Exit from the High Street:
An exploratory study of sustainable fashion pioneers

Sarah Bly, Wencke Gwozdz, Lucia A. Reisch
Department of Intercultural Communication and Management, Centre for Social Responsibility, Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark

Corresponding author:
Wencke Gwozdz
Copenhagen Business School
Porcelænshaven 18A
2000 Frederiksberg
Denmark

e-mail: wg.ikl@cbs.dk
telephone: 45 38153391
Abstract. In today’s marketplace, dominated by business models predicated on continual consumption and globalized production systems that have major environmental and social impacts, the concept of ‘sustainable fashion’ takes on an almost paradoxical quality. This paper explores this paradox by focusing on a previously under-researched group of consumers – ‘sustainable fashion pioneers’ who actively engage and shape their own discourse around the notion of sustainable fashion. These adversary innovators actively create and communicate strategies for sustainable fashion behaviour that can overcome the nebulous and somewhat paradoxical situation that sustainable development presents. Specifically, we use in-depth interviews and netnography to illuminate the motivations, abilities, and facilitators or barriers that play a role in the reported behaviour of these sustainable fashion consumers. This includes such key behaviours as purchasing fewer garments of higher quality, exiting the market, by purchasing only second-hand fashion goods, and sewing or upgrading their own clothing. We identify key themes that appear to both fuel and support such behavioural strategies that include distrust for retailers’ sustainability motives; a desire for freedom and self-expression; a belief in the necessity of reduced consumption; and distaste for fashion, a preference for style.

Key words
Adversary innovators, anti-consumption, voluntary simplicity, second-hand/ DIY consumption, fashion consumption, sustainable fashion, sustainable fashion pioneers
BACKGROUND

Like many industries competing in today’s market landscape, the fashion industry is plagued by a host of negative environmental and social externalities, from environmental degradation and hazardous chemicals to low wages, violation of workers’ rights, and child labour issues (Chapman, 2008; Fletcher, 2008; Giesen, 2008). As a result, the term ‘sustainable fashion’ has begun entering the vernacular of policymakers, NGOs, and fashion design educators alike, and movers in the fashion industry have begun experimenting with innovative materials, improved supply chains, and textile recycling programs. Attempts to engage consumers have also increased, with high profile fashion magazines like *Vogue* launching ‘green style’ blogs, a growing presence of eco fashion weeks in major fashion centres, and the world’s second largest retailer, H&M, conducting an on-going campaign for their pro-environmental Conscious Collection and clothing recycling program. Yet despite these attempts to raise sustainable fashion’s profile, research suggests that to date engagement with eco conscious apparel is rather limited (Butler and Francis, 1997; Connell, 2010; Kim and Damhorst, 1998).

There does, however, appear to be a small group of vocal and pro-active consumers – the so-called ‘adversary innovators’ or pioneers (Hemetsberger, 2006) – who actively engage in what they deem to be sustainable fashion consumption and construct and promote their lifestyle choice through personal blogs, online group memberships, and other public forums. This exploratory research examines this as yet under-researched (Connell, 2011) consumer group by exploring their conceptualization of sustainable fashion consumption, the internal motivations and abilities they express, and the external facilitators and barriers that shape their notions around this relatively unstudied area of consumption. By investigating such an extreme group – one that reports actively engaging in sustainable fashion consumption – we hope to offer deep insights into the different ways this topic is being discussed and shaped by those actively engaging with it. We also aim to enhance understanding of the potential disconnects between industry and consumer conceptualizations of sustainable fashion and the factors that influence this. More specifically, our research aim is fourfold: to uncover how these sustainable fashion pioneers conceptualize ‘sustainable fashion’, to understand their expressed behaviour along the different phases of fashion consumption, to pinpoint how they express their motivations and
internal abilities, and to identify the opportunity facilitators and barriers that enable or hinder them from consuming fashion in a self-defined sustainable manner.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

As a theoretical framework, this study adopts the MOAB (motivation, opportunity, ability, behaviour) model first introduced by Thøgersen and Ölander (2002), which assumes that deconstructing how consumers’ make sense of their consumption decisions (Jackson, 2005) demands a holistic view of the consumption environment. The MOAB model is based on an integrated theory of consumer behaviour that includes both internalist and externalist perspectives (Thøgersen and Olander, 2002; Thøgersen, 2010). Hence, unlike earlier behavioural models that attempt to draw causal relationships between such individual factors as consumer motivations and the resulting behaviour, it acknowledges the dynamic and interlinked relations between consumers’ internal motivations and resources and external factors such as cultural meanings, marketplace conditions, and other structural factors that are part of the consumption experience (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. MOAB model (Thøgersen, 2010).](image)

Such a model is particularly useful for understanding the oft-cited discrepancy between consumers’ intentions and behaviour (Eckhardt et al., 2010; Thøgersen, 2002); that is, the observation that although many consumers express intentions to consume sustainably, they tend not to act accordingly (the so-called attitude behaviour gap). In fact, many problems in consumption are deeply embedded within the social context and may as well prevent consumers
from acting on their intentions as support them in doing so (Briceno and Stagl, 2006). Hence, not only do socio-economic forces, options, and choices all play an integral role in determining consumption patterns, but internal factors such as knowledge, cognitive capacity, resources, and self-control may also help or hinder consumers from achieving their desired consumption behaviour. By providing a framework of the different factors influencing the consumption context and illuminating the tension between consumer motivations and the structural barriers that limit their ability to realize them, the MOAB model offers a sensitizing approach that promises a better understanding of sustainable consumption.

Our analysis does not, however, use the MOAB model in a predictive or causal manner but rather to make sense of the consumption context – of the emotional, symbolic, and structural setting that sets the stage for our consumers’ practices. We thus study consumers who not only purport to be managing these tensions but who also communicate these practices to others. Studying our participants through this lens provides insight into how they shape and frame the discourse around sustainable fashion consumption within their larger social structures and how the myriad inter-relating factors play a role in their perception and construction of sustainable fashion consumption. Most particularly, it reveals the barriers these consumers negotiate and how they overcome them, thereby offering insight into how their consumption patterns might relate on a macro level to those of other consumers.

Sustainable consumption

Although not a new phenomenon, sustainable consumption has recently become of considerable interest to academic researchers and industry practitioners alike. Defining the concept, however, has been more problematic. Within the literature, there are at least two dozen definitions of sustainable consumption and sustainable consumption behaviour is not only conceptualized using diverse terminology but often contextually based on industry, consumer good, and/or setting (McDonald et al, 2009). The first attempt to contour the concept, for example, came from a political perspective in which sustainable development was defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundlandt, 1987). Reisch (2003) expands on this definition by suggesting that sustainable consumption ‘means seeking to provide adequate levels of goods as services such as housing,
water, food, recreation to all people in the world (*equity*), while minimizing the use of natural resources, energy and land use by dematerialization of production and consumption (*efficiency*), and accepting that there are absolute limits for end-use that should enter one’s lifestyle (*sufficiency*). Another suggested strategy is *consistency*, the production of goods with materials that can be re-used, composted, or fully recycled (Braungart and McDonough, 2002).

This complexity of sustainable consumption is not lost on consumers, many of whom have adopted their own definitions of conscious consumer behaviour amidst the confusion and contradictions (Moisander, 2007). Accordingly, academic research has studied the notion of sustainable consumption under many topical labels and definitions, including anti- or reduced consumption in such movements as voluntary simplicity, asceticism, constrained consumption, downshifting, anti-consumption, and non-materialism (Cherrier, 2009; Cherrier and Black, 2010; Fournier, 1998; Press and Arnould, 2009). The term ‘green consumption’ has also been applied to the process of avoiding certain types of products, recycling, or other pro-environmental behaviour, as distinguished from ethical consumption, which considers environmental issues, animal issues, and ethical issues in the consumption decision (Mintel, 1994). Ozanne and Ballantine (2010), in their study of toy library users, also identified a sharing or collaborative consumption that could be conceptualized as sustainable consumption behaviour. Although not directly implicated as sustainable consumption, consumption rejection refers to acts of boycotting or opposition, often aimed at enacting change in the marketplace (Holt, 1997; Kozinets, 2002). Such rebellious consumer movements frequently arise in response to the perceived undermining of community, totalizing force, and/or the unethical behaviour of large companies (Firat and Venketash, 1995; Kozinets, 2002).

Defining what constitutes sustainable consumption in fashion is perhaps even more problematic. The sustainable fashion lexicon consists of many words such as ‘environmental’, ‘ecological’, ‘green’, ‘sustainable’, ‘ethical’, ‘recycled’, and ‘organic’ that are often used interchangeably, causing confusion for researchers and consumers alike (Thomas, 2008). One buzz word that has recently attracted the fashion industry and related areas of marketing, merchandising, and publicity (Fletcher, 2008; Thomas, 2008) is ‘eco fashion’, whose offerings
tend to be made of organic and recycled textiles and carry fair trade labels. Yet very little is actually known about the sustainable consumption patterns of real fashion consumers.

**Fashion consumption**

Perhaps crucial to understanding sustainable fashion consumption is to understand fashion consumption itself. While commonly associated with clothing, not all clothing can be considered “fashion”. Also, the notion of fashion can apply to many different spheres, ranging from transportation to management. Barthes (1983), for example, suggests that although clothes are the basis for fashion, fashion itself is a system of meanings, while Kawamura (2005) argues that fashion ‘adds the extra value to clothing, the invisible elements that exist in people’s imaginations and beliefs’ (p. 4). Fashion also carries a temporal aspect encapsulated by historian Elizabeth Wilson: ‘fashion is dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual change of styles’ (quoted in Svendson, 2006, p. 13). In similar vein, Solomon and Rabolt suggest that fashion is ‘a style of dress that is accepted by a large group of people at any given time’ (p. 6). Thus, for the purposes of this paper, we consider fashion garments to be symbolic resources that share some level of mutual social understanding but exist in a state of transience.

Many different streams of research have tried to understand why consumers engage in the consumption of fashion, observing that although the clothing itself can be considered a biogenic need, fashion consumption seems to fulfil social needs and symbolic desires. Some have therefore argued that consumers purchase fashion items to fulfil a need for confidence, excitement, and/or self-esteem (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Roux and Korchia, 2006; Solomon and Rabolt, 2004), while others implicate desire, arousal, and passion (Redden and Steiner, 2000, cited in Rafferty, 2011). Gronow (1997) suggests that fashion satisfies two opposing constructs: self-identification and distinction, assisting consumers to construct both who they are – and who they are not (Freitas et al., 1997; Kaiser, et al., 1991). Other scholars have taken a more negative view of fashion consumption, suggesting that concerns, anxieties, and fears over one’s appearance coerce one to engage in fashion consumption (Park and Burns, 2005; Roux and Korchia, 2006 cited by Rafferty, 2011). Some stress the social nature of fashion - suggesting that competitive social class relations foster the need for consumers to assert their status and identity through their consumption of the latest fashions (Rafferty, 2011). Other
authors argue however, that in a highly fragmented modern society, there are a vast number of cultures and subcultures that rely on different standards. High culture and mass culture have become blurred, and consumers consider lifestyle preferences rather than class membership when making consumption decisions. Thus, fashion is considered as a tool for consumers to construct and re-construct lifestyles and their desired identities (Crane, 2000).

**Motivation in the MOAB model**

Research has likewise suggested that sustainable consumption, like fashion consumption, is closely linked to the formation and reinforcement of self and acts as a signalling device to others. Sustainable and ethical consumption, for example, can provide uniqueness, distinction, group cohesion, and a bridge between actual and ideal selves (Black and Cherrier, 2010; Connolly and Prothero, 2003, 2011; Shaw and Shiu, 2002; Vlosky et al., 1999). A close relation has also been identified between the act of non-consumption and consumer identity projects, with many anti-consumption practices playing an integral part in consumers’ identity creation (Black and Cherrier, 2010). Anti-consumption may also provide social capital, labelled ‘sub-cultural capital’ by Portwood-Stacer (2012), a status earned for going against the flow and refusing the dominant regime. Cherrier (2009), for instance, describes creative consumers who reject commercialization as part of both their identity construction and desire to find meaning in their consumption practices. She argues that beyond helping consumers construct unique identities, sustainable consumption gives them a sense of empowerment through the avoidance of positional goods and competitive social hierarchies.

Research on such consumer movements as voluntary simplicity, asceticism, constrained consumption, downshifting, and non-materialism describes a consumer who has reduced consumption in an effort to find happiness and well-being (Cherrier, 2009; Fournier, 1998). Soper (2007) offers an ‘alternative hedonist’ perspective on reduced consumption, suggesting that many consumers who find displeasure in the by-products of affluence have simply reconstituted the nature of ‘the good life’. Alternative consumption behaviours, she argues, provide not only moral rewards but sensual pleasures. A sensory focus also underpins the argument that sustainable consumerism can be motivated by a desire for ‘enchantment’ or an experiential outcome that results from selecting alternative consumption rituals (Thompson and
Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Szmigin and Carrigan (2006) conceptualize this desire as an ethical hedonism in which the action produces pleasure and prevents pain. Such ethical consumption, they argue, can create an aesthetic experience by providing an antithesis to mass produced goods, while the ‘feeling’ engendered by the goods being created in a manner that is socially and environmentally just can create a halo of aesthetic beauty.

Research evidence also exists, however, that sustainable behaviour can be compelled by negative emotions like mistrust and scepticism (Beck, 1992). Cherrier (2009), for instance, points to future uncertainty and ‘living in an uncontrollable world’ as powerful discourses motivating the voluntary simplicity and culture jammer consumer movements. Many such studies also show that in light of this distrust, consumers may form resistance to large corporate brands (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Luedicke et al., 2010). According to Carrigan and Attala (2001), much of this resistance comes from large companies’ inherent opacity, which makes it difficult for consumers to be certain of these firms’ ethical motives. Holt (2002) and Kozinets (2002), for example, in their studies of consumer resistant movements, conclude that consumers resist large corporate brands in an effort to pursue individual freedom from the perceived control of the market.

Such scepticism over large companies’ profit motives may also compel consumers to resist large multinationals (Holt, 2002; Thompson and Arsel, 2004), distrust of whom has been linked to companies’ lack of true intentions or ‘authenticity’. Consumers may seek such authenticity as a response to the fragmentation and alienation elicited by postmodern cultural forces like globalization, de-territorialisation, and hyper-reality (Arnould and Price, 2000). Consumers can, for example, be resistant to the homogenizing force that large brands enact on local communities, suggesting a preference for the seemingly authentic nature of smaller local retailers (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). In fact, according to Holt (2002), postmodern consumer culture may even have developed a particular notion of authenticity, one in which those who are ‘intrinsically motived’ by a brand’s inherent value require brands to act as ‘disinterested parties without an instrumental economic agenda’ (p. 83).
Ability in the MOAB model: Internal barriers and drivers

Tightly linked to motivation are the internal abilities that either impede or facilitate consumer’s motivations to consume sustainably, the most commonly cited being educational status, occupational level, and income (Thøgersen and Ölander, 2002; Thøgersen, 2010). At the same time, knowledge, although not sufficient in itself, has often been cited as a pre-requisite for pro-environmental behaviour (Thøgersen and Ölander, 2002; Thøgersen, 2010). An early meta-analysis of 128 research studies, for example, linked pro-environmental action to both knowledge of the issues and knowledge of action strategies (Hines et al., 1986). Knowledge and awareness have also been linked to the so-called information overload, in which excessive information – often of a conflicting nature – can cause consumers to feel overwhelmed and unable to act (Eckhardt et al., 2010; Kozinets, 2010). This conflict may be compounded by the fact that advertising, news reports, and expert columns often provide conflicting and non-linear opinions about exactly what constitutes an ethical product (Cherrier, 2007). Referring to this phenomenon as our ‘inability to know’, Beck (1998) proposes that the greater amount of information available today prompts confusion and tension about the proper action to take.

In addition, ethical consumption is often seen as greatly dependent on both temporal and economic resources (Carrigan and Pelsmacker, 2009; Reisch, 2001) and thus linked to consumers with increased economic resources (Alberini et al., 2005; O’Donovan and McCarthy, 2002) or even perceived as a luxury good (Starr, 2009). Yet much of the discourse around the high cost of sustainable purchasing behaviour has overlooked the effects of the voluntary simplicity or consumption rejection movements (Black and Cherrier, 2010; Sanne, 2002). Some forms of ethical behaviour, such as more planful shopping behaviour, have indeed been shown to be viable means by which consumers can save money (Carrigan and Pelsmacker, 2009). These behaviours, however, can also draw heavily on consumers’ temporal resources; that is, ethical consumption is often time rather than money intensive, meaning that recycling, commuting by public transport, and other time dependent activities actually go down with income (Starr, 2009). Starr (2009) therefore distinguishes between ‘buying’ sustainably and ‘behaving’ sustainably, suggesting that there is an inherent trade-off between access to temporal and access to financial resources.
Opportunity in the MOAB model: External barriers and drivers

Although many researchers have looked at individual motivations and internal resources as a precursor for sustainable consumption behaviour, a clear understanding of the influence of outside structures is also integral to explaining consumption decisions. The dominant culture in richer parts of the world, for example, is commonly referred to as a consumer culture (Featherstone, 1990; Gallagher, 1997; Lury, 1996), and academe has long debated the pressure that such societies put on consumers to consume. Soper (2007), for instance, maintains that ‘capitalist lifestyle ideals permeate all aspects of consumer culture’ (p. 209), while Sanne (2002) argues that both the state and self-interested businesses are in the habit of creating conducive conditions for increased consumption, thereby locking consumers in to unsustainable consumption patterns.

The barriers to sustainable consumption, however, extend far beyond modern economic policy and rhetoric: products are not purchased simply to satisfy individual needs but to create distinction and status in a social world (Bourdieu, 1986). This meaning and distinction provided by goods is thought to be consistently changing, with a continual re-appropriation of meaning being negotiated and manipulated (McCracken, 1986). Such transience can in turn fuel an ongoing need to consume goods in order to maintain a desired position in society. The fashion system appears to epitomize this drive; especially, the Western fashion system, which is characterized by rapid change, a profusion of styles, and mass consumption of goods (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). In the past 15 years, particularly, globalization and supply chain efficiencies have resulted in ever cheaper goods and faster fashion cycles, ultimately creating vastly increased consumption (Black, 2008). Hence, fashion change can be seen as planned symbolic obsolescence aimed to motivate consumers to consume continuously (Law et al., 2004) whose logic, as initiated by the fashion industry, can create an endless cycle of ‘desire’ (Farschou, 1987).

Fashion critics thus suggest that ‘fashion immerses consumers’ self-perceptions in cultural meanings and social ideals that foster depthless, materialistic outlooks and a perpetual state of dissatisfaction over one’s current lifestyle and physical appearance’ (quoted in Thompson and Haytko, 1997, p. 16). Yet in their actual research, Thompson and Haytko (1997)
show that those studied do not submit to the hegemony of the fashion system but rather construct their own meanings of fashion, forging their own social distinctions and creative ways to adapt meanings into their lived experiences. Firat and Dholakia (1998) thus theorize that emancipation from totalizing market structures can be found in ‘communal, performative, alternative life mode communities’, which allow ‘autonomy from mainstream culture’ (pp. 157–58).

**Behaviour in the MOAB model**

Although it is unlikely that consumers consciously delimit the different phases of their consumption behaviour, the academic literature divides fashion consumption into four phases: pre-purchase, purchase, wear/care, and disposal (Reisch, 2003). Except for one recent exploration of sustainable purchasing decisions (Connel, 2011), an in-depth study of use and wear behaviour (Laitala et al., 2011), and investigations into end-of-life consumption (e.g., Birtwistle and Moore, 2007), however, little research has applied this paradigm to consumers who purposefully engage in sustainable fashion consumption. The extant literature does point to different environmental impacts within each phase, with most occurring during the use phase (Fletcher, 2008) through activities like laundry (e.g., wash/dry temperatures), ironing, and dry cleaning, which are all major contributors to CO2 emissions.

One widely accepted assumption is that only a very small group of consumers actually take sustainability concerns into account when shopping for clothes (Butler, 1997, Kim and Damhorst, 1998; Connel, 2011), an observation variously attributed to cost considerations, interest, availability, and (lack) of knowledge (Butler and Francis, 1997). In addition to the often observed attitude-behaviour gap between consumers’ intentions and actions, some research has also identified a mismatch between the behaviours consumers perceive as sustainable and the behaviours that scientific studies suggest cause most impact (Connel, 2011). This finding again points to the confusing and conflicting accounts that complicate sustainable consumption decisions (Beck, 1998; Kozinets, 2010).

Even the reports of those who claim to engage in sustainable fashion consumption can be interpreted in many different ways. For example, Kim and Damhorst (1998) and Connell (2011) suggest that in the purchase phase, some consumers attempt sustainability by purchasing
items that can be worn for a long period of time. Fibre content is also often a consideration for those looking to behave pro-environmentally, with natural fibre content or recycled fibres being preferred over synthetic fibres. Yet research on fabric sustainability has actually suggested that in terms of fibre, the ‘natural’ heuris may be misleading: natural fibres like wool and traditional cotton often carry considerable environmental impact (Fletcher, 2008). Other possible forms of sustainable fashions acquisition of clothes or sewing one’s own clothing can all be seen as sustainable fashion consumption.

As regards the wear/care phase and disposal phases of fashion consumption, the research remains somewhat limited (Peattie and Peattie, 2009). There is evidence that in the former, consumers may attempt to extend the aesthetic and physical durability of their clothing by repairing or re-fashioning (Connell, 2011) and may also limit washing/drying behaviours, although often for reasons of clothing maintenance or financial savings rather than pro-environmental concerns (Laitala et al., 2011). Disposal, the final phase of fashion consumption, is generally divided into four possible behaviours: throwing items away, giving or selling them to another person or second-hand shop, donating clothing to charity, or lending clothing to another person (Ha-Brookshire and Hodges, 2009). According to Shim (1995) and Koch and Domina (1997), pro-environmental consumers are more likely to engage in textile recycling or donation; however, other studies conclude that regardless of environmental concern, consumers are more likely to donate, recycle, or hand down clothing if the infrastructure for doing so is widely available and easy to use.

**METHODOLOGY**

Because the extant research on sustainable fashion pioneers is currently so limited, this study adopts an interpretive methodological approach (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) that is inductive and exploratory. Its primary aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of how consumers make sense of sustainable consumption, including the behaviours they deem sustainable and the underlying issues that reportedly contribute to their avowed beliefs (Cherrier, 2005). The most apt site for exploring how consumers negotiate sustainable fashion consumption proved to be the online context, not least because it allowed an expansive search for participants free of geographic
limitations and the active monitoring of on-going and relevant discourse in this niche area of consumption. More important, developments in online digital media have radically changed how consumers engage in their daily lives, blurring the line between ‘real’ interactions and virtual interactions and engendering almost seamless transfer between interactions mediated online and those occurring in the natural world (Kozinets, 2010). As a result, the implementation of Web 2.0 has had a significant impact on the study of consumer cultures, and online spaces have become crucial for understanding contemporary consumption (Beer and Burrows, 2007; Kozinets, 2010). As regards to sustainable consumption specifically, social media and other participatory web forms are being studied as places in which consumers can come together, find empowerment, and form marketplace resistance (Kozinets, 2011). In fact, Kozinets et al. (2011) suggest that online communities can provide an innovation context in which consumers can co-create new visions, one in which ‘new paths for consumer well-being can be plowed, stepped [up] on and perhaps even followed’ (p. 205).

Nevertheless, the initial phase of the fieldwork we conducted between July and December 2011 was unable to readily identify any online communities rich in active dialogues and participation (Kozinets, 2010). We thus broadened the search to other online presences, including personal blogs, forums, online magazines, online stores, and social networks (LinkedIn and Twitter). Because these alternative online presences follow a one-way communication (i.e., without interactive dialogue), we adopted a netnographic approach comprising two components: (i) an observational netnography analysis of online content and (ii) offline interviews that added depth to our understanding (Kozinets, 2002, 2010; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004).

Sample

The sampling process was iterative, meaning that we employed on-going screening of potential participants during the entire field phase. Participants were recruited via theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in which initial observations from Internet groups, online forums, personal blogs, online stores, and websites found under the search terms ‘sustainable fashion’, ‘eco fashion’, and ‘organic fashion’ led to early interviews with participants actively engaged with relevant sites. In addition to traditional search engines (e.g., Google Search), we posted on
the Ethical Fashion Forum and on such social networks as Twitter and LinkedIn. On LinkedIn, we posted on such forums as ‘green my style’, ‘slow fashion’, ‘LOHAS’, and ‘eco fashion network’. As the research progressed, we subsequently amended our search terms based on interview feedback; for example, discarding ‘sustainable fashion’ as too resonant of ‘greenwashing’ and adopting informants’ initial descriptions of their sustainable fashion ideology as based on both environmental and social consciousness. We also expanded the search to do-it-yourself (DIY) blogs, anti-shopping competitions, second-hand blogs, and other forms of sustainable fashion consumption discovered through the interviews. We reached out to 30 potential participants.

We identified participants through a screening process that encompassed both sustainable fashion behaviours and fashion involvement, criteria selected to eliminate any risk that those completely uninterested in stylistic expression. Rather, we wanted to sample consumers who professed to make conscious consumption decisions and assess how they managed potential tensions between fashion and sustainability. Potential interviewees were screened to determine that they had active and expressed interests in clothing as a form of self-expression and that their interest in clothing extended beyond the utilitarian means of ‘canvassing the body’ (Kaiser, 1999). Nevertheless, the criteria were loose enough to leave the definition of sustainable fashion up to the participants. The screening for sustainable behaviours also made allowances for informant-defined definitions of sustainability not yet considered by the researchers to allow the emergence of themes not explored in previous research. To ensure participant fit, the same criteria were used in both the screening of potential participants’ online presences and the offline interviews.

Once identified as meeting the criteria, the final sample of 10 participants engaged in hour-long semi-structured interviews, 8 conducted by phone because of geographic limitations, 1 in person, and 1 by email at the informant’s request because of a language barrier. Although the interviews were loosely constructed, they all began with general questions on the participants’ backgrounds and interests and then focused in more specifically on sustainable fashion consumption and the reasons for engaging in it. The discussions were guided primarily by the participants, although to ensure identification of the potential disconnects between etic an
emic notions of fashion sustainability, if respondents did not freely volunteer descriptions of their behaviours throughout the consumption phases, we specifically asked for such information. The data from the interviews, which were recorded and then transcribed, were supplemented by the concurrent observational netnography, which analysed participants’ online presences (Kozinets, 2002) by pasting excerpts from their online content into documents and later identifying prevalent themes on sustainable fashion consumption. The interviews continued until we reached a saturation point at which much of the data elicited no longer felt new.

The on-going data collection soon revealed that rather than being motivated by a desire to oppose current fashion industry structures through anti-consumption or voluntary simplicity behaviours (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), our participants were driven by the overarching goal of changing the system through acts of sustainability while not wholly rejecting it. Their efforts can thus be more closely linked to what Hemetsberger (2006) described as adversary innovation, which rather than attacking or destroying established capitalist products or structures, attempts to radically disrupt them and add new elements via active construction and new market structures. Because of the close relation between this latter definition and the behaviours witnessed in our research, we therefore labelled our participants 'sustainable fashion pioneers', meaning consumers who are co-opting new strategies for engaging in sustainable consumption.

According to Hemetsberger (2006), such innovative resistant communities construct a culture of ‘creativity and collaboration’ and pro-actively address the source(s) of their grievance. Such a pro-active stance was evidenced by our participants’ active engagement in promoting sustainable fashion: 9 out the 10 maintained an active online presence, with 7 managing personal blogs dedicated to the sustainable fashion topic. Timothy’s blog, for example, was dedicated solely to products that were well-crafted and manufactured in Western countries, while May Anne’s featured only second-hand and DIY clothing that she had created. She also led local second-hand tours of her city and was active in her local community and an online community dedicated to refashioning clothes. Likewise, Chloe worked in a job dedicated to refashioning second-hand clothing into new products that could be sold at a well-known
British charity shop and also maintained her own blog featuring her handmade clothing. Sandra consulted with companies on how to manage their fashion supply chains and had recently won a high profile award for her contributions to ethical fashion. Maura, a graduate student, both blogged on sustainable fashion and worked to create a global network of sustainable fashion advocates to promote change in the industry. Among those who did not blog, Magda designed and sold an “ethical” organic clothing online, Noel ran a high profile online contest dedicated to ‘eliminating fashion consumption for a year’, and Shanna wrote for an online sustainable fashion magazine and was in the midst of creating her own ethical jewellery line with a partnership in Africa.

**Data analysis**

The analysis of the transcripts and web content was hermeneutic (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997; Thompson et al., 1994) and iterative throughout the data collection, with content being read and re-read several times until thematic codes emerged. After first analysing the data from each interview without any theoretical frame, we integrated the data into the MOAB framework to identify online and offline themes for each participant and then sorted them along the MOAB model’s dimensions. The most substantive content was then aggregated into the macro level MOAB categories.

**RESULTS**

We outline our main thematic findings according to the MOAB model, whose delimitation is a sensitizing tool used to identify the sustainable fashion pioneers’ consumption contexts and the relations between the motivations, abilities, and opportunities they cited as relevant to their sustainable fashion behaviours.

**Motivation**

The *motivational* themes identified represent the reasons for our participants’ engagement in sustainable consumption and their conceptualization of their behaviours. Although social and environmental concerns were cited in all of the interviews, larger notions of sustainability appeared to drive our participants’ discourse. They suggested, for example, that sustainable fashion is not simply ‘fashion’ but rather that sustainability requires good intentions and is
incompatible with consumption per se. They also reported that their own chosen sustainable
behaviours have given them freedom from the masses and a sense of pleasure and well-being.

*Sustainable fashion is not fashion.* In general, the participants did not favour the term
‘sustainable fashion’ because conceptually they associated sustainability with ‘long-term’,
‘slow’, and ‘conscious’ and were thus hesitant to use it in conjunction with the term ‘fashion’.
Noel explained her objection as follows:

> It is a contradiction because fashion is about speed and it’s about consuming and it’s
> about change. Sustainability is about slow, it’s about […] being careful with your raw
> materials and about being stable about the future.

As discussed in more detail later in the paper, this theme seemed to inform many of the
participants’ beliefs around sustainable fashion, and several participants suggested that the
terminology had been hijacked by commercial interests, creating what Sandra described as ‘a
flavour of greenwashing’.

Another notion that appeared very strong was *consistency*, with several respondents
suggesting that sustainability was holistic and required attention to all aspects of a garments’
lifespan. Quick to emphasize that sustainability in fashion involves both social and
environmental considerations, they also bemoaned the common trade-offs between the two,
suggesting that many companies provide pro-environmental products without any indication of
the labour that produced it. Marie, for instance, pointed out that ‘even though H&M has a
launched a Conscious Collection with all recycled materials, they still have these atrocious
labour problems’. Several other respondents commented that when faced with complexity, their
best option was simply to be ‘conscious’, something they defined as being aware and thoughtful
in making purchasing decisions. Both these findings support Moisander’s (2007) contention that
consumers will – amidst the complexity and contradictions of sustainable consumption – adopt
their own definitions. They also imply that one single initiative or a new word along the lines of
sustainability (e.g., ‘consciousness’ or ‘eco’) is not sufficient for sustainable fashion pioneers.
Rather, as suggested by Thomas (2008), it has the potential to create mistrust and confusion.

*Sustainability is about good intentions.* Some of the distrust for large retailers appeared
to stem from the belief that less consumption was imperative to sustainability – something the
respondents felt could not be easily reconciled with profit motives. In fact, throughout the interviews, the participants valued companies’ overall sustainability motives more highly than any single sustainable act. Moreover, in line with other evidence of consumer reticence toward company profit motives (Holt, 2002; Shaw and Moraes, 2009), they seemed to believe that if a company’s purpose for engaging in sustainability is linked to profit or sales growth, their sustainability efforts are somewhat futile. Rather, the sustainable fashion pioneers trusted more in the sustainability efforts of small or local producers, perceived as ‘truly believing in what they are doing’ and ‘passionate about their cause’. As in other studies of consumer resistance, the participants frequently invoked the word ‘authentic’, suggesting that sustainability requires genuine engagement (Holt, 2002; Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Although the exact meaning of such ‘genuine engagement’ was somewhat difficult to pin down, for the respondents, the contradiction between consumption and sustainability seemingly diminished the potential for authentic motives.

Consumption is sustainability’s antithesis. Rather than perceiving large fashion retailers as authentically engaging in sustainability, the respondents seem to assume that today’s fashion system encourages over-consumption. Most particularly, as part of their definition of sustainability, the participants ardently professed a belief that society’s current levels of consumption are in direct conflict with sustainability ideals. In fact, their perceptions of sustainability seemed strongly motivated by their belief that ‘consumption is sustainability’s antithesis’, a sentiment echoed in many ethically minded consumer movements, including voluntary simplicity, asceticism, constrained consumption, downshifting, and non-materialism (Cherrier, 2008; Fournier, 1998).

Particularly vilified as an antithesis was the fast fashion model, with its ever-changing assortments. Thus, the sustainability efforts of major fashion retailers left the sustainable fashion pioneers sceptical. Several argued that despite offering certain supposedly more sustainable options, fashion producers and retailers still rely on hyper-consumption and cheap prices to meet their business demands. Hence, Noel, referring to a large retailers’ recent decision to offer organic cotton, argued that
… their whole business model is based on selling a lot of fast fashion cheaply, and I think there is no way they can be sustainable. I mean, their Conscious Collection is what… 1 per cent of what they make in a year? And my feeling is that they only do this so they can say, ‘hey look, we’re sustainable’.

Chloe agreed, asking:

how can a company that has a business model based on selling clothing that is made cheaply and falls apart after one season claim that it is concerned with sustainability?

This ‘cheapness’ of today’s fashion goods was pinpointed by most interviewees as a major factor in over-consumption, encouraging thoughtless consumerism and easy throwaway. Such consumerism, the respondents argued, could simply not be reconciled with sustainability regardless of the eco label or social promise (cf. Carrigan and Attala, 2001).

*A sense of self and freedom from the dictated masses.* Our respondents also saw a close link between current levels of over-consumption and today’s fashion system, suggesting that anti-consumption attitudes do indeed play an important role in their identity creation (Black and Cherrier, 2012). Thus, beyond the importance of the sustainable fashion consumer identity, the identities of our respondents seemed linked to deeper values and aspirations such as individuality and freedom from the fashion system and mass culture. These values are illustrated by Marie’s account of one of her own choices:

I know this great designer; she gave up everything to do what she loves and designs these beautiful, sustainable Vegan coats. They are very expensive, but I own one because I love it and I love what it stands for.

This coat seems to symbolize what she values in sustainable fashion: a desire for non-conformity and resistance to system pressures. This value is also seemingly espoused by several other participants, who frequently distinguished between their own behaviours and those of the mainstream. Sustainable fashion consumption may also provide aesthetic distinction and uniqueness (Szmigin and Carrigan, 2006), a view agreed upon by several respondents. DIY blogger Chloe, for example, discussed how sewing her own clothing allowed her individuality:
I absolutely love the idea that the things I have are unique. You know, when you go and buy something from Top Shop and go out and see other girls in the same thing, it is truly disheartening.

Given that both fashion and sustainability consumption behaviours have been linked to consumers’ finding a sense of self-identity while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from others (Black and Cherrier, 2010; Freitas et al., 1997; Vlosky et al., 1999), it is not wholly surprising that sustainable fashion consumption should be seen as a way to facilitate these desires.

As already discussed briefly, a strong distaste for the word ‘fashion’ emerged as a common theme throughout the interviews, imbued with such negative connotations as ‘dictation from above’, ‘short term’, and ‘trendy’. Yet the majority of participants expressed a strong interest in aesthetics, seeing their own interest in garments as a form of stylistic expression closer to art than material consumption. Unlike fashion, a banal pastime fuelled by hedonism and conformity, they see style as a pursuit that requires creativity and self-awareness. Hence, when asked if she saw herself as fashionable, fashion blogger Mae Ann immediately protested ‘no, no, I would not say that!’ and instead described her personal style and self-perception as an individual with a unique, non-dictated way of wearing garments.

In fact, ‘dictation’ was a dirty word among participants, who associated it with control, insecurity, and a follower mentality. For them, the need for independence was strong: not only independence from other consumers but also from the system at large (Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002). Several participants reported a tension between their desire for aesthetic expression and the fashion system, which they felt shackled them into behaviours that did not meld with their value sets. The notion of style, in contrast, seemed to free them in many ways; for example, by helping them to achieve their need for uniqueness and non-conformity. This sense of freedom contrasts with the conclusion reached elsewhere that ethical fashion consumption requires aesthetic sacrifice (Shaw and Duff, 2002). Rather, style helps the sustainable fashion pioneers to satisfy their need for aesthetic expression in ways that resonate with their personal values. Our findings thus echo Thomson and Haytko’s (1997) conclusion that consumers are able to
construct their own meanings and resist the hegemony of the fashion system, even though in this case, such re-appropriation occurs under the guise of sustainability.

*Sustainable fashion brings pleasure and well-being.* Several participants suggested that sustainable fashion consumption has helped them to generate lifestyles of pleasure and well-being; with ‘comfort’ being the word most commonly ascribed to their sustainable fashion consumption decisions. Not comfort of the corporeal kind but rather a sense of security and confidence in themselves. They also described their freedom from the fashion system as a way to find acceptance of their body image, a means of overcoming the need to conform to the idealized body image promoted by the fashion industry or to buy clothing that is not flattering. This feeling of freedom and comfort, however, extends beyond body image; it also, as implied by the notion of empowerment in sustainable consumption behaviours (Cherrier, 2008), appears to reduce the competitive pressures participants once felt to consume. Chloe explained her own experience of such empowerment as follows:

> In the past, when I was earning a really low salary, I always kind of felt entitled to new things. And I always felt a bit perturbed that I couldn’t afford things my friends could. Now I care very little. I don’t really care what my friends can afford compared to me. It has put a lot of things into perspective for me.

To date, much of the literature on sustainable behaviour has suggested a puritanical approach to ethical consumption, one that sees it as requiring sacrifice and a loss of pleasure (Jackson, 2005). Only recently have researchers acknowledged that sustainable consumption can actually serve more self-interested notions of personal pleasure and well-being (Black and Cherrier, 2010). Our participants also described how the pleasure they once associated with consumption of fashion goods has been replaced by self-fulfilment and self-improvement. For example, when asked the number one reason that others should follow in her path of sustainable fashion consumption, sustainable fashion blogger Sandra simply replied, ‘for well-being. It is a better way to live’. Likewise, Noel described a sense of calm derived from reducing her consumption and finally having time to dedicate herself to more important endeavours. Our respondents also provided support for research that links sustainable consumption to feelings of
enchantment and sensuality (Smizgn and Carrigan, 2006; Thompson and Coskuner Balli, 2010).

As Magda explained it,

I choose to live in a conscious way, and it is my lifestyle. I simply do not believe we will become happier by consuming more. When it comes to fashion, I believe that both our bodies and surroundings can only feel better from natural materials, natural colours.

In sum, the themes identified by our participants in the motivation domain are all deeply interwoven, suggesting that individuals forge their own definitions of sustainable fashion, which helps them to negotiate any disconnect between the fashion system and sustainability. Believing that the current fashion system encourages over-consumption, our respondents prefer holistic approaches to sustainability and eschew many sustainability offerings offered by the market. This observation is strongly linked to the notion that sustainability is more than an impact measurement; rather, it appears to be a more comprehensive way of being and acting, of ‘being’ sustainable instead of only ‘buying’ sustainably.

Opportunity

The opportunity dimension provides a lens into the structural barriers and facilitators that the participants suggested may prevent or promote sustainable fashion consumption as a mainstream reality. Interestingly, many of the barriers identified seem to inform and motivate the respondents’ conceptions of sustainable fashion and compel their behaviours. They suggested, for example, that distant opaque markets, the allure of fashion, and the societal pressure to consume all make sustainable fashion consumption hard to realize.

Distant opaque markets. When asked about barriers to making sustainable fashion consumption an achievable reality, our participants referred especially to distance, speed, and opacity in today’s global fashion production system. Most particularly, they lamented the impossibility of knowing the true provenance of a textile or the labourers who produced it, a problem to a large extent linked to modernization and globalization. Marie, for example, was sure that

100 or 99 per cent of what people wear they cannot trace. They can barely remember where they purchased it, much less whose hands created it. I think dislocation from the source is problematic. It lets things like polluting the water table in a community in Asia
or hiring child labourers to produce a product in a foreign country be OK because that
disconnect is there and consumers cannot see it.

As reported in other studies (Beck, 1998; Cherrier, 2007), our respondents felt that what
consumers cannot see or feel, they have a hard time caring about. This feeling of modern
displacement also tends to imbue past ways of doing things with fond nostalgia, with reverent
descriptions of a past in which consumption was slower and localized. Several of our
participants, although they described this distance as a barrier to other consumers, reported that
their experiences allowed them conceptualize the process of creating a garment. Elena, for
example, said she could picture the person sewing beads onto a shirt thanks to her experience
volunteering in Central America. Nevertheless, the distance did make them hesitant to engage
with the fashion system, so most opted for alternatives that reduce the need to mediate this
unknown.

The allure of fashion consumption. Respondents particularly vilified the fashion system
for pressuring consumers to engage in an on-going re-invention to satisfy the industry’s profit
needs. According to fashion critiques, this need to consume is perpetuated through the fashion
system’s grip on consumers and consumer desires to fit in with others (Farschou, 1987). Some
participants admitted that in the past, their ability to ‘fit in’ or be socially acceptable hinged on
their ability to conform to the fashion system’s ideals. Noel, for example, recounted her own
past behaviour:

I was studying fashion, and I would be really influenced and inspired by the people
around me. I would get new impressions every day, and I would want to adapt.

The participants also discussed feeling entrenched in a cycle of purchasing unnecessary items to
stay on trend. Hence, in their view, the fashion system simply could not be reconciled with
sustainable product offerings. As Maura complained,

It was one thing to have two fashion seasons a year, but now we have six or seven. It is
exhausting. The way the fashion industry is structured, the environment is inherently
unsustainable, and it is going to take a really big paradigm shift for us to be able to shop
at all.
Beyond identity building or status seeking, respondents also argued that fashion has a particular allure – one of creativity, novelty seeking, and excitement – that is hard to overcome. Some described it as ‘indescribable – a je ne sais quoi sort of feeling’. This seduction, several respondents admitted, was hard to resist in the past, but in their new efforts to be sustainable, they have come up with new and innovative ways to satisfy the desire. They shop, for example, in their own closets, re-imagine their clothing, or swap with friends. As a result, Noel acknowledges, ‘I no longer get bored, which is what I want to promote. Fashion is about creativity and not about adding new stuff’.

Societal pressure to consume. Another general notion put forward by these fashion pioneers is the difficulty of engaging in mass scale change within the constraints of the market system. Specifically, reminiscent of the viewpoint that it is a citizens’ duty to consume (Sanne, 2002), they pointed out that for most citizens, consumption is simply a fact of life, with governments and companies equally complicit in its fuelling and promotion. Several participants, while not actually labelling themselves anti-capitalists, suggested that the idea of greater profits and growth is in direct conflict with the ideas of sustainability. The system in which companies work, they explained, requires them to put profits first, which in turn leads to the search for low-cost labour and cheaper materials and to anti-environmental behaviour. This structural reality directly contradicts their belief that the only way to consume sustainably is to consume less, which leaves the majority of the respondents feeling disheartened with the system. Maura specifically refers to this feeling of entrapment on her blog:

I know I’m not the only one who feels like the system is broken. But do we really have no choice but to continue to operate within the system we hate? What is the alternative? Falling off the grid and joining a commune?

In general, the participants not only see the current fashion system as distant from consumers but blame it for perpetuating consumption, something they find incompatible with sustainability. These perceived structural barriers help to shape and fuel their motivations.

Ability

Thøgersen (2010) proposes that consumer ability shapes how consumers develop their motivation both explicitly and tacitly and strongly influences behavioural outcomes. In the case
of the sustainable fashion pioneers, it is a set of consumer abilities that compliment and compel their motivations to consume sustainably and enable them to be innovative in their conceptualizations of sustainable fashion. The most salient facilitators supporting their behaviours seem to be the abilities of knowledge and re-conceptualization of financial resources.

The knowledge conundrum. Although not sufficient in itself, knowledge, particularly task-specific knowledge, has often been cited as a prerequisite for sustainable behaviour (Thøgersen and Ölander, 2002; Thøgersen, 2010), and our interviewees did in fact demonstrate a vast amount of knowledge about sustainability issues in the fashion industry. Much of this knowledge was gained through direct fashion experience, with 7 of the 10 participants having had direct contact with fashion or a fashion affiliated industry at some point in their careers, and 4 explicitly citing their professional experience as having directly impacted their decision to adopt or advocate sustainable fashion behaviours. Chloe, for example, became highly disillusioned with the fashion industry while working at a textile company: ‘there was just so much waste. And nobody seemed to care. It was just so disheartening to watch’.

Several participants also discussed how their deep knowledge of fashion production helped them understand the value and work that goes into creating garments, something they felt other consumers may not understand. As Noel explained it,

I understand that if you wear a cotton dress, people have had to put in a lot of effort before the cotton was there. I was working for a web shop, and we sold garments, and I told the people I was working with that everything we sold was made by real people. They just thought a t-shirt comes from a factory somewhere, and they have no idea that there is a human who must push it through the machine.

The other participants echoed these sentiments, suggesting that their knowledge and background has provided them with an appreciation for goods’ provenance and the true effort expended to create them. This realization in turn appears to shape their conception of ‘sustainability’ and limit their ability to see cheaply made goods as sustainable regardless of fabric content or production method.
Nevertheless, although these palpable experiences seemingly shaped many of their opinions about the fashion industry, several of the respondents were not wholly forgiving of other consumers who choose not to engage in sustainability. According to Sandra, such a decision is less about ignorance and more about choosing to ignore:

I do consider it a conscious choice to ignore it. We have all grown up with a certain understanding of what quality stuff is and that it comes at a certain price, so if they do accept something outrageously cheap, it is because they are aware that someone does pay for it somewhere, but they want to ignore it.

Hence, although information has clearly helped to shape the participants’ understanding of sustainability, they also cited it as a source of confusion and complexity for which there is no clear answer (Beck, 1992; Cherrier, 2009; Kozinets et al., 2010). Yet this tension itself seemed to facilitate the way in which they engage with sustainability. That is, by forging their own conceptions around the topic, they are able to mediate the tension and complexity that sustainable fashion presents.

Re-conceptualization of resources. Although all the sustainable fashion pioneers reported busy lifestyles, none suggested having too little time to spend on their sustainability efforts. In fact, some commented that their decision to shop less actually afforded them more time to do more meaningful activities. Nevertheless, many of the behaviours they described, although not exactly time intensive, did suggest that the effort required by sustainable fashion consumption is far greater than perceived by the participants. Apparently, however, the pleasure they derive from activities like sewing their own clothing or second-hand shopping makes them less concerned about time requirements. Moreover, because many have incorporated sustainable fashion into their lives through their blogs or professional efforts, they are not necessarily expending additional resources on this behaviour.

The sustainable fashion pioneers also seem able to overcome the limited financial means identified as inhibitors of sustainable consumption behaviour. This is not to say that they have ample economic resources, but rather that they do not see economic resources as paramount to achieving their sustainability goals. On some level, economic resources do appear to shape how they conceptualize sustainable fashion – those who reported having ‘enough’
resources could invest in higher quality pieces up front. Yet, as reported in other research on sustainability-based lifestyles (Carrigan and Pelsmacker, 2009) versus purchasing sustainable goods (Starr, 2009), those with insufficient resources found alternative routes (e.g., buying second-hand or making their own clothes) that were actually less expensive than shopping the high street. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a trade-off between temporal and financial resources: sustainable consumption activities that require more time may cost less money and vice versa (Starr, 2009).

Although in general, research has treated temporal and financial resources as a fixed variable, with deficiencies linked to unsustainable consumption patterns (Starr, 2009; Thøgersen, 2010), this study found these resources to be somewhat subjective and related to consumers’ value priorities, perceptions, and chosen sustainable behaviours. Most particularly, the fashion pioneers have strong knowledge of both the fashion system and sustainability, and some are equipped with task-specific skills such as sewing. This knowledge seemingly plays a crucial role in their innovative behaviour toward a sustainable lifestyle. Most particularly, besides making them aware of sustainability issues within the fashion arena and despite confusion and information overload on sustainability (e.g., Eckhardt et al., 2010), it enables them to construct their own notions of sustainable fashion and act regardless of their own misgivings and confusion about what actually constitutes sustainable fashion behaviour.

**Behaviour**

Although the behaviours reported by the sustainable fashion pioneers are potentially more aspirational than realistic, the descriptions themselves provide valuable lessons. In particular, these consumers are constructing their own ways of engaging with a relatively undeveloped consumption domain, one in which, their reported behaviours suggest, they make use of their abilities to overcome the tensions between their motivational goals and the structural barriers that hinder them. In this discussion, therefore, we outline the key behaviours described by these sustainable fashion pioneers as ‘sustainable fashion consumption’ from the pre-purchase to the disposal phase.
As expected, the motivations, abilities, and opportunity barriers reported by all the participants were very similar, with many described behaviours overlapping. Two slightly divergent groups did emerge, however, in the pre-purchase and purchase phase: ‘consume less/consume better’ (CLCB) and ‘second-hand/DIY’ (2DIY). The CLCB group described their sustainable consumption behaviour as purchasing fewer but higher quality goods from artisanal or small producers rather than from mass retailers on the high street. Their consumption principles are thus similar to those professed in the voluntary simplifier and slow fashion consumer movements (Ballantine and Creery, 2010; Cherrier, 2008; Lastovicka et al., 1999; Shaw and Moraes, 2009). The 2DIY group, in contrast, reported exclusively purchasing second-hand garments or making their own garments, behaviours also reported in Connell’s (2011) research on eco conscious fashion consumption behaviour and Portwood-Stacer’s (2012) study of anti-consumption activists.

Pre-purchase phase. Most particularly, we, like Connell (2011), find that during the pre-purchase phase, sustainable fashion pioneers in the CLCB group spend time considering their desired purchases before buying them, with several participants claiming that their knowledge of different retailers’ sustainability strategies factors into these decisions. Elena, for example, reported that she searches retailers’ websites pre-purchase for content on the company’s sustainability initiatives and then uses in-store information – particularly tags and labels – to determine where the item was made: ‘If it says Bangladesh or Cambodia, that is not a good sign’. This sentiment was echoed by other participants who reported place of origin as a red flag. They also indicated price as a source of sustainability information, with very low prices immediately being discounted as unsustainable, although the exact meaning of the word ‘cost’ came into question. In general, the participants maintained that the true cost of most fashion goods is not reflected in their cheap prices. Noel, for instance, expressed her feelings in terms of waste:

I hear this all the time, and people say ‘I will buy this dress; it’s only 20 Euros, so if I only wear it once it’s not a waste’. Not a waste of money maybe, but a waste of fabric and the energy it has in it.
The respondents often attributed this reconceptualization to their knowledge of the work that goes into a good’s production; therefore, while not believing that sustainable fashion products should be astronomically more expensive, they maintained that ‘cheap’ could not be sustainable. Although the issue of fabric content also came up, in line with the belief that identifying the most sustainable fabric choices is problematic (Fletcher, 2008), feelings on what constitutes ‘more sustainable’ behaviour were mixed. For those who limited their purchases to second-hand or DIY, the pre-purchase phase appears less complicated: having exited the original market, they are less concerned with product specifications. Hence, they focus not on the research prior to their purchases but rather on the hunt inherent in second-hand shopping. They thus consider rummaging through bins, racks, and piles in search of a potential purchase an essential if not enjoyable aspect of shopping at charity or second-hand shops, because ‘there is no way to know what you will find before you get there’. As a result, they care less about a garment’s sustainability because it is already on the second market.

*Purchase phase.* It is in the purchase phase that the consumption behaviour of the two groups of sustainable fashion pioneers diverges. Although both expressed similar ideas of what constitutes sustainable fashion purchasing behaviour – smaller shops, artisanal producers, and second-hand or DIY fashion – they described their consumption decisions rather differently. Whereas some of the 2DIY participants reported not purchasing anything new for an extended period of time – buying only second-hand or making their own garments – others from the CLCB group had temporarily ceased shopping altogether and vowed to purchase only small amounts of quality items once they began shopping again. One participant of this latter group reported purchasing only high quality clothing made by Western producers, while another described a ‘capsule wardrobe’ that could be fit in a suitcase under her bed in off-seasons. For these participants, the other key factors in the purchase decision are aesthetic elements like quality, classic styling, and fit; all factors believed to contribute to the goods’ perceived longevity (cf. Connell, 2011).

One possible small distinction in purchasing behaviour between the exclusively second-hand shopper and those who mix such behaviours with sufficiency strategies is that those who have exited the system tend to feel less guilt over their consumption frequency. Chloe, for
example, claimed not to have purchased a single clothing item in a year, but made herself new garments weekly, never buying new fabric because it has ‘become commercialized’. Likewise, Sharon reported that since beginning to purchase used, she has felt less constricted by the notion of less and no longer feels the guilt associated with her high street purchases.

**Wear-and-care phase.** In the wear phase of the clothing, nearly all the participants reported a desire to have limited, well-tended wardrobes of clothes they wear regularly. They thus described the idealized sustainable fashion wardrobe as ‘versatile’, ‘high quality’, and made up ‘only of pieces I love’. Nevertheless, levels of success in achieving these goals seem to vary, with those who shop predominately second-hand or make their own clothing skewed slightly toward less managed closets than those who have made the decision to purchase high-quality newer goods. The concept of ‘shopping in one’s closet’ was also mentioned by several CLCB respondents who on feeling boredom or a desire to shop, reach into their own repositories to re-discover, re-fashion, and re-imagine garments they already own. Such behaviour not only allows them to feel the novelty and excitement once derived from purchasing new items but elicits a great sense of enjoyment.

Although many recent lifecycle assessments have pointed to garment care – washing, tumble drying, and dry cleaning – as a key contributor to fashion’s total environmental footprint (Fletcher, 2008), our interviewees placed greater focus on choices related to purchasing, wearing, and disposing of clothing. This focus is also very apparent on their blogs, which contain very limited content on clothing care. During the interviews, they did admit to considering environmental issues when laundering clothes, but overall, clothing care is not a major focus of their communication on sustainable fashion behaviour. Interestingly, the only two respondents who did not emphatically state that they ‘never use a dryer’ because ‘it is bad for your clothing’ and/or ‘terrible for the environment’ were American. Whereas most participants reported opting for eco soaps or detergents, some also reported limited laundering, although primarily because ‘it is better for the clothing’ a finding that lines up the more self-interested motivations for pro-environmental washing behaviour identified by Laitala et al. (2011).
End-use and re-use phase. In contrast to many recent studies showing that Western consumers typically throw away an abundance of clothing items (Allwood et al., 2006; Birtwistle and Moore, 2007; MISTRA, 2010), the sustainable fashion pioneers interviewed reported ‘zero binning’, throwing away no second-hand clothing items except for underwear and rags. This observation echoes Shim’s (1995) finding that environmentally conscious consumers are more likely to engage in recycling and other pro-environmental behaviours. The most commonly cited means for removing clothing from the wardrobe at the end of use included giving clothing to charity shops or friends, or organized clothing swaps. All those interviewed considered binning clothing to be unacceptable and avoidable; however, feelings about donating clothing to charity were mixed. Maura and Sandra both suggested that too much unusable clothing is donated to charity each year, and Maura argued that many consumers are able to justify their overconsumption by giving their things away when in reality charities have too many items to sell and must often take them to the landfill. Several interviewees also referred to the mending and repairing of clothes, a common practice for those with sewing skills, who in many cases choose to ‘upcycle’ or refresh the appearance of old clothing. This act seem to help them satisfy the need for novelty and self-expression/identity.

In sum, pre-purchase and purchase behaviour can be divided into two categories. The first is an intensive search for sustainable alternatives and a fashion investment dominated by such criteria as origin of production, aesthetics, and price. The second opts out of the primary fashion market in favour of the second-hand market or DIY, invests resources heavily in the pre-purchase phase, and buys fashion independently of sustainability criteria like place of origin. In the wear-and-care and disposal phases, however, both groups act similarly: they take care of their clothes and strive for zero binning.

These findings suggest that sustainable fashion pioneers often construct the behaviours they engage in and limit their interaction with the mainstream market by selecting innovative sustainable behaviours that allow them freedom from a market system in which they find no consonance. These behaviours are closely linked to the pioneers’ motivations, abilities, and experiences of structural barriers and circumvent the tension between sustainability and fashion through the notion of style, reduced consumption, and the pleasure and well-being derived from
independent lifestyles and freedom from mass dictation. The latter motivation, particularly, arises from such perceived structural barriers as societal pressures to consume and the current structure of the fashion system. Another perceived barrier to sustainable fashion consumption is distant opaque markets, venues with which these pioneers are familiar because of their knowledge of the fashion industry. Whereas for other consumers, financial and time resources are factors that inhibit sustainable consumption, the pioneers re-conceptualise this inhibition based on their own behaviours and perceptions. These key themes extracted along the MOAB model dimensions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes identified along the MOAB model

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Abilities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainable fashion is not fashion</td>
<td>Distant opaque markets</td>
<td>The knowledge conundrum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainability is about good intentions</td>
<td>The allure of fashion consumption</td>
<td>Reconceptualization of resources</td>
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<td>Consumption is sustainability’s anti-thesis</td>
<td>Societal pressures to consume</td>
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<td>A sense of self, freedom from dictated masses</td>
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<td>Sustainable fashion brings pleasure and well-being</td>
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DISCUSSION

For researchers, the fashion industry, and consumers alike, the term ‘sustainable fashion’ remains ill-defined, confusing, and paradoxical. Our research suggests that this lack of clarity, together with fashion’s contradictory nature and large degree of complexity, shapes how consumers engage with this topic. The ten participants interviewed for this study have overcome the complexity and inherent tensions between personal motivational goals and structural barriers by forging their own conceptions around the issue. Yet some of the sustainable fashion behaviours emphasized by these sustainable fashion pioneers conform to the academic literature’s assessment of what constitutes sustainable behaviour, including reducing, recycling, and re-using. Nevertheless, the sustainable fashion pioneers also seem to rely heavily on their
personal motivation, abilities, and external structures to determine how creatively act within these boundaries. Hence, their concept of sustainability is more than simply reducing the environmental or social impact: it incorporates broader concepts of *freedom, uniqueness, resistance, trust,* and *well-being.*

From the outset of the research, the pairing of the terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘fashion’ emerged as problematic. Whereas our respondents defined sustainability in terms of ‘endurance’, ‘the long term’, and ‘conscious decisions’, they unanimously vilified the word ‘fashion’ as conveying ‘waste’, ‘transience’, and ‘dictation’. The fashion system they deemed to be a hegemonic institution that preys on consumers’ insecurities at the behest of its own profit motives. They themselves mediate the tension between these two concepts by invoking the notion of personal style, which allows them to escape the trappings of a system they want nothing to do with. Hence, style is sustainability and fashion its antithesis.

Such personal style, concretized through sustainable fashion behaviours, allows for *uniqueness* and *freedom* – values about which the participants feel deeply. That is, style not only allows them to distinguish the pitfalls of modern consumption and frees them from the need to conform to beauty ideals or keep up with others through consumption, it also distinguishes them from mass culture and its conformist consumers. It even appears to free them from some of the complexity inherent in sustainable consumption decisions.

The fashion behaviours communicated by these pioneers can also be conceived as a form of *resistance* to a system deemed unsuitable. The same structural barriers perceived as impeding sustainable consumption have themselves become motivational forces. The pioneers embody this resistance creatively by using their resources to reconstruct notions of sustainable fashion on their own terms. All, for example, posited that reduced consumption is the only true way to achieve sustainability but felt that no profit-motivated company could actually achieve such business objectives in the current framework. They thus conceptualize their sustainable fashion consumption behaviours in a way that works outside this broken system, a system that they argue precludes the attainment of sustainable fashion. This resistance also plays into their larger value structures of seeking *freedom* and *uniqueness.*
Trust and authenticity are also inextricably linked to our participants’ notion of sustainability: the ideology that a company should engage in sustainability for itself rather than for profit or other self-interested motives was implicit in most of the interviews. As a result, the respondents see sustainability efforts by large multinational companies as opportunistic while according small and local retailers a halo of authenticity and sustainability. These perceptions have very little to do with impact or environmental figures but rather with the emotional sense that sustainability requires a holistic approach and good intentions. Hence, the interviewees discounted many of the current efforts and single actions of retailers to offer organic or recycled textiles or recycling schemes as ‘not enough’ or ‘questionable’.

Interestingly, whereas these sustainable fashion pioneers deemed self-interested actions by companies to be inherently ‘unsustainable’, the opposite was true for their conceptualizations of their own behaviours. For most, sustainable fashion consumption was a ‘win-win’ scenario rather than a puritan sacrifice, especially in that it allowed them to creatively re-appropriate the terminology to fit their own perspectives. Participants therefore reported valuing uniqueness, creativity, and stylistic expression and claimed that following a sustainable lifestyle in fashion generates pleasure and well-being. Accordingly, they select behaviours that meld with their larger goals and value structures. When communicating their sustainable fashion behaviours both in the interviews and in their public communication forums, these pioneers focus on different ways to satisfy their craving for novelty and newness without feeding into a system they deem unsustainable. Hence, the allure of fashion is not lost on them: it is simply re-appropriated to meld with their lifestyles and values.

Admittedly, it could be argued that these notions – freedom, uniqueness, resistance, trust, and well-being – are not unique to sustainable consumers; they are also valued by many other consumers. Yet in sustainable fashion, there still appears to be a discrepancy – generated partly by the disconnect between industry attempts at sustainability and what consumers truly value – between what can reportedly help consumers achieve and the perception of these means in the marketplace. As long as sustainability is linked to fabric selections or recycling rather than pleasure and self-expression, it seems that limited engagement is likely to persist. Hence,
perhaps the best way to engage consumers in sustainable fashion is to forgo the terminology altogether.

CONCLUSIONS

This study describes the behaviours reported by 10 adversary innovators of fashion that we label ‘sustainable fashion pioneers’. The aim of the paper is fourfold: to uncover how this consumer group conceptualizes ‘sustainable fashion’, to describe their expressed behaviours along the different phases of fashion consumption, to pinpoint how they express their motivations and internal abilities, and to identify the external opportunity facilitators and barriers that enable or hinder them from consuming fashion in a self-defined sustainable manner. Specifically, we apply the MOAB theoretical framework to data from in-depth interviews with the 10 pioneers and a content analysis of their online presences to reveal six prevalent themes: freedom, uniqueness, resistance, trust, authenticity, and well-being.

Of these six intangible associations that our respondents made with sustainability, trust and authenticity rank higher than any impact measures or eco labels. Although such valuation could be related to the complexity and contradiction inherent in sustainability, it could equally be seen as a reaction to the perception that many companies or businesses engage in sustainability efforts only for self-interested gain and profit. This self-interest, whether measurably sustainable or not, minimizes the perceived efforts, thereby calling into question the oft-cited ‘business case’ for sustainability. This doubt is increased by the fact that although the companies themselves extol the virtues of the ‘win-win’ scenario of increasing profits by increasing sustainability, our interviewees apparently see the two as likely to diminish one another. Such a perception makes for a complex situation, implying that a communication of sustainability is precarious for any large profit-driven company.

Our findings thus raise larger questions about the notion of sustainable fashion – how it is conceptualized, discussed, and reportedly achieved. First, the very term ‘sustainable fashion’ appears to be conceptually weak and nebulous in meaning. Hence, if the underpinnings of fashion – transience, seasonality, and change – continue to dominate, it is unlikely that consumers will find consonance with their perceptions of sustainability. At the same time, many
aspects associated with the notion of fashion are crucial to the adoption of more sustainable fashion behaviours. Aesthetics, novelty, and creativity, for example, were all cited by our participants as reasons for engaging in fashion consumption, and instead of abandoning such pleasures; our pioneers have found new ways to satisfy these needs. The notion of style also serves as a conduit through which the sustainable fashion pioneers can meld their ideals of sustainability with their desires for personal expression. Hence, more than a simple re-framing of words, style carries important qualities of individuality, freedom, and longevity.

These findings therefore present a valuable opportunity to re-calibrate and re-position the current discourse around sustainable fashion, perhaps borrowing from the emotionally captivating imagery and experiential nature successfully created by many involved in the slow or ethical food movement to make the ‘good choice’ the enjoyable one. Likewise, the puritanical sacrifice often associated with sustainable fashion consumption could be mitigated by not only confronting but embracing the hedonism involved in fashion consumption and re-channelling it into more sustainable options. Doing so could even level the playing field with more traditional fashion offerings. This re-calibration may be particularly important if sustainable fashion is to become less of a niche phenomenon and more mainstream in its adoption.

One interesting question remains, however: If sustainability efforts by large multinationals are perceived as meaningless and sustainable fashion consumption facilitates the need for freedom and uniqueness, how can the sustainability agenda actually make an impact on fashion? Our findings suggest that achieving large-scale change requires mainstream adoption of sustainable fashion consumerism, a change that large multinational companies must help drive. In other words, sustainable fashion must simply become ‘fashion’. Yet although those interviewed seemed very interested in extending their behaviours to include other consumers, it is worth contemplating whether doing so might not reduce the perceived benefits of this very type of consumption. That is, if sustainable fashion consumption becomes mainstream, will there still be an appeal? Can we forgive large companies their profit driven intentions if it means larger scale change? Or will the logic of sustainable fashion risk falling victim to the same logic of traditional fashion: ‘in today, out tomorrow’?
In addition, as often occurs in cases of socially desirable behaviour (e.g., sustainably desirable habits; Maccoby and Maccoby, 1954), our participants’ responses reveal discrepancies between reported and actual behaviour. Their public roles as bloggers, for example, could potentially compel them to report a certain type of behaviour to remain consistent with their public persona. Yet because of geographic limitations, we were unable to verify the respondents’ claims. This research, therefore, should be seen as an expression of how sustainable fashion pioneers perceive sustainable fashion, not as an account of sustainable behaviours actually witnessed. Nevertheless, the information is valuable in that it identifies what sustainable fashion pioneers perceive to be important when reporting on sustainable fashion consumption.

Another research limitation is that the data encompass only the self-reported behaviours of a small group of limited and specific consumers – sustainable fashion pioneers – and thus do not address the motivations, abilities, or external facilitators or barriers reported for other important consumer groups. Future research, therefore, could focus on other reported consumption behaviours, such as highly unsustainable fashion consumerism or consumers who report sustainable consumption in areas outside fashion.
References


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