. Participants described how plentiful inexpensive clothing had changed their general attitudes to clothing and therefore practices. For instance: 'It's not worth making your stuff anymore. It's so cheap! You can get £2 a pair of leggings in Primark'. This and other accounts demonstrate how expectations of clothing being worn only once or twice have been normalised, something that would have been unthinkable in previous decades.

This material abundance of dramatically less expensive and readily available clothing witnessed in the places of study is part of a radical social shift which has taken place in the last few decades in many places in the UK. A new material reality has altered the logic of the kind of practices that 'make sense' for people to take part in and therefore a changed normative behaviour. This transition follows one of Schatzki's key premises of practice theory, that 'people do what makes sense for them to do' (2002) based on the material and social realities around them. In tandem with this it is 'rendering previous forms of competencies redundant' (Abernathy and Clark, 1985 in Shove, 2010: p. 1278). In this case such 'redundant' competencies include skills in making, mending and clothing maintenance.

In contrast, the analysis also revealed areas where convenience or cost was not prioritized, often highlighting 'inefficient' or 'irrational' spending of time, money or effort. These often fell into practices where the emphasis was on a relationship with a friend or a family member rather than on specific material acquisition. For example, one participant avoided inconvenient shopping locations but was willing to wait months to repair broken clothing while visiting her grandmother in another country. Others placed some emphasis on personal improvement, for instance by seeking unique second-hand clothing from vintage shops or car boot sales to express individuality or engaging in therapeutic practices like mending or knitting. Finally, others were described as supporting the local community in some way, for instance, in the choice to shop from locally owned shops. The emphasis in all of these is on a relationship, with another close person, with oneself, or the wider community. In such cases, the participants often went out of their way in 'inconvenient' ways to engage in practices not made convenient by dominant systems in place.

The variations above challenge simple categorization. A practice theory lens helps

demonstrate how material changes to what is locally (and conveniently) available and changes to normative behaviour happen to respond to each other. The positionality maps used by Situational Analysis allow for practices to be observed where multiple, contradictory or ambiguous viewpoints are used, rather than side-lined, to better understand the complex reasons behind practices. The participant descriptions of quality and convenience in their clothing practices highlight the constant negotiation between material and symbolic factors present in the sites of those practices. This analysis critiques simplistic approaches to behavioural influences which are often used in sustainability discourses. It highlights the contingent nature of people's practices as supported by social practice models and situated theories.

Convenience from a situated view

As already discussed, there is a well-documented shift in the UK towards consumers buying and disposing of higher volumes of clothing more quickly than in decades past (Allwood, *et al.*, 2006). Consumer education is one strategy within the field of fashion studies that targets this and focuses on behaviour change. However, when not backed by situated or systems social theories, these attitudes are often viewed in isolation as individual maladaptive behaviours that should therefore be easily corrected through education (e.g. WRAP, 2017). Within places like the UK where individualism is increasingly the dominant paradigm of government policy and social discourse, seeking convenience is popularly associated with lack of moral fibre (Shove, 2003). In fashion, journalist Jessica Evans highlights the classist undertones in online criticism of Primark shoppers queuing when stores reopened after the Covid lockdown (2020). Aja Barber and others have written that demonizing fast fashion shoppers overlooks broader systemic issues and is therefore useful to distract from the failure of brands to take responsibility for their own actions, and the power imbalance existing between consumers and retailers (Barber, 2021; Gabriel, 2024). Better education for consumers is one remedy, which while not always explicitly falling into these traps, is in danger of fitting within the same reductionist paradigm.

In contrast, the situated social practice models used for FIR find that by removing the moral normative lens, instances of convenience can be understood as points where people have *best* utilised the available materials and social expectations at any given time. Practice theory finds that practices that are deemed as convenient by users can be viewed as reasonable responses that have co-evolved to shifts in the technologies available and to collective social anxieties. Situated theories also find these to be sensible reactions within current systems of power and discourse present in these places. Within both areas of scholarship, trying to influence individual behaviours to achieve social change is akin to treating the symptoms, allowing the underlying causes to persist. Only by attending to the existing materials, relationships, competencies, and historic patterns of practice can practices be altered. This study suggests that strategies of 'tips and behavioural encouragement' from initiatives like WRAPs Love Your Clothes campaign (WRAP, 2017), would therefore be seriously undermined by

the presence of large volumes of cheaply available and accessible clothing in the areas studied. The shifting technologies that have enabled clothing to be mass-produced and sold for lower prices than at any other time in history need to be seen as entangled with social changes to how people interpret and value characteristics such as durability and exclusivity. It is not feasible to adequately shift behaviours without addressing policy decisions and other structural issues that continue to allow societal systems and practices to be re-shaped by the ubiquity of fast fashion.

For this reason, it is important to look at collective concerns and societal anxieties that are implicated in expectations and characteristics around the accessibility of plentiful cheap clothing. The results of this study demonstrate that the availability of low-cost fast fashion has been part of a shift in people's expectations about the level to which clothing can be expected to feel regularly *novel* to its owner (as expressed by the comments made about one-time use clothing). Furthermore, clothing was increasingly expected by participants to be *maintenance free*. For instance, see the following participant quotes:

> I don't think anyone has any hand wash clothes anymore…We're too lazy nowadays...[I used to do things like re-dye my jeans but] I don't have time for all that rubbish. …[Now] I'd just chuck them away. And get new ones, yeah.

> I look for material to be nice. Acrylic. I like it. I hate ironing.

Of particular interest to sustainability discussions, clothing was also expected as much as possible to look *freshly purchased*. The easiest way to achieve this was for participants to frequently purchase new clothing. In addition, practices were described such as storing shoes in dust-free boxes and laundering to 'freshen up' clothes using fabric softener and careful hanging, rather than washing them, to maintain a freshly bought appearance, which Shove notes has become more common (2003). Furthermore, the influx of fast fashion materials can be seen as part of a 'reconfiguring of interpretations of value and significance' (ibid.) in changing attitudes to quality and obsolescence. The research uncovered much evidence of participants embracing fast fashion. There were many reports of participants' pleasure at being able to access relatively good quality, cheaply available clothing. Participants found it easy to change their clothing quickly when their body size changed or to suit a new transition in life. People from marginalised groups were grateful for being able to dress their families in smart-looking clothing cheaply and to keep themselves looking professional and 'fresh'. But the flip side of this accessibility, as participant descriptions often made clear, is that individual pieces of clothing themselves were not often very highly valued. Illustrating this, the most common reason participants gave for discarding clothing was to make way for more clothing in overflowing wardrobes. Another example is how participants described giving clothing to friends or family without using language that indicated it held significant sentimental or monetary value. Within the wardrobe audits,

there were certainly some pieces of clothing which were highly prized or meaningful for participants, but these did *not* represent participants' approach to clothing overall. The sheer ubiquity of clothing from a material perspective seemed to give it a low value because it was easily replaceable.

Technology, social change and normative practice

From an environmental perspective, Shove says we should be particularly interested in how norms around convenience are established, because they often function as a driver of escalating consumption and increased resource use (Oka, 2021; Shove, 2003). The findings in this study of participant perceptions and practices around quality and convenience demonstrate changing social norms in the areas studied. These are in line with overall UK trends towards practices where clothing is treated as more disposable; where expectations are for clothing to be low cost and high convenience, and lowering levels of quality is acceptable (Connor-Crabb & Rigby, 2019). In researching such phenomenon, Shove often finds the literature of consumption and Science and Technology Studies (STS) to be lacking in that it focuses on acquisition rather than modes of integration of new materials and technologies within existing practices of everyday life. This critique highlighted the potential to use Shove's scholarship in this area, along with STS studies which highlight relational aspects (e.g. Star, 1990) to further analyse participant descriptions of *quality* and *convenience* in this study. Therefore, the next section addresses how the situation of increasing fast fashion materials in the areas studied was seen to be contributing to changes in social norms in several ways.

In examining fashion activities through a systems and social practice lens, it was useful to conceptualize fast fashion as a socio-technical regime and within this, the high volumes of cheap clothing present in the areas studied as a *technology*. The substantial amounts of cheap clothing can be seen as a local fashion 'resource' of an area, given how much material is at hand. Although it could be argued that there is nothing particularly 'techy' or new about the material characteristics of the clothes themselves, the term is used to denote a system or tool created by humans to produce objects and techniques for the attainment of specific goals (Carroll, 2017). The presence of this clothing mass was often used as a tool, around which participants adapt and shape their clothing practices. In this case it is not the individual pieces of clothing that are the innovation here; it is the qualities of the clothing being *high volume and within easy reach* that are the technology. This will be called the technology of *mass clothing,* and the following section will explore how conceptualising this shift towards *mass clothing* as a technology adds to the discussion of convenience, social norms and an overall situated knowledge of fashion.

The nature of production processes and the artefacts of fashion have not radically changed over the last century (Thanhauser, 2022) and the current glut of cheaply available clothing is not something which has suddenly arrived; it has been decades

in the making (Hoskins, 2014). Yet the current state of *mass clothing* can be seen as 'innovative' because present levels of material excess, easy availability, record low prices and huge variety of choice in style and sizing, distinguishes it from former versions of clothing technologies. The introduction of a new type of material element, such as a domestic freezer or a smartphone, is the most common way of viewing a 'technology'. Yet within relational models, the introduction of the new object is only one part of technological change. In both systems thinking (Meadows, 2010) and practice theory (Shove, *et al*., 2012), materials are one part of the constellation of elements that make up practices, operating with meaning, and local competencies or relationships (depending on the theory). The new object entering the system is not the sole bearer of change. Rather technological change is defined by 'constant processes of re-calibration; whereby over time structure-agency relations re-form dialectically' (Star and Rhuhleder, 2015, p. 278). For instance, the way a smartphone is adopted and used in a place is contingent on many historic and cultural factors and simultaneous technologies including the availability of reliable electrical grid and wi-fi infrastructure, the presence of social media and app industries, adequate levels of disposable income and an enthusiasm for constantly available personal digital experiences. Similarly, in Shove's investigation of the changes to cleanliness and practices of bathing or laundering over time, she finds that the popularity of the 'daily shower' with its associated high levels of personal water and energy consumption was not inevitable, but rather the product of a rollout of technologies such as more modern indoor plumbing and more cheaply available appliances which corresponded with a shift in social norms about acceptable levels of cleanliness based on general social anxieties about disease and what constitutes adequate hygiene and health. A new technology may enable the possibility of certain configurations but no element on its own produces the other. Rather they are developed in tandem in relation to each other. In such cases the individual everyday practices are 'private routines and rationales [which] represent working responses to collective concerns and societal anxieties' as discussed previously (Shove, 2003, p. 90).

The expectations described above are for clothing in participant's wardrobes to be constantly novel, maintenance-free, to always look freshly purchased, and of little value and easily replaced. In decades past, such expectations for clothing would only have been available for the very wealthy or, in some cases, to those people willing to spend a lot of time on clothing maintenance. The technology of *mass clothing* has made it possible for the majority of people (although not inevitable). This wider distribution of such expectations to more classes of the UK population partly helps explain why the change feels like such a positive innovation for many participants. Through its material characteristics this technology has enabled changed practices and changed social norms which are unintentionally (for the participants) more resource and energy intensive.

CONCLUSION

This paper addresses a call coming from within the field of fashion and sustainability to fundamentally shift societal structures away from the harm brought by increasing rates of clothing consumption and disposal. This paper offers the conceptualisation of *mass clothing* as a technology as one means of unlearning certain fashion and sustainability doctrine. In doing so it submits a more situated understanding of how fashion operates within everyday contexts of consumption and use. Through the application of practice theory and situated knowledge, it highlights how dynamic patterns of behaviour—shaped by interconnected factors such as material realities, local networks and relationships, and cultural meanings—play a critical role in sustaining the current fashion system. Importantly, this paper discusses how traditional eco-efficient strategies often fail to engage with these dynamics, overlooking how individuals integrate new materials and innovations into their established practices. Without addressing these complexities, efforts to drive meaningful behaviour change will likely fall short.

This paper takes a novel approach by applying theories from outside the traditional domain of fashion studies, responding to the growing need for interdisciplinary research in this area. By focusing on quality and convenience, we have identified two key themes through which practice theory can help illuminate the systemic challenges of sustainable fashion. As an emerging area, this research is limited by the nature of exploratory research. However, this approach is a useful foundation for further investigation to build detailed, situated in-depth knowledge of fashion systems which acknowledge lived realities of consumers and communities. Addressing these gaps is an essential part of the required re-assessment of fashion towards meaningful sustainability.

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