



Fashion clothing – where does it all end up?

G. Birtwistle

*Division of Marketing, Glasgow Caledonian University,
Glasgow, Scotland, UK, and*

C.M. Moore

School of Management and Languages, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate how consumers dispose of fashion products and how it might be possible to increase sustainable consumption of textiles.

Design/methodology/approach – Increasing volumes of textiles are being produced, purchased and disposed of in landfill sites, which affect the environment. Research has identified the influences in increased purchase behaviour and the tendency to keep clothing for a shorter time. The primary research, undertaken in three stages, is an exploratory examination of the experiences of UK consumers and charity shops managers. Focus groups and key informant interviews were undertaken to achieve the objectives.

Findings – This qualitative study identifies consumers' lack of understanding of how this behaviour affects the environment and key informant interviews explore how clothing can be re-used and recycled. The conclusions assess what can be learnt from the data and offer suggestions for future research.

Originality/value – The paper is a new area of research which has global implications.

Keywords Clothing, Ethics, Sustainable development, Recycling, Consumer behaviour, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In a fashion market place where retailers grasp every device to increase sales, and, via fast fashion, at ever shorter intervals (Mintel, 2004), this research is aimed at discovering how consumers dispose of outdated purchases. A number of studies have explored the re-use and recycling of paper, glass and plastic but very few have examined textiles. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to explore the disposal element of fashion items and the attitudes and behaviours of the consumer to this process.

Sustainable consumption

Concern with environmental and ethical issues came to public awareness during the 1970s, and gained acceptance during the 1980s and 1990s (Anderson and Cunningham, 1972; Doane, 2001; Sanne, 2002). This was brought about by greater public awareness of environmental issues and ethical concerns raised by pressure groups and the establishment of regular international conferences providing a forum for their discussion (Strong, 1996; Robins and Roberts, 1997; Kalafatis *et al.*, 1999; Jones *et al.*, 2005). One of the specific themes to emerge from this was that of sustainable consumption – a term which entered common parlance during the early 1990s (Jackson, 2004):



Sustainable consumption is consumption that supports the ability of current and future generations to meet their material and other needs, without causing irreversible damage to the environment or loss of function in natural systems (OCSC, 2000 cited in Jackson, 2003, p. 14).

Fashion consumption

Researchers have begun to investigate aspects of and motivations for the consumption act itself as opposed to generating knowledge for marketing use (Holbrook, 1987, 1995; Brinkmann, 2004). Contingent to this has been deeper investigation into the factors which might influence the consumer behaviour of specific social groups (Strong, 1996; Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Brinkmann, 2004; Jackson, 2004). The success of a new fashion product is related to the acceptance by fashion innovators in the early stage of the life cycle (Goldsmith *et al.*, 1999). The adoption theory was proposed by Rogers (1983) where he argued that even within the same culture, not all people adopt an innovation at the same rate; some do so rapidly, and others never at all. By examining Roger's theory, two interesting facts are found. Firstly, around 16 per cent of consumers, innovators and early adopters, are highly fashion aware and conscious of new fashion trends. They notice the new trends, evaluate them and adopt them in a short period of time. Two-thirds of consumers belong to the early or late majority. They are interested in the new trends but are less adventurous hence, everybody, except for the laggards, care about fashion trends and would like to adopt some of them before they are "passé".

Recent research (Birtwistle and Moore, 2006) demonstrated that early fashion innovators, compared to fashion followers, were heavily influenced by the fashion media, they shopped and purchased fashion garments more frequently, were influenced in their purchasing by celebrities and were spending more per month. They only used clothing for socializing a few times. For work, garments were expected to be kept longer. In contrast, fashion followers were more interested in whether garments were practical and could be worn again next season than early fashion innovators. However, even younger fashion followers did not expect to keep clothing for a long time. Furthermore, the study identified early fashion innovators to be impulse purchasers seeking self gratification by shopping (Lee, 2003).

Throwaway fashion attitude

The trend of throwaway fashion owes much to increases in fashion purchase frequency and a real reduction in price levels. Although consumers only spent 16.6 per cent more in cash terms between 1998 and 2002, in real terms and at year 1998 prices, they actually spent 38 per cent more (Keynote, 2004). Furthermore, fast fashion retailers, such as H&M, TopShop and Zara, sell garments that are expected to be used less than ten times (McAfee *et al.*, 2004) at very competitive price points. The increase in fashion purchasing has led to a new phenomena of disposing of garments which may only have been worn a few times (Birtwistle and Moore, 2006).

Re-use and recycling of clothing

Sustainable consumption as an aspect of consumer behaviour, involves pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase components (Jacoby *et al.*, 1977). The disposal component is a relatively new area of research (Holbrook, 1995; de Coverly *et al.*, 2003).

Essentially this final component of consumer behaviour is about whether clothing is re-used, recycled or simply discarded or destroyed. Jacoby *et al.* (1977) developed a basic framework and identified three main factors: psychological characteristics of decision-making, such as personality, attitudes, social conscience, etc. intrinsic factors to the product, such as condition, age style, value, initial cost, durability, etc. and situational factors extrinsic to the product such as finances, storage space, fashion changes, etc. to explain disposal behaviour, and positioned consumers as “redistributors” in the channel structure as opposed to “end-users”. Burke *et al.* (1978) profiled consumers on whether they discarded product or disposed of it responsibly. They found that consumers who disposed of products with little reference to further use, potential use by others or the environmental impact of disposition tended to be younger. This is an increasing problem in the UK where more than one million tonnes of textiles end up in landfill sites every year (Waste Online, 2004).

Textile recycling originated in the West Riding of Yorkshire about 200 years ago when the “rag and bone” men went door-to-door to collect rags, metal and any other household articles. Today, many consumers dispose of their clothing to charity shops, where donations are sorted and are then either sold, sent to developing countries where they are re-used or sent to a recycling plant and made into fillings or cleaning rags. Linen, cotton and viscose can be made into paper pulp and wool can be recovered and felted or re-spun (TRC, 2006). Textile reclamation businesses recycle both natural and man-made fibres and 50 per cent of all the textiles we throw away are recyclable (Waste Online, 2004). The advantage of re-using and recycling has both environmental and economic benefits. Textile recovery reduces the need for landfill space. Textiles present particular problems in landfill as synthetic products do not decompose, whilst woollen garments decompose and produce methane, which contributes to global warming (Waste Online, 2004; Naturegrid, 2006). A number of companies specialize in textile recycling. Nathan’s Wastesavers, established in 1903, is the largest firm in the UK. The firm collects goods from charity shops and more than 1,000 textile banks; they sort and process more than 350,000 kg of material every week of which 98 per cent is reused or recycled (Nathan, 2006).

Methodology

The exploratory research contained three phases; eight consumer focus groups, six consumer interviews and four in depth interviews with charity shop managers. The focus groups were conducted during December 2005 and targeted younger fashion consumers. In total 71 females in the age group 18-25 participated. The aim of the focus groups was to establish an understanding of attitudes towards purchasing and disposal of fashion garments. The age group was chosen since young people purchase more fashion garments than older people and if disposal habits are to be changed then it is this age group that has to be influenced.

The six in depth interviews with fashion consumers aged between 27 and 57 were carried out during March 2006 to identify differences in attitudes between younger and older age groups. The interviews aimed to explore the underlying motives and beliefs determining consumer behaviour with regard to the purchase, consumption and disposal of fashion products. Four interviews were held with charity store managers during March 2006 since the focus groups and the in depth interviews with consumers had established that donating garments to charity shops was common, and

the charity shop interviews would be able to provide quality information on disposal methods. Fashion clothing

Consumer attitude towards purchasing fashion garments

In the focus groups, the majority of female respondents were readers of fashion or celebrity magazines. The overwhelmingly most popular magazines were *Heat* and *Hello*; others included *OK*, *Grazia*, *Cosmo*, *Elle*, *Glamour* and *Marie Claire*. The places the younger shoppers purchased from were the fast fashion retailers *H&M*, *TopShop*, *Zara* and *River Island* and many would shop two or three times a week. The older interviewees added *Marks & Spencer* and next to this list. None would purchase every time they visited fashion shops since browsing was regarded to be a leisure activity. The majority thought they bought more now than they used to do and the spend varied from £20 to 200 per month. Some expressed concern with the rising trend of fast fashion, greater abundance of products available, and many felt alienated by the increasing pace of change in fashion.

Fashion disposal

Generally speaking, respondents did not have a specific idea of how long they would keep clothing. Most kept items for as long as they were wearable and stopped wearing the cheaper clothing, such as from *H&M*, for three main reasons: lower quality, new fashion trend or clothes were bought for a one off event. They were more likely to retain expensive clothing, even if they no longer wore it. There were feelings of guilt in disposing of expensive higher quality items worn only a few times and these tended to be donated to charities, whereas cheaper clothing used for socializing would quickly be un-wearable due to wear and tear were just thrown out.

Many respondents stated they took items to the charity shops or donated to charities via doorstep collections because it made them feel good; very few had used supermarket community recycling or charitable collection bins. This is illustrated by the following statement “If anybody else could wear them, I’d give it to a charity shop. Something that was damaged, I’d put in the bin though”. Clothes were taken to a charity based on convenience. Everybody tended to throw away clothing that was damaged due to wear and tear, was personally significant or was of “no use” to other people (e.g. clothing which was especially unfashionable). All of this would end up in the rubbish bin. A few had sold items via *eBay* or in second hand shops, some mentioned handing clothing on to other family members, some met with friends at “swapping” parties and one had used old clothing to make new items. None had used council recycling boxes for discarded clothing. Older consumers stated that work clothes were more likely to be worn until they were no longer wearable and would be thrown out or used as household rags and then disposed off via household refuse.

The charities reported that they received large amounts of clothing as donations. The lowest donation figure was cited to be between 20 and 200 bin bags per week. This accounted for up to 70 per cent of their total donations. The main source of donations was via “threshold stock”, i.e. donations passed straight to the shop by members of the public. Some stores also received stock transfers from other stores in their charity usually because the stock in question had failed to sell elsewhere. Half the stores had relationships with local companies and organisations (e.g. a major local retailer; student’s accommodation offices) which allowed them to make collection from these places.

While door-to-door collections had been used by managers in the past, they typically chose not to use this method since they already had sufficient stock and felt it was a waste of effort.

Charity shop managers were unanimous in reporting an increasing quantity of clothing donations over the past few years. They said this growth was in excess of other product donations illustrated by the following statement: "I think people are more willing to donate than before, they're more keen to get rid of stuff, and they have more stuff lying about that they don't use but which is in good condition." The reasons for this were cited as being a result of increasing consumption of fashion products, faster aging of trends and styles, response to specific appeals, greater interest in charitable activities and wider acceptance of charity stores as being an attractive venue for fashion purchasing.

Typical sell-through rates were between 50 and 75 per cent. Managers reported that good quality donations meant they had little problems in selling stock within two weeks of display. Typically fashion items are given a two week "window" in which to sell after which they are moved to another store. After another two week period, they are moved to discount store, or liquidated for recycling or dispatch for emergency relief abroad. Managers reported that no items go to waste, even those which are unfit for sale since they are sent to recycling companies. Products derived from this process include loft insulation, automobile soundproofing and soft furnishings stuffing. Managers mentioned that some clothing was used for emergency appeals and sometimes it was used for charity's work with the homeless in the UK.

Discussion, conclusion and further research

Generally, consumers were unaware of the need for clothing recycling, however, they did agree that there was a general lack of knowledge of how and where clothing was disposed of, or even how it was made – the environmental consequences of artificial fibres, intensive cotton production, etc. were poorly understood concerns. This deficiency in awareness was thought to be due to lack of media coverage. If the environmental impact of clothing manufacturing and disposal was made more widely known, participants predicted that clothing retailers would have to adapt their collections and sales strategies. Participants also stated that they might modify their clothing consumption and disposal behaviour if they were more aware of the social and environmental consequences.

Most participants were sceptical as to the ultimate value or contribution to society of fast fashion and felt it encouraged a "throwaway culture" where products and fashion lost intrinsic value, encouraging consumers to replace and dispose of products before their real life cycle had ended. Consumer awareness of their ownership of excessive amounts of clothing motivates charity donation – along with convenience and a desire to "do good" however, this study did not identify what would make consumers contribute towards increasing the re-use and recycling of textiles. Whilst respondents were mindful of the greater quantities of clothing being produced and sold, they had little interest in the potential social, environmental or ethical impact. In the future, the media may be able to help change peoples disposal habits by providing more information about sustainable consumption in the area of fashion clothing and local councils by increasing consumer awareness of the facility provided by them in collecting textiles along with glass, plastic and metals in recycling boxes.

Given the issues around sustainable consumption and the exploratory findings of this study with regards to consumption of clothing, the next stage of this research is to interview managers at recycling plants, local council waste managers and the media to explore how consumer attitudes and behaviour can be changed before undertaking a large-scale survey.

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Corresponding author

G. Birtwistle can be contacted at: gbi@gcal.ac.uk