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Making it Real: Engaging the Consumer in Sustainable Fashion Consumption

Natalie C. McCreesh, Christopher R. Jones, Alex McIntosh, Helen Storey

Abstract

With moves towards improving sustainability within the retail sector and a growing requirement to conform to existing and emerging legislation, retailers from ostensibly disparate sectors face the common challenge of encouraging the reduced consumption of saleable products, while simultaneously maintaining their prosperity. Project TRANSFER was initiated to investigate how efforts to promote sustainable consumption within retail is received and responded to by consumers. Consumers and partners in the retail sector were engaged with throughout the research which culminated in three consumer facing outputs; a workshop (Put a Better Foot Forward, The Moor retail destination, Sheffield, UK), installation (Making in Real, pop-up T-Shirt factory, Trinity Shopping Centre, Leeds, UK) and animated short film (Nothing to Wear? available via YouTube and launched at the Sheffield Shorts film screening, Sheffield, UK). Each of the outputs were designed to allow consumers to reflect on their shopping and consumption habits in an engaging, stimulating environment. The key aim was to promote mindfulness and engage consumers in discussion and debate. All the output events were free for the general public to attend / participate in. This paper will discuss the role of engaging the consumer in sustainable fashion research and the impact of consumer facing outputs in education and awareness of sustainable issues in shopping and consumption.

Key Words: Sustainable fashion, fashion, consumer, retail, public engagement, fashion film.

1. Project TRANSFER

The TRading Approaches to Nurturing Sustainable consumption in Fashion and Energy Retail (TRANSFER) knowledge exchange project was a collaboration between the University of Sheffield (UoS) and the London College of Fashion (LCF), at the University of the Arts London.¹ The key aim of the project was to facilitate knowledge exchange between energy and fashion retailers regarding the promotion of sustainable consumption. Due to the interest of numerous additional parties the project went on to include utilities companies including regional water providers and retailers from areas outside of fashion with an invested interest in sustainability.

Retailers are increasingly confronted by a common challenge, they must encourage the reduced consumption of their saleable product in order to promote sustainability and conform to existing and emerging environmental legislation, while simultaneously maintaining growth and financial prosperity. Energy retailers are experienced in such practices having been legally required to promote energy-efficiency to consumers for some years (e.g. Loft and cavity wall insulation).² This is paired with a growing recognition among fashion retailers of the need to engage in activities that help to promote sustainable consumption among consumers (e.g. in store recycling schemes).³

With this in mind, the aims of this research were twofold: (1) to bring together representatives of the energy and fashion retail sectors, with academic experts in psychology, management and fashion, to exchange best practice around the promotion of sustainable consumption to consumers; and (2) to investigate how efforts to promote sustainable consumption within these sectors is received and responded to by consumers. In fulfilling these aims we hoped to foster a more complete understanding of how initiatives in both sectors can be successfully designed and implemented in order to have maximum positive impact on the behaviour of consumers (e.g., energy use and clothing purchase practices).

With regards to addressing the first aim (1) a collaborative one-day partner workshop event was planned, to bring diverse stakeholders together in a synergistic, collaborative context, in order to promote in-depth, problem-solving discussion on key issues. Workshops provide forums where different options can be considered and knowledge and expertise exchanged but where increased consensus on solutions (i.e. best practice) can be achieved. Prior to this workshop event interviews were held with delegates to address a series of questions relating to the opportunities and challenges of promoting sustainable consumption (SC), how they currently promote SC (if relevant), what specifically they wish to achieve from engaging with project TRANSFER, and what format they would wish the workshop to take. The responses from these interviews were analysed in order to generate a formal discussion framework for the workshop. By allowing partners to participate in the design of the workshops and by providing them with an advanced framework for the discussions, we hoped to tailor the workshop so as to maximise the benefit to them in participating.

The second aim (2) was met in the first instance by holding a series of consumer focus groups. A total of 5 focus groups were conducted (3 at Meadowhall, Sheffield; 2 at Westfield Centre, Shepherd's Bush, London) each with an average of 8 participants. Participants for these focus groups were a convenience sample of shoppers at the respective shopping centres. If facilitated carefully, focus groups can provide a useful context for establishing 'why' people feel the way they do about issues and to learn more about how such issues become represented and socially shared. To stimulate discussion on these topics at the

workshop, participants were shown video recordings of the partner discussions (selected to illustrate the main points of the discussion and edited to maintain the anonymity of workshop participants), thus creating an indirect ‘fishbowl’ method.⁴ A series of set questions, were used to structure and guide conversations however the discussions were left to progress naturally with minimum prompting from the facilitators. Focus group discussions were analysed by the academic team using thematic analysis in order to identify central themes in responding and how these map to psychological models of trust and consumption (see forthcoming publications from the authors)⁵. The results of this analysis would provide the commercial and academic partners with feedback on the current level of understanding and importance that consumers place on the issue of SC and how the efforts made by retailers to promote the issue within each sector affect (e.g., levels of trust in the retailer, intentions to purchase from the retailer).

Using the set questions to guide the discussion participants were first asked about their shopping habits in relation to fashion (clothing / apparel / accessories) and feelings / emotions surrounding this. Secondly participants were asked the same relating to energy and water utility shopping. They were then asked to compare the two, noting similarities and differences in the process and emotions surrounding the topics. A clear distinction was made between shopping for a specific item which was perceived as a ‘need’ and shopping as a pass time or hobby for pleasure with no specific aim to purchase. In the latter any purchases made were spontaneously desired or ‘wants’. Items regarded as needs were generally those required for specific occasion or purpose such as clothing items for work, special occasions, holidays or seasonal, for example a new dress for a friend’s wedding or a new white shirt for a job interview. The purchasing process of ‘need’ garments was often considered stressful, due to difficulties of finding the exact item required. Problems included finding the correct size, colour, style and price were listed as main issues preventing purchase in addition to practicalities such as store opening times and time afforded to look around a number of different stores. In this type of scenario the faster the needed item could be located and purchased the more appeased the consumer was. In contrast shopping as a pass time was viewed as a leisure activity which was pleasurable, often done with friends as a mode of entertainment. With regards to the shopping environment malls were seen as more stressful, but a necessity during bad weather and as a convenience due to later opening hours in comparison with the High Street. Charity and vintage shops were seen as the most pleasurable places to shop in addition to the cheaper prices, buying second hand was considered more ‘guilt free’ as consumerism was viewed as being offset by donating to charity. Overall price was the main signifier in purchasing choice with the lower price often sought out and purchase delayed in some instances until there was a price reduction from sales or discount events.

Energy and water utility purchasing was not viewed as ‘shopping’, it was seen as paying for necessities which participants felt they had little choice over doing so. The process of choosing or changing supplier was viewed as a chore, which was time consuming and overly complicated. Participants admitted to a general lack of knowledge with regards to different energy suppliers and tariffs. Finding the option with the lowest price was seen as highest priority and price was the only important feature. There was a lack of trust towards energy companies, with participants feeling ‘cheated’ and forced to pay more for something perceived as a basic human right. Whilst there was agreement that saving energy / water was important there was little understanding of the metrics employed to measure their usage. It was generally presumed that discussing bills was a taboo subject to bring up with friends which may be a result of lack of knowledge. A smaller number of participants had educated themselves on energy tariffs by using online comparison websites to find the cheapest energy deals. They admitted that they felt a sense of pride in ‘getting one over’ on the energy companies by making savings. Some had noticed the option of ‘green energy tariffs’ but admitted that price was the only priority for them. They felt that producing and providing green energy was the responsibility of the suppliers.

When asked to compare the similarities and differences between shopping for fashion and energy, predominant trends were that both types of shopping can be stressful however due to the items to be purchased being perceived as ‘needs’ it could not be avoided. The element of ‘bargain hunting’ was one method of counteracting the induced stress, with feelings of ‘getting one over’ on energy companies and retailers. It was agreed that both sectors offered a lot of choice and competition, however this was not always a positive factor with too much choice and competition leaving shoppers feeling confused and unaware of all their potential options. The key differences between shopping for fashion and energy were that (1) there was generally no pleasure element to shopping for energy, unlike fashion; and (2) the lack of a High Street bricks and mortar presence for energy and water companies was viewed as a huge issue for fostering trust in them (i.e. trust in fashion retailers was facilitated by the presence on the High Street). Energy retailers having no physical presence for shopping i.e. no retail outlet can result in a lack of personal approach. Consumers felt reassured when they could go into a physical store and speak to someone in person regarding any problems or questions they might have. The energy and water companies were only available to contact over the phone and online which left a feeling of unease to many shoppers. People would like help with energy saving but would like a more personal approach, tailored to meet their specific needs. With regards to fashion retailers who already had a physical presence it was suggested that they could offer tailoring / alteration services to improve their services. In addition to this extending garment life cycle it was felt that if something had been made / tailored specially to

fit you then it would hold more non intrinsic value and you would be encouraged to wear it more and keep it longer.

2. Partner Concept Feedback

During the partner workshop, delegates were asked to design a concept which could promote sustainability through combining the fashion and utilities industries. Delegates were divided into three groups and each designed a concept: 1. Wash less, Wear more; 2. Pass on Savings; 3. Make it real / Scan your Life. These concepts were presented to the consumer focus groups for participants to feedback on. The Making it Real concept—the idea that overconsumption could be stemmed by more explicitly sharing the social / environmental impacts of consumer choice with consumers—resonated most with the consumer participants therefore this was the concept chosen to expand on for the next stage of research – taking the concepts and making them consumer facing. It was recognised that consumers likely feel detached from the people and processes that bring electricity, gas and water into their homes and put clothes on the shop floor for them to buy. It was reasoned that this detachment in itself might promote over-consumption due to a lack of awareness of the consequences associated with purchasing decisions. It was argued that if retailers could more clearly elucidate how these goods and services are ‘manufactured’, that this could enhance awareness and responsibility for change. It was also recognised that communications (e.g., the metrics used) should be tailored to map to things of personal relevance to the consumers. The commercial partner generated concept to offer consumers the opportunity to ‘Scan their Life’ was, for example, suggested. This would involve providing consumers with a barcode/QR code on their clothes / energy bills which can be scanned using a mobile device, which would then present them with a picture or narrative as to where and how that good or service was sourced and/or transported. Suggestions of how to appropriately affect lifestyle change in order to reduce impact would also be provided.

3. Engaging with Consumers

Taking the information gathered from both the partner workshops and consumer focus groups, the aim of the project was to then devise ways of communicating findings with the general public, especially those visiting retail destinations. The challenge was to use the ‘Making It Real’ concept to promote thoughtful and sustainable consumption in a positive way by both consumers and retailers. This culminated in three consumer facing outputs; a workshop (Put a Better Foot Forward, The Moor retail destination, Sheffield), an interactive installation (Making in Real, pop-up T-Shirt factory, Trinity Shopping Centre, Leeds) and an animated short film (Nothing to Wear? available via YouTube and launched at the Sheffield Shorts film screening, Sheffield).

In November 2014, members of the TRANSFER team were involved in hosting a half-day workshop as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science.⁶ The ‘Put a Better Foot Forward’ workshop was an interactive event designed to promote more conscientious consumption of fashion, focusing on people’s footprints. A number of activities were designed to highlight the backstory to where and how shoes are made; and what impact our shoes have upon environmental, economic and social sustainability. These activities included; a creative thinking exercise where people⁷ thought of innovative ways to make more sustainable shoes, two socio-dramas where people were invited to step into the shoes of people involved in the shoe supply chain and a life-cycle analysis where people were asked to think about the relative impacts of the different parts of the shoe supply chain. The workshop was held at a former Woolworths store at The Moor retail destination in the centre of Sheffield. This store is now being used to host a series of cultural events designed to encourage shoppers back to the high street through the provision of non-retail events and activities.

The ‘Making it Real’ interactive installation was held at Leeds Trinity Shopping Centre (7-8th February 2015) in association with DED and ANTIFORM.⁸ Developing from the idea that overconsumption of clothing is driven in part by a disconnection from the processes that produce the products we buy; this exhibition sought to highlight the backstory to our clothing by showcasing the steps involved in the manufacture of a simple t-shirt. Present at the exhibition was Dr Rob Speranza of the South Yorkshire Filmmakers Network, who shot a documentary style video of the event. This documentary comprises interviews with the academic team, the manufacturing team and some members of the public who interacted with the exhibition and has been used to further promote the message of the installation after the event.⁹

Project TRANSFER also worked with Emily&Anne Animations and Dr Rob Speranza to create a short animated video stemming from some of the key themes arising from the research. “Nothing to Wear?” follows Jasmine, a 20-something fashion conscious individual, on her journey to work. It explores how the pressures of living in a consumerist society can easily make us look past the things we already own and prompt a never ending desire to acquire. The animation can be viewed on the project website (as above).

4. Conclusion

Project TRANSFER was designed to facilitate discussion and knowledge-transfer between academics, industry and consumers in the context of how to sustainably promote sustainable consumption. The aim of the consumer focus groups and industry workshops was to promote discussion and gain an understanding of how people feel about their consumption and shopping habits in

light of sustainability. The consumer focused engagement activities were then designed with the intent of showcasing some of the key results of these discussions.

The first consumer facing activity was the ‘Put a Better Foot Forward’ workshop. This workshop built upon the ‘Making it Real’ theme—the idea that overconsumption might be driven by an inherent disconnection between products and the processes by which they are generated and supplied—that pervaded our stakeholder discussions. The concept was to connect consumers with their clothing by engaging workshop participants in a series of interactive tasks designed to illustrate the social, economic and environmental footprint of our shoes..

The second consumer facing activity—the interactive exhibition at Trinity Shopping Centre in Leeds—similarly built upon the ‘Making it Real’ theme; showcasing the steps, resources and personnel involved in the manufacture of a simple t-shirt. The intention with the installation was not to tell people where to shop or what to buy but rather to get people to begin to understand the embedded costs in the clothing we often take for granted (often because of how cheap it is). In doing so, we hope that we would begin to get people to think twice before making a spontaneous or spurious purchase; to ask themselves ‘is this something that I will value and wear?’ The installation yielded considerable interest and engagement from passing shoppers. Those we spoke to typically bought into the aims and objectives of the project, recognising the importance of making more considered clothing purchase decisions. While it often takes more than the raised awareness of issues and the formation of good intentions to affect change; these things make a good starting point and can be a catalyst for change.

The final consumer facing activity was the production of the ‘Nothing to Wear’ animated film, designed to, again, prompt consumers to consider what they are buying and why they are doing so. Is there a genuine need or is it to fill other social and psychological needs and desires? The animation has met with a good response, receiving in excess of 3,000 unique views on YouTube (correct at the time of publication) and has been positively engaged with via social media. We hope that it will continue to be shared and provide as a reminder for us to be more considerate consumers. Project TRANSFER succeeded in achieving its stated aims. While the project officially ended in March 2015, it has yielded a rich, diverse dataset and a number of legacy outputs, which we hope will ensure continued academic and non-academic impacts into the future.

Notes

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² This is being achieved, in part through an on-going series of programmes, e.g., the Energy Efficiency Commitment (EEC, 2005-08), the Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT, 2008-12), the Community Energy Saving Programme (CESP, 2009-12) and more recently the Energy Company Obligation (ECO, 2012-15).

³ A number of UK High Street retailers now offer schemes where customers can return unwanted clothes to stores for recycling in exchange for store gift vouchers. E.g. 'Clothes for Life', *Monsoon*, Viewed on 18th October 2016, <http://uk.monsoon.co.uk/view/content/tandc-clothes-for-life>; 'Sustainability' *H&M*, Viewed on 18th October 2016, <http://about.hm.com/en/sustainability.html>; 'Shwopping, Ordinary Clothes Made Extraordinary', Marks and Spencer, Viewed on 18th October 2016, <http://www.marksandspencer.com/s/plan-a-shwopping>

⁴ R. Sutherland, et al., 'Teaching a Fish Bowl Tutorial: Sink or Swim'. *The Clinical Teacher* 9.2 (2015): 80-84.

⁵ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.2 (2006): 77-101.

⁶ Core project TRANSFER team in collaboration with Teo Greenstreet and Nick Nuttgens

⁷ For details on the other concepts please see 'Workshop 1', *Project TRANSFER*, Viewed on 18th October 2016, <http://www.project-transfer.com/workshop1/>

⁸ DED Associates Graphic Designers founded by Nic and Jon Daughtry and ANTIFORM a UK based fashion company founded by Lizzie Harrison

⁹ The video can be watched here 'Public Engagement and Impact', *Project TRANSFER*, Viewed on 18th October 2016, <http://www.project-transfer.com/public-engagement-impact/>

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