

The Fashion Detox Challenge: An experiment in reduced clothing consumption

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Abstract

Five years after the UN launched its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) it has reported that although progress is being made in many places, overall, action to meet international sustainable development goals is not yet advancing at the speed or scale required (UN, 2020). The UN cautions, therefore, that as from 2020 a decade of ambitious action is necessary in order to deliver the SDG's by 2030 (UN, 2020). However, given the fast growing pace and scale of clothing consumption – which currently stands at more than 100 billion clothing purchases every year - buying our way to 'sustainability' through purchasing new clothes that are 'more sustainable' does not lead to a significant pro-environmental impact overall (Csutora, 2012). Following the UN SDG goal no.12, consumers must be encouraged to do 'more and better with less' (UN, 2015).

The United Nations launched the #ActNow Fashion Challenge in August 2019 with the aim of raising awareness and promoting lasting behaviour change in clothing consumption. However, without policy changes, the reduction in overall clothing consumption which these zero-waste fashion actions aim for must be voluntary and internally motivated (De Young, 1996). The UN gives no suggestion as to 'how' these voluntary changes might take place or what this process of change might involve. Before paths or doorways to behaviour change and sustainability transitions can be designed and promoted, a better understanding of existing clothing consumption patterns is needed, from a consumer perspective (Fletcher and Grose, 2012). Yet this need remains largely unmet because research into

consumer usage practices and reduced fashion consumption has so far received little academic attention (Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015).

In response to this unmet need, we set up a public experiment in Scotland called the [Fashion Detox Challenge \(FDC\)](#), which has now gone global. This experiment was created to further the pioneering research by Ruppert-Stroescu et al. (2015) and Joyner Armstrong et al. (2016) in the US which explored the potential benefits of voluntary simplicity for consumers who have a high-propensity to consume fashion. The FDC is designed to overcome complex barriers and systemic lock-in to overconsumption in the clothing system through disrupting the individual consumer's habitual purchasing behaviours by engaging them in a ten-week process of voluntary abstinence and reflection. This working paper reports findings on the challenges and opportunities connected to reducing final clothing consumption and promoting more sustainable consumption behaviours. These findings were derived from a phenomenological analysis carried out on the Detox Diary entries from fourteen Fashion Detox Challenge participants.

The Fashion Detox Challenge participants primarily adopted or perceived benefits from the ten-week experiment for internally based personal, financial, and lifestyle reasons. Building on research findings from other studies in voluntary simplicity, we argue that this constrained approach to buying and using clothes could be promoted most effectively through emphasising the *personal* benefits that this form of sustainable consumption can bring (Cherrier, 2009; Joyner Armstrong et al., 2016; Lewis, 2012; Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2012; Zalewska and Cobel-Tokarska, 2016). The new found abilities, or capacities, demonstrated by the fashion detox challenge participants' in relation to refraining from previous impulsive shopping habits, to resist commercial pressures and develop a capacity for mindful purchasing all appeared to be characterised by a conscious, conscientious decision making process which is typically associated with minimalists, slow fashion consumers and voluntary simplifiers (Fletcher, 2008, 2010, 2012; Gambrel and Cafaro, 2010; Martin-Woodhead, 2017). However, to extend the discussion of achieving sustainability transitions in relation to reducing final clothing consumption beyond a preference-based conceptual framework, a need-based framework is required in order to gain a deeper understanding of how to reduce final consumption and how to encourage consumers to adopt a consumption pattern based on a principle of doing more and better with less (Fletcher, 2008; Guillen-Royo, 2020).

When considering challenges to reducing the pace of clothing consumption in relation to the Fashion Detox Challenge data, what was striking from a sustainability perspective was how little the actual

objects of consumption – the clothing items – had to do with the act of consumption. The dominant marketing strategies in the clothing system persistently encouraged the participants into a consumption pattern of *doing less with more*, which is the exact opposite of the UN's (2015a,b) responsible consumption goal of doing more and better with less. In order to reduce the scale and pace of final clothing consumption at the level of the individual, therefore, the pervasive, provocative nature of the powerful arms of marketing and advertising, who are finding ever more insidious ways to press themselves into the most intimate areas of a clothing consumer's lifeworld, must be confronted and addressed.

Keywords: Sustainability; sustainable clothing consumption; reduced consumption; voluntary simplicity; degrowth; fundamental human needs; mindful consumption; UN SDG's; overconsumption.

ISBN: 978-989-54263-1-7