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Spotswood, Fiona; Moraes, Caroline; Kindberg, Tim; Priest, Chris

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Citation for published version (Harvard):
Spotswood, F, Moraes, C, Kindberg, T & Priest, C 2024, Understanding the Constraints to Transforming Online Fashion Shopping into a More Sustainable Practice. in *Consumer Culture Theory Conference Proceedings*. San Diego, CA, pp. 1-4, Consumer Culture Theory 2024, San Diego, United States, 11/07/24.

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Understanding the Constraints to Transforming Online Fashion Shopping into a More Sustainable Practice

Fiona Spotswood, University of Bristol, UK
Caroline Moraes, University of Birmingham, UK
Tim Kindberg, Matter2Media
Chris Priest, University of Bristol, UK

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on sustainable fashion marketing shows that dominant corporate interests do little to promote meaningful market transformation (Solér, Baeza & Svärd, 2015). A “logic of sustainability” is “yet to materialize” in fashion (Ertekin, Atik & Murray, 2020:1473). Research further highlights the role that diverse industry stakeholders must play in fostering fashion market change toward sustainability, as “it is not easy for an individual alone to take responsibility for sustainability” (Ertekin & Atik, 2020: 373).

Indeed, mainstream consumer awareness about sustainability is not leading to increased purchases of sustainable fashion. Nevertheless, sustainably-committed consumers persevere and nascent research highlights that their altruistic and biospheric values, alongside the more dominant, egoistic, self-expressive values, underpin ongoing psychological commitment to sustainable fashion consumption (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). Highly committed consumers acknowledge the importance of conscientious clothing use, reuse, and disposal as environmentally preferable to shopping for sustainable but new fashion items (Bly et al., 2015).

However, such research takes a psychological perspective and neglects to consider the growing importance and pervasiveness of online shopping (Guillen-Royo, 2019; Mukendi & Henninger, 2020), irrespective of consumers’ commitment to sustainability. Scant research exists on the experiences of sustainably-oriented fashion consumers who navigate the challenges of fashion shopping online (Connell, 2019). Therefore, we ask *‘how are sustainable online fashion shopping practices attempted and constrained among the most committed sustainably-oriented fashion consumers?’*

We use a practice theories lens (Warde, 2005) and apply Magaudda’s (2011) practice framework to analyze online fashion shopping as comprising performative linkages between three elements: material objects (devices and technology); doings (embodied competences and activities); and meanings (representations and emotions). We focus on how online fashion shopping practice is ‘glued together’ through its internal dynamics, making it resistant to sustainable transformation.

We examine how self-defined, sustainably-oriented consumers perform online fashion shopping. Interpretive analysis drew on data from five unfolding research phases (Figure 1), involving interviews and focus groups with 58 UK participants. Through thematic approach, we engaged in a back-and-forth iterative reading of transcripts, and between theory and transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Figure 1
Research phases and samples.

Research phase	Sample size	Nature of Research
Phase 1: Two face-to-face focus groups, Bristol, UK, Feb 2020	9	Explored ‘sustainable orientations’ and how these are enacted in shopping practices
Phase 2: Online interviews, May 2020	13	Explored how sustainability is enacted in online shopping. Interviews included a ‘walk through’ of online shopping practice performance, as participants searched for an item of their choice and attempted to make sustainable purchases
Phase 3: Online interviews, Aug/Sept 2020	15	Explored online fashion shopping and what would be useful in enable sustainable online shopping
Phase 4: Online interviews with international fashion consumer activists, Oct 2022	9	Explored sustainable fashion practices beyond shopping, including researching and information sharing
Phase 5: Two face-to-face focus groups with sustainable fashion enthusiasts, Bristol, UK, Dec 2022 - Jan 2023	12	Explored sustainable fashion shopping practices on and offline, and how sustainability can be supported
Total number of participants	58	

Findings reveal a continuum of ‘sustainable orientation’ among our participants from generalized concern to extreme commitment, which relates to a continuum of sustainably-oriented reflexivity that destabilizes online shopping and triggers participants’ attempts to adapt the practice.

Core meanings of online fashion shopping (pleasure, excitement, and emotional appeal) are integrated into online fashion shopping performance alongside fashion objects (garment photographs, websites, code) and doings (scrolling, searching, comparing, purchasing; Magaouda, 2011). Participants discussed their love of fashion in passionate terms, and a compulsive urge to buy. However, participants exhibit ongoing reflexive rationalization and monitoring (Giddens, 1979), as they articulate the unsustainability of online shopping and the fashion industry:

“There’s a point when you realize that every single item has been made by someone, somewhere in the world” (Phase5 FG2).

This reflexivity habituates into commitment to sustainability, contesting and destabilizing online fashion shopping. Participants can no longer shop unproblematically or pleasurably:

“I’ve loved to shop, I have hundreds of pairs of shoes, handbags, jewelry, all of it. And then obviously something shifted, and I had to change my habit” (Phase5 FG2).

To restabilize the practice, participants attempt to enact practice adaptation. An important adaptation is how scrolling is done. Scrolling is a central ‘doing’ of normative online fashion shopping: *“I do enjoy the scroll and I will scroll a lot” (Phase5 FG1)*. Scrolling leads to *“an urge to shop”* due to ad appeals.

There are three ways in which scrolling is adapted. First, through the reconfiguration of digital-material spaces that filter products, participants move their scroll to second-hand websites (Vinted or Depop). Second, participants scrolled non-retail sites (Pinterest), reconfiguring online fashion practices around styling not purchase; a viable alternative to material garment consumption (Gupta, Gwozdz & Gentry, 2019). Third, participants extend their normative scrolling to purposeful searching for sustainable versions of desired products:

“I’ll see something come up... and then it says it’s 100% polyester, but (...) then I’ll start going, ‘cotton’, or ‘silk’, or ‘recycled’, or ‘Vinted’, or ‘Wolf and Badger’ or whatever” (Phase5 FG1).

Searching for sustainable alternatives often spills over into researching the fashion industry, involving reading product information, scouring second-hand sites, and accruing knowledge about its consequences. Thus, sustainable online shopping fails to stabilize. Many participants felt overwhelmed and frustrated by their adaptation attempts, unlike intentional attempts at consumer work for leisure (Beverland, Fernandez & Eckhardt, 2024):

“If you want to know my reflections on trying to shop sustainably, I find it frustrating, if I wasn’t so committed, I’d do a 180 in a heartbeat and go, ‘F it, I’m off. I want to shop.”*

Concurrently, increased engagement with sustainable marketing claims on brands’ websites and deeper research about the fashion industry enhances practitioners’ awareness of the complexity of fashion (un)sustainability, furthering frustration:

“I don’t think it’s possible to shop sustainably... I think it’s really complex and the trade-offs are really difficult to navigate as an individual” (Phase2 Participant2).

For some, the struggle to shop online sustainably becomes habituated. Others described being close to surrendering their sustainability concerns. Commonly, participants abandoned online shopping altogether, adding to other rules, *“I do not shop online.”*

Online shopping practice adaptation requires existing digital infrastructures to integrate with alternative sustainability meanings, new tasks, and skills (search and research), and sustainable products. However, this integration is obstructed. The frustrations participants experience mean that sustainable online shopping remains in their discursive consciousness, failing to habituate into the routines that characterize settled practices (Warde, 2005).

Sustainably-oriented participants feel they are juggling two incommensurable ideals:

“You’re always juggling those things, the aesthetic and the sustainability” (Phase5 FG2).

Thus, participants’ intensifying reflexive commitment to sustainability continues to destabilize sustainable online fashion shopping.

This work contributes an original theorization of obstructed practice adaptation, reinforcing the need to transform retail platforms and policies to reconfigure online shopping practices (Geels et al., 2015), of which individual behaviors are the tip of the iceberg. Innovation is needed to support the cultural acceptance of alternative ways of enjoying fashion through aesthetic appreciation and styling rather than unsustainable purchases.

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