

An Investigation of European Climate Activists' Fashion Buying Behaviour

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Abstract

Background scientific research: As a response to the rising threat of the climate crisis, activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future have emerged during the last few years (Portway, 2019), with millions of people regularly participating in climate strikes globally (Taylor et al., 2019). Along with this, general consumer awareness of environmental and ethical issues has risen (Yang et al., 2020). The fashion industry is a particularly strong contributor to climate change, for example through pollution of waters and improper disposal of clothing (Hill & Lee, 2015). The overconsumption of fast fashion with its planned obsolescence and increase in collections that are brought out each year is one of the key reasons for this (Gwozdz, Nielsen & Müller, 2017). Despite the rising awareness for fashion's environmental and social impacts, research has still observed a mismatch between consumers' intentions to consume more sustainably and their actual consumption behaviours (e.g., Achabou, Dekhili & Codini, 2020; Govind et al., 2017). While consumer attitudes towards sustainable fashion have been explored in many studies (e.g., Ritch, 2020) sustainable consumption behaviours are still an under-researched area (Mukendi et al., 2020). Many previous studies focus on consumers who are not interested in sustainability (Lundblad & Davies, 2016), and only few papers have explored fashion acquisition behaviours of environmentally aware consumers (e.g., Bly, Gwozdz & Reisch, 2015; Do Paço & Reis, 2012). With the popularity of the new climate strikes (Roser-Renouf et al., 2014), climate activists have been of interest for researchers as well, but due to their relative newness on this scale, the research about them is still in its infancy (Martiskainen et al., 2020; Fisher, 2019). Moreover, research on whether their activist behaviours translate into their consumption is very limited (Roser-Renouf et al., 2016), particularly in a fashion context. However, small, vocal groups and environmentally aware consumers of sustainable fashion have been found to set trends for other consumers (Bly, Gwozdz & Reisch, 2015), and climate activists can be powerful opinion leaders (Roser-Renouf et al., 2014). More recent

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research by Djafarova & Foots (2022) proposes that Generation Z consumers in the UK are aware of ethical issues and declared that this younger generation have reduced clothing consumption. Thus, it is important to investigate such an influential consumer group of opinion leaders to find new ways of consumption for a more sustainable fashion industry.

Research issue to be addressed: Given the very limited literature exploring consumption behaviours of climate activists and the environmental impacts of the fashion industry, the aim of this novel research is to explore the attitudes of European climate activists towards fashion and its environmental impact, as well as understand their fashion clothing consumption. The objectives informing the research were:

1. To explore the attitudes of European climate activists towards fashion and its environmental impact.
2. To understand how European climate activists consume fashion.
3. To consider the practical applications as a way to contribute to meaningful change.

Methodology used: Given the subjectivity of deliberating sustainability among other idiographic lifestyles implications, the research adopts a social constructionist stance (Bergman & Luckman, 1966) to explore how existential experiences inform and direct attitudes towards climate activism and fashion practice. Using purposeful convenience sampling, nine semi-structured in-depth interviews with self-describing European climate activists were conducted in early 2021 via Zoom. Potential participants had to rate themselves on a scale of 1-7 describing their involvement with climate activism (1 being no involvement, 7 being highly involved) and only participants who rated themselves 3 or higher were chosen to participate (Hackett & Reysen, 2017). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. A second stage of research is planned for summer 2022 to explore the process of the communication of these opinion leaders to understand the potential for creating meaningful change.

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: The findings show that European climate activists exhibit a high awareness of environmental issues in the fashion industry and are critical of the lack of response in addressing sustainable production as well as manipulative marketing that encourages frequent consumption. Involvement with climate activism means that fashion is mostly consumed sustainably. Common ideologies between climate activists were identified, with some shared practices evident. Their main source of fashion are various forms of collaborative fashion consumption, including second-hand garments from online second-hand platforms, charity shops and hand-me-downs from friends and family. However, overall consumption of fashion is reduced considerably, and creative ways of consuming fashion have emerged. Some barriers to consuming fashion more sustainably remain, including price, style, and the need to purchase second-hand and sustainable clothing online, which was identified as a new barrier to sustainable consumption in this research. These behaviours can provide examples for other

consumers on how to adjust their consumption habits to become more sustainable, as well as illustrate to fashion brands that their environmental impact is under scrutiny.

This research advances theory by moving beyond the well-established attitude-behaviour gap, to illustrate that engaging with fashion does not necessarily allude to unsustainability and that new practice can be built on collaboration and creativity. Understanding what motivates sustainable fashion practice in ways that do not induce elements of self-sacrifice are an important means for engaging a wider audience with sustainability. In a society in which fashion followers follow fashion leaders (Martensen et al., 2018), sustainable fashion leaders could be a way towards more sustainable consumption. What the participants express is confidence in their fashion acquisition practice and satisfaction that they do not contribute to the climate crisis. Further, as many of the participants are young people, this supports research that identifies a greater awareness and concern for the climate crisis in younger generations. Consequently, the research will also be of interest for fashion industry practice, offering pathways to engaging with fashion consumers concerned for sustainability and developing new business models that support sustainable fashion practice.

Keywords: ethics, climate activism, sustainable fashion consumption.

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