

“NOT IF IT TOUCHES MY SKIN!” UNCOVERING STIGMAS TOWARDS THE CONSUMPTION OF PREVIOUSLY WORN CLOTHES AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TRANSITION TO A CIRCULAR FASHION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by unprecedented ecological challenges, conventional human-centric approaches to fashion production and consumption are under scrutiny, given the drastic impact of the industry on planetary boundaries. Clothing reuse, and particularly, second-hand clothing and accessories consumption, is presented as a viable short-term alternative and scenario for ecological impact reduction. The study employs a qualitative research design and utilises qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore perspectives regarding second-hand clothing and accessories consumption and reflexive thematic analysis is used to identify patterns, themes and meanings within the collected data. ‘Skin closeness’ emerges as a barrier in the transition towards alternative ways of acquiring and wearing fashion.

INTRODUCTION

“Our world is not feeling well. Our Mother Earth, who we assume nourishes, cures, and protects us, will not be able to fulfill her task for much longer”.

-Jørgensen et al. (2021: 465)

Recent research by the Stockholm Resilience Center has proved that humans are now far from a safe operating space on Earth, since six out of nine planetary boundaries have been transgressed (Richardson et al., 2023). Maintaining the Earth system is a critical responsibility that ‘humans’ must take (Lien and Pálsson, 2021; Richardson et al., 2023; Wright, 2019).

More particularly, in the last decades, the impact of the fashion and textile industry on planetary boundaries has increased dramatically and it is therefore a key industry to look at when planning future Earth system projections (Brooks et al. 2017; Millward-Hopkins et al., 2023; Niinimäki et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND SUSTAINABILITY: ANTHROPOCENTRISM VS POST-HUMANISM

Anthropocene activity and human-induced transformations have been, in the past centuries, the main cause for the ecological crisis and climate change (Alaimo, 2012: 561; Brooks et al., 2017; Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000; Jørgensen et al. 2021; Lien and Pálsson, 2021; Tsing, 2015).

Moreover, sustainability discourses remain human centred and rely on the need to maintain our ecological systems to cover the needs of generations to come, to maintain “it”, for “us” (Brundtland, 1987). We must fundamentally shift our role as ‘humans’ on Earth (Jørgensen et al., 2021). In parallel, the understanding of sustainability and sustainable development must be shifted. Alaimo (2012), Blanco-Wells (2021), Cielemecka et al. (2019) and Dedeoglu and Zampaki (2023), among others, have contributed to the discussions of post-human sustainability, claiming the need to theorize new notions of sustainability from an anti-anthropocentric perspective that abandons human exceptionalism.

SUSTAINABLE FASHION: BEYOND GROWTH TOWARDS POST-HUMANISM

The question of how to deal with the outlined challenge from a fashion industry perspective, however, remains unanswered (Mukendi et al., 2020).

“Humans, it is implied, are privileged beings, charged with special responsibility to speak for Gaia, and to address the global environmental problems of the Anthropocene”

-Lien and Pálsson (2021: 9)

It is against this backdrop that this paper is situated. The ability that humans have to fulfil the ecological requirements of Earth as “citizens, producers, consumers” is acknowledged, and therefore, the role of consumption in environmental impact reduction transitions (Dedeoglu and Zampaki, 2023: 38).

In a post-pandemic context, there is an urgent need to decelerate and radically change fashion production and consumption (Buchel, 2022; Peters et al., 2021). In fact, it is argued that production and consumption themselves should be questioned as mechanisms to solve ecological issues, since socio-ecological impacts have been caused by industrial activity itself (Blanco-Wells, 2021; Vänska, 2018). Post-humanism means that capitalist dynamics need to be criticised and that techno-solutionism is wrong (Dedeoglu and Zampaki, 2023). Still, one must acknowledge the structural reality of today’s fashion system, which is based on the premises of economic growth, and that capitalist and eco-modernist approaches to sustainable development still remain the dominant solutions (Dzhengiz et al., 2023).

Vänska (2018) presents a critique to the concept of “sustainable fashion” itself and the fact that consumer and industry solutions, such as “circular systems” are being proposed to solve the ecological issues, which are caused by the industry and consumers themselves (Brooks et al., 2017; Vänska, 2018). However, the issue is that the current fashion system is far from dying (Vänska, 2018). In fact, the fashion industry is experiencing continuous growth (Euratex, 2022).

TEXTILE WASTE AND CLOTHING REUSE

Radical change literature exists among sustainable fashion scholarship, looking at novel ways to create value in clothing production and consumption and encouraging consumers to ‘not buy at all’, resist, or even boycott marketed products (Balsiger, 2014; Mukendi et al., 2020; Vesterinen and Syrjäjä, 2022). However, whilst some literature

seeks to promote strong sustainability in fashion, it equally acknowledges the impossibility of incorporating these radical practices in the fashion system as it is today (Armstrong et al., 2016; Ritch et al., 2020). This study takes a pragmatic view and focuses on the most evident route to reduce environmental impact in the short-term: clothing reuse. This is because currently textile waste poses one of the most significant environmental challenges in the clothing supply-chain, resulting in high levels of greenhouse gas emissions (Birtwistle and Moore, 2007; Peters et al., 2021). Clothing reuse can create more environmental benefits than other alternative waste management strategies such as textile-to-textile recycling, by postponing the creation of textile waste and reducing the amount of new clothing produced, hence, avoiding energy intensive production processes and carbon emissions (Farrant et al., 2010; Sandin and Peters, 2018). This is, if the consumption of second-hand fashion replaces to some extent the consumption of the new (Farrant et al. 2010). However, the literature evidences that there is consumer aversion towards clothing reuse, and more specifically, second-hand clothing and accessories consumption (Ferraro et al. 2016, Marzella, 2015; Na'amneh and Al Husban, 2012; Rulikova, 2019; Schreven et al., 2022; Valor et al. 2021). If circular consumption practices among consumers are to be facilitated as part of everyday life, existing barriers need to be understood and uncovered.

CLOTHING REUSE: A FOCUS ON SECOND-HAND CLOTHING CONSUMPTION

The trade history of pre-used garments dates back to Europe in 1,600 and beyond, it is a complex phenomenon which has evolved very differently depending upon economic, cultural and material dimensions across time (Lemire, 2012). Whereas before the 1980s second-hand clothing consumption was an informal economy usually associated with the consumption of clothing among lower socio-economic classes, it has seen an enormous increase in popularity in the past years, and since then, multiple reasons for engagement with this type of consumption have been explored in the literature (Guiot and Roux, 2010; Laitala and Klepp, 2018; Williams and Paddock, 2003). However, the reasons for non-consumption of second-hand clothing (SHC) consumption have remained under-researched. Although the literature claims that there has been a 'de-stigmatisation' towards SHC, the stigma remains (Ferraro et al., 2016; Rulikova et al., 2019; Valor et al., 2021).

Consumer aversion must be targeted, and "stigmas, taboos and disgust" uncovered if circular consumption is to be facilitated as part of everyday life (Schreven et al., 2022).

It is therefore that this study asks: "in the transition towards environmental impact reduction in the fashion system, how are alternative circular models of consumption perceived (with a particular focus on barriers), and what does this mean for a sustainable fashion world?"

METHODOLOGY

As part of a larger mixed-methods sequential explanatory study, the methodology employed for this particular study involved the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection method, which have been previously used in similar SHC studies (Guiot and Roux, 2010; Petrescu and Bathli, 2013; Turunen et al., 2020). The study employed purposive sampling and the semi-structured interviews were carried out online and offline with participants born between 1940-2003 living in England, Sweden and Spain. The focus of the semi-structured interviews was to understand previous experience with SHC clothing and accessories and motivations for and against its acquisition.

Reflexive thematic analysis was applied, emphasizing the researcher's active, reflexive and interpretative role in knowledge production (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2023). This approach involved a systematic process of coding that was done through the software NVivo 12.7 and manual coding. For this, the researcher engaged in a thorough examination of the data, identifying patterns, themes, and concepts that emerged from the content (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2023).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

SKIN CLOSENESS

The 'Skin closeness' theme that was discovered across the dataset. Among the study participants 'skin closeness' was found to be a strong motivation against the acquisition and wearing of second-hand garments and accessories. The skin closeness theme arose from the codes: touch of skin, body proximity and germs.

TOUCH OF SKIN

A few participants reported the touch of skin as a motivation against second-hand clothing and accessories acquisition and wearing (B, G, K, G1, W). Participant B declared "Basically, the things that touch my skin I am unlikely to buy. If it touches my skin I am buying it new". Equally, Participant G stated: I certainly would not feel comfortable at all wearing a second-hand item towards my skin, so I think it is about that, the item not being directly on my skin".

BODY PROXIMITY

Many of the participants (D, E, K,O,I, F1, E1, I1, J1) raised body proximity, particularly referring to intimate garments, as a barrier towards second-hand clothing and accessories acquisition and wearing. Participant K mentioned "I can't imagine second-hand when it comes to clothes that sit next to your body. I mean underclothes." Participant F1 even rejected the clothing and accessories category of SHC, because of body proximity: "I would feel less comfortable buying home wear, and that is probably because it is not being worn by anybody or it has not been close to the body".

The above was evidenced in one of the exercises conducted with the participants in which different type of garments were displayed. Overall, participants (C1,D1,E1,H1,I1,J1, U1, V1, W1,X1,Y1,Z1, A2, B2, C2, D2) showed a higher probability and openness of acquiring and wearing a second-hand accessory than an intimate garment. As stated by Participant C2: "I'm 100% sure that the less it's attached to my body, the more I would wear it". Intimate garments caused complete rejection among participants (A1, B1, C1, D1, E1, F1, G1, H1, I1, J1, U1, V1, W1,X1,Y1,Z1, A2, B2, C2, D2).

GERMS

The fear of germs, such as virus, bacteria, fungi, or other microscopic organisms leading to a disease, infection or odour, was a worrying factor among participants and this was related to health and hygiene factors (C, R, E, U, W, F1, G1, U1). When asked about second-hand clothing and accessories acquisition, Participant G1 stated "Yes, so I am a germophobe. So when I think about second-hand clothing, that is my biggest fear, that the person who wore it before had a disease or anything that could be transferred."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In terms of how circular models of consumption are perceived with a particular focus on barriers, this paper engages with one of the barriers identified in the study. 'Skin closeness' was identified as a motivation against the acquisition and wearing of second-hand clothing and accessories. Humans showed that the fact that a garment or accessory had been in close contact with other people's skin negatively influenced their willingness to acquire and wear second-hand garments or accessories. For that reason, the body proximity of the garment or accessory was an element that was found to strongly influence this negative perception of SHC, with participants being highly apprehensive to intimate garments previously worn by other people. Not only was the touch of skin a barrier, but the fact

that clothes and accessories worn by others could carry germs, that could cause a disease, infections, or odours, among others. In terms of what this means for a sustainable fashion world, the study evidences one of the barriers that leads to the stigmatisation of second-hand clothing consumption.

Collaborative fashion consumption practices are a possible path toward more sustainable clothing (Iran and Schradler, 2017). Yet, the findings reveal that the 'skin closeness' barrier can interfere in the transition towards these circular consumption models. The study calls for further investigation of barriers hindering the transition towards circular fashion consumption, that should be overcome to reach circular transitions. Future research directions include amplifying the geographical coverage of the study and exploring motivations against other strong sustainability consumption practices (i.e. swapping, renting or sharing) (Vesterinen and Syrjälä, 2022).

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