

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.

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

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The scale and pace of clothing consumption is vast and currently stands at over 100 billion new garments purchased each year, ninety-nine percent of which cannot be remanufactured into new clothing (EMF, 2017; WRAP, 2017). Despite the enormous quantity of clothes already being produced by the clothing industry the global production of clothes is predicted to grow by 63 percent over the next decade (GFA, 2017). The growth of the scale and pace of clothing consumption has been considerable in recent years. In the last fifteen years alone, the total number of clothes being produced by the fashion industry for global consumption has approximately doubled (EMF, 2017). In the UK, the consumption of new clothing is now higher than in any other European country, at 26.7kg per capita, per year (EAC, 2019). Increased levels of clothing consumption are also leading to upwards growth in clothing disposal. It is currently estimated that 336,000 tonnes of used clothing are sent to landfill or incineration annually in the UK (WRAP, 2019). In terms of the number of individual items being thrown away, this amount of clothing waste is equivalent to more than 10,000 individual garments (Edie, 2015), or the average contents of over 100 women's wardrobes, being sent to landfill or incinerated every fifteen minutes in the UK alone.

These statistics evidence the fundamental unsustainability of the current scale and pace of final clothing consumption and disposal, and the seemingly intractable nature of the problem of final consumption when faced with addressing the unsustainability of the clothing system as a whole (Fletcher and Grose, 2012). It is argued that 'weak' approaches to sustainability which focus on eco-efficiency gains alone will not be sufficient in achieving environmental sustainability (McMeekin and Southerton, 2012; Munasinghe et al., 2009). It logically follows, therefore, that the *final consumption* of clothing must be reduced in order to achieve global environmental sustainability targets, such as the IPCC's global emissions targets (IPCC, 2018). To achieve this, interventions and policies must move from relative decoupling from energy and environmental impacts via technological improvements to understanding what change might look like at the level of the consumer (McEachern et al., 2020; McMeekin and Southerton, 2012; O'Rourke and Lollo, 2015).

Following Fletcher and Grose (2012), this paper argues, therefore, that the pace and scale of final clothing consumption must be *reduced* in order for environmental sustainability to be achieved, not only in the clothing system but for humanity as a whole. However, as alluded to above, the logic upon which the clothing industry and clothing business models are based is predicated upon continuous and expanding economic growth (Fletcher and Tham, 2019). How can the level of final clothing

consumption be reduced when the production trajectories and business models upon which the major part of the clothing system is currently founded are designed primarily to promote constant growth? Growth-based production strategies rely on growth-oriented consumption strategies. In order for production levels, and the profits which result, to continuously increase, individuals in a consumer society are pressed into increasingly buying more and more (Bauman, 2004, 2007). Questions of planned systemic degrowth in relation to the design and governance of businesses that produce goods, and the governments who rely on their financial contributions, currently remain largely theoretical (Schwartzman, 2012). If degrowth is not yet a systemic reality, how can individuals who live in, and live by the directives of, an economic growth-oriented consumer society be invited to reduce the amount of clothing that they currently consume?

In response to the significant lack of action towards global sustainability from nations across the world, the United Nations (UN) has created a set of sustainable development goals (SDG) for member nations, organisations and individuals to follow (UN, 2015a). The UN covers the issue of production and consumption in SDG 12, which is named *Responsible Production and Consumption* (UN, 2015b). Within this sustainable development goal, the necessary changes which the UN state are needed from businesses and consumers in order for global sustainability to be achieved is the realisation of a process which they describe as “doing more and better with less” (UN, 2015b). The United Nations also launched the #ActNow Fashion Challenge in August 2019 with the aim of raising awareness and promoting lasting behaviour change in clothing consumption (UN, 2019). The #ActNow Fashion challenge is part of the ActNow Climate Campaign, which aims to educate and encourage individual behavioural change, mainly by adjusting consumption patterns. A summary of examples of every day zero-waste fashion actions that the UN encourages consumers to take are as follows (UN, 2019):

- Reducing consumption - considering whether new clothes are really necessary. Consider whether the item will be worn a minimum of thirty times, before purchasing and if not, do not buy the item.
- Buying second-hand.
- Washing clothing less frequently, to reduce the negative environmental impacts connected to laundering clothing.
- Donate used clothing to charity shops or consignment stores.
- Never put clothing into domestic bins that send waste to landfill. Instead, find stores, recycling bins or recycling companies that have a zero-landfill policy.
- Upcycle clothing or find other uses for the fabric from old clothes.
- Share zero waste efforts on social media, such as UN #ActNow.

Having identified that the individual has a key role to play in sustainable development, the UN's (2019) outline of zero-waste fashion actions provides concrete examples of the specific actions that individuals can take in helping the clothing system, and the world as a whole, to transition to an ideal state of environmental sustainability. However, no suggestions are given by the UN (2015b, 2019) as to *how* to help individuals transition away from current habits and patterns of behaviours and towards a way of being which embodies a process of "doing more and better with less". Furthermore, despite many years of research into ethical and sustainable consumer behaviour in academia, promoting sustainable clothing consumption actions at the level of the consumer continues to be a pressing contemporary problem (Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015; Schor, 2005).

The Fashion Detox Challenge

The research design of this study aimed to produce a contribution to knowledge which could aid a more effective understanding and, therefore, promotion, of the changes needed to reduce *the scale and pace* of final clothing consumption at the level of the consumer (Fletcher and Grose, 2012; Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015; Schor, 2005). The broad methodological framework chosen for this research was hermeneutic phenomenology, the focus of which was narrowed by adopting van Manen's (1997, 2016) approach to a Phenomenology of Practice. This methodological framework was chosen to better understand the level of the individual in the clothing system by exploring the lived experience of people who bought clothing frequently but wanted help to change their purchasing habits. An experimental approach to data collection was achieved through implementing a public intervention called the Fashion Detox Challenge. This intervention challenged frequent clothing consumers in Scotland to refrain from buying clothing for ten weeks and invited them to reflect on their experience of doing so through weekly diary entries. This public intervention was based upon a development of past research in the field of *Education for Sustainable Consumption* from the United States (US) called *the Fashion Detox* which was conceived and conducted by Joyner Armstrong et al. (2016) and Ruppert-Stroescu et al. (2015).

The public Fashion Detox Challenge in Scotland, which forms the basis of this study, was created to expand upon the US Fashion Detox educational research by including non-students, expanding to recruitment to all ages, using a different geographic location, positioning the experiment as a public engagement intervention aimed at reducing national clothing waste, and by not using a hard incentive, such as academic credit, vouchers or money, to motivate participation. The Fashion Detox Challenge involved ten weeks of voluntary abstinence from clothing consumption and encouraged weekly reflections in the form of short written diary entries and/or social media posts. The ten-week

intervention was aimed at disrupting the flow of automatic actions relating to clothing consumption and invited the individual consumers to deliberate afresh over less conscious, habitual behaviour. Members of the public were challenged via posters, emails and social media to go ten weeks without buying any new clothes and they were also invited to sign up to the www.fashiondetoxchallenge.com website. Although the challenge interface was online, in response to Scotland's circular economy agenda this study restricted recruitment to Scottish residents (Natural Scotland, 2016).

After signing-up to the Fashion Detox Challenge the participants were given the option to share private diary entries on the online Detox Diary forum and/or to share their experience through their own blogs or social media profiles using the hashtags #fashiondetox and #fashiondetoxchallenge. Following the intervention design from Ruppert-Stroescu et al. (2015) and Joyner Armstrong et al. (2016), at the end of week one, participants were asked to reflect on their pre-detox shopping habits and their motivations for joining the challenge. In weeks two to ten, participants were invited to share their experience openly without a suggested theme or prompt. Data for this paper was collected from fourteen participants who completed the ten week Fashion Detox Challenge aged 20 to 56 (one male and thirteen females). These participants completed the ten-week challenge in 2019. As Creswell (2013) asserts, qualitative research studies cases rather than variables, and insight rather than representativeness. Therefore, a small sample size was deemed appropriate for this qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016). According to van Manen (2017), phenomenology is the 'science of examples', and the "examples" form the data of phenomenological research (van Manen 2017:814). Therefore, examples of the Fashion Detox Challenge participants' lived experience material, gathered mainly from the detox diary entries, has been used as data, and as evidence for this qualitative study (van Manen, 1997, 2016, 2017).

First Impressions

The lead researcher followed the journey of each Fashion Detox Challenge participant across the ten weeks by reading each of the participants' diary entries as soon as they were posted online every week. This initial encounter with the participants' lifeworld enabled immediate insights into avoidance tactics and coping strategies whilst each of the participants' negotiated their own personal path through the ten-week challenge. Avoidance tactics that the participants use to refrain from buying new clothes included:

- Deleting fashion apps on smart phones

- Unsubscribing from mailing lists of clothing retailers
- Avoiding walking through the city centre
- Temporarily refraining from shopping-related activities with friends

Aside from these tactics used to avoid routine purchasing habits and situations, entering into the participants' lifeworld during their ten-week journey led to an immediate noticing of a series of coping strategies employed by the participants in order to help themselves survive or succeed in this voluntary challenge. These coping strategies included:

- Decluttering drawers and wardrobes
- A familiarising process with existing clothing
- Planning outfits in advance
- Creatively re-working 'new' outfits
- Enjoying 'forgotten' clothes
- 'Shopping' from their own wardrobes
- Discovering extended use practices (repair, alteration, re-dyeing)

Reading the participants' descriptions of their experiences every week, using a phenomenological attitude, opened a window through which the researcher could enter into the lifeworld of the participants (van Manen, 1997, 2016). This initial encounter with the participants' lived experience material afforded the researcher an opportunity to see 'what' was happening during their attempts to not buy clothes for ten weeks, such as the avoidance tactics and coping strategies listed above. This singular process was not sufficient alone, however, to arrive at a phenomenological understanding of *how* the challenges and opportunities connected to reducing clothing consumption were lived through at the level of the consumer (van Manen, 2016). This meant that the lead researcher needed to deepen her encounter of the participants' lifeworld through searching for the significance and meaning of events and themes in each participant's ten-week journey through the Fashion Detox Challenge, and across the dataset as a whole, the lived experience material from all fourteen participants, by applying specific phenomenological methods other than just a phenomenological attitude. The five iterative steps recommended by Finlay (2013) were adopted and specific analytic methods from van Manen's (1997, 2016) Phenomenology of Practice were also used as a practical guide to support the analytic research process.

Phenomenological Findings

After engaging in the analytic processes listed above (Finlay, 2013; van Manen, 1997, 2016), dwelling in the data, reading and rereading the participants' lived experience material, "tilling and turning the soil of daily existence" (Van Manen, 1997:119), three themes emerged:

- Theme 1 – Tuning-in to the consuming nature of overconsumption
- Theme 2 - Enough *is* enough!
- Theme 3 - Empowerment – It doesn't need to be this way

The challenges that the fashion detox challenge participants had to overcome in order to 'survive' ten weeks without buying clothes were great, as at the heart of the experience was a new personal attempt at surviving everyday life. The scene of which was set by the context of living within a consumer society that is predominantly powered by principles of constant and increasing economic growth. What this new bid for survival meant *in practice*, and *in context*, at the level of lived experience, was a sudden need to learn *how* to navigate through the terrain of everyday life without payday treats or retail therapy and to learn how to develop resistance to a barrage of internal and external pressures to consume, formed of a potentially toxic mixture of vested commercial interests and personal insecurities. The participants started their ten week journey tuning-in to the consuming nature of overconsumption (theme one). Once the unexpected consequences of a history of frequent clothing consumption has become apparent, such as noticing dwindling finances, growing piles of clothing and a constant struggle with the experience of 'having nothing to wear', the participants came to the realisation that Enough is Enough! (theme two). From this new perspective of viewing clothing consumption through the lens of 'needs' rather than 'wants' an experience of release emerged, a release from the internal and external pressures that had kept the participants in a cycle of perpetual consumption. Finally, after having experienced a release from these pressures and newfound freedom emerged. The experience of feeling free from the pressures to consume led to a realisation that 'it doesn't need to be this way' and from this a deep sense of empowerment and a new found autonomy in relation to the clothing system emerged (theme three). These three themes expressed a ten-week experiment in achieving the UN's (2015b, 2019) goal of "doing more and better with less", not only in terms of what the participants did, such as creating 'new' outfits from existing items of clothing, but in terms of *how* the participants' learned to overcome the challenges that living in a growth-oriented postmodern consumer society presents to those who are already caught up in a stream of overconsumption.

The Fashion Detox Challenge participants' reported that these efforts to find new ways of surviving everyday life within the landscape of a consumer society had their experiential rewards and, therefore, the personal benefits of constrained consumption are discussed towards the end of this paper. However, the rewards arguably would not have emerged had they have been simply presented as 'information' and offered out of context, that is out of the context of a practical, experiential learning experiment in temporarily abstaining from buying new clothes. The true practice of the Fashion Detox Challenge appeared to be not just a simple experiment in buying less, but a deep, inner exercise which involved holding back the tide of impulse, learning to stem the shake of anxiety and developing resistance to the squeeze of terror which comes hand in hand with an existential fear of being rejected, in the hope, and then eventual personal realisation, that clothing consumption "doesn't need to be this way".

The Power of Habit

The findings from this research study suggest that one of the main challenges to frequent clothing consumers' transitioning towards consumption patterns which embody the UN's (2015b, 2019) goal of "doing more and better with less" is *habit*. However, for the frequent clothing consumers who participated in the fashion detox challenge, the phenomenon of habit appeared to be multidimensional, functioning as a link *between* the individual, their consumption patterns and a growth-oriented consumer society.

The challenge of habit was presenced within the findings of this study in two main ways, both of which mediated the relationship between the self and world in ways which prevented deep or long term satisfaction from being achieved in relation to clothing consumption. These habits, therefore, had previously prevented the opportunity for participants to moderate their purchasing habits or to develop the skills and capacities needed to do more and better with less in relation to clothing (UN, 2015b, 2019).



Figure 1: Habit as a key driver in the overconsumption of clothing

As figure 1 illustrates, the factor of habit presented itself as a challenge to the UN's (2015b) goal of "doing more and better with less", and to achieving reductions in final clothing consumption at the level of the consumer, in two distinct but interconnected ways within the Fashion Detox Challenge participants' lived experience:

Habit 1 – Attempting to satisfying non-material needs by shopping for/buying new clothes

Habit 2 – The misperception "I have nothing to wear"

Combined, it appears that these two distinct habits serve to drive frequent clothing consumption by creating two positive feedback loops of dissatisfaction, which perpetuate and are driven by a weak relationship to the objects of consumption (see figure 2 below).

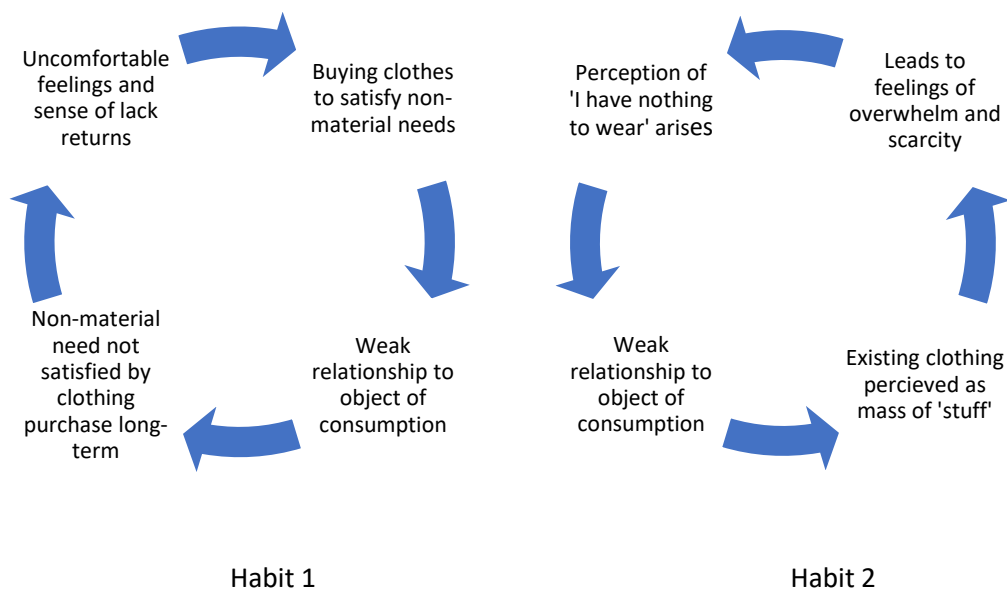


Figure 2 – Twofold habit of overconsumption: two positive feedback loops of dissatisfaction

Habit was often given as an initial motivation for joining the challenge, either to kick start better habits, as illustrated in the quote by Amanda below:

I thought it would be a fab motivator to make some changes with regards to clothes, and hopefully kick start some better habits. Amanda - Week 1

To overcome what were perceived to be 'bad habits', as described by Lisa:

Stopping my horrible shopping habits will be really tough for me – I've tried a lot of times but never managed to stop for more than a few days, so I'm hoping having a community of people around to support me will make a huge difference!

Lisa - Week 1

Or both to overcome bad habits and to create better ones, as illustrated in this quote by Sarah:

And on a deeper level, I had the desire to change an unhealthy habit, optimistically to make room for better ones. Sarah - Blog Post

Di Guilio and Fuchs (2014) argue that in order to identify effective ways to make consumption more sustainable, and avoid overlooking essential inhibiting or inducing factors, we need to understand and describe consumption acts as comprehensively as possible. This is based on the premise that both consumption and sustainability are highly complex issues, so in tackling the sustainable consumption we are faced with a 'double complexity' (Di Guilio and Fuchs, 2014). Therefore, the following sections will describe the sustainable consumption challenges that these habits present in more detail and discuss their relationship to the overconsumption of clothing in relation to existing knowledge on the drivers of frequent consumption and barriers to reduced/sustainable consumption.

Habit 1 – Attempting to satisfying non-material needs by shopping for/buying new clothes

The findings from the phenomenological analysis clearly showed that before abstaining from buying clothing for ten weeks the individuals undertaking the Fashion Detox Challenge had been caught up in a cycle of habitually reacting to a pernicious realm of commercial provocation which had been embedded within their lifeworld. These contextual provocations included:

- Discount codes/coupons (email, apps and print).
- One-click links to outfits in influencer posts on Instagram.
- Constant sales in stores (online and on the high street).
- Time-pressured sales discounts, like SMS saying "50% off - ends tonight!".
- Incentives to repeat purchase, such as free returns, free delivery.
- In-app/online pay-later schemes such as PayPal credit.
- Seasonal advertising, such as "New Season, New You" marketing messages.

- Shopping apps, such as ASOS, which look/feel more like social media than retail apps.

This realm of constant commercial provocation had ordinarily been *lived through* by the participants unthinkingly, or in the context of a consumer society, it could be said, obediently (Bauman, 2004, 2007; Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1986:xvi-xvii). The constant provocation to consume seemed to be accepted without being questioned due to the way in, on some level, the habit of constantly acquiring new clothes did provide a form of satisfaction for the participants. Before joining the challenge, the participants' experience of buying new clothes had woven within it a quality of 'promise'. Each act of purchasing a new piece of clothing contained within it a possibility or hope that something about *the experience of self* would improve during or after the process of acquisition. Yet, this improvement or satisfaction was neither deep nor long lasting and so, therefore, the habit of frequent clothing consumption could continue. This absence of lasting satisfaction revealed a key element of the participants purchasing decisions, *emotionality*.

The participants' habitual buying behaviours had, historically, been emotionally charged which, prior to participating in the fashion detox challenge, had locked-them in to continually accepting the growth-oriented provocation of the clothing system. In attempting to abstain from buying clothing, this habit of responding to commercial provocation in order to satisfy non-material needs was revealed and the ineffectiveness of this habit was brought to light. The habit of using the act of purchasing clothing to self-satisfy, or, mostly, self-soothe, transferred the clothing system's need for continuous and expanding growth into a pattern of frequent overconsumption at the level of the consumer. Combined, the commercial need for financial growth and the perpetually unmet non-material needs of the consumer led to continuously expanding physical growth in the consumer's wardrobe(s), or as the participants' described it, a continuously expanding pile of *stuff*. The findings from the fashion detox challenge suggest that it this cycle of *pseudo satisfaction* (defined later in this section -see Max-Neef, 1986, 1989, 1992) presents a major barrier to reducing clothing consumption, and sits at the heart of the sustainability-consumption paradox (Bly, et al., 2015).

In the quote below Sarah described her realisation of this sustainability-consumption paradox (Bly, et al., 2015):

The inconvenient, unglamorous truth, one that I often subconsciously deny for the FOMO of not being able to wear what I want, is that we can't solve this crisis by buying more STUFF, no matter how ethical and sustainable that stuff is. Sarah - Blog Post

The participants reported having previously habitually turned to buying new clothing as a 'one size fits all' solution to the ups and downs experienced in everyday life, as expressed by Hayley in the quote below:

I was tidying up yesterday and I realised how much I bought summer clothes last year that I didn't end up wearing. On reflection I realise I was doing retail therapy due to the masters' stress as well as binge eating. Hayley - Week 9

The Fashion Detox Challenge participants, therefore, demonstrated a strong relationship between habit and purchasing clothes that went far beyond typical wants and needs associated with buying clothing, such as identity or social status (Mair, 2018). Niinimaki and Armstrong (2013) argue that most clothing purchases are driven by a need to fulfil emotional desires rather than a real need for new clothing. Findings from the Fashion Detox Challenge confirmed this, as the internal drivers (implicit and explicit) were largely emotionally-related, mood-altering responses to meeting non-material needs and these responses, listed below, were heavily underpinned by habit:

- Boredom
- Low-self esteem
- Filling time
- Lack of confidence
- Constant temptation (marketing, discounts, sales, social media)
- Fear of social judgment
- Fear of missing out
- A payday treat
- Consolation for a hard week at work
- Retail therapy (shopping to feel better)
- Shopping alleviate 'negative' feelings

The emotionally-related reasons for buying clothing listed above strongly align with key findings from the Fashion Detox study in the US, for example, Ruppert-Stroescu et al. (2016) found that challenges to buying less clothing for the fashion-oriented students involved drivers of frequent consumption such as; a compulsive internal yearning for new/different clothes, the use of shopping as retail therapy, appearance consciousness related to social inadequacy, and boredom. The challenges that these types of emotionally-motivated shopping experiences and consumption habits present is that

these behaviours inhibit the creation of deep, long-term relationships with the object of consumption (Niinimaki and Armstrong, 2013) and they prevent the deeper, non-material needs from genuinely and sustainably being satisfied. (The participants' weak person-product will be discussed in relation to Habit 2). The action of buying clothing to satisfy emotional, social or psychological needs is a strategy that has inherently limited potential for success (Mair, 2018). However, it these deeper, non-material needs which have to be taken into account for the goal of sustainable consumption to be fully realised (Di Guilio et al., 2014; Rauschmayer and Omann, 2012). For the participants on the Fashion Detox Challenge, buying clothing frequently had become a habit used to address the complex, troubling existential challenges of everyday life - a strategy promoted by, and which sits at the heart of, materialism and consumerism (Bauman, 2004, 2007; Courtwright, 2019; Faber, 2004; Schor, 1998, 2005, 2007).

Fundamental Human Needs and Psuedo-Satisfiers

As outlined in the Brundtland Report (1987), needs are often understood as basic material necessities such as food, water and shelter, and therefore, the satisfaction of basic material needs is commonly associated with equitable distribution of resources (material goods) and increased economic growth to enable the production and consumption of those resources (Rauschmayer and Omann, 2012). However, this limited view of human needs does not take into account the existence of non-material human needs or the ways in which these needs are satisfied (Smith and Max-Neef, 2012). More recently, however, sustainable consumption scholars such as Fletcher (2008) and Di Guilio and Fuchs (2014) and sustainable development scholars such as Rauschmayer and Omann (2012) have argued that a more complex, nuanced conceptual framework of human needs is needed in order to more fully understand the element of satisfaction in relation to individual consumption habits. Therefore, these scholars use the Needs/Satisfiers matrix which was created by the Chilean Economist Manfred Max-Neef (1986, 1989, 1992) as part of his theory on Human Scale Development to achieve a more holistic conceptualisation of human needs and argue that the topic of satisfying fundamental human needs should be an integral part in any discussion on achieving lasting global sustainability (Fletcher, 2008; Di Guilio et al., 2014; Rauschmayer and Omann, 2012). The phenomenological findings from the fashion detox challenge support this assertion, as it is clear that the inability to genuinely satisfy non-material human needs fuelled the participants' habits connected to frequent clothing consumption.

What is of most relevance to this research study in terms of Max-Neef's (1986, 1989, 1992) framework of fundamental human needs is the concept of satisfiers and, more specifically, pseudo satisfiers. According to Max-Neef's (1986, 1989, 1992) holistic conceptualisation, satisfiers are not neutral and

present various characteristics depending on how the satisfier relates to the fundamental human needs system as a whole (Cruz et al., 2009). Pseudo-satisfiers are elements that stimulate a false sensation of satisfying a given need, which means, in the medium to long-term, they prevent the possibility of satisfying the need they were originally aimed at (Max-Neef, 1986, 1989, 1992). Due to the repetitive, habitual nature of their purchasing habits and the weak person-product relationship which characterised the Fashion Detox Challenge participants' behaviour prior to engaging in the detox, their frequent clothing purchases appeared to be pseudo satisfiers.

Aside from being caught in a cycle of pseudo satisfaction, unable to meet deeper fundamental human needs, the participants' repeatedly described the ways in which their ever-growing pile of clothing was rarely paid attention to and largely experienced as dead weight, absent of life and possibility. This suggests a weak person-object attachment/relationship. This perceived absence of possibility which the consumers' were faced with when confronting their wardrobes in search of an outfit presented a second major challenge of habit change in relation to reducing clothing consumption at the level of the consumer.

Habit 2 – The misperception “I have nothing to wear”

The second habit which emerged from the analysis of the participants' lived experience material was a habit of thinking/feeling that they had *nothing to wear* despite having wardrobes, drawers and even extra storage devices that were overflowing with clothes. This habit of misperception is expressed succinctly in the quote by Victoria below:

It is very stressful as well, because you end up with so much stuff that you can't enjoy it, you don't know the amount of stuff that you actually have and you always think that classic thing of I have nothing to wear! When in fact you have tons of stuff to wear. Literally! Victoria - Television Interview

This perception of nothingness which arose in relation to facing the mass of existing clothing that the participants on the Fashion Detox Challenge already owned is alluded to in existing literature as the 'wardrobe moment' (Banim and Guy, 2001; Gregson and Beale, 2004). The way in which this misperception kept participants at an experiential distance from individual items of clothing prevented the material reality of owning 'too much stuff' from inhibiting future purchasing. This habit

of perception sat in stark contrast to, and was never truly fulfilled by, a habitual urge to purchase yet more clothing, which together contributed to previously unnoticed experiences of low-level stress.

The misperception “I have nothing to wear” presents a significant challenge to personal sustainability transitions through the way in which it perpetuates a weak attachment to existing clothing through preventing the consumer from paying detailed attention and direct experience to specific clothing items. The area of attachment to objects of consumption has received great interest from scholars but this interest is largely focused within the subject of sustainable design. These discussions consider the ways in which relationships to products can be developed through the framework of emotionally durable design (Chapman, 2005, 2009) and physically durable design (Fuad-Luke, 2010). Clothing specific research on this topic has focused on how the consumer can develop a connection to the garment in a such a way that the longevity of ownership is increased (Fletcher, 2012; Niinimäki & Koskinen, 2011; Niinimaki and Armstrong, 2013). In debates on sustainability and sustainable consumption, longer-lasting materials and products are often promoted as a strategy to increase the time in which a product is kept in active use. However, as Fletcher (2012) argues, these gains in longevity depend on changes in user behaviour and in consumption patterns.

Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pilgrim (2008) define person–product attachment as the strength of emotionally engaged experiences that a consumer has with a particular product. Deep attachment towards a product prevents its disposal (Belk, 1991; Niinimaki and Armstrong, 2013). However, findings from the Fashion Detox Challenge suggest that if a habit of misperception, characterised by a thought/feeling of ‘having nothing to wear’ is preventing the consumer from paying attention to the individual items of clothing in a wardrobe a strong, long-lasting person-product attachment cannot develop. Chapman (2005, 2009) argues that engagement between a consumer and a product develops over time and through direct experience. Findings from the Fashion Detox Challenge suggest, therefore, that the misperception of having nothing to wear prevented the development of an emotional engagement with the clothing through the way in which it perceptually paralyses individuals, preventing them from using their focused attention and awareness to explore and further understand their lived experience of specific items of clothing.

The specific challenges that habitually purchasing garments without developing a strong attachment to the material objects presents are firstly, reduced clothing utilisation. This supports macro-level which suggest that data the average number of times that a garment is worn before it ceases to be used has decreased by 36 percent compared to 15 years ago (EMF, 2017). The second challenge which a weak person-object relationship presents in relation to reducing final clothing consumption and

encouraging a process of “doing more and better with less” (UN, 2015b) is that the absence of a strong attachment to clothing makes it less likely for an individual to engage with extended-use practices and the other zero-waste fashion actions suggested by the UN (2019) such as repairs, alterations and upcycling.

Personal benefits of reduced clothing consumption

The fourteen participants whose lived experience material was analysed in this study were diverse in age, in profession, and appeared also to be diverse in terms of the specific sustainability knowledge and degree of ethical values that they possessed in relation to clothing consumption. The participants’ reflections on their pre-detox shopping habits and motivations for joining the challenge were, therefore, largely self-focused. Even when there was an expressed desire to align individual habits with values connected to collective environmental or social impacts, the medium through which this change was established was via individual behaviour changes that began and ended with the individual self. The participants’ primary motives for reducing personal clothing consumption, expressed in their week one diary entries, were described through self-focused internal, incentives such as regaining self-control over shopping habits, facing the mass of clothing which had already accumulated due to past purchasing habits, and regaining control over spending habits. This emphasis on the predicted personal benefits of reducing future clothing consumption reflect the internally-based personal and financial reasons that minimalists and voluntary simplifiers adopt a constrained approach to consumption (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Cherrier, 2009; Joyner Armstrong et al., 2016; Lewis, 2012; Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2012; Zalewska and Cobel-Tokarska, 2016).

A key finding that the phenomenological analysis of this study suggests, in Theme Two and Theme Three, is that developing an attentive way of being is key to being able to develop the greater appreciation of existing clothing necessary for individual consumer’s to achieve the UN’s (2015b) goal of “doing more and better with less”. As the participants progressed through the ten-weeks they overcame the challenges described in the sections above in a number of ways, all of which presence opportunities for reducing clothing consumption at the level of the consumer. During the ten weeks the participants’:

- developed an ability to restrain from impulsive habits
- developed an ability to resist commercial pressures
- found ways of spending their time which satisfied non-material needs
- developed a capacity for mindful purchasing

The new found ability to refrain from previous impulsive habits, to resist commercial pressures and develop a capacity for mindful purchasing are all characterised by a decision making process that is typically associated with minimalists, slow fashion consumers and voluntary simplifiers (Fletcher, 2008, 2010, 2012; Gambrel and Cafaro, 2010; Martin-Woodhead, 2017).

As discussed in Theme One in the phenomenological findings of this study, before taking the Fashion Detox Challenge the participants' experience of buying new clothes had woven within it a quality of 'promise'. Each piece of clothing contained a possibility or hope that something about the experience of self would improve during or after the process of acquisition as a direct result of the purchase but, during the ten-week challenge, the participants' realised that this hope consistently did not become realised. Instead, therefore, during the ten week challenge the participants' learnt to resist the commercial, social and internal pressures which had previously led them into a locked-in habit of overconsumption. A release from the inner pressures to consume is described in the quote by Cathy below:

It's just nice to go to the shopping centre and feel no inner pressure to buy any clothes only because they are there. I did not even look once at the clothing shops, ignored all the advertising and refuse to be obsessing over any sales. Cathy - Week 5

In the final week of the ten-week challenge, Clara described her new perspective on the commercial pressures to consume which had previously drawn her into purchasing clothes frequently:

I think as consumers we believe when we see that influencers have new outfits all the time that will make us and bring us happiness but these companies target us to make us feel that way to make money. Even I have to admit I have always known this but I still found myself falling for these companies advertisements, I think I have realised how much I have fallen for this over the past 10 weeks. Clara - Week 10

In the quote below, Claire described the empowering feeling which emerged from gaining a new perspective on, and relationship, with the pressurising marketing arms of the clothing system:

"You have the power"...I've realised more than ever that the consumer has more power than we think. I was stuck in a bubble thinking I was controlled by advertisements and sales and in some ways, I was. But it's easier than you think to break away from that control and regain power. Who knew unfollowing brands on Instagram could have such a positive influence on your life? Claire - Week 5

As a result of developing a more attentive way of being and refamiliarising themselves with their existing clothing new possibilities emerged for 'how' clothing could be used by the participants going forward. During this process of refamiliarization a sense of enjoyment from discovering forgotten clothing emerged, and the generalising, frustrating perception of having 'nothing to wear' dissolved. This fixed, pre-existing, almost debilitating perception was transformed into a way of seeing and being that was more attentive, self-aware and participatory. This more attentive way of being led to the creation of new opportunities for extended use practices and the development of the perceptual skills which Sheth et al. (2011) argue are necessary to cultivate a more conscious, conscientious or, in other words, more mindful consumption pattern. This constrained, mindful approach to consumption is described by Gemma in the quote below:

*So old habits die hard but I do think I will be much more mindful about my purchases from now on and rather than buying for a short term fix, ask myself: Do I really need it? Can I afford it? Is it value for money? Is there something else I already have that I can wear instead? Gemma
- Week 10*

Victoria also illustrated a new, conscientious approach to acquiring clothes:

I don't think I'll be heading straight out to the shops in a months' time but will take time to think carefully about whether I actually need something rather than just wanting things because of old habits. Victoria - Week 6

The fashion detox challenge participants voluntarily abstained from buying clothing for ten weeks for largely personal, financial, and lifestyle reasons, this supports findings from literature on the motives to which drive voluntary simplifiers to adopt a minimalist or constrained approach to consumption (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Cherrier, 2009; Joyner Armstrong et al., 2016; Lewis, 2012; Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2012; Zalewska and Cobel-Tokarska, 2016). The experiential personal benefits reported by the fashion detox challenge participants include unexpected benefits such as feeling 'lighter', more confident, empowered, less anxious and stressed by clothing consumption, and more free to move through life without feeling constrained by purchasing pressures, internal and external.

An unexpected list of personal benefits also emerged which further supports findings from research on voluntary simplicity, such as the satisfaction derived from developing a long-lasting personal style, increased creativity, an enhanced sense of personal freedom and increased self-confidence (Bly et al., 2015; Joyner Armstrong et al., 2016; Lundblad and Davies, 2016; Ruppert Stroescu et al., 2015; Watson and Nan Yan, 2013). The unexpected personal benefits which emerged from the ten-week abstinence during the fashion detox challenge, therefore, support the unexpected personal benefits from the aforementioned studies on constrained consumption, whether it be sustainable consumers, minimalists, voluntary simplifiers or slow fashion consumers (Bly et al., 2015; Joyner Armstrong et al., 2016; Lundblad and Davies, 2016; Ruppert Stroescu et al., 2015; Watson and Nan Yan, 2013; Zalewska and Cobel-Tokarska, 2016). Together, these findings suggest that a more diverse array of personal benefits of voluntary simplicity exist than are commonly associated with constrained approaches to clothing consumption, such as saving money. The research studies by Bly et al. (2015) and Lundblad and Davies (2016) also suggested that even sustainable consumers and sustainable fashion pioneers were largely motivated by the self-focused positive benefits of sustainable clothing consumption and only partially motivated by altruistic values. These studies, therefore, further confirm the phenomenological findings from this study on the fashion detox challenge which suggest that the self-focused benefits of constrained clothing consumption, personal and financial, present a promising opportunity for promoting the adoption of constrained consumption patterns.

Conclusion

Fletcher (2008) asserts that emotional needs are complex, subtle and inexhaustible, and that when individuals try to meet them through purchasing clothing there is an escalation in how and what is bought. Findings from the Fashion Detox Challenge confirm this through the participants' accounts of their pre-detox consumption habits. Therefore, 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). Until a more in-depth understanding of the ineffective habitual attempt to use clothing as a *satisfier* of non-material human needs is achieved, sustainability practitioners and policy makers cannot expect to reduce clothing consumption through either informing or nudging consumers to do 'more and better with less' (Fletcher, 2008). However, as previously noted in this section, the concept of need has been

largely absent from discussions in sustainable development and sustainable consumption (Boulanger, 2008; Jackson, 2004, 2005; Mebratu, 1998).

Viewing the habitual overconsumption of clothing as learned pattern of behaviour which attempts to meet fundamental non-material human needs which stretch far beyond the scope of the physical or even symbolic value of the clothing item itself, suggests that the unsustainability of frequent clothing consumption should be framed not as an issue of environmental awareness or an absence of ethical values but as a problem related to learning, self-awareness and personal development. Parodi and Tamm (2018) refer to the personal aspects of sustainability, such as self-awareness and personal development, as the 'far side' of sustainable development. These authors argue that the global transition to sustainability is stuck, that academic research has not yet resulted in significant change, and therefore, that a void exists in terms of research for sustainability. They argue that this void has occurred due to the focus on external, collective and global processes, which has neglected the micro-level aspects of human, individual, intra and inter-personal aspects of sustainability and sustainable development (Parodi and Tamm, 2018). The findings from the fashion detox challenge support this assertion. It is imperative, therefore, that when practitioners or policy makers are attempting to overcome the challenges related to reducing the pace of clothing consumption attention must be given to the non-material fundamental human needs which consumers are neglecting when frequent clothing consumption is used as a pseudo satisfier.

In line with the Fashion Detox research in the US by Joyner Armstrong et al. (2016) and Ruppert-Stroescu et al. (2015), the findings from this study suggest that an action-oriented experiential learning challenge, such as the ten-week Fashion Detox Challenge, presents a novel means by which to offer consumers path from which to challenge their own barriers to reduced consumption, from the unique perspective of their life world, which offers in return, to those willing to stay the course, a lived experience of the tangible, personal benefits of reducing clothing consumption.

This paper has argued that although the personal benefits of constrained clothing consumption are clear, the deeper sustainability transition involved in reducing clothing consumption at the level of the consumer is *the individual's practical and existential transition* from an emotionally-vulnerable habitual shopper chasing a simple wish to feel better, to a mindful individual who can practise resistance, restraint and develop a strong enough relationship with their clothing to overcome the misperception of "having nothing to wear".

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. As mentioned in the section above the dominant marketing strategies in the clothing system persistently encourage 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, evidenced by the time-limited sales and constant discounts from which, in essence, carry an underlying message that the clothes which the individual owns will *never be enough*, must be confronted and addressed.

Findings from this study suggest that the internal and external barriers to reducing clothing consumption could be addressed by projects, services or businesses aimed assisting the individual consumer manage the complexity of their wardrobe and deepening their awareness of, and relationship to, existing clothing items. Projects such as the capsule wardrobe project 333 and the decluttering techniques of Marie Kondo provide existing examples of such initiatives. The Fashion Detox Challenge participants expressed a desire to change consumption habits but reported that they had either failed in past attempts or wanted help to change. Implications for policy and practice are, therefore, at the level of the individual, to consider transitions in pacing clothing consumption as a habit change task, which may require active support and intervention rather than information or didactic education alone.

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; Gambel and Cafaro, 2010; Martin-Woodhead, 2017). These new found abilities represent important opportunities for further research, possibly within the domain of personal sustainability competencies, a subject already being researched in the field of education for sustainability (ESC). Some scholars in (ESC) have already called for a greater focus on the personal competencies needed for individuals to transition to more sustainable consumption habits and practices (Barth et al., 2007; Fischer and Barth, 2014; Frank and Stanzus, 2019; Frank, Sundermann and Fischer, 2019; Sahakian and Seyfang, 2018; Weinert, 2001).

In terms of being able to measure or evaluate any lasting changes or to explore the opportunities for reduced clothing consumption outside the artificial constraints of a time-limited, collective challenge, the absence of longitudinal data is a limitation of this exploratory study. Consequently, conducting a longitudinal study of the effects of a voluntary abstinence intervention, such as the fashion detox challenge, could provide a more detailed insight into long-term implications, reliability and suitability of this approach as a behaviour change intervention and, therefore, provides a promising avenue for future research.

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