



Plus Size Intersectional Identity and Sustainable Apparel

Paige Tomfohrde and Elizabeth Bye, University of Minnesota

Keywords: sustainability, plus size fashion, intersectionality, identity

Introduction

Like all sustainable fashion consumers, plus size individuals are not a monolith. They bring a myriad of other, often marginalized, identities into their purchase behavior. This study found, while they experience similar purchase barriers to the wider public, like price and availability, intersectionally marginalized individuals experience sustainable fashion differently, creating fashion communities and working against oppression to express their identities.

Review of Literature

Social Identity Theory focuses on the social self and group relations, centering the idea that self-identity is dependent on adopting and maintaining behavioral strategies for asserting in-group/ out-group comparisons that favor the in-group and, as a result, the self (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Hogg et al., 1995). McNeill and Venter used Social Identity Theory to understand how young women engage with sustainability, identifying that fashion self-concept is formed around four key factors: social implications, expressing individuality/ standing out, emotion/ pleasure/ hedonism, and fitting in/social norms (2019). Four additional sustainable constructs fit inside their model: friendship/ community, reputation/ ethical image, risk reduction, and ownership (McNeill & Venter, 2019). They developed the study to engage with a dominant identity in the fashion industry, leaving an opportunity to explore fashion self-concept and sustainability of marginalized, non-dominant identities.

Forehand et al.(2021) showed the importance of examining identity interplay in understanding consumer behavior. Research in multi-racial identity development has shown that individuals with multiple racial backgrounds can switch dominance between racial identities by projecting different versions of themselves, but the non-dominant identity is always present (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Peters found that plus size women would negotiate their fat identity with other identities (2014). The concept of identity interplay was applied to this study to extend the understanding of sustainable identity and fashion self-concept.

Methods

Two pilot studies were conducted that centered on two plus size communities. Study 1 recruited female racial-minority participants from a plus size resale shop in a major Midwestern city. Seventeen filled out a questionnaire about the barriers they faced to participating in sustainable fashion, with seven resulting interviews. Study 2 centered intersectionally marginalized identities (BIPOC, transgender/ non-binary/ gender non-conforming, queer/ LGBTQIA+, plus size/ big & tall/ fat, physically disabled, age 40+). Five individuals were

recruited and interviewed from a popular fat and queer fashion Facebook group.

Results

Study 1, focused on the barriers and needs of plus size individuals to engage with sustainable fashion, found several significant inhibitors to purchasing sustainably that were consistent with Eder-Hanson et al. (2012). Availability, in the context of lack of options in the participants' size, was a common challenge. One participant said, "Let's get it [sustainable apparel] everywhere (...) and let's make it size friendly (...) and at the same price point." Discrimination and a lack of Visual Representation were also barriers to participants. While they universally cited their willingness to spend more for a sustainable item, several felt it was unfair for a plus size individual to pay more than a straight-sized person. Participants discussed community building with other plus size individuals online through social media and around the clothing that they purchased, sold, and swapped, consistent with findings by McNeill & Venter (2019). One participant shared how she had laid out her old clothes for some former students to allow them to find free plus size options.

Study 2 explored how identity was shaped in the context of sustainable apparel for plus size intersectionally identified individuals. When asked if there were any sustainable options accessible to them that fit their identity, one participant briefly pondered, then said, "I can't think of any." While the options to meet their identities were not readily available, the labor of looking for options (sustainable or otherwise) was intensive with one describing it as "a part time job". Participants detailed a six to nine step process of searching for items online and in-person using resources including swaps, resale shops, social media groups, Google searches, department stores, and specialty retailers. Participants indicated exhaustion at the effort required to find options that were often just "kind of okay." While they created community with those engaged in similar struggles, participants felt defeated by the process of trying to express their identity through apparel. Participants showed remarkable resilience and desire to radically express their identities through what they saw as a pervasive threat from broader society who opposed their body, their identity, and their self expression.

We found that the plus size identity was the most salient and top of mind when discussing sustainable apparel options. Even when discussing difficulty finding options that met participants' needs as members of their racial group, gender identity, etc., the main source of their inability to find options was the lack of options in their size. The three participants who identified as non-binary/ genderfree, interviewed in Study 2, consistently brought up their gender representation and how the options for expressing that gender were limited to smaller size individuals. They were sized out of representing their own identity.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

One participant perfectly summed up the sentiments of the broader participant group by saying, "I'm not something to be ashamed of. My body is not something to be ashamed of." Identifying as plus size while also identifying as a marginalized individual created a pattern of exhaustion, defeat, personal activism, and significant engagement with the process of looking for

greater apparel options. The focus on marginalized minority consumers, an expanding and significant market, begins to explore how individuals whose intersectional identities are not traditionally catered to engage with sustainable fashion. As individuals continue to diversify in their identities and needs, the sustainable fashion industry must be prepared to meet those needs in order to grow and meet the challenge of the climate crisis. While fashion has persisted on the concept of exclusivity for hundreds of years (Hoskins, 2014; von Busch, 2018), it is inclusivity that will allow fashion to meet the social and environmental needs of the twenty-first century.

References

- Eder-Hansen, J., Kroger, J., Morris, J., Sisco, C., Watson, D., Klorboe, N., . . . Burchardi, I. (2012). The NICE Consumer: Research Summary and Discussion Paper: Toward a Framework for Sustainable Fashion Consumption in the EU.
- Forehand, M., Reed, A., & Saint Clair, J. K. (2021). Identity interplay: The importance and challenges of consumer research on multiple identities. *Consumer Psychology Review*, 4(1), 100-120.
- Hogg, M.A., Terry, D.J. & White, K.M. (1995). A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 58(4), 255-269.
- Hoskins, T.E., 2014. *Stitched up: The anti-capitalist book of fashion* (Vol. 254). London: Pluto Press.
- McNeill, L., & Venter, B. (2019). Identity, self-concept and young women's engagement with collaborative, sustainable fashion consumption models. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 43(4), 368-378.
- Peters, L. D. (2014). You Are What You Wear: How Plus-Size Fashion Figures in Fat Identity Formation. *Fashion Theory*, 18(1), 45-71.
- Rockquemore, K., & Brunnsma, D. (2002). *Beyond Black : Biracial identity in America*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. *Political Psychology*, 276-293.
- von Busch, O., 2018. Inclusive fashion—an oxymoron—or a possibility for sustainable fashion?. *Fashion Practice*, 10(3), 311-327.