

Sewing as a dynamic to alter consumers' sustainability behaviours towards fashion

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Abstract

This research explores how sewing skills shape customers' behaviours towards the acquisition, use and disposal of clothing. For fashion retailers understanding and reshaping more sustainable responses have come to the fore, as the current trajectory is untenable. Fashion retailers contend with environmental pressures related to scarce resources, climate change and pollution - in the UK alone WRAP (2012) estimate 350,000 tonnes of clothing ends in landfill. Their clothing produces CO₂, methane and toxic leachates that permeate water sources. Social aspects revolving around working conditions, with globally dispersed manufacturing and complex value chains add to the burden. Since the 1980s, rivalry in consolidated markets has depressed prices and quickened fashion-cycles which drives demand, exacerbating the problems above. Cheaper fast-fashion also accelerated a decline in home sewing, until the recent resurgence with the Maker Movement. Yet, currently little is understood about the relationship between sewing and sustainability behaviours.

To address this issue, within a two-year on-going study funded by Innovate UK, participatory action research with a large UK fashion retailer was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 involved an experiment conducted in six UK stores (each lasted 1-3 days) in 2015/2016, with photographic/video recording, participant observations, and in-depth interviews with 45 customers/employees. The events were organised around: a) sewing lessons for repair/upcycling and awareness talks on landfill issues, or b) sewing artefacts for charitable causes. Subsequently the body of verbal and visual data was thematically interpreted using qualitative content analysis. For Phase 2 an online 'Sewing and Clothing Behaviours Survey' was administered in October 2015, which resulted in 1009 usable responses; the data was subjected to regression analysis. Further qualitative data was collected/analysed from interviews with 15 survey participants.

The results indicate the possession of sewing skills offers benefits at an individual level through: creativity, individuality, empowerment, well-being, positive body image, community

engagement, ability to assess quality/value, cost effectiveness and entrepreneurial opportunities. These benefits are found to advance changes in sustainability behaviours towards fashion at a systemic level such as lower/slower consumption, extended garment lifespans and reduced rates of landfill disposal.

This study offers valuable knowledge to academia through new insights into the possession of sewing skills as a determinant of behavioural changes and the impact of sewing on sustainability for UK fashion retailers. For practice the results help fashion retailers in their efforts to address sustainability and identify sustainable practices to engage with current and future customers.

Keywords

Sewing, sustainability, behaviours, fashion retailing, clothing