



Exploring sustainability and object attachment with Patagonia apparel: “I love my daughter, I love my son, I love my wife, I love the wilderness, and I love this hat”

Gwendolyn M. Michel, Iowa State University, USA
Meegan Feori, Iowa State University, USA
Mary Lynn Damhorst, Iowa State University, USA
Young-A Lee, Auburn University, USA
Linda Niehm, Iowa State University, USA

Keywords: Brand love, emotional attachment, Patagonia apparel, sustainability

Background and Purpose. Individuals interact with apparel products, generating a relationship that can shape and reflect identity. Previous research has focused on consumer relationships developed with a brand; however, less emphasis has been placed on how marketing efforts impact an individual’s identity and consumption choices. The omni-channel Worn Wear program, part of which includes the Stories We Wear (SWW) blog, is an experiential marketing initiative of Patagonia, Inc. Customers are encouraged to take pride in the signs of wear on their apparel and to share their adventure stories through the SWW blog. Informed by previous research regarding consumer-object relations (Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011) and attachment theory (Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008), this study sought to understand why authors of the SWW blog extend the lifespan of their garments. Our analysis of the SWW blog has enhanced understanding of consumer relationships with their garments and benefits businesses seeking to expand sustainability as part of their brand identity and to improve customer engagement. Findings include expanded knowledge of object consumer relations and consumer-product attachment with implications for sustainability, brand love, and digital marketing.

Method. A netnographic, qualitative case study approach was used to complete in-depth analysis of the SWW blog posts for emergent themes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Kozinets, 2002; Yin, 2009). An initial “grand tour” (Kozinets, 2002) of all SWW blog posts was completed and then narrowed to a systematic analysis of 49 posts from the year 2015 to 2017. Michel, Feori, Damhorst, Lee, and Niehm (2017) conducted an analysis of the SWW data from 2015. For greater trustworthiness, our study expanded that work further to examine a larger data sample, covering a span of several years, resulting in a wider variety of findings. Data reported by Michel et al. (2017) and data from 2016 and 2017 were coded using the constant comparative method, including open, axial, and selective coding (Dey, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

A coding guide was created by two of the researchers and reviewed by the third. The final coding guide was then applied to the data. NVivo 11 was used for the final data analysis. SWW blog posts were excluded that were produced by the brand Patagonia or that were reader-submitted but less than 100 words. The content of the SWW was analyzed without direct interaction of the researchers with participants of the SWW blog. Emergent themes included: (a) motivations for the blog writers to extend the life of their garments, including sustainability, (b) imagined future of the apparel item as explained by the blog writer, (c) description of the garment, (d) description of how the garment was fixed, (e) thanking Patagonia, and (f) outdoor

adventure, travel, and escapism related to the apparel.

Findings. One of the recurring motivations found was to pass the garment on as a legacy such as “I hope to pass it down to my kids and truly carry on the tradition” [P29]. Findings on sustainability espoused that “repairing clothing is way better than spending more money on something else you don’t really need” [P38]. Authors who maintained their apparel because of an emotional attachment told stories such as, “I wore it every day...It was always with me...It is so much more than an article of clothing” [P19]. Writers also imagined a future with the garment through statements like “These shorts very well could last until the day I die, and I plan on seeing if that’s the case” [P31]. Compared to Michel et al. (2017), our findings included anthropomorphized descriptions of garments such as “My gear takes care of me and I take care of my gear” [P49]. Additionally, discourse on sustainability, and retaining the apparel as a reminder of the past, often of someone who had passed away were present in the 2016-2017 data. Other findings included recounting how the blog writers fixed their garment (e.g., iron-on patches, duct tape, staples) and expressing gratitude towards the brand. One post shared, “I would wear this vest...when I felt the urge to seek more and explore” [P10], highlighting the wearer’s association of the vest with adventures.

Conclusions. The Worn Wear program encourages consumers to get maximum use from their Patagonia apparel and celebrate the relationship their apparel has with their lives. By participating in the SWW blog and repairing their Patagonia apparel to make it last longer, Patagonia’s customers become engaged with the brand in a meaningful way. This brand engagement results in acts of sustainability, sustains brand love, and reinforces consumers’ emotional attachment to their apparel and to the brand. The reasons SWW blog contributors kept their Patagonia apparel items support object-attachment theory and the concept of brand love, with an overarching theme of sustainability. Our findings expand knowledge of object-consumer relations and consumer-product attachment with implications for sustainability, brand love, and digital marketing. The SWW blog’s content, with its short stories and personal snapshots, functions as a small group of people making acts contributing to environmental and social responsibility and sharing them with a wider audience.

Further studies need to be conducted for validating our findings with other sustainability-driven brands. Future research may focus on brand attachment, attachment to clothing, clothing repairs, and consumers’ stories about favorite clothes. The topic of consumers repairing and remodeling articles of clothing and maintaining them over a period of time could also be addressed. Limitations include the blog being the proprietary channel of the brand, and the brand’s potential for editing and selecting only those posts that conform to a predetermined brand image. Writers of the SWW posts were not contacted, limiting their full voice in the findings. Overall, the findings of this study show that the Patagonia brand is essentially advertising its product as both long-lasting and much loved by its owners. By using the blog as a platform from which to broadcast its sustainability philosophy, Patagonia encourages its customers to form lasting emotional attachments to their apparel as a means for reducing consumption and fostering feelings of brand love. The lessons from this SSW blog can be used by other brands planning to launch similar sustainability practice campaigns.

References

- Dey, I. (1999). *Grounding grounded theory: Guidelines for qualitative inquiry*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Hancock, D. R., & Algozzine, R. (2017). *Doing case study research: A practical guide for beginning researchers*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Hepburn, S. J. (2013). In Patagonia (clothing): A complicated greenness. *Fashion Theory*, 17(5), 623-645.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(1), 61-72.
- Lastovicka, J. L., & Sirianni, N. J. (2011). Truly, madly, deeply: Consumers in the throes of material possession love. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(2), 323-342.
- Michel, G., Feori, M., Damhorst, M. L., Lee, Y. A., & Niehm, L. (2017). "The Stories We Wear": Mending and blogging Patagonia brand apparel. In *2017 Global Fashion Management Conference at Vienna Proceedings* (pp. 163-164). Changwon, Gyeongnam, Republic of Korea: Global Alliance of Marketing & Management Associations. doi: 10.15444/GFMC2017.03.01.01
- Schifferstein, H. N. J., & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, E. P. H. (2008). Consumer-product attachment: Measurement and design implications. *International Journal of Design*, 2(3), 1-13.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.