

An Application of Grounded Theory to Develop a Typology of Sustainable Apparel Consumers

Elena Karpova & Farimah Bayat
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Background. When studying environmentally conscious apparel consumption, scholars tend to focus on determining how sustainable apparel consumers are different from the rest of the market (e.g., Chang & Watchravesringkan, 2018; Kim & Jin, 2019; Lundblad & Davies, 2016; Rahman & Koszewska, 2020). As a result, sustainable consumers are often treated as a homogenous group that is different from non-sustainably minded consumers. We identified four studies that attempted to classify all apparel consumers into more than just two groups with respect to sustainability-related attitudes and behaviors (Cavender & Lee, 2018; Koszewska, 2013; Ogle, et al, 2014; Park et al., 2017). In these studies, researchers proposed three to six consumer clusters characterized by different environmental and social responsibility knowledge and attitudes as well as general motivational drivers for purchasing clothing. The findings of these studies indicate that sustainable apparel consumers display diverse attitudes and behaviors: place different importance on various product attributes (e.g., price, quality) and other clothing-related characteristics (e.g., fashion consciousness, personal aesthetics). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that sustainable consumers vary in their clothing needs and motivations and are likely to utilize diverse apparel consumption practices to reduce their environmental impact. However, to date, no study focused exclusively on sustainable apparel consumers with the goal to classify them into distinct market segments.

The **purpose of this study** was to explore the differences between sustainable consumer motivations and practices when acquiring and using clothing, besides being as ‘green’ as possible. Understanding what factors drive apparel-related decisions of sustainable consumers is the first step for effectively distinguishing between different segments of this population. This, in turn, will allow for developing a typology of sustainable consumers. All previous studies, which focused on classifying apparel consumers into different groups depending on their degree of ‘greenness’ and other apparel-related motivations, utilized a quantitative methodology of clustering participants based on their survey responses (Cavender & Lee, 2018; Koszewska, 2013; Ogle, et al, 2014; Park et al., 2017). While these studies produced useful knowledge, the results across these studies were not consistent due to: (a) different segmenting factors used and (b) the lack of a theoretical foundation in the final classifications. To address this research gap, we selected a qualitative approach, specifically grounded theory, with **the goal to develop a theory-based typology** of sustainable apparel consumers. Examining how sustainable apparel consumers differ in their motivations and practices is critical for addressing their apparel needs and expectations in terms of product attributes, retail channels, marketing communications, etc.—all important aspects of business strategies and decisions.

Method. We selected grounded theory to explore sustainable consumers’ motivations and practices in relation to apparel acquisition and use. Our goal was to develop a theory-based

typology of sustainable apparel consumer that is “grounded in the words and actions of those individuals under study” (Goulding, 2005, p. 296). To have a wide representation of sustainable apparel consumers with respect to their clothing attitudes and behaviors, we used secondary data—specifically, the comments made by *New York Times* readers to Elizabeth Cline’s (2019) article published in the newspaper’s opinion section. Unsolicited comments minimized social desirability bias common in sustainability-related research and provided real people’s opinions voiced in a non-invasive manner (Roxas & Lindsay, 2012). We collected 1,003 comments posted during a 24-hour open forum period and then used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data, including: open coding; line-by-line analysis to capture words and sentences that have meaning; constant comparison across the data points (individual posts); developing abstract concepts and searching for interrelationships among them for theory construction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Spiggle, 1994). Only those comments indicating concern for the environment and/or sharing sustainable clothing practices were included in the final data analysis ($N=724$), given the focus of this study on sustainable consumers.

Results. In line with the final stage of the theory development process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), two core categories emerged that connected together all other concepts: (1) willingness and/or ability to spend on apparel purchases and (2) importance placed on personal appearance and dress (i.e., how they look and are perceived by others). The application of the two factors allowed for a conceptualization of the four distinct groups of sustainable apparel consumers (Figure). In the paper, each of the four groups is described using participants’ own words, or “thick” description (Creswell, 2013).

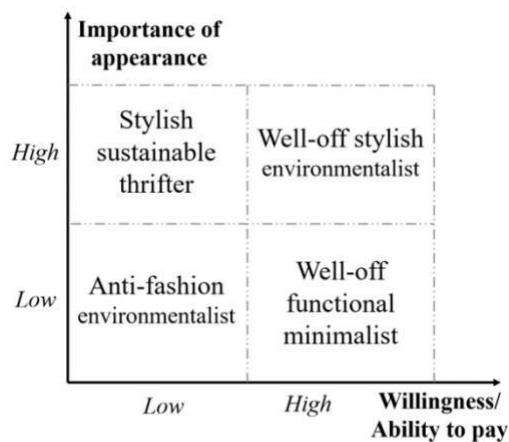


Figure. Typology of sustainable apparel consumer.

consumer and views fashion as an investment in pieces they love and use for a long time. *Stylish sustainable thrifters* also place high importance on appearance and want to be recognized for their taste and style. They invest a lot of time and effort to create specific looks but are unable or unwilling to spend much on apparel. To be sustainable, they reconcile their interest in fashion and aesthetics by primarily buying chic secondhand clothing. They are resourceful and use their creative skills (e.g., sewing, upcycling) to look stylish *and* be sustainable. *Well-off minimalists* favor high-quality, functional, comfortable athleisure and do not mind paying more because they are getting a lot out of their investment by wearing garments until they are no longer usable. They are not interested in fashion, place less importance on their appearance, and prefer brands known for their concern for environment. *Anti-fashion environmentalists* choose simple,

uniform-like clothes (e.g., black jeans and sweater/t-shirt) and spend little on apparel, relying mostly on secondhand. They actively despise fashion and social dress codes and norms. Neglect for appearance might even result in minimal laundry practices. In the paper, we contextualized the proposed typology within the existing research on sustainable apparel consumption.

Conclusions and implications. Using grounded theory, we developed a typology of sustainable apparel consumers based on two core categories: willingness/ability to pay for clothing and importance of appearance. We proposed a theoretically based approach to effectively distinguish between consumers in this diverse market segment—people who want to reduce the environmental impact of their clothing consumption but utilize completely different strategies to be sustainable. The findings offer key insights for apparel companies to determine who their sustainable consumers are and understand their clothing priorities. Our study's findings open opportunities for future research. Scholars might further examine the four types of sustainable apparel consumers (Figure) utilizing both, a qualitative methodology with purposive sampling as well as quantitative methods.

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