



Systemic Fashion Change and Wardrobe Research-Related Tools for Supporting Consumers

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Abstract

With strong consensus around the need for holistic, systemic change to the dominant fashion paradigm across the Global North, this article aims to generate practical strategies for better engaging and supporting fashion consumers as one key stakeholder group. It critiques the prevailing discourse of ethical fashion consumption—narrowly focused on fast fashion consumption—as both unjust and considerably limiting the scope of broader consumer awareness and action. Wardrobe research facilitates rich empirical evidence of consumers' ordinary clothing practices and can support more fair and helpful representations of fashion consumers and consumption. Proposing wardrobe research as a tool to create a more engaging and supportive discourse, the article considers how evidence from wardrobe research might enter circulation and extends to consider everyday wearers engaging in and sharing wardrobe research in 'amateur' forms. The article examines large public 'garment storytelling' projects as an example and proposes that such accessible and appealing wardrobe research-related tools could be further used and developed.

Keywords

Fashion; sustainability; consumers; wardrobe research; garment stories.

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Systemic Crisis, Change, Consumers

Increasingly over the past few decades, through the work of numerous environmental and labour rights activist organisations and academic scholarship on fashion sustainability, the extent and interrelationships of social and ecological ills associated with the global fashion industry¹ have become more starkly realised. Events such as the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh (International Labour Organization 2022a) and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Fashion Revolution 2022) have exposed and drawn public attention to the fashion industry's workings and deeply entrenched injustices. In particular, these cases highlighted the industry's protracted and opaque global supply chains and the profound violations and precarity of the millions of female garment workers at the bottom of them—in the Global South. Against a background of continual reporting on fashion companies' perpetually lacklustre sustainability performance,² these events have triggered widespread perceptions of the industry as 'broken' or in 'crisis'; although for many insiders this view is not new (Givhan 2020; Khan and Richards 2021). Of course, the need to address this broken industry exists not in isolation but as part of broader and intensifying global crises of climate change and inequality (Pörtner et al. 2022; United Nations 2015, 2022), to which the global fashion industry is contributing significantly (Global Fashion Agenda 2017: 2–20). Continuing its current trajectory brings risks of 'catastrophic outcomes' (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017: 21) and a failure to meet critical global environmental and development agreements (GFA 2019: 1).

In recognition of these risks and the deep systemic nature of the industry's issues, recommendations for reforming the fashion industry have become more holistic. Mainstream approaches tend to work with 'life cycle thinking' to encompass impacts occurring throughout products' entire life cycles and to enact a shift from linear to circular economies (e.g., EMF 2017, 2020; Waste and Resources Action Programme 2022). More progressive approaches are also concerned with circularity, yet more critically and fundamentally question the economic imperatives and structures of global capitalism, what we are actually seeking to sustain and how this might provide flourishing for all (e.g., Fashion Revolution 2020a; Fletcher 2014; Fletcher and Tham 2019; Payne 2021; von Busch 2021). Although these approaches differ in appealing to either greater technological or cultural change, they nonetheless demonstrate keen consensus that the fashion industry needs 'transformational, systemic change' (Fashion Revolution 2015: 26), which clearly requires a substantial departure from current practices for all involved.

In seeking to understand and scope new futures for fashion activity, the recommendations above variously map our broader dominant fashion 'system' (Payne 2021: 13) and commonly identify multiple stakeholders involved in and capable of shaping its material and cultural flows—broadly industry, consumers, governments and non-government organisations (NGOs). These systemic views inevitably illustrate stakeholders as dynamically interconnected, bringing a sensitive and practical understanding to evolving the fashion industry. This article brings focus to consumers in this critical collaborative evolution and aims to generate practical strategies for better engaging and supporting this stakeholder group. Specifically, I critique limitations in our prevailing discourse around fashion consumers and consumption and explore how wardrobe research, and related 'tools' such as sharing personal garment stories, can help ground and expand this current discourse to better engage and support consumers towards systemic fashion change. While the potential for wardrobe research to positively affect our dominant discourse has been identified previously, this article looks closely and practically at how this might be achieved.

The discussion in this article is motivated by concerns of ethics and productivity, or fair and effective engagement, around fashion consumers in the context of systemic fashion change and is informed by a background knowledge in the areas of wardrobe research and 'garment storytelling'—defined below as an activity related to wardrobe research. A curiosity about how sharing personal garment stories might relate to fashion sustainability, and in particular might operate as a durability strategy for wearers' existing garments, led me to explore participant perspectives of this process, including approaches, experiences and wardrobe impacts (on clothing relationships and practices) (Holgar 2019). Some brief findings from this research are included in the discussion of garment storytelling; hence, I will briefly explain that this study was conducted with a group of 16 participants of mixed gender and age (24–63 years), recruited through my social network and snowball sampling, in Brisbane, Australia. The study

took stories of ‘favourite garments’ (up to five) as an example and utilised a qualitative methodology involving open format participant documentation of garment stories, semi-structured interviews and thematic and visual content analysis of collected data. This article draws from this study to engage with the broader question of how fashion consumers might be better engaged and supported in systemic fashion change. The section below begins to unpack this question.

Speaking to Fashion Consumers

This article addresses consumers across the relatively affluent region of the Global North,³ which currently forms the largest market for the global fashion industry. Countries within this region feature consumer economies, global brand retailers and a Western system or culture of dress predicated on regular, systemic change (Entwistle 2000: 47); elements that encourage consumption. Yet these market conditions are not the only consideration. This focus also derives from global justice perspectives of the Global North as a region of relative privilege and power where agents have a moral and political responsibility and capability to address injustices to which we are connected (e.g., Ackerly 2018; Miller 2010; Young 2011). I am informed here by this sense of responsibility within a globalised world of uneven relations while also considering the involvement of consumers, along with the other key stakeholder groups, as critically important in transforming our dominant fashion system.

This article considers the consumption of changing fashions as well as more staple clothing across the Global North in a broad sense, informed by changes in the overarching Textiles, Clothing, Leather and Footwear (TCLF) sector since the late twentieth century. From this time, the progressive liberalisation of this sector (World Trade Organization 2022) significantly reshaped global patterns of textile and clothing production, consumption, trade and investment (Kowalski and Molnar 2009) and ‘accelerated’ a trend within the TCLF sector towards fast, flexible, low cost production by making available competitive offshore textile and garment manufacturing (ILO 2022b). Fast fashion brands such as Zara, H&M and Uniqlo have honed this production strategy, becoming highly profitable⁴ and contributing significantly to the near doubling of global clothing sales from 2000 to 2015 (EMF 2017: 18). With this success, the fast fashion business model has dominated the fashion industry from the mid-2000s, influencing not only low cost but mid-priced and luxury brands (Fashion Revolution 2020: 26), who have sought to achieve similar ‘speed to market’ (Payne 2021: 84). Fast fashion has become ‘paradigmatic’ of fashion in the 21st century (Horton 2018: 516).

This current paradigm of fashion involves not only the rapid delivery and consumption of new ‘fashions’ but also staple clothing. Fast fashion priorities (i.e., high volume and speed, low cost) and globalised supply chains are common throughout the contemporary TCLF sector, while what we might identify as fast fashion retailers also sell ‘core and basic lines’, sometimes comprising up to 80% of their product offering (Bruce and Daly 2006: 339). Hence, whether Global North consumers seek out more or less fashion-forward clothing or consider themselves ‘fashion consumers’, they are likely subject to similar challenges relating to global, mass-produced garments, which dominate the clothing provision landscape. Nonetheless, we are commonly faced with the ethical challenges of the current structures and economic model of the TCLF sector. For consistency, this article will refer to ‘fashion consumers’; however, it holds relevance to all wearers of clothing, without distinction of age or gender.

Acknowledging this broad definition of fashion consumers in the Global North—the great majority of the populations here who likely, by circumstance, routinely source clothing through high volume globalised supply chains, influenced by the global fashion industry—raises a point of reflection regarding how fashion consumers have been invoked in the discourse around fashion sustainability, which has intensified over recent decades. In short, I argue that fashion consumer responsibility has been painted in a considerably limited and unjust way that is impeding more effective cooperation towards transforming our dominant fashion system. This view is informed by the critical analyses of a range of scholars, outlined below.

Since the era of fast fashion dawned in the early 21st century, Horton (2018) notes, citing also Gaugele (2014) and Tseïlon (2014), that fashion consumption has undergone a ‘renewed ethical turn’ or

‘remoralisation’. In this period, renewed calls for ‘ethical’ fashion consumption have been essentially ‘anti-fast fashion’, with this view resounding across and endorsed by powerful voices within academia, industry and popular media (Pham 2017; Horton 2018). Commonly central to this far-reaching discourse has been the message to ‘buy better and less’ (Hatcher 2019: 217), as well as a particular view of fast fashion consumers—inevitably cast as variously desultory, leisured and ignorant young females (Hatcher 2019; Horton 2018). Hatcher (2019) and Horton (2018) examine influences on this defined characterisation of fast fashion consumers, identifying popular confessional narratives (e.g., Cline 2012; Siegle 2011), historical ideologies relating fashion to gender and frivolity, and expected market research. They note that while age and particularly gender often go unsaid, these characteristics, plus assumed dispositions, are nevertheless implied and consistently represented visually (e.g., Horton 2018: 519–522). This view of ‘the’ fast fashion consumer is perpetually replicated across media and reinforced to the wider public; yet, it appears exceedingly simple and perhaps convenient. It failed to be borne out, for example, by Horton and Hatcher’s more ethnographic studies of this target market, and Pham (2017) considers it just one ‘myth’ attached to the pervasive cliché of ‘the high cost of cheap fashion’.

Hence, despite the many segments of the global fashion industry that too operate under the growth logics of global capitalism—and, increasingly, of fast fashion, as discussed above—the most apparent manifestation of fast fashion and its consumers has almost exclusively dominated the discourse of fashion and ethics in the past decades. Certainly, a sincere concern with the large ‘traditional’ fast fashion retailers (Payne 2021: 84) is not misguided; however, an exclusive focus on this segment is simplistic and classist. The typical antidote of buying fewer, more expensive and supposedly more ethical garments—‘ethical consumerism’—is also problematically naive in equating cost with ethics (Pham 2017), currently quite inaccessible to consumers of lower budgets and diverse body sizes (Horton 2018), and perpetuates a focus on what is bought over how garments are used (Tseñlon 2014). More pointed than the focus on the fast fashion segment and cost-focused remedy, however, has been the unabashedly gendered and limited representation of consumers who engage with fast fashion: wasteful young females. Given that fast fashion retailers cater and appeal to a much broader demographic—young men, adult men and women, parents—this singular portrayal is clearly not a fair representation of this market segment while broader fashion segments or consumption, infiltrated by similar practices and values, are not invoked at all. In essence, a poorly founded characterisation of fast fashion consumers—as wasteful young females—has borne the brunt of fashion consumer responsibility in the Global North. In the face of systemic fashion change, this is a situation that bears stark consideration regarding both ethics and productivity.

How we talk about and represent fashion consumers—and ethical or sustainable fashion consumption—matters. As fashion scholars have stressed, for the fashion industry to genuinely move towards greater sustainability, it is imperative that the industry and commentators strive to communicate accurate information and avoid misleading simplifications (Fletcher and Tham 2019; Klepp, Nielsen and Tobiasson 2017). Klepp, Nielsen and Tobiasson (2017) consider our dominant fashion vocabulary and modes of expression,⁵ concepts that limit critical thinking,⁶ as well as ‘transformative’ alternatives.⁷ They apply a literacy perspective to argue for ‘the basic insights that all knowledge, understanding, ways of knowing, skills, and capacities for social action are based on language, concepts, and words’ (67). This understanding positions language as a vital gateway to new ways of being and doing, while we might consider similarly that shifts at the conceptual ‘paradigm’ or ‘mindset’ level of a system are considered the most powerful leverage point for systems change (Meadows 2008). In all, our discourse around fashion consumers and consumption appears to be a critical space of hindrance or opportunity in relation to this stakeholder group, which deserves attention in our efforts to transition to a more sustainable fashion system.

If we genuinely seek to engage and support fashion consumers in systemic fashion change then, how might our discourse be improved? As I have already argued, we must vastly broaden our definition and representation of ‘fashion consumers’—essentially to all wearers of clothing in the Global North. This would much more accurately reflect the contemporary realities of the overall TCLF sector and consumption landscape in the Global North, operating to various degrees under the paradigm of fast fashion. While diversifying well beyond the image of wasteful young females could support more accurate, critical understandings of the fashion industry, it could also make this discourse appear relevant to all

rather than a few and foster a sense of commonality, empathy and cooperation over divisive moralism. Representing diverse demographics clearly offers significant scope for more fair and effective engagement of fashion consumers in the Global North.

However, in seeking to foster systemic fashion change, it is vital to consider not only who is represented but how—which communicates about fashion consumers' scope of thinking and action. This element of our discourse relates to how we understand and portray 'fashion consumption', which I argue has also been extremely limited, unjust and unhelpful. In this regard, our prevailing discourse has almost exclusively portrayed vacuous purchasing and disposal of fast fashion and the remedy of buying fewer, more expensive garments of supposedly higher quality and ethics. These representations arguably convey an extremely poor view of fashion consumers, consumption and the potential in this space and continue to represent consumers operating within the dominant fashion system rather than beyond it. Broader statistics of clothing purchasing and disposal are fairly easily measurable and available and can create critical views of fashion consumers. Yet, such statistics do not generate understanding or appreciation of consumers' circumstances, motivations or what they actually do with clothes during their lifetimes—the ways they might wear, care for, repair, share or repurpose clothes, and so on. These details likely demonstrate skill, care and agency on the part of consumers, rather than the mindless frivolity, slavishness or indulgence that supposedly accounts for all fast fashion purchasing and that preoccupies our current discourse. Actually representing these details—or fairly representing fashion consumption—has the ability to expand perceptions of fashion consumers from indelibly 'problematic' (Woodward 2015; Hatcher 2019) to agential, capable and responsible, as well as ideas of fashion consumption and sustainability far beyond the narrow act of purchasing clothing. This shift would immediately expand the scope of thinking and action attributed to fashion consumers and could, both psychologically and practically, help to engage and support consumers towards systemic fashion change.

Given that our prevailing discourse over recent decades has failed to represent the majority of fashion consumers or consumption, it can be seen as largely 'mythical' and, correspondingly, unethical and underproductive. Both of the above points of discussion demonstrate how fair representations—of fashion consumers and consumption—could enable our public discourse to better engage and support fashion consumers in the task of systemic fashion change. Such representations require substantially more evidence of fashion consumers and garment use, which has historically been lacking in the context of fashion sustainability. Over the past two decades, sustainable fashion researchers have pointed to a relative neglect of the garment use phase and called for more sensitive understandings of consumers and this critical phase of the garment life cycle.⁸ An industry focus on technological solutions (Fletcher 2014: 53–54; Payne 2017: 13) as well as methodological challenges (Fletcher and Grose 2012: 141; Laitala and Boks 2012: 136) seem to have contributed to this lack of engagement with the garment use phase, which has likely, as a consequence, helped to facilitate assumptions, myths and poor or simplistic perceptions of fashion consumers and consumption.

While complex, contextualised understandings of fashion consumers and consumption for sustainability purposes were not concertededly pursued and, therefore, available for some time, this is changing. The emerging methodology of wardrobe research, used within wider and sustainable fashion research, has been developed to address the challenges of researching garment use and facilitates rich accounts of fashion consumption. It is promoted in this article as a critical means of grounding and expanding our prevailing discourse of fashion consumers and consumption, which, in turn, has the potential to support all consumers in engaging differently and affecting systemic fashion change. This article explores different contexts where wardrobe research, or versions of it, might be applied to support this outcome. The first is as a traditional research field, discussed in the following section.

Wardrobe Research

Beginning among an interdisciplinary network of scholars from the mid-1990s, wardrobe research⁹ is a developing methodology aimed at understanding 'everyday' or 'ordinary' fashion and clothing consumption (e.g., see Fletcher and Klepp 2017: 2–11; Klepp and Bjerck 2014; Skjold 2018: 4.3). This

includes researching ‘ordinary’ people, representative of populations, and the ways that they engage with clothes in daily life.¹⁰ This frame of reference brings focus to a range of routine clothing engagements that extend the notion of clothing consumption beyond acquisition and disposal to other distinct and necessary practices such as dressing and care¹¹ that fill out the span of, and are related within, the garment use phase.

Wardrobe research offers a more accurate account of clothing consumption through acknowledging the various practices involved in the span of garment use, while researchers employ a range of techniques to understand these everyday clothing practices. These include combining ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ data and methods—qualitative, quantitative and practice-based—often at sites of clothing engagement (e.g., wardrobes, streets, stores) and with materials to hand (e.g., clothes, textile samples) to facilitate participants’ responses and recollections (Fletcher and Klepp 2017: 168–169; Klepp and Bjerck 2014; Woodward 2016b). These techniques are employed to generate rich accounts of clothing use and to verify what people say and do in relation to clothes, given that routine practices and materiality are commonly tacit, subconscious aspects of life that are difficult to verbalise (Klepp and Bjerck 2014; Klepp and Laitala 2015; Woodward 2016a). Influenced by ethnography, wardrobe research may also be conducted across time and place to generate longitudinal or comparative perspectives (e.g., Hebrok, Klepp and Turney 2016; Laitala and Klepp 2020; Miller and Woodward 2011; Skjold 2016). Overall, the methods in this developing field demonstrate sensitivity to multiple dimensions of clothing use—the ‘social, relational, material, practical’ (Fletcher and Klepp 2017: 5)—that can help create a fuller, more accurate and useful understanding of fashion consumption.

Applications of wardrobe research have regularly yielded refreshing data on clothing use. Fletcher’s large-scale ‘Local Wisdom’ research (2009–2016) provides a notable example of this. Using a collaborative network across nine countries, this project invited examples from the general public of how they used clothes in ways that related to a range of known sustainable use pathways, gathering almost 500 stories (and tangible examples) of extended ‘resourceful and satisfying’ clothing use (Fletcher 2016, 2022). This project offered evidence of participation in alternative ‘relational’ fashion systems, built on ethics of care and connection (Fletcher 2015). Other wardrobe studies have also revealed how wearers’ everyday clothing practices diverge from assumed fashion logics and are, consequently, not always ‘fast’ or ‘wasteful’ or about ‘consuming’ (Woodward 2015). For example, they have found: how wearers can express individuality through consistency and routinely achieve novelty without buying new things (Woodward 2007); how continuity in style is often a much stronger drive than perpetual change and thus individuals tend to critically ‘select’, ‘filter’, ‘absorb’ or ‘transform’ fashion trends rather than slavishly follow them (Skjold 2016); and the considerable extent to which wearers participate in alternative economies such as informal exchange (Laitala and Klepp 2017). Yet others have revealed how clothing practices can be driven by structurally induced anxiety (Clarke and Miller 2002) or already ‘overburdened’ with everyday complexity before any consideration of sustainability might occur (Heinze 2021).

The fact that such findings about ordinary consumers’ fashion practices might be considered ‘refreshing’ reveals how rarely we are exposed to such ideas, which are arguably much more diverse and nuanced than the typically circulating discourse of wasteful fast fashion consumption. This diversity and nuance is the value that wardrobe research data can offer our public discourse around fashion consumers and consumption. In researching everyday wearers of varied social demographics,¹² and the span of the garment use phase, wardrobe research offers much broader ideas and images of fashion consumers and consumption. These are also more nuanced, detailed or complex, which fosters greater understanding, empathy and practicality around sustainability. In this latter case, through closely observing wearers and ordinary use, wardrobe research is able to reveal tangible challenges (e.g., Heinze 2021) and opportunities (e.g., Woodward 2007) that exist in wearers’ everyday lives. These opportunities refer to wearers’ ‘already sustainable’ clothing practices (Woodward 2015)—alternatively described as wearers’ clothing ‘wisdoms’, ‘crafts’ (Fletcher 2011) or ‘sustain-abilities’ (Gill, Mellick Lopes and Kaye-Smith 2016). These instances of use, in particular, have not featured in our discourse. They have passed unnoticed yet have the potential to transform our limiting ideas of fashion consumers and educate about the diverse range of positive practices already underway, and possible to build on, within ordinary wardrobes—altogether, they can empower and assist consumers towards systemic fashion change. Hatcher (2019: 230) suggests

that engaging with the inevitable particularities of real consumers and their practices can ‘complicate’ the paradigms we have—both around fashion consumers and how they might become more sustainable. Ultimately, this is a thoroughly useful complication that wardrobe research can support.

Perhaps in small part due to a lack of research focus and more appropriate methods regarding everyday garment use, our dominant conceptions of fashion—and we could add consumers, consumption and sustainability—have been significantly shaped through an industry or marketing lens (Buckley and Clark 2017; Fletcher 2015; Klepp and Laitala 2015). Indeed, it is telling that our popular discourse revolves around fashion consumers and ethical consumption over relevant alternative terms¹³ and that people tend to find it more difficult to talk about aspects of clothes outside industry rhetoric (Fletcher 2016: 51; Klepp, Nielsen and Tobiasson 2017: 68). It is possible to begin reclaiming this discourse through greater use of empirical evidence, yet where might a more diverse representation and discourse of fashion consumers, consumption and sustainability likely be supported? Skjold (2015) considers the potential of this within traditional institutions of fashion media, such as magazines and other platforms of fashion reporting, which have naturally evolved from and remain closely tied to the fashion industry. Discussing the historical development, guiding logics and funding arrangements of traditional fashion media, she identifies the constraints of journalists working within them to raise alternative ideas or challenge commercial agendas. The institutionalised practices of fashion media, she claims, are ‘inherently counter-productive’ (2015: 171), or face inherent conflicts of interest, in earnestly pursuing sustainability—at least as the mainstream fashion industry currently stands, bound to an economic growth model. Whether or how this might change remains to be seen.

Hence, although valuable understandings of fashion consumers and consumption can be generated from wardrobe research, given that these are likely ‘disruptive’ or ‘complicating’ to dominant fashion ideas, their use or promotion in our discourse may depend on a cultural actor’s relation to the current fashion industry. And although there is an increasingly pressing need to ‘decentre’ fashion’s values and norms and move towards ‘a more inclusive and plural fashion imaginary’ (Mora, Rocamora and Volonté 2014: 145), we might not expect this to come so easily from within traditional fashion media. In exploring viable alternative typologies and platforms for more critical fashion journalism, Skjold (2015: 173–177) suggests two options: niche fashion magazines, which overlap art and fashion, borrow a more critical tone from other cultural fields and challenge the typical ideals of mainstream fashion magazines; and fashion blogs featuring everyday style. Each of these offers highly valuable content that breaks down existing power structures and can play a valuable role. In the following section, I consider other forms and avenues for spreading alternative ideas about fashion, which stem from everyday wearers and bear a relation to wardrobe research, through looking at large public ‘garment storytelling’ projects. These projects have invited people’s stories of personally owned garments, like Fletcher’s ‘Local Wisdom’ research (2016, 2022); however, they have occurred in popular and industry contexts, rather than academic.

Public Garment Storytelling Projects

Garment stories are considered here as reasonably ‘holistic’ accounts of individual personally owned garments. I have adopted the term ‘stories’ from references within the field of wardrobe research (e.g., Woodward 2007; Fletcher 2011; Heinze 2021; Klepp and Bjerck 2014, where ‘narratives’ is also used), as well as from use within popular and industry contexts, as demonstrated below. Although there are many configurations of wardrobe research, it commonly involves everyday wearers as participants and with their own garments (e.g., see Fletcher and Klepp 2017). When this occurs, participants are often asked to provide accounts of individual garments, either through various forms of documenting or through wardrobe interviews that are characteristically garment-led.¹⁴ These accounts may be prompted around any number of particular topics or may be a more general account of the item. In this latter case, participants are free to share information that they see fit and, if they are ‘stuck’, researchers may offer prompts relating to the garment’s provenance, details or how participants wear it or feel about it (e.g., see Twigger Holroyd 2017; Woodward 2016a: 46). This kind of account is open-ended, allowing wearers to express everything of note or significance to them about that garment, and could, therefore, be seen to constitute a more holistic account or story of a garment. And while there are no set requirements or format,

such stories tend to encompass the garment’s history or biography with the wearer, including aspects such as its provenance, use patterns, experiences, valued qualities and meanings.

Beyond the academic context of wardrobe research, personal garment stories have been invited and celebrated in several recent and ongoing public projects across popular and industry contexts. In a popular context, there has been Hoette’s interactive online archive ‘Worn Relics’ (live from 2007 to 2015),¹⁵ and crowd-sourced and curated literature projects such as Heti, Julavits and Shapton’s ‘Women in Clothes’¹⁶ (with a book published in 2014) and Spivack’s ‘Worn Stories’¹⁷ (with books published in 2014 and 2017 and Netflix docuseries in 2021). In conjunction with their spring 2018 exhibition, ‘Fashion Unraveled’, the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) ran the social media campaign ‘Wearing Memories’,¹⁸ while we could also acknowledge here Fletcher’s ‘Local Wisdom’ project, as the gathered stories were published for a popular audience on a website (2022) and in print (2016). In an industry context, there have been brand and NGO-led consumer campaigns, such as Patagonia’s ‘Worn Wear’¹⁹ and Fashion Revolution’s ‘Love Story’,²⁰ that over years have similarly invited wearers to submit a written story and photograph of a cherished garment, through their website or by tagging on social media.²¹

Sharing a garment story requires wearers to reflect upon and articulate various aspects—the origin, personal practices, experiences, qualities and meanings—of a garment within their wardrobe. In unearthing such diverse details, garment storytelling could be seen as a small instance of wardrobe research that wearers are conducting, knowingly or not. Perhaps it could be considered an amateur, informal or popular form of wardrobe research, with the potential for sharing valuable evidence of clothing use from everyday wearers? Accepting this view, we can appreciate the projects above as avenues for ‘publishing’ wardrobe research–related evidence. While traditional wardrobe research, outlined in the section above, has a critical role to continue playing, there could be broader ways of engaging with and spreading wardrobe research to extend the impact of this tool, which exists as fundamentally useful for reshaping our popular discourse around fashion consumers and consumption. Garment storytelling, I propose, is one such wardrobe research–related tool that can be employed to further engagement with wardrobe research both on the part of participants and audiences.

The potential of garment storytelling as a simple, popular form of wardrobe research is demonstrated well through the projects above. One point to note is that each of these projects has attracted participation rates in the hundreds,²² with the ongoing consumer campaigns likely much higher. These rates indicate not only that wearers are capable of this participation but also that this process holds personal appeal. In my own research examining participant perspectives of personal garment storytelling, the majority of participants demonstrated a spectrum of comfort and excitement in the idea of sharing garment stories, and all subsequently enjoyed and valued this experience, with common themes emerging throughout these positive responses (Holgar 2019: 104, 114–115). I found garment storytelling to hold multiple dimensions of interest and reward for wearers—reflective, creative or expressive and emotive (164)—which may very briefly indicate the rich intrinsic value of engagement for participants.

Beyond the interest of participants, the emergence of numerous projects involving personal garment stories and the continued publications and hosting of some (e.g., Spivack’s, the consumer campaigns) would also seem to indicate producers’ perceptions of public interest in these stories or audience appeal. Garment stories would additionally seem enjoyable or meaningful to ‘consume’. Perhaps audiences gain similar kinds of rewards to participants? There is certainly much creative and emotive potential in garment stories, told by wearers with close experience of the material subject and often using words and imagery. These stories have a compelling quality, in part due to the range and depth of experience, emotion and relationships they tend to capture involving people, time and place—but also due to a sense of intimacy and common humanity that is disarming, prompting empathy and connection. There is also the consideration of their ‘novelty value’ in contemporary culture, in which they might seem oddly ‘real’, vulnerable or aesthetically shocking.²³ In any case, as these projects demonstrate, there appears to be scope for effective engagement in both sharing and consuming garment stories.

In addition to the scale of participants and audiences attracted by the above projects, it is also valuable to consider how their varied channels contribute to the public's engagement with wardrobe research–related content. These projects demonstrate various mediums and platforms through which garment stories reached a general audience—books, a docuseries, an exhibition component, websites and social media. These avenues span the spectrum of culture, presumably reaching varied demographics, and overall extend the typologies and platforms that may be considered for sharing alternative fashion ideas (Skjold 2015). Relatedly, they also indicate a promising range of cultural actors interested in supporting a broader fashion discourse, including bestselling authors,²⁴ a fashion museum in one of the world's fashion capitals,²⁵ a leading entertainment streaming service²⁶ and a highly popular global 'activist' brand.²⁷

Garment storytelling demonstrates good practical scope for engaging participants and audiences; yet, we might consider its capacity to spread alternative fashion ideas in at least two other ways. The first is through the types of garment stories invited to be shared. While the 'Local Wisdom' and 'Women in Clothes' projects had a broader interest in different ways clothes are used or experienced, the remaining projects have invited stories of garments that have personal meaning or value. Just taking this latter example, such attributes are understood to develop around objects *over time*, through use and experiences (e.g., Chapman 2015; Norman 2005); while in Crewe's observation, clothes with the most personal value are 'so often those with the least market value' (2017: 116). Giving such clothes a platform or venerating context, public visibility and acknowledgement, brings the opportunity to establish alternative hierarchies of value around materials, aesthetics and wearer practices. This could be observed in my research where participants' favourite garments were ones of sundry sources, ages, 'quality' and industry-concerned fashionability: an unpredictable selection, far from the merely 'new', that demonstrated diverse, thoughtful, creative and meaningful practices around clothes.²⁸ Beyond 'favourites', however, there are many other valuable garment types that might be featured through stories, as 'Local Wisdom' did.

The other area of scope lies in who is sharing the stories. While the projects above were or are open to the general public in specific locations and online, there is clear potential to generate a greater diversity of voices, experiences, images and 'wisdoms' captured and circulated through such projects, through the specific inclusion of groups typically marginalised by mainstream fashion culture.²⁹ The potential for inclusion in garment storytelling projects is supported by the fact that everyone has garment stories, whether grand or humble. Personal garment stories are inevitably unique and capable of offering insights, given wearers are comfortable sharing them. The public sharing of garment stories is clearly an effective means of increasing the representation of real consumers and the garment use phase in the public sphere. Ultimately, the continued sharing of these stories could help our discourse around fashion consumers and consumption become an enriching and helpful one, more attuned to the idea and skill of living with clothes rather than their purchasing and disposal.

This section has focused on the potential of garment storytelling to facilitate popular engagement with wardrobe research; however, the field of wardrobe research features numerous creative methods of researching everyday clothing use—creative workshops, wearer diaries, dressing experiments, unpicking garments and many more (e.g., as captured in Fletcher and Klepp 2017). While these methods have been developed for research purposes, and may sometimes be applied in fashion educational contexts, there would appear much creative and critical potential in exploring how they might be adapted or scaled for more popular use. These might be activities or experiences for the public that might alter their perspectives and conversations around fashion and clothing; additionally, they might produce content or evidence to be shared, as in the case of garment storytelling. In any case, they might form a broader range of simple wardrobe research–related tools that could be employed on smaller or larger scales by individuals, cultural institutions and NGOs wanting to foster alternative fashion ideas. Given that numerous such experiences and tools exist and are in use, it is valuable to consider how these might be developed and built as a movement—one guided by the potential of wardrobe research to significantly diversify our popular discourse around fashion consumers and consumption and, correspondingly, support systemic fashion change.

Conclusion

There is a pressing need for transformational, systemic change to the dominant fashion paradigm across the Global North and fashion consumers are one key stakeholder group capable of effecting this change. I have argued that our prevailing discourse of ethical fashion consumption, which speaks almost exclusively of wasteful young females and fast fashion, features extremely limited views of fashion consumers and consumption and is hindering the more accurate, wider awareness of fashion consumers, who essentially extend to all wearers of clothing in the Global North. In the face of systemic fashion change, it is imperative to explore how this discourse can become more fair and effective to better engage and support fashion consumers overall.

I have argued that our discourse must feature fairer representations of fashion consumers and consumption—diverse demographics of consumers and the span of the garment use phase—which can help to practically engage and support consumers. The developing methodology of wardrobe research delivers this kind of evidence, which naturally tends to be disruptive or ‘complicating’ (Hatcher 2019) to dominant fashion ideas and agendas. This is its critical value, which also informs the pathways that may be more receptive or viable for sharing such data. Circulating wardrobe research evidence is likely to be more difficult through traditional fashion media, and greater opportunities might be found via platforms or cultural actors adjacent to the mainstream fashion industry. I also propose that wardrobe research could be applied more broadly, in amateur or popular ways, to accelerate change in our public discourse. Garment storytelling, I suggest, is one such simple and appealing wardrobe research–related tool that has already proven popular in large-scale public projects. There would appear to be much potential to grow this tool, as well as to adapt or scale other creative wardrobe research methods for popular use that altogether can assist in cultivating a more empirically grounded, ethical and helpful discourse for fashion consumers.

¹ Equating to the TCLF sector of the global economy, currently valued at \$3 trillion (Fashion United 2022).

² Occurring, for example, through now numerous ‘brand ranking reports’ by NGOs (although these are reliant on brand-produced information; The Fashion Law 2018), companies’ own voluntary and newly mandatory public reporting (for an overview, see Fashion Revolution 2020: 14–17), and increased media attention.

³ Generally encompassing Europe, North America and economically developed parts of Oceania and Asia.

⁴ Placing regularly, for example, in Business of Fashion and McKinsey’s ‘Super Winners’ ranking of top 20 listed companies by economic profit (2022: 120).

⁵ Revolving around ‘fashion’, ‘trends’, the ‘new’, being ‘in’ or ‘out’—basically, change (68).

⁶ Such as minimal content labelling on garments, ‘circularity’ and ‘closing the loop’ (69–70).

⁷ Such as ‘slow’, ‘local’, ‘good’ or ‘healthy’, which have benefitted the food sector (70–71).

⁸ For example, Fletcher and Goggin (2001), Laitala and Boks (2012), Gwilt (2013), Klepp and Laitala (2015), Mellick Lopes and Gill (2015). This decades-long oversight also spurred the recent formation of the International Research Network on Sustainable Fashion Consumption (2022).

⁹ Sometimes called ‘wardrobe methods’ or ‘wardrobe studies’.

¹⁰ For example, see Woodward (2007), van der Laan and Velthuis (2016), Skjold (2016) or Laitala, Boks and Klepp (2015).

¹¹ For example, see Klepp and Bjerck (2014: 375), Skov (2011: 4–5) or Skjold (2018: 4.3).

¹² Age, gender, nationality, race, income and so on—as demonstrated by studies cited in the above two paragraphs.

¹³ Such as clothing, style, wearers, wearing, use, maintaining, needs or sufficiency, as flagged by a range of authors (Klepp and Laitala 2015; Skjold 2015; Gill, Mellick Lopes and Kaye-Smith 2016; Fletcher and Grose 2012: 132–141).

¹⁴ See Klepp and Bjerck (2014) and Fletcher and Klepp (2017) for this characteristic approach to interviews within wardrobe research.

¹⁵ Hoette (2022a, 2022b).

¹⁶ Heti, Julavits and Shapton (2022a).

¹⁷ Spivack (2022a).

¹⁸ Fashion Institute of Technology (2021).

¹⁹ Patagonia (2022a).

²⁰ Fashion Revolution (2020b).

- ²¹ It should be noted that there are certainly other examples of garment story collections that could be added here; however, this cluster of more recent larger-scale public projects is useful to illustrate some points in this section. These projects also feature stories contributed by wearers themselves, while historical archives of everyday fashion exist as a related resource. Pham's 'Of Another Fashion' (2022a, 2022b), for example, is a crowd-sourced digital archive and forthcoming exhibition of the everyday fashion histories of women of colour, with contributions often including small stories by relatives.
- ²² For example, 'Women in Clothes' compiled contributions from 639 women, which partially represented contributions to this project; 'Local Wisdom' attracted almost 500 garment stories and 'Wearing Memories' more than 400.
- ²³ I remember the experience, for example, of encountering the first edition of 'Worn Stories' on display in the shop of a state art gallery. On its cover is a photograph of a thoroughly worn, holey purple sweater and I remember being struck and captivated by the alternative beauty of this image, which drew me to purchase the volume.
- ²⁴ The editors of 'Women in Clothes' (Heti, Julavits and Shapton 2022b) and 'Worn Stories' (Spivack 2022b).
- ²⁵ The Museum at FIT, with 100,000 visitors per year (Fashion Institute of Technology 2022).
- ²⁶ Netflix (2022), with a worldwide subscriber base in the hundreds of millions.
- ²⁷ Patagonia (2022b).
- ²⁸ For example, see table of participants' favourite garments in Holgar (2019: 79–80). As some further indication of the 77 garments documented, roughly 40% were bought new, 30% were gifted or inherited, 20% were bought second-hand, and 10% were self-made or upcycled, with garment lifetimes appearing mostly (this was not always specified in participants' stories) as 1–5 years old, with the remainder spread out fairly evenly up to 40 years old. Participants often discovered common provenances behind their favourite garments, with these themes including second-hand, vintage and gifted clothing; designer pieces bought directly, second-hand or self-made; as well as clothing bought while travelling, or with focused criteria of quality in mind. For examples of the diverse relationships and practices connected to these clothes, see Holgar (2019: 121–154).
- ²⁹ Pham's 'Of Another Fashion' provides an excellent example here (see endnote 21 above).

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