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## Shame, Blame, and Passion:

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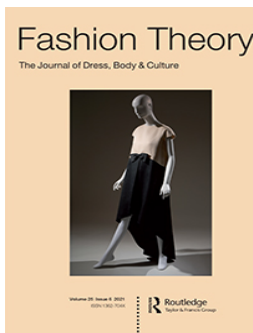
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# Shame, Blame, and Passion: Affects of (Un)sustainable Wardrobes

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## **Abstract**

In order to change consumption patterns into something that is more sustainable, it is essential that we consider the various and conflicting meanings clothes have in people’s lives. This article presents an analysis of diaries written by consumers of different ages and occupations over a period of three months in 2015. These consumers documented their clothing and shoe purchases, took inventory of the contents of their wardrobes, and reflected upon their clothing consumption. The aim of this study is to examine consumers’ use and consumption of clothing and how they deal with dissonances in relation to what they see as ‘sustainable’. *What motivated their consumption? What compromises*

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*did they make?* and *What were the processes that determined their choices?* The authors of the diaries claimed that they wanted to consume clothing in a sustainable manner, but they found that they did not. Direct criticism of the fashion system was often elusive and difficult for them to articulate. Consequently, instead of asking for the creation of a different fashion system, the authors of the diaries blamed themselves for their failures with respect to sustainable clothing consumption. Drawing on Affect Theory, the article discusses how emotional attachments informed the authors' relationships with their wardrobes and the conflicting emotions surrounding the pleasure and pain of fashion. In their texts, they provided a number of different explanations as to why they bought, kept, and used clothes to justify why they consumed clothing even if they did not want to consume or felt that they should not. The diarists also remarked on how this made them feel about their consumption. Some claimed to "love" fashion. Others wrote they "hated fashion", whilst others stated that they "didn't care at all". However, as was the case for all of the authors, the dream of owning a 'perfect' wardrobe pervaded their texts and worked as a way for them to deal with the dilemmas, contradictions, and struggles of fashion.

**KEYWORDS:** affect, wardrobe, emotion, fashion, consumption, diary, Affect Theory

Sustainability is one of the major challenges of our age. Notwithstanding this, the consumption of clothing is ever increasing. Although many Western consumers are fully aware of how and why they should make sustainable choices, the impact of this awareness on total consumption is negligible. Why do consumers keep consuming in the ways that they do? Only a very few sustainable consumption initiatives appear to really be capable of addressing this problem. Such initiatives are either involved in the development of new technologies; replacing fabrics with different kinds of materials, or improving supply chains (Fletcher 2014; Tham 2015; Payne 2017). In this article, I argue that, in order to change consumption patterns, it is essential that one considers the complex roles clothes play in consumers' lives, emotionally, practically, and morally, including the ability of clothing to mobilize human actions. As argued by Payne (2017), sustainable fashion is caught up by ideas such as the belief in technological development (on the one hand) and the hope that users will change their engagement in fashion (on the other). To avoid falling in to this dichotomy it is crucial that we consider the deeper meanings clothes have in people's lives, and why so many people say that they want to consume sustainably, but fail to do so. In order to explore this predicament in depth, this article focuses on (i) clothes' capacity to affect human actors and (ii) the pleasure and pain involved in creating and sustaining a wardrobe. Despite

the fact that the sales and marketing of clothing and fashion aims precisely to mobilize consumers' affective responses, the feelings and sense-making practices of consumers rarely form the basis of sustainability initiatives.

The article is based on the close analysis of 34 'clothing consumption diaries' written by consumers of different ages and occupations over a period of three months in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Consumers were asked to document their purchases of clothing and shoes during the three month period, make an inventory of the contents of their wardrobes, and reflect upon their consumption of fashion and clothing. A more detailed description of the research methodology is provided in the method section below (cf. Hedtjärn Wester and Petersson McIntyre 2017a, 2017b). For all of the participants, however, fashion, consumption, and dressing themselves were emotionally intense endeavors that involved many aspects of their lives.

Four different overlapping sentiments structured the diaries. The first concerned *the contradictions between what the authors said they did and what they (morally) felt they should do, and how this dissonance made them feel*. Many of the diary authors wrote that they wanted to consume sustainably, but found that they did not do so. They thought sustainability was important, but "tricky". They tried to think about it, but it still did not change their consumption habits (see also Connolly and Prothero 2008; Binkley and Litter 2011; Fuentes 2011, Fredriksson and Fuentes 2014). In turn, this made them feel frustrated because they could not understand why they did not make more sustainable choices. They bought garments they did not need, which were then left hanging, unused, in their wardrobe. This made them feel bad. Words such as "dirty", "repulsive" or "disgustingly expensive" were used by the authors and illustrates the moral tension that they felt. The second sentiment concerned their *reliance on routines and a self-perceived inability to explain or motivate actions*. 'I don't know why I do it' was a very common reason given to explain purchases, as well as the storage of unused garments. Getting dressed in a particular way, as well as going shopping and the making of decisions related to their shopping activities were explained in terms of 'routines' that they were not fully conscious of. The authors found it difficult to put words to these routines (cf. Skov 2011). Many authors wrote that they could not provide any rational explanations as to what they did. This is something which can, as will be discussed below, be seen as a way of dealing with the perceived dissonance between (A) knowing what actions are sustainable and (B) not performing these actions. The third view concerned *the capacity of clothing to affect one*. While, on the one hand, the authors were aware of the problems associated with consumption and they wished to see themselves as sustainable and conscious consumers, the desire to keep consuming was also strong. Many authors found various reasons to explain why they needed to reward themselves with new purchases.

They often felt that they deserved to buy themselves something new even though it felt wrong and led to feelings of shame and guilt. However, many also reported that they wanted to exercise more agency with respect to their clothing choices, thus giving rise to the fourth sentiment which was an articulation of their *feelings of not being in control of their own actions along with the desire to be more in control*. Many of the authors ostensibly participated in the diary project as a way of developing their thinking about sustainability and their practices regarding consumption. Notwithstanding this, some authors wrote that they tried to “resist” buying things but did not succeed.

The idea that unsustainable consumption patterns can be changed by means of conscious, or rational, consumer choices is wide-spread. Authorities often implement the so-called ABC-model – Attitudes-Behavior-Change – but, as argued by Shove (2010), sustainability cannot be achieved simply by changing attitudes. Consumption practices must be understood as being interwoven with other parts of society. The practice of buying new clothes keeps the idea of shopping alive and in circulation; routine-shopping becomes normal, but only so long enough people keep doing it. Thus to encourage people to think of themselves in terms of consumers whose capacity to act and contribute to a sustainable world lies in the consumer choices they make keeps the practice of routine-shopping for clothes alive (see also Fletcher 2010; Reiley and DeLong 2011; Payne 2017). In my reading of the diaries, I found that many authors touched on the idea that unsustainable consumption was a problem that lay with in themselves, as made manifest by their (wrong) choices and attitudes. Practice Theory, where practices are seen as the primary locus of the social has come to dominate the social scientific field of sustainable consumption. ‘Practices’ are seen as recognizable and discernible entities that are routinely performed by individuals (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012; Evans 2019). I found, however, that emotions and affective forces played a prominent role in the authors’ explanations of their consumption and the content of their wardrobes. The answer as to why they consumed lay in their desire to affect and to be affected. Routines were used as explanatory models for dealing with the contradictions of sustainable fashion.

### *Purpose and aim*

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of affects in contemporary consumers’ ways of making sense of their own use and consumption of clothing and how they deal with dissonances in relation to what they consider as ‘sustainable’. *What motivated their consumption? What compromises did they make? and What were the processes that determined their choices?* Answers to these questions shed light on why, and how, people shop for clothes, what meanings shopping practices have in their lives, and the relationship consumers have to their wardrobes. More specific research questions include: *Were there ways of dealing*

*with the desire to change that did not involve purchasing new items and, if so, what were they? What would make the authors want to have fewer clothes – not just a differently produced fabric? Were there differences depending on the amount of clothing consumed? Why did the authors empty or replenish their wardrobes? What affective role does gender play in this context?*

## **Affect**

The analysis of the role of emotion and affect in people's relationship with their clothing is informed by Affect Theory, notwithstanding the fact that 'affect' and 'emotion' are different concepts. An often-cited definition of 'affect' is from Massumi (2002, 23–45) who, drawing on Deleuze, speaks of 'affect' as "a capacity to affect or be affected" with respect to both human and non-human actors. 'Affect' is more open than 'emotion' which, according to Massumi, has a subjective content since it arises in the midst of 'in-between-ness', in the capacities 'to act' and 'be acted upon'. 'Affect' is different to mere conscious knowing (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). Clough (2007) describes 'affect' as being as much about body as thought, about materiality as much as reason, about the discursive as much as feeling, about affecting the world around us as much as being affected by it, and the relationship in between. Deleuze originally borrowed the concept from Spinoza who understood mind and body as one and the same. The mind cannot decide over the body and vice versa. The relationship between the two can only be explored as something that is continually ongoing (Clough 2007). Thus, in this philosophical approach, the consumption of clothing involves both body and mind, and in this context, 'reason', 'passion', 'intellect', and 'affect' occur simultaneously. What *can* be researched, according to Clough (2007), is the relationship between affect and intellect in particular situations, thereby constituting a different way of understanding human agency. The relationship between 'body', 'desire', and 'object' is put in focus. Satisfying a lust for consumer goods has a direct affect, which simultaneously creates a feeling of guilt. The participating authors often understood shopping as the result of a lack of character and will. However, in the framework explicated by Affect Theory, the interpretation of why the authors shop on impulses becomes more complex.

Drawing on Kathy Davis' (2015) discussion of certain people's 'passion for the tango', we may think of fashion practice as:

[an] affective, sensual attachment with political implications as a site for exploring the contradictions and entanglements, the constraints and the possibilities that are part of any activity which is pleasurably intense and fervently desired, yet unsettling and perhaps even profoundly disturbing. (p. 17).

Davis invokes the concept of ‘affective dissonance’ so as to understand the desire for things we know that are bad for us. In her case, the context of study is the tango and feminism, although I also think ‘affective dissonance’ can be used to understand the conflicting emotions that surround taking pleasure in fashion. As I will show, ‘affective dissonance’ can be used to explain why the diary authors so often stated that, with respect to being ‘sustainable’, they behaved in ways in which they did not want to. ‘Affective dissonance’ is also invoked to explain how their behavior made them feel. In this approach, emotions are seen, not as individual experiences, but as embodied experiences of social relations. ‘Affect’ is an aspect of the cultural definition of emotion, and is not merely limited to a psychological definition of emotion. ‘Affect’ is, instead, the condition of the emergence of emotions (cf. Wissinger 2007, 251).

A similar way of talking about emotion can be found in Sara Ahmed’s work (2004) who, instead of asking: ‘What are emotions?’, asks: ‘What do emotions do?’. Ahmed tracks how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they “‘stick’ as well as move” (p. 4). She uses the concept of ‘stickiness’ to talk about how affects stick to objects, and of certain objects as ‘happy objects’. “Objects are sticky because they are already attributed as being good or bad, as being the cause of happiness or unhappiness” (Ahmed 2010, 35). As I will show, emotions stuck to the diary authors’ garments in different ways.

## Wardrobe studies

‘Wardrobe Studies’ refers to a field of study as well as a method. As defined by Fletcher and Grimstad Klepp (2018), the study of wardrobes is both about studying ourselves and engaging with radical sustainability potential (p. 5) (see also Klepp and Bjerck 2014). Woodward (2007) sees the wardrobe as a resource for identity construction in which the public presentation of the body is negotiated in the privacy of the bedroom. Similarly, Banim and Guy (2001) wonder why women keep clothes that they no longer wear and why women feel compelled to “wear out” fashion when these clothes have obviously not been purchased for their utility value (see also Bye and McKinney 2007). Several fashion scholars have taken up the wardrobe’s symbolic meaning of “coming out of the closet”, i.e. revealing secrets, particularly with regard to sexuality (Klepp and Bjerck 2014; Cwerner 2001; Bye and McKinney 2007; Guy, Green, and Banin 2001; Skov 2011; Lövgren 2015). Thus, ‘the wardrobe’ is also a metaphor for change which, in the context of the diaries, was particularly prominent with regard to a desired change towards a more sustainable lifestyle, a more responsible life, and even a better life.

Many wardrobe studies focus on women’s reasons that they provide as to why they keep (i.e. ‘hold on to’) clothing. Some of these studies



argue that reasons that are given might be different from what is generally recognized, but still, in some form, 'rational'. However, from a perspective that is informed by the concepts of 'affect' and 'affective dissonance', I find that creating and maintaining a wardrobe is not so much about making sense, not so much a conscious choice, but rather, it is affective, contradictory, ambivalent, and conflicting. Such aspects need to be given more consideration. The diary authors' relationship with clothing can be described as a shifting, affective assemblage of:

1. *Availability*: What is on offer, either in one's wardrobe or at the shops.
2. *Expectations*. What one feels is required of oneself so as to fit in with the rest of the world.
3. *Aspirations*. Dreams of the future and what one wants to become.
4. *Practicality*. What works practically in everyday life.
5. *Morality*. The feeling that one should do what is right for the world, from a 'sustainability' perspective.

## Method

The diary project reported on in this paper was initiated by the County Museum of Sörmland, Sweden. I was later contacted by the museum to analyze the data generated by the project. For the museum, the diaries formed part of a larger project entitled *All about clothes*. Requests for participants were made on the museum's website, on the radio, and via social media, and at schools. 106 individuals signed up and deposited their diaries with the museum. 34 of these individuals were adults and their diaries form the empirical material used in the present study. 24 of the authors described themselves as women and 10 as men. Their background, age, and occupation varied. The diaries comprised two parts. One part was a form in which they entered information about their purchases of clothing and shoes during a three-month period. In addition to responding to questions about price, material, and retailer, the authors were asked to explain why they made their purchase, if it had been a planned purchase or whether the purchase had been made on impulse. The second part of the diary contain further personal information where the diarists were asked to reflect more freely on their consumption of clothing. In this second part of the diary, apart from being given the opportunity to freely recount their views on fashion and clothing in general, the authors were asked about their use and reuse of clothes, i.e. what happened to clothes they did not want any longer or could not use anymore. The authors were also asked whether they ever mended their clothes. They were also asked to count the number of garments that were in their wardrobes at the time. The number of pages written in the

free part of the dairies varied from between half a page and 15 pages. Most of them were somewhere in between.

Unlike Woodward (2007), I did not meet the participants next to their wardrobes (cf. Lindblad 2017). The participants were merely asked to make an inventory of what they possessed in terms of clothing and shoes and to document their purchases during the given period (cf. Klepp and Bjerck 2014). Asking the participants to write down the above was a good way of making them become actively involved in the project. This prompted the participants to contribute to the project with their own reflections and expertise in different ways than if we had merely interviewed them. Many participants raised issues that I may not have asked them about, and thus, in no small sense, they became co-researchers (Brembeck 2010; Berggren-Torell 2003; Lessiter 2005). Some of the dairies had the character of being a condensed 'life story'. This also indicated that many participants felt very involved in the project and some of them said that they would continue thinking about these issues and their own consumption behavior after the project had ended. The participants had a wide variety different reasons why they had joined the project, which led to great variation in the dairies themselves.

Participation in the *Consumption Diary* project gave the authors an opportunity to reflect on the topic of 'fashion and sustainability'. In fact, this was given as a reason why many of the participants wished to join the project. Many of the participants raised the problem of having too many clothes and that participation in the project was a kind of purging for them (Fredriksson 2016). A wish to empty their wardrobe was frequently articulated, often in relation to passing garments on to others. Many authors also found it difficult to deal with the amount of clothing that they owned.

Notwithstanding the fact that the empirical data used in this study is textual, the method that was employed is ethnographic. Ethnography can be defined as:

[...] iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods...that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject. (O'Reilly 2005, 3)

This definition is significant because it emphasizes that ethnography is not just a method of observing or listening to human agents, but it is a way of analyzing; a way that depends on theory and on the researcher's view of the world (Pink et al. 2016). The dairies are different from conventional ethnographic settings and my contact with the diary authors was thus 'mediated'. However, by reading their texts, I gained access to their daily routines and thoughts, to conversations they had with themselves and, even though I was reading instead of listening to

their views, their writing concerned topics that were much like the topics that might have asked about in in-depth interviews and transferred to my own ethnographic writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Ethnographic writing relies on identifying patterns that make up a culture (Ehn, Löfgren, and Wilk 2016). As the world changes, ethnographic practices must also change (Pink et al. 2016).

The wardrobe can be seen as a space that reveals certain aspects of consumers' personal lives; aspects that are rarely shared openly. Skov (2011) sees the wardrobe as a place where the ethnographer can meet the informant in a way that differs from more conventional research methods. The wardrobe points to an unconscious, bodily dimension of the owner's everyday life, much in line with the 'affective'. Thus, wardrobe studies can compensate for the over-reliance on the act of purchase within consumption studies and, instead, focus on how people use and live with products (Skov 2011). Dressing the body lies at the heart of what Stewart (2007) calls 'ordinary affects'.

### Clearing out

Calls for consumers to empty their wardrobes are often made. The reasons given to respond to such calls range from sharing, donating and letting others use what is no longer needed, to getting rid of what you already have in order to acquire something new, or even a combination of both. Clothing collections are, however, not necessarily meant to be used, and many diary authors wrote about their wardrobes in terms of 'storing', 'saving', or 'collecting' clothes (Cwerner 2001; Bye and McKinney 2007; Banim and Guy 2001). Affective qualities were often given as reasons for keeping garments, even if they had no practical use value. "I don't want to throw clothes away", several authors wrote. Grandma's wedding dress, family baby clothes, formal attire, the desire to fit into certain garments after losing weight, or clothes retained after losing weight were all examples that were given to explain why clothes were kept. Often, particular garments were reminders of a certain phase of the owner's life (Woodward 2007). One writer recounted his life narrative by referring to various garments and with the memories of having made or watched other family members make certain pieces of clothing. Clothes were seen as carriers of affects, even sad ones. Connections with others, and emotions, were 'stuck' to these clothes (cf. Guy, Green, and Banin 2001; Gibson 2015; Jenss 2015; Brembeck 2015).

The idea of 'only keeping what one needs' builds on a view of human agency in which emotional attachments are considered to be irrational. As argued by Ahmed, 'emotion' has long been viewed as being 'beneath' the faculties of *thought* and *reason*. "To be emotional is to have one's judgement affected [...] it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous" (2004, p. 3). In this way, many participants described the habit of keeping clothes that they didn't

use as 'irrational', and they said that they should really clear things out, but they did not know why they failed to do so. It simply 'felt wrong' to throw things out. They acted upon their affects; the affective notion of not betraying the memory of past sensations and experiences. Garments were emotionally charged, thus getting rid of them felt like getting rid of the memory that was stuck to it, or getting rid of a person. However, the authors perceived themselves as being unable to articulate why they kept garments, even when they did not need to. They described their acts of storing superfluous clothing as 'irrational'. At the same time, they knew very well why they saved their clothing, they just were not used to thinking of affective qualities as rational, since clothing, with respect to sustainability initiatives, is thought of in terms of use-value, and thus to keep clothes for their sentimental value could only be irrational.

### **Affective change**

'Change' – a theme so central to fashion, as well as to wardrobes in general – also emerged in affective form. The 'will to change' was central in the authors' stories and concerned changing oneself into someone better dressed, more successful, or more sustainable. There was a perceived relationship between changing your wardrobe and changing your life, whether it included more sustainable consumption, or physically looking better and more stylish, getting a better job, or a more interesting life in general. As one author wrote: "I have decided that this autumn I am going to wear dresses much more". Without saying why, this author shows the affective aspirations of clothing, the fantasy attached to fashion's agency for changing life, or for 'making things happen'. Change was an affect stuck to certain dresses, to practices of caring for clothes, and to how the authors hoped to behave as future consumers. The diary project, too, it was reported, was going to create change. When change was described as a happy feeling, it was connected with the other improvements that changes in the consumption of clothing was going to create.

Many authors wrote that they found it difficult to know what to wear, particularly when they had to combine garments. Some reported that they were tempted to buy something and then find out that they had no use for it. Some authors wrote about buying clothes with the intention of changing their style of dressing, but this often never came off and their clothes were left hanging, unused, in their wardrobe. Others wrote about their desire to replace worn out clothes with the same clothes. They didn't like change and did not invoke the metaphor of 'changed clothing' to refer to a desire of a changed life. As argued by Stewart (2007), everyday experiences can be contradictory, fragmentary, and inconsistent, while at the same time they are intertwined with political and cultural processes at large. "Change" appeared both as a facet of fashion, and a facet of sustainability. Talk of the need to change the

fashion system into something more sustainable is wide-spread in contemporary discourse. Often, however, change emerged, in the diaries, in the form of a feeling, a desire to affect or to be affected, rather than an experience of actual change.

Numerous authors reported that it was the clothes themselves that made them buy them, not their own conscious decision. It was as if it was not really the clothes they bought, but the affects the clothes gave rise to; the ordinary affects that build intensities and make certain thoughts and feelings possible (cf. Stewart 2007). Of course, such reasoning can be offered up so as to make an excuse for one's own behavior, but it also illustrates clothes' capacity to affect human actions. Clothes, it was claimed, made them feel in certain ways and thus influenced their choices. "Not being able to resist", "I had to", and "I fell in love" were very common statements. As one author wrote: "I had to buy it because I had been looking for such an item forever". Another wrote: "I totally fell in love with this sweater when I saw it". The authors did not feel that they had decided to buy particular garments autonomously. Not strange then, once the affect has dissipated, that certain pieces of clothing were left hanging in the wardrobe, bereft of any use value. The authors may have been affected by certain garments – often dresses – and the dreams that were stuck to them, but when the affect had passed away they were left unused. Dresses made affective promises that the everyday demands of practical and wearable clothing could not sustain. It was very clear that dresses, in particular, played a prominent role in this process, which illustrates how the gendered fashion market affects men and women.

We thus argue that it was not the clothes, in their material form, which the authors desired, but rather, it was the feelings the clothes created, the scenes they potentially set in motion, and the passions they could stir. Certain garments emerged as a source of *the possibility of thoughts and feelings*. A yearning glimpse of a new exciting life, a sense of guilt, a hope to be affected.

### **The pleasures of fashion**

'Getting dressed', 'fashion', and 'clothing' were repeatedly described as pleasurable and as "fun". Clothes were 'happy objects' for many of the authors. Similarly, shopping for clothes was often described as a way of spending (pleasurable) time on one's own. Many of the participants reported that they liked to go downtown on their own as a form of relaxation or recreation. Clothing was described by some as "an interest" that is "the best thing there is", referring to the consumption of new items as well as secondhand items. To "love" a particular piece of clothing, or a favorite item was a frequent occurrence, or to "fall for" a certain garment in a store. Many authors mentioned such affective bonds or reactions as the reason for making a purchase. Statements

such as “fun designs cheer me up” occurred in some diaries. Or, as one person wrote: “I needed to cheer myself up and it was on sale”. The same person also wrote: “I love hearts and always wanted a pair of pyjamas with a heart print”. Many authors wrote similar things about loving briefs or stockings that had a certain print, often cute (feminine) patterns. Terms such as ‘seduction’, ‘opportunity’, and ‘special offer’ were frequently used to justify purchases. “I spotted a special offer and had to buy it”, or “it was cheap and fitted me perfectly”, or “I had to buy it because it was perfect”. The positive emotions attached to ‘fun designs’ reveal the role that shopping can play in creating affects of consolation. Several participants explained that they bought something because they “needed to shop that day” in order to feel better. Why clothing has been given this role has perhaps to do with the way it is considered to be ‘a happy object’ and that people long to be positively affected. However, the emotions triggered by garments in shops were different to emotions stuck to garments in one’s wardrobe, and explains how the capacity of clothing to affect also leads to a wardrobe that is overflowing with unused items.

Nevertheless, many authors appeared to be satisfied with the impulse purchases they made. Buying socks and underwear was frequently described in this way. The utility of stockings and under-garments entails that even if they were purchased just because of a desire to be affected, they are rarely left unused and thus do not lead to feelings of guilt. Consequently, the purchase of such goods works as a way of dealing with affective dissonance.

The commonsensical ways in which the authors mentioned impulse-buying as a means to feel better is of interest, from a sustainability perspective and in relation to the responsibility that consumers are encouraged to take with respect to sustainable consumption. Clothing stores trigger impulses and play on emotions through the use of various techniques. The ‘passive’ form of language the authors used in their diaries reflects an awareness of sales techniques designed to trigger impulse purchases. One author, who was a shop assistant herself, wrote that she recognizes these techniques and tries to avoid being influenced by them. However, only a few authors used their ability to recognize such techniques to then go on to criticize the fashion industry. Rather, *they blamed themselves* for not being “able to resist” or for not being “consistent”.

At the same time however, many of the authors wanted to play a more active role in their consumption practices. A large number of the authors liked shopping for secondhand and vintage items. As highlighted by Gregson and Crewe (2003), secondhand shopping requires a more active role than shopping in conventional stores. This is because much of the work of sorting, pricing, finding the right fit, and finding something really special is carried out by the consumer, not just by shop assistants. However, as the diaries show, the participants who bought secondhand and vintage items were among those who bought the

greatest amount of clothing. These authors also donated a lot of clothing to charity shops, thus giving input to the circulation of garments and fueling change.

Two of the authors were a heterosexual couple who, based on their diaries, could be described as connoisseurs of vintage clothing. Out of all the authors, they owned the most clothes. The woman owned 60 winter coats and the couple had to rent a special storage room to store their seasonal clothing. They were in contact with a shop owner who would call them if something special came in. Buying secondhand or vintage clothing was described as a way of getting better quality at a lower price, and a way of being unique and elegant. The couple explained that they did not buy any clothing that had been manufactured after 1970 (approx.) (cf. Gregson, Brooks, and Crewe 2001).

However, collecting vintage clothing may also be seen as a way of dealing with affective dissonances. Within contemporary culture, according to Ahmed (2004), emotions may be represented as being 'good' or 'better than thought', but only insofar as they are represented as forms of intelligence, as 'tools' that can be used by subjects in the task of life- and career enhancement. Thus, from a sustainability perspective, the *joy of thrift* may be seen as cultivating a sustainable Self, but it is defined against uncultivated and unruly emotions such as the *desire for excess* or the *joy of consumption*. "Emotions get narrated as a sign of 'our' prehistory, and as a sign of how the primitive persists in the present. The hierarchy between emotion and thought/reason gets displaced, off course, into a hierarchy between emotions: some emotions are 'elevated' as signs of cultivation, whilst others remain 'lower' as signs of weakness" (Ahmed 2004, 3–4). Thus, the emotional engagement in collecting vintage clothing fits more easily together with the norms of responsible consumption than excessive shopping for new items. Hunting for and collecting vintage clothing thus transgresses guilt and works on affective dissonance. Put simply, affective ties to second hand clothing can be explained as being 'rational'.

### The pains of fashion

Affect is not always positive. Several participants reported that shopping for clothing and dressing up was 'difficult' and 'problematic'. While some authors searched for "the perfect garment", which they would wear and love forever, others thought of perfection as a way of finding clothes that fit. Many authors wrote that they hated shopping and fashion and just wanted a wardrobe that worked: "I would love a uniform". Some authors regarded fashion as 'work', both dressing oneself and dressing others, such as children.

The authors' relationship with (mostly) her or his body was a recurring theme. There were many examples of when sadness was stuck to situations or garments. For example, one author wrote that one of the

main objectives of clothes for her is “to hide my stomach” – a statement that shows the complex relationship that many people have with their clothes. Many diary authors had mixed feelings about clothing that involved the body and the body’s ability to meet ideals, the Self’s ability to live up to expectations, and the feelings that were evoked when it did not live up to expectations. One’s size, being overweight, and the need to adapt the contents of the wardrobe to different body weights was a source of concern for many. Being “in tears” in fitting rooms was a theme that was introduced by some authors. Clothes became sad objects when they exposed one’s body as being inconsistent with the fashion industry’s ideals. “Disappointment” and “evoking tears” were recurring emotions related to plus-size lines and the way such collections made certain authors feel about having a body size that was not included in the “normal” assortment. This created feelings of otherness and of not fitting in.

Another theme that was present in the participants’ diaries was the demands that many authors felt were placed on them by their employers, people around them, and themselves. Finding something that fit was often described as “a relief”, particularly with regard to work clothes. One author wrote that she constantly suffers from “clothing stress”. ‘Anxiety’ was frequently mentioned in relation to shopping and many authors simply wanted to find clothes that functioned in all situations, but they felt that they were unable to make up their minds about what kind of clothes these really might be (Clarke and Miller 2003; Miller and Woodward 2012). Some authors did not find shopping a pleasurable activity and just wanted a working wardrobe. In this context, making choices was considered to be difficult by many of them. Several said they suffered from “decision anxiety” or they had difficulties in finding clothing that worked. Some of them wrote that they just “wanted to get away from it all”.

Yet another theme related to the participant’s age; many authors found that it was easier choose their wardrobe when they were younger. They also found that they needed to change their wardrobe, for example, when they retired (Klepp and Storm Mathisen 2005; Lövgren 2015). Often, they found it difficult to find the clothes that matched their lifestyle later in life. Similar to their concerns regarding sustainability, only a few of the participants criticized the fashion industry and its segmentation strategies. Instead, they thought that they were at fault, by being too fat, too uninterested, too old, too lazy, or too impatient.

## **Perfection**

The word *perfect* was frequently used by the authors. Many authors wished that they could create the perfect fit or wardrobe “just for me”, “for my body”, “to suit my personality” or “suit my lifestyle”. A ‘perfect fit’ was also a regular justification for buying a particular garment. They searched for the perfect garment that would last a lifetime



or they dreamed of a perfect and well-balanced wardrobe (cf. Zukin 2004). Some of them reported that they had bought certain garments because these seemed to be made “just for me”, or were “perfect”, whereas, others spoke of garments they had been using for the last 10 or 20 years which they thought had become “part of me”. The ‘perfect wardrobe’ exists out there apparently, it is just a matter of finding it, many seemed to think. Similarly, many authors mentioned that they would like to have professional help to fulfill their dreams of owning a perfect wardrobe. Considering the wardrobe as a whole, thinking about what was missing in the wardrobe, and identifying what would make the wardrobe “perfect” were ways of dealing with the problem of owning a wardrobe that was overflowing with clothes whilst still not having anything to wear. In the case of vintage clothing, the search for the ‘perfect wardrobe’ becomes part of cultivating a sustainable Self where treasure hunting is seen as rational. ‘Perfect’ was the affective fantasy of always knowing what to wear and always looking right.

The descriptions that were provided in the diaries reveal the authors’ insecurities as well as a perceived gap between (A) what was on offer and (B) what the person wanted. The diaries also reveal the capacity of clothing to affect. But note, instead of questioning the fashion industry’s standardized fits, sizes, cycles, and techniques for triggering affects, the authors of the diaries blamed themselves. The hunt for the perfect garment functioned as a way of *channeling the affects of exclusion*. Fantasies about the perfect garment and the perfect wardrobe could thus replace resistance to the fashion industry, and motivate a person to keep consuming. The dream of perfection may be interpreted as a strategy for managing affective dissonances.

## Gender

In terms of gender, affect, as an embodied experience of social relations, was made clear in the diaries. Many of the female authors wrote about the pressure to look fashionable, even though they did not really want to. Women felt more pressure to dress according to normative ideals, to keep up with the fashion, or to look good in general. Similarly, sad emotions were stuck to women’s fashion and garments. This suggests that questions of sustainability also need to be related to gender issues.

As claimed by Ahmed (2004), the subordination of a person’s emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body. “Emotions are associated with women, who are represented as being ‘closer’ to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will, and judgement.” (p. 3). Scholars of the history of consumption have observed how women have often been understood as being irrational and unable to control themselves in relation to consumer goods (Abelson 1989). Such ideas entail (as articulated by several of the female diary authors) that women feel more guilty, choose to

consume for others, rather than for themselves, and feel under pressure to transcend their desire to buy. This accounts for the affective dissonance between, on the one hand, the pressure to transcend the impulse to buy and, on the other, the pressure to look right.

The day-to-day care of children's clothing and buying gifts for relatives are activities which women are more involved in – a fact noticed by many scholars of consumption (Stillerman 2015). Such observations are the result of gendered divisions of Labor, but they can also be interpreted as an expression of gendered affects, where women channel their desire to be affected by clothing into buying clothing for others. Thus, affects are often gendered, like the feeling of being a 'bad mum' if one's children are not properly dressed. This pressure does not necessarily come from others, since it was articulated by the authors themselves just as frequently. Often, this pressure was in response to the authors' affective desire to fulfill norms of femininity, and in response to the role of clothing and fashion in the performance of femininity. However, in many ways, the diaries did not only confirm conventions regarding gendered shopping. Several of the female diary authors described shopping as a pleasurable consumer experience that was about rewarding themselves. From such a perspective, the women's (relatively) higher consumption of clothing can also be interpreted as a questioning of the traditional roles of women, that is, of affectively yearning to be other than the self-sacrificing mother. Instead, the longing to fulfill gendered norms has to do with the affects of 'belonging' and 'recognition'. Importantly however, these affects operate differently for men and women.

The male authors of the dairies rarely wrote of feeling guilt, and, in many cases, they seemed quite happy to write about their consumption. Many of them reported that they had a great personal interest in clothes and fashion; a kind of self-proclaimed connoisseurship. These men shopped for themselves because they were "interested" in fashion, while many women, as mentioned above, wrote about providing for the family. Men could allow themselves to have an interest in fashion, if they thought it was enjoyable. But note, they felt that they could opt out of shopping for clothes if they did not find it enjoyable. Their social status did not stand or fall with their interest in fashion nor with their ability to stage a fashion persona.

## Conclusion

Clothing takes on many different meanings in our lives. In order to move towards more sustainable practices of shopping and dressing, we need to understand why people shop, what dressing means to them, and the role these activities plays in their lives. In this article, I have discussed consumption diaries in terms of affects. The authors of the diaries invoked different motives in their explanations as to why they went clothes shopping (or not) and what garments they kept in their

wardrobes. These motives were informed by notions of 'sustainability', 'preserving memories', 'gendered fashion norms', 'body ideals', and 'interests'. The participants claimed that they wanted to consume sustainably but found that they actually did not.

All of the diaries contained an affective dimension which was expressed through the writers' inability directly explain why they consumed clothes in the way that they did, when what they really wanted was a different culture of consumption. The authors repeatedly wrote that they did not know nor could they explain why they did what they did. I have discussed fashion's capacity to affect and the authors' desire to be affected. The authors avoided describing shopping for clothing as a conscious choice. Rather, their narratives revealed a particular convention – a way of talking about their purchases using a passive voice. I have discussed this way of thinking as being reflective of contemporary discourse on sustainability, where affects are understood as 'irrational'.

The authors yearned for the affective responses clothes give with respect to body, the longing of affectively being recognized, by oneself and others, as a good parent, a good woman, a good human. The participants wanted to fit in, to get respect, but also enjoy the immediate affective rewards and stimulation a purchase can give; i.e., a rush of joy. Clothes possess a capacity to affect thereby giving everyday life a quality that reflects a continual motion of relations with others, dreams of what is to come, and a measure of one's social life.

Using the concept of 'affective dissonance', I have focused on the contradictory dualities that are present in the diaries; namely, why people say one thing and do another. I have also examined the ways the authors negotiated the desires and pleasures of fashion consumption, on the one hand, and the guilt, pain, and demands associated with fashion consumption, on the other. Clothes shopping was simultaneously pleasurable and demanding for the authors. While some of them described shopping as 'enjoyable', and others as 'painful', yet others described it as 'boring'. Many of the participants reported that they both wanted and did not want to dedicate time and energy to their wardrobes. They disclosed that they felt feelings of uncertainty about clothing and fashion, of not knowing what they liked, what was suitable, and what they should wear. However, a perfect, well-functioning wardrobe was something that was desired by everyone and thus functioned as a way of dealing with affective dissonances.

Even if the authors were affected by their clothes, they found their affective reactions to be irrational. Thinking of affect as 'irrational' entailed that criticism of the fashion system was elusive and difficult (for the authors) to articulate. Rather than asking for systemic change, questioning economic models that are based on constant growth, or the role of affective seduction techniques in fashion stores, the authors blamed themselves. However, the extensive use of the passive voice in relation to clothing consumption indicates that the authors did not see

themselves as being fully in control, even if putting the blame on the clothes rather than on oneself was a way of dealing with affective dissonance. The organization of the current fashion system was taken for granted. It was seen as something monolithic, and change was thought of as something that their own choices had to be subject to. Furthermore, the passive voice can be seen as resonating with the gendered cultural politics of emotion, and with feelings for clothes that are considered as being 'irrational' and something that should be overcome. Thus, questions about clothing, fashion, and sustainability must relate to matters of gender, affects, and emotions. Clearly, the transformation of consumption patterns is a complex issue that involves many different aspects.

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