

Fast fashion versus sustainable style: the rise of vintage fashion consumption in the age of disposable dress

Sandra McNabb

Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the increasing trend of vintage fashion consumption in a time when, according to Bruce and Greenwood (2006) “The Fast-Fashion concept has become a mainstay of the UK fashion industry” and, Bain (2005), claims that a cotton top from a typical mass market retailer can cost less than the price of a lunchtime sandwich. The key question posed will be: is the increase in vintage fashion consumption a reaction to the ‘Fast’ (disposable) fashion movement prevalent in the UK market? Are consumers seeking to escape from the mediocrity of the mass via their use of vintage clothing? This may well be the reason when, according to Ulrich (2001) vintage clothes function in a similar way to designer labels in that they are used to differentiate the wearer. DeLong, et al (2005), assert that, although little has been written on the subject, vintage clothing is becoming increasingly important. This increasing importance may be due to the vintage fashion movement being seen as one manifestation of the ‘Nu-Austerity’ movement where, according to Raymond (2006) “Once if you had it, you flaunted it, now if you have it you hang on to it, trade it on eBay, or recycle it.” Interviews with consumers, fashion academics and specialist vintage retailers will be undertaken; to develop a deeper understanding of why they involve themselves in the vintage fashion movement, as well as appropriate secondary research. In line with current and future issues of sustainability, consumption and consumer behaviour, this work will be of interest to the academic community and the fashion industry in investigating the causes for the growing movement in vintage fashion consumption.

Keywords:
fast fashion,
vintage fashion,
disposable fashion

Introduction

The UK fashion market has become polarized, with low value, mass produced 'disposable' fashion at one extreme – the fast fashion of the title of this paper, and premium and luxury priced fashion at the other. Premium and luxury fashion, due to economic constraints, is inaccessible to mainstream consumers and therefore, it could be argued, choice is limited. This paper will first characterize and discuss the structure, concentration and impact of the UK fast-fashion market, and subsequently explore an alternative, specifically, the 'sustainable' vintage fashion sector and the reasons for the parallel rise of vintage fashion as a growing, accessible, consumer choice. Secondary and primary research methods will be used via a literature review, interviews with practitioners and knowledgeable sources, and the results of a vintage fashion shopper survey will be analyzed.

Definition, structure and concentration

Fast fashion – the shortening of the supply chain, to reduce cost and selling prices, increase turn-over of styles, contain recognisable elements of cat-walk trends and improve or sustain competitive edge, has become the strategic intention of many UK fashion retailers. Fast response production systems and governmental deregulation have been the key drivers of this phenomenon. As Bruce and Greenwood (2006) state "The fast fashion concept has become a mainstay of the UK fashion industry." Fast fashion has revolutionized the way in which the fashion supply chain operates and how the market, predominantly female, now regard and consume fashion clothing; as stylish, low cost, and highly disposable. According to Sally Bain, a UK based fashion market analyst "We now have a mass consumer culture which sees the average woman on the street eating a sandwich which quite probably cost more than the top she's wearing" (personal communication 12th February, 2007).

The fast fashion trend has been driven by the power of 'own label' retailers who no longer carry high levels of on-site inventory but rely on their suppliers to react swiftly, via the use of technology, to alter styling and quantities, depending on customer demand. The UK value clothing sector was worth £7.8bn in 2006. Verdict (2006). Of the fast fashion retailers currently operating in the UK; Primark, Top Shop, New Look, H & M and Zara together share 12 % of the total UK clothing market.

Miller (2006). As the current clothing market in the UK is valued at £36 billion plus (Mintel, 2006), this translates to an effective strategy for the brands concerned.

In addition to high street fashion retailers, the growth of 'Supermarket Fashion' another value led, fast-fashion sector, has seen a 94% growth in the last five years. Wal-Mart owned George at Asda accounts for 17% of value sector clothing in the UK. Tesco, a relative newcomer to the supermarket clothing scene, already accounts for 11% of the value clothing sector, with sales of £750 million. Of all retailer brands mentioned thus far, the current most popular with UK fashion media and consumers is Primark. The fashion and business media have been highly influential in promoting this retailer as the latest low-cost, best performing fast-fashion marketer. "Primark thrives on its price positioning, which is the lowest in the market" Verdict (2006). Nicknamed 'Primarni' by the press, their current Spring Summer 2007 range includes women's vests priced at one pound and jeans priced at four pounds; typical prices for their merchandise. Such is the appeal of their product that it is traded on eBay. At the time of writing, there were 956 Primark items for sale on UK eBay. Although Primark have signed up to an Ethical trading charter, questions still arise about how prices can be kept low with one Primark customer commenting "...at the back of my mind, I wonder how they can sell so cheaply" (personal communication February 10, 2007).

The fast fashion consumer

As the general fashion market is principally driven by womenswear, so too is fast fashion. In the BBC series, the Money Programme, on the business of fast fashion, the typical consumer was described as "shopping every day, looking for styles and outfits like those her favourite fashion icons wear." (2004). Although the marketing mix is overwhelmingly targeted at the high spending 18-24 year old woman, from empirical evidence, fashion attitude rather than age is the determining factor in behaviour. Mintel (2006) maintains that there is a good penetration of ABC1 customer types who shop for fast fashion. She reads weekly rather than monthly fashion magazines – "Vogue may remain the fashionista's bible, but you have to wonder whether *Heat* exerts a greater influence on the way women dress" Davidson (2005). Typically, low-cost, weekly magazines now encourage readers to

emulate their celebrity idols by presenting them with new ideas and styling at a much greater frequency; therefore aligning trend and stockist information with in-store supply. She wants fashion clothing to be inexpensive, to provide a weekly quick fashion 'fix' in line with her lifestyle and she 'wants it now.' She does not require a relationship with the goods; only with the price and fashion value. Can this behaviour truly be termed 'fashion' consumption for, as George Davis, founder of Next and George at Asda states "If I stood up and said I've sold a quarter of a million of those, that's not fashion, that's volume. To be a long term credible women's fashion brand you have to respect the individuality of your customer" BBC (2005)

Environmental impact

The consumer behaviour, described above, which sees queues forming outside Primark and H & M, to purchase the latest cat-walk inspired 'bargain,' feeds an addiction to purchase higher volumes of progressively lower value clothes. What does this spending culture add up to terms of waste and impact on the environment?

The average UK consumer spends £624.00 on approximately fifty items of clothing per year. This equates to an average cost per item of £12.48 and to three billion items of clothing purchased per annum (Allwood et al 2006). In order to sustain the cyclical nature of fashion, much of this clothing will be disposed of as waste. According to TRIAD, the UK based re-cycling charity, 700,000 tonnes of clothing are dumped in land-fill sites each year. Land fill sites produce the second highest amount of methane; a gas which is responsible for 20% of all greenhouse gases. It has now been proven that greenhouse gases effect climate change. Therefore, the adage that 'haste makes waste' appears to be correct in the case of fast fashion – however, fast fashion cannot be said to be responsible for all clothing wastage but as low-value clothing is now seen purely as a commodity item, something to fulfil a short-lived need, to be discarded quickly and without thought to the consequences of the disposal, then it could be argued that fast fashion is indeed a growing contributory factor in waste clothing land-fill. To fully understand the problem, and using data provided by the *Well Dressed?* report (2006), an analysis of a single product type, demonstrates the impact of contemporary consumption. In 2004, the average UK consumer typically purchased eight T-shirts per year which amounted to 460

million T-shirts imported in to the market. Therefore, it is not only the amount of waste after usage which is a growing environmental issue but the size of the corresponding carbon footprint involved in supply.

Changes in consumer behaviour

From the evidence provided thus far, it could be argued that conformity to the fast-fashion retail cycle is endemic within the UK fashion marketplace. To maintain low prices however, the fast-fashion items need to be produced in large quantities; to maintain profit margins and meet consumer demand. This, for some, is the reason cited for switching from fast fashion to the more unique, one-off styles provided by vintage clothes. No longer content to be faced with the overwhelming choice and blandness associated with high volumes and the parallel marketing mixes of high street retailer brands, they are turning to an alternative approach to 'conspicuous' fast-fashion and are partially, or completely, disengaging from it. Furthermore, influencers from the fashion media are now bemoaning fast fashion consumption. Clare Coulson, fashion editor of the UK broadsheet newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, states in her on-line blog that "My only New Year's resolution was to buy fewer clothes – not as part of an economy drive but because there is something senseless about the incessant need for something new". (2007)

Boyle (2004) proposes that those categorised as 'inner-directed' no longer feel the need to be 'conspicuous consumers' but rather seek out autonomy, self-expression, health and independence. He further contends that approximately fifty percent of the UK population are driving the trend for authenticity. Crane (2000) asserts that "The obsession with personal identity that is characteristic of some but not all lifestyles can be explained in part as a consequence of a society and culture that are increasingly complex and difficult to interpret"

Willmott and Nelson argue that every age cohort has become more individualistic over the last 25 years, citing the decline of traditional institutions and the rise of the affluent society as the cause; being better off gives us confidence as consumers – specifically confidence to be different. (2005) "Mass marketing has become a very hard thing to do because people don't like to be seen as 'normal' any more – they all want to be seen as individuals" states Martin Hayward, chairman of the Henley Centre (cited in Boyle, 2004). Moreover, Mintel (2006) finds that

we no longer want to be defined by our material possessions because the wide choice of goods in the marketplace have changed our attitudes towards a more caring consumption and favour an individualistic and rebellious approach to manufacturers and their messages.

Demographic trends

Demographic trend predictions which are likely to influence fashion consumption are also an important area to consider. Future Laboratory, a UK based trend prediction agency, believes that consumers are looking for more real experiences in their lives. They claim that the approaching 'Nu-Austerity' movement will mean that consumers will no longer define themselves via conspicuous consumption but will make more use of re-cycling, re-use and eBay (Raymond 2007). Future Laboratory has termed this consumer the 'micro-preneur.' A consumer will purchase in the knowledge that they will re-sell their consumer goods and, in effect, become part of a leasing system which will see the purchase of goods as a link in a chain of re-cycling rather than waste disposal. eBay and other on-line auction and swap sites, already facilitate this system, with eBay proclaiming on its current UK website that 'Old is the new new' (2007).

If this is indeed a growing trend, it corresponds with Willmott and Nelson's assertion that the 'self-actualized' consumer will seek an 'experiential' life (2005). Empirical evidence strongly suggests that in seeking out and purchasing vintage fashion items, the vintage fashion follower is engaging in 'experiential consumption'; the excitement of the hunt and the delight in the discovery of unique, 'one-off' clothing items. The satisfaction of buying into the 'authentic' and usage of something with a past, a history, be it real or imagined, adds to its inherent value, in addition to the craftsmanship of manufacture and quality of materials. Clothes, which due to economic necessity and a higher relative value, were well cared for and loved. "It wasn't the throw-away fashion of today so clothes tended to be well kept – we find a lot in their original boxes and wrappings" (personal communication, vintage fashion stallholder, Nottingham, 2007).

Vintage fashion defined

It is important to define what is meant by the term 'vintage fashion' in the context of the post-industrialized, contemporary consumer society of

the UK. DeLong, Heinemann and Reiley (2005) reason that “In clothing, vintage usually involves the recognition of a special type or model, and knowing and appreciating such specifics as year or period when produced or worn”. Most writers agree that the term is used to describe clothing which is recognisably representative of an era, a style movement or of a particular fashion house. From primary research however, it is evident that, in the context of clothing, the term ‘vintage’ is now open to interpretation and miss-use; vintage being classed, particularly by 18-24 year old interviewees, as being of a period as recent as ten years ago. Therefore, the definition of ‘vintage’ from the perspective of many engaging with it, has become a purely personal one. Opinions vary in what now differentiates the ‘vintage’ items from the ‘second-hand’, ‘retro’ or thrift store ‘cast-off.’ It appears that, except for the recognisable and highly valued vintage couture items which garner press coverage from auction sales, movie star and celebrity events and museum retrospectives, there is no longer a clear differentiation for the average vintage fashion purchaser and more importantly, they do not care. More important factors for them are that items are recognisably different from mainstream fashion and that they will demonstrate that the wearer is stylish rather than a fashion ‘slave.’

Many writers concur with this definition of functionality. According to Ulrich (2001) vintage clothes function in a similar way to designer labels in that they are used to differentiate the wearer. Jenss (2004) notes that today’s original vintage clothes function like designer labels, as markers of distinction. From primary research results, this ‘differentiation’ is a factor cited for the increasing consumption of vintage fashion clothing. Palmer and Clark describe it as “The quest for originality and the one-off is, in part, a reaction to the globalization of enormous fashion chains at all price levels” (2005). They further claim that “It is the uniqueness of vintage that appeals to consumers who now consider themselves connoisseurs and collectors, and that makes buying an old garment complex in terms of style and price”. Foster, (cited in Wilson, 2001) argues that it is “...a flight from the industrial present to the romantic past”. Therefore dressing in vintage clothing can be interpreted as a sign of protest against fast-fashion; by using vintage clothing to signal that the wearer does not require the latest trends to express their stylishness and individualism. “They are no longer driven by fashion but by the unique.” S. Bain (personal communication 12th February, 2007).

A key element in the growth and general acceptance of vintage fashion clothing has been the extensive reporting of it by the mass media. Oscar nights featuring movie star 'A-listers' wearing vintage couture gowns for their acceptance speeches are now commonplace; Halle Berry, Rene Zellwiger, Ashley Judd and Julia Roberts are just some of this celebrity group. Add to this the UK obsession with celebrity culture and style icons such as Kate Moss and Sienna Miller who are often seen in vintage clothing and thus, a trend is born. Such is the celebrity influence that Vivienne Westwood re-introduced her 1970's 'Pirate' boot after Kate Moss was photographed wearing them. "Once upon a time, second-hand duds were deemed cast-offs. Today they have cachet." Meyer (2005).

Shopping for vintage clothing is also encouraged by some of the fast-fashion retailers previously mentioned. Top Shop, a favourite fast fashion store for many celebrity shoppers, has a vintage department within its London flagship store and Oasis, another UK retailer, markets a range of 'vintage' inspired clothing. It should also be noted that many of the 'vintage' items observed by the writer, at fairs and in vintage fashion stores, are themselves from a period of mass production but still sold as 'vintage'. Gregson and Crewe (2003) describe these as "previously commoditised, often mass-produced goods – goods that typically were located in the mainstream during their first cycle of exchange and consumption." These are clearly recognised as such by their trade names; popular UK and American brands from the 1960s, 70s and even more recent decades. This does not appear to impact on their appeal to customers, as vintage fashion shoppers nonetheless consider them to be different and removed from the mediocrity of the mass market.

Evidence also suggests that respondents, regardless of age, income or gender, expressed a need to involve themselves in the vintage fashion movement as a reaction to the mass market's lack of originality, personal 'choice fatigue' and their search for authenticity. "Not only does authenticity refer to new and original objects and themes but also the re-creation or revival of objects and motifs from the past" (Jenss 2004). Vintage clothes are regarded as having greater intrinsic value to the wearer because they are *not* mass produced and therefore contain an altogether more interesting narrative with their uniqueness, their provenance, styling and authenticity. Vinken (2006) reasons that wearing second hand clothes has little to do with frugality but rather

that one is wearing the 'spirits of the past' and that, 'fashion – contrary to its reputation, has become an art of memory.' Vintage clothing has a uniqueness and a ready-made history, it could therefore be argued that an item of vintage clothing comes with a built-in 'experience'; part, or all of the appeal for many vintage clothing shoppers. As Lewis and Bridger's text on contemporary consumers asserts "...they tend to reject mass-produced and mass-marketed commodities in favour of products and services that can claim to be in some way authentic." (2004).

From the evidence provided thus far, there is an assertion that general changes in social trends are providing sound reasons for shifts away from a mass market culture and towards a more considered approach to consumption. For the purpose of this research however, a specific investigation was undertaken, to first identify a typical vintage fashion consumer and to elicit attitudes towards vintage fashion consumption. This was undertaken at a Vintage Fashion Fair in Nottingham city in February 2007, first interviewing the organiser of the fair and subsequently undertaking a survey of fifty shoppers. The findings are listed below.

Primary research

From an interview undertaken with Edwin Dyson, the fair organiser, three specific vintage fashion consumer types were identified:

- 1) the younger shopper, usually a student who is looking for 'something different' and 'low cost' but does not want low value, mass market fashion
- 2) the more affluent, older customer who has an informed knowledge and appreciation of the quality and uniqueness of vintage clothing
- 3) the 're-enactors' who dress almost exclusively in vintage clothing. Many of the 're-enactors' are themselves vintage stall or shop owners.

Overwhelmingly, according to the organiser, all three groups use vintage clothing to demonstrate their individuality and as a means of self expression. He further stated that the market is changing, with more business oriented stall holders entering the vintage fashion market "this is not just a week-end hobby any more. The trends I see are not just about vintage fashion but also entertainment which evokes the past. I've begun to organise cabaret and burlesque nights because

there’s a growing demand.” (personal communication February 4, 2007). This evidence suggests that, together with the uptake of vintage clothing, leisure choices may also be changing but it is too early to determine if this is indeed a trend.

Shopper survey

From the results of the shopper survey, the diagram below clearly demonstrates a predisposition to purchase vintage clothing in the high spending 18-24 age group. This is the same age group which fast fashion retailers also specifically target. It is also interesting to note that there were as many respondents aged 45+ as there were those aged under18. All of the age 45 + respondents had engaged in the vintage fashion movement for many years and did not see vintage as a ‘new’ fashion movement.

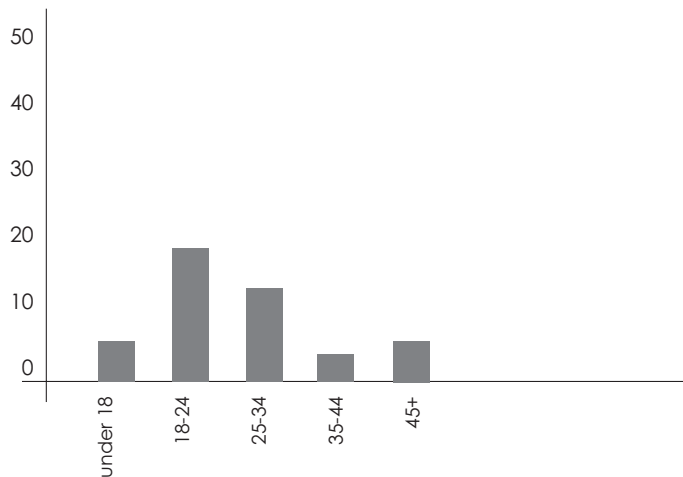


Table 1. Age distribution of respondents

Respondents were asked to provide at least two reasons for wearing vintage fashion. The significant response was uniqueness of styling, followed by the need to be seen as different from their peers. This could also be interpreted as a need to react, via differentiation in clothing choice, against mass market retailers and therefore, the low figure associated with the ‘reactionary’ response would be much higher. Quality refers to that of vintage clothing and not the quality of fast fashion merchandise. The ethical and environmental reasons were low but both are growing issues in the UK and therefore this figure will rise over time; when more consumers become aware of the impact of fast

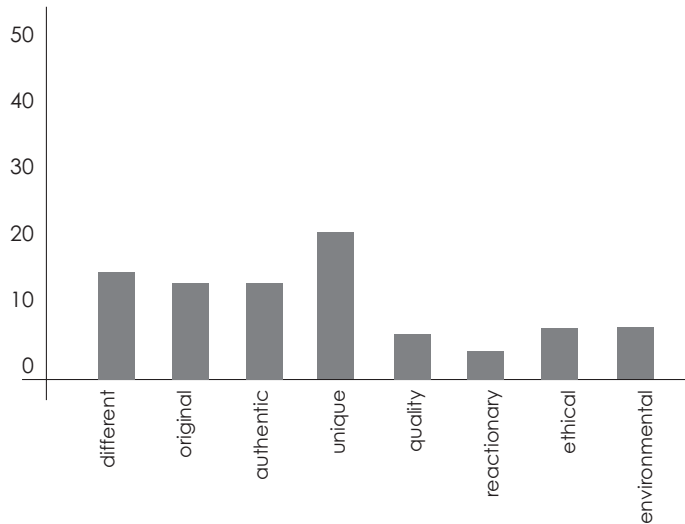


Table 2. Motivation for wearing vintage fashion

fashion on the supply chain and the environment and for the need to engage in more sustainable consumption. Overall, the first four reasons given can be interpreted as a need to exhibit individualism and as self-expression via their clothing choices.

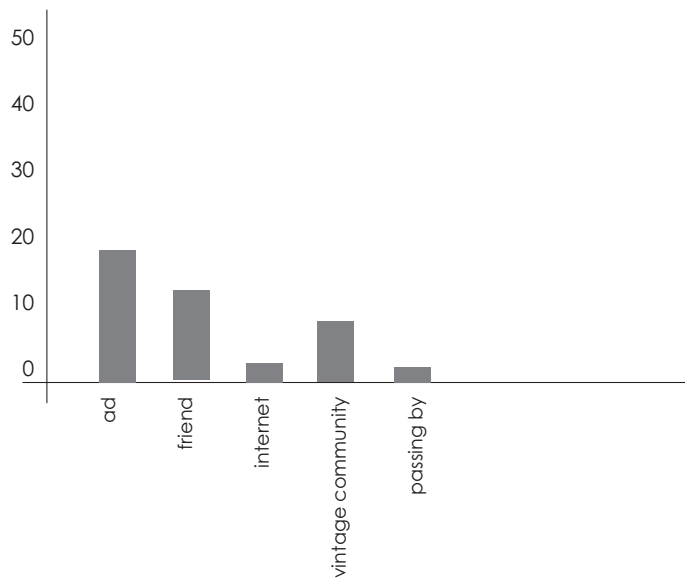


Table 3. How did you find out about this vintage fair?

Due to the fragmented and unstructured nature of the vintage fashion sector, it was important to find out by what methods and mediums the

event had been communicated to respondents. In contrast to the advertising budgets used by fashion retailers, little or no advertising is undertaken and word-of-mouth, as can be seen in the diagram, is an important communications medium. As can also be seen from the diagram, the advertisement to which the respondents refer, was an A5 notice, placed by the fair organiser, onto the walls of local cafes, bars and student union spaces. The vintage community was defined as being vintage shop owners in the local area. Over the eight hour opening period, over 350 hundred people purchased entrance tickets to the fair. It is interesting to note from the findings that the vintage fashion community, in this instance, provided more promotional information than the internet.

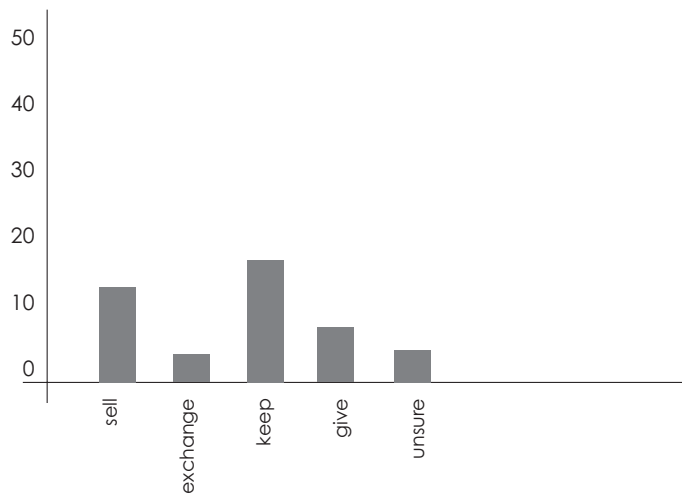


Table 4. *By what method will you dispose of the item?*

To gain understanding of attitudes towards their purchases, respondents were asked to describe by what method they would dispose of the item. The eight respondents who stated that they would give the item away indicated that it would to be given to a family member; to be kept within the family group. Of the respondents who indicated that they would keep the item, some were concerned about fit, having purchased without first trying on and some were concerned about long-term cleaning costs. Therefore, this may not be an accurate figure. Of those who indicated that they would sell the item, over half said that they would use eBay as their primary selling tool. The ‘exchange’ group stated that it was likely that they would exchange with friends, for

another item of vintage clothing, if available. With the exception of the 'unsure' group, no respondent indicated that they would dispose of their purchase as waste.

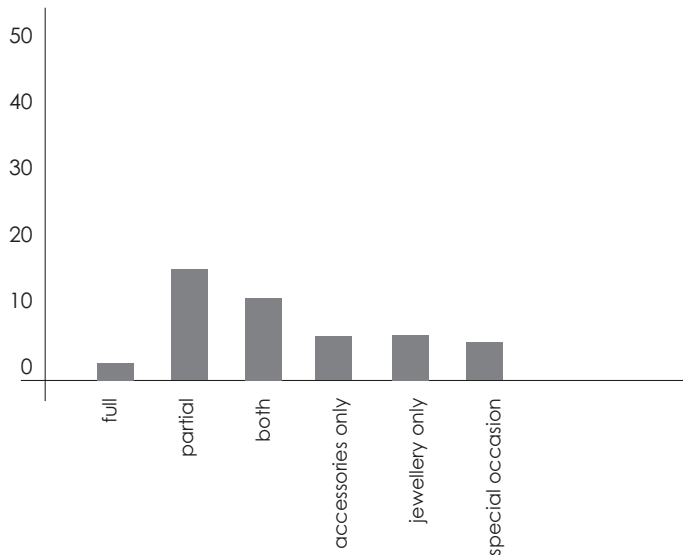


Table 5. How do you wear your vintage clothing?

This question established usage. Only two respondents dressed entirely in vintage clothing and at all times. The majority mixed their vintage clothing items with other, unspecified clothing. Some respondents, depending on mood and occasion, sometimes fully dressed in vintage items but at other times, only partially. Of the groups who purchased only accessories and jewellery, only two respondents had also purchased clothing, preferring instead to mix their vintage accessories with modern clothing items. The 'special occasion' group purchased items for parties and one had purchased her wedding dress from a vintage store.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that fast-fashion will remain an important and growing part of mass fashion consumption but it has been argued that in the UK, there is a concurrent and growing movement to disengage from it via participation in vintage fashion. Several reasons have been discussed as to why; the need to engage in a more authentic lifestyle, the need for individualism and self-expression in the midst of a mass consumer culture, the reaction to global fashion brands and the emerging 'Nu-Austerity' movement which promotes sustainability.

Moreover, the chain of supply and clothing disposal will continue to impact on the environment. Particularly the carbon footprint associated with decreasing selling prices and increasing volumes.

Unlike the fast fashion market, the vintage fashion sector is unstructured and fragmented, therefore it is currently not possible to determine quantifiable shifts in consumption, growth or spend. Nonetheless, research findings reveal a growing number of influencers and consumers who are disillusioned by, and disengaging from, the fast-fashion market; either partially or fully. Organisation such as eBay and other auction and swap sites will continue to facilitate the move towards 'lease' consumption, 'micro-preneurship' and corresponding sustainability. The term 'vintage' has become subjective but all participants agree that they are seeking the unique, the authentic and clothes with a history and narrative which fast fashion cannot provide. Vintage clothes enable the wearer to be more creative than fast fashion allows.

Mass media promotes and encourages frequency of spend and determines shopping behaviour but one influential fashion editor has bemoaned the effects of fast fashion on her own behaviour and intends change. George Davis, himself a founder of two UK fashion organisations criticises fast fashion for not actually promoting real fashion but simply promoting volume sales. This is now the time for agencies to re-evaluate the market, quantify consumer dissatisfaction with fast fashion and promote alternatives.

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About the author

Sandra McNabb is a senior lecturer in fashion marketing with the School of Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University, UK. Her specific areas of research are fashion retail marketing and vintage fashion.

sandra.mcnabb@ntu.ac.uk

Sandra McNabb MSc
Lecturer in Fashion Marketing & Communication
Fashion Subject
SADBE
The Nottingham Trent University
Burton Street
Nottingham NG1 4BQ, UK