



Commentary

Trendy or Classic? Increasing Sustainability by Increasing Preference for Style Durability

Hannah Elizabeth Smith* | Karen Page Winterich

Smeal College of Business, Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania, United States

ABSTRACT

Fast fashion clothing typically has a lower price with a shorter lifecycle, resulting in more frequent purchases than traditional fashion. Consequently, consumption of fast fashion has negative consequences for the environment and society. Consistent with the lower price for fast fashion apparel, it is often lower quality and thus has lower physical durability. However, distinct from physical durability, we introduce the concept of style durability, which refers to the timelessness of the design. We propose style durability can increase clothing lifecycle as timeless clothing can be worn for extended periods without being perceived as “out of style”. In this commentary, we identify several factors that may influence a consumer’s preference for clothing with more style durability, or more classic clothing. Specifically, product-level factors such as hedonic versus utilitarian focus and experiential versus material goods may impact preference for greater style durable clothing. Additionally, consumer characteristics including self-concept clarity, self-concept continuity, and consideration of future consequences may impact the extent to which consumers choose more classic clothing. We offer future research questions that can be studied better understand how to increase consumption of style durable clothing and extend clothing lifecycles.

KEYWORDS

conceptual, theoretical, consumer behavior, fashion

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 21 May 2024

Accepted: 23 May 2024

Published: 30 May 2024

I. Introduction

Recent decades have seen large scale changes to the fashion industry, which have had detrimental impacts on the environment as well as on social welfare. Trends are no longer anchored by twice-yearly catwalks or seasonal catalog releases; instead, they are continuously updating. There is a “virtually instantaneous movement of trends,” which gives rise to ‘micro-trends’ lasting for very short periods (Brewer, 2019). Additionally, spending on the latest, trendiest clothing is no longer solely in the hands of the few; fashion is more accessible due to both the growing

middle class globally and slower increases in apparel prices relative to the increases to other consumer goods categories (The Price of Fast Fashion, 2018). The slower price increases within the fashion industry are predominately the result of increasing fast fashion sales (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

Fast fashion refers to those products which are low-cost (in terms of both production and sales) and have been created to capitalize on current trends (Beebe, 2010; Joy et al., 2012; Maiti, 2021). In contrast, slow fashion has a universal appeal, focuses



Corresponding author:

Hannah Elizabeth Smith | hes5407@psu.edu | Smeal College of Business, Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania, United States.

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on timeless designs, and tends to be of higher quality, often making it more expensive (Clark, 2008; Smith, 2003; Fuad-Luke, 2009). Due to these differences, slow fashion and fast fashion tend to differ in physical durability (Sun et al., 2021). However, slow fashion and fast fashion also often differ in style durability, for which there has been little prior research.

Distinct from the garment's physical strength and material quality, style durability pertains to the timelessness of the design (Okie, 2021). Clothes with style durability can be worn for extended periods without being seen as dated or out of style because style durable clothing is not explicitly tied with current 'micro-trends'. We refer to clothes with high style durability as classic, and those with low style durability as trendy.

We acknowledge that distinctions between trendy and classic clothing are often associated with physical durability in the context of fast versus slow fashion. However, these are not mutually exclusive (see Figure 1). Style durability exists independent of physical durability such that clothes can have low physical quality but high style durability. For example, a fast fashion retailer may sell a classic style white shirt or black dress that are high in style durability but low in physical durability. At the same time, a slow fashion retailer may sell a shirt with the season's popular floral pattern or a black dress with a unique cut specific to the current style. These items may have high physical durability but low style durability. Though it is understood that physical durability is important as it may increase length of wear (Gracey & Moon, 2012; Sun et al., 2021), why does style durability matter and how might the preference for style durable clothing be increased?

2. How Style Durability Impacts the Environment and Social Welfare

We propose style durability is an important attribute to increase length of wear and reduce total fashion consumption, which has been increasing over time. At the end of 2014, the average consumer was purchasing 60% more garments than they were in 2000 (United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, 2018), but each item was only being kept for half of the

amount of time. This increase in clothing sales (Smith, 2023) has resulted in an "environmental and social emergency" (United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, 2018). Specifically, the fashion industry is currently responsible for an estimated 10% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions (United Nations Climate Change, 2018), 17-20% of global industrial water pollution (Kant, 2012) and 9% of the annual microplastic losses to oceans (United Nations Fashion Alliance, 2021). Furthermore, fashion, particularly fast fashion, has numerous social sustainability pitfalls, such as unsafe processes causing dangerous working conditions, modern slavery, child labor, and exposure to hazardous substances (United Nations Climate Change, 2018). Literature has explored a variety of ways to mitigate these issues, which can largely be summarized with the 3R principle: reduce, reuse, and recycle (Winterich et al., 2019).

Reducing the quantity of products purchased, and ultimately that are produced, is the first step, which in this case refers to encouraging consumers to buy less clothing, particularly that sold by fast fashion retailers; demonstrated by the Patagonia "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign (Allchin, 2013). Gracey and Moon (2012) reported that if garments' lives are extended by a third, an estimated 20% of carbon, water, and waste from the production of textiles can be saved. Prior research has considered factors that reduce consumption, such as by purchasing higher quality or luxury items, with greater physical durability (Sun et al., 2021). While some consumers may pay this higher price tag when considering environmental and social consequences (Kotler, 2011; Sidhu, 2018), many consumers will not want to pay for higher-priced clothing or will be unable to do so (Bray et al., 2011). We propose that focusing on style durability may be an important opportunity to shift consumers to more sustainable fashion consumption irrespective of consumer budget constraints and environmental consciousness. Specifically, increasing preferences for classic styles may aid in extending the clothing life cycle. Existing research in the fashion literature has found that traditional elements (i.e., neutral colors and cuts of coats) of clothing increases intentions to wear



Figure 1. Physical and Style Durability Matrix

Note: Both style durability and physical durability exist on a continuum and perceptions of each company’s placement may vary as companies often sell both high and low style durability clothing items.

items for longer (Casto & DeLong, 2019). If a stronger preference for style durability can increase duration of use, how can style durability preferences be increased?

3. Factors Influencing a Preference for Style Durability

3.1. Product Level Factors

3.1.1. Hedonic vs. Utilitarian

Recall that style durability reflects classic versus trendy clothing. Nystrom (1928) categorized fashion products into three categories existing on a spectrum; on one end there is ‘fad’ or ‘micro-trend’, lasting for a very short period, and on the opposite end there is ‘classic’, with ‘normal’ falling in between. The cycle for fads is typically very short-lived, however the classic cycles rarely lose their original adopters, nor do they lack new adopters over extended periods (Carter, 2003; Loschek, 2009).

We propose that heightening utilitarian shopping motivations may increase preferences for style durability or classic (vs. trendy) clothing. Hedonic-utilitarian

(H/U) categorization theory proposes that consumer attitudes mainly arise from affective or instrumental motives, forming a bi-dimensional understanding of consumer perceptions and behaviors (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Li et al., 2020). Utilitarian consumption is theorized as being needs-based and goal-directed (Taniguchi, 2019) relating to the need to complete tasks efficiently (Childers et al., 2001; Mathwick et al., 2001). This theory suggests that when consumers shop with a utilitarian focus, they have a more detailed objective, and subsequently more precise requirements that a product must meet. Accordingly, we predict that these shoppers may give greater consideration to length of wear and may include this factor in their criteria for new clothes. We propose this utilitarian focus may result in a stronger preference for classic clothing.

In contrast, H/U categorization theory states that hedonic consumption is based on shopping experience, consumer’s emotional attachment to the prod-

uct or service, and focuses on aspects such as enjoyment, adventure, and the need for surprise (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin et al., 1994; Novak et al., 2003). Hedonic consumption is goal-ambiguous and emotional, with pleasure emerging as an important aspect of hedonic purchases (Moe, 2003; Schulze et al., 2014). When consumers shop with a hedonic focus, they tend to focus on the desirable and fun aspects of shopping, selecting novel items to meet their need for surprise (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). Consequently, we propose consumers may consider current styles rather than length of wear, which may lead them to select trendier items. Based on this rationale, we predict that consumers who have a more hedonic focus may have a weaker preference for classic clothing compared to those with a more utilitarian focus.

We encourage future research to draw upon the bi-dimensional categorization outlined in H/U categorization theory, manipulating either a hedonic focus or a utilitarian focus, and then examining the impact on preference for classic clothing as well as testing the effect on actual product choice. If support is found for this relationship, then marketers could incorporate more utilitarian messaging to encourage customers to select more classic pieces, which may increase length of wear and result in more responsible clothing consumption (United Nations, 2024). Within the current fashion landscape, some retailers employ utilitarian messaging. For example, LANDS' END (2024), may be viewed as promoting utilitarian motivations by highlighting practical features such as comfort and a variety of use occasions for their “Classic Navy Adult Hooded Pullover Sweater”. Alternatively, some fast fashion retailers promote hedonic motivations (e.g., Cider organizes clothing into “moods”, selecting clothing by feeling colorful, sweet, or magic (Cider, 2023). As noted earlier, style durability does not need to be synonymous with physical durability. As such, consumers can purchase more classic pieces from fast fashion retailers. If support for this prediction is found, we suggest all retailers, even those in fast fashion, could highlight utilitarian motivations to encourage the purchase of more classic items. While fast fashion items may still be less sustainable in their production, if they are more classic styles,

they may be worn longer, extending the lifecycle of the product (Casto & DeLong, 2019).

3.1.2. Experiential and Material Goods

Another product level factor is experiential versus material (Goodman et al., 2016, 2019). Though experiential-material theory often employs a dichotomous categorization (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Gilovich et al., 2015; Nicolao et al., 2009), Goodman et al. (2019) theorizes that it is perhaps better understood as a continuum. On one end of this continuum, there are entirely material purchases. These items are tangible, and consumers purchase these with the intention of acquiring a physical good. Solely experiential products are purchased with the intention of experiencing something intangible lasting for a short period (Gilovich et al., 2015; Nicolao et al., 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Goodman et al. (2019) explains that there are also those purchases which lie somewhere in between these extremes. For example, purchasing a swimming pool or home theatre were found to be perceived as both material and experiential (Weingarten et al., 2022). It is possible that a purchase may be perceived as more experiential or material, based on the reasoning for its purchase; a bottle of wine bought to share with friends at a dinner party may be seen as more experiential than one bought for home consumption (Goodman et al., 2019).

We propose that when products are positioned as more experiential, consumers may prefer trendier items because experiential products are inherently linked more closely to a shorter period. Alternatively, products positioned as more material may encourage a consumer to consider keeping the item for an extended period. Furthermore, drawing from construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), material purchases made by consumers are likely more concrete and low level (vs. the abstract nature of experiential purchases). These distinctions in construal may lead consumers to focus on objective features and functionalities such as consideration of length of wear, increasing preference for classic clothing. Future research could use experiential-material theory to manipulate whether a shopping task is perceived as

more experiential or more material to explore the effects on style durability preferences. For example, focusing a consumer on the purchase of a raincoat for an upcoming trip to Seattle may be viewed as an experiential purchase, whereas focusing on purchasing a raincoat for rainy days could suggest a more material purchase. If results find material positioning increases preference for classic clothing, this positioning could be used by fashion brands to promote the purchase of more style durable items.

3.2. Consumer Related Factors

3.2.1. Self-Concept Clarity

Since the democratization of fashion, clothing has been used to communicate one's identity to society (Crane, 2000). Possessions are thought to be an extension of the self (Belk, 1988) as consumers construe meaning from objects, including clothing (Belk et al., 1989). Consistent with this theorizing, social identity theory is an underpinning throughout the fashion literature (Joung & Park-Poaps, 2013). Individuals hold a multitude of identities which they may seek to express through their clothing consumption (Joung & Park-Poaps, 2013). These identities collectively result in the self-concept (Isaksen & Roper, 2008), which varies in structure and clarity across consumers (Campbell et al., 1996; Savary & Dhar, 2020).

To understand the self-concept and the way this differs amongst people, academics have developed several theories. First, we examine the theory of self-concept clarity, which refers to the extent to which an individual's beliefs about the self are "clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable" (Campbell et al., 1996, p.141). Self-concept clarity theory posits that individuals with low self-concept clarity have "unstable, uncertain, or less coherent self-concepts" in comparison to those clearer in their self-concepts (Savary and Dhar, 2020, p. 888). Low self-concept clarity has been associated with low self-esteem (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996; Smith et al., 1996), which is an important motivational driver for consumption of clothing and other symbolic goods (Bannister & Hogg, 2004). Additionally, individuals with low self-concept clarity have been found to internalize other people's expectations more, particu-

larly regarding their appearance (Vartanian, 2009). As such, we theorize that because low self-concept clarity consumers tend to put greater emphasis on other's opinions, they may focus on trendy clothing that is currently fashionable to meet others' expectations. In contrast, self-concept clarity theory suggests that consumers with higher self-concept clarity may be more likely to identify clothing that reflects their self-concept with less focus on others' expectations. Accordingly, they may be less influenced by trends. Therefore, we predict that the higher the self-concept clarity, the greater the preference for classic clothing.

Future research could explore the role of self-concept clarity on classic clothing preferences through manipulation and measurement, using techniques such as those used by Campbell et al. (1996), Hogg et al. (2007), and Morrison and Johnson (2011). If support is found for this prediction, marketers could seek to heighten self-concept clarity to promote purchase of more classic clothing. This approach may be particularly effective when external events impact one's self-concept clarity. For example, starting a new job can weaken one's self-concept clarity, because a person may view who they will be at this workplace as very different from who they currently are (McIntyre et al., 2014). Clothing companies could attempt to strengthen the clarity of the self-concept by highlighting that business wear can reflect "your true self" (i.e., minimizing the differences between the person they currently are and who they will be at work), as done in Next's "Suit Camp" advertisement (Next, 2017). By trying to increase the consumer's self-concept clarity, marketers could reduce the likelihood that consumers choose trendier items that they may have selected with lower self-concept clarity.

3.2.2. Self-Concept Continuity

Clarity is one way in which individuals differ in their self-concept, however another self-concept theory may also be relevant to style durability preferences. Self-concept continuity refers to the belief that one's own identity stays constant over time (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; Hershfield, 2011; Parfit, 1984; Sedikides et al., 2008). Self-concept continuity theory posits that those who strongly believe that identity

stays constant are referred to as having high self-concept continuity. Alternatively, those who do not perceive their self-concept to be stable are referred to as having low self-concept continuity (Rifkin & Etkin, 2019).

Self-concept continuity has been demonstrated to have a variety of consequences on consumption and other consumer behaviors, such as consumer well-being, financial decisions, and choice of symbolic products, including clothing (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; Hershfield, 2011; Urminsky, 2017; Urminsky & Zauberaman, 2015). We theorize that self-concept continuity may also impact style durability preferences such that those with high self-concept continuity may purchase more classic items relative to those with low self-concept continuity. Individuals with high self-concept continuity may have a greater preference for classic clothing because they see their current and future self as similar. As such, they may consider length of wear and be less influenced by current trends that may not be relevant in the future. Alternatively, individuals with low self-concept continuity believe that the person they are today is different from the person they will be in the future. For these consumers, they may be more inclined to adopt trendier items that are relevant to the current self.

To understand the effect of self-concept continuity on preference for classic items, research can manipulate consumers' self-concept continuity using methods employed by Rifkin and Etkin (2019) and Hershfield et al. (2012). Support for this proposed effect would identify another method that could be used by marketing practitioners to encourage more classic clothing purchases. Currently, The North Face Back to School campaign, which highlights that the need for a classic backpack is something that will continue throughout many generations, is an example of such a campaign that emphasizes a consistent aspect of one's self-concept for their lifetime (The North Face, 2019).

3.2.3. Consideration of Future Consequences

A third individual difference that we hypothesize will influence the preference for classic styles is consideration of future consequences. Strathman et al. (1994) theorizing proposes that consumers with

higher consideration of future consequences tend to consider the future outcomes, whether positive or negative, of their immediate actions to a greater extent than those with lower consideration of future consequences. Those who greatly consider future outcomes are willing to sacrifice immediate benefits, or deal with immediate and undesirable costs, to achieve desirable future states. The extent to which an individual considers future consequences of current actions has significant impacts on both current behavior and long-term outcomes (Strathman et al., 1994). For example, prior studies have found that emphasizing trade-offs restrains spending (Frederick et al., 2002; Nenkov et al., 2008; Hershfield et al., 2011), suggesting that increasing one's consideration of future consequences increases willingness to make choices that are perceived to result in more beneficial futures.

We propose that consideration of future consequences will also impact preference for classic clothing. Individuals with high consideration of future consequences may consider length of wear and the wasteful consequences of selecting clothing they only wear for a short period while in style. These individuals may therefore select relatively more classic clothing as they may perceive fewer negative consequences of this clothing in comparison to trendier, less style durable items. Alternatively, individuals who do not consider future consequences wish to maximize immediate benefits and do so at the expense of later outcomes. These consumers put more emphasis on the present, which may lead them to select trendier clothes that best represent the current fashion landscape, despite having limited long-term benefits.

Research could explore the role that the consideration of future consequences plays in choosing classic clothing, using manipulation techniques such as those employed by Bartels and Urminsky (2015). Future work could consider encouraging consumers to think about how long they will wear clothing items and what will happen to the garment when they finish using it to increase preference for classic clothing. Additionally, there may be differences between encouraging consumers to think about the positive consequences

of using classic, more style durable items, versus encouraging consumers to think about the negative consequences of using trendy, less style durable items.

4. General Discussion

This article introduces the concept of style durability to the marketing literature to increase responsible clothing consumption through increased length of wear and, ideally, subsequently reducing total clothing consumption. We have proposed several possible factors that may increase a consumer's preference for classic (vs. trendy) items. As detailed earlier, the concept of style durability is distinct from the cost and quality differences between slow and fast fashion.

Literature has previously explored physical durability, such as within product quality and durability in luxury fashion (Sun et al., 2021) or within repair literature, discussing how to increase the life of a product (McNeill et al., 2020; Godfrey et al., 2022). Understanding style durability and how to encourage consumers to consider it is a vital component to encouraging slower, and more sustainable, consumption. The product needs to be more than well-made; the consumer needs to feel it will not go out of style for a long period to increase the duration of use (wear).

We have proposed both product and consumer level variables that may influence consumer preference for style durability or more classic clothing. Further research in this area will be an important theoretical contribution as it highlights a method for changing consumer attitudes and intentions surrounding style durability, contributing to existing fashion and durability literatures (see Table I for a summary of proposed research questions).

4.1. Practical Implications

Due to the high environmental and social costs of fast fashion, it is in the interests of policy makers, marketers, and other business practitioners, to encourage more sustainable fashion consumption. Increasing intentions and attitudes toward more classic items could be a method of influencing consumers to behave more sustainably without directly discussing sustainability or eco-conscious behaviors with consumers. This approach may be important given prior research

has demonstrated that some individuals, particularly those who are less environmentally conscious, will not want to, or will not be able to, engage in behaviors or spend more money on items for sustainability reasons (Bray et al., 2011). As not all consumers are interested in shopping for sustainability, finding more subtle methods to increase preference for classic clothing through product or consumer level factors is essential to responsible consumption. Our current fashion consumption behavior is not sustainable on either a social or environmental level (Brewer, 2019; United Nations Climate Change, 2018). Encouraging people to purchase clothes with high style durability that they may then wear for longer periods would lengthen life cycles without explicitly calling on consumers to act more sustainably. This tactic does not increase the production cost for companies: style durable items have different designs but can use the same materials such that companies could improve sustainability without increasing their spending, a key motivator for businesses (Knowles, 2023).

If there is support for the proposed effects, marketers could use this information when designing in-store or online advertising campaigns, for example by making the shopping experience feel more utilitarian or boosting consumers' self-concept clarity. To be sure, the consumer level factors discussed, such as self-concept clarity, are individual differences. It is not clear how much impact they will have on style durability preferences relative to product or situational factors and whether individual traits can be influenced at the state level enough to impact style durability choice. Our hope is that future research can identify the tactics that may prompt consumers to have a greater preference for classic items such that they may buy items with greater style durability. Of course, one criticism of this research is that, if the effects we propose occur, consumers will purchase fewer clothing items, which may stall business growth. However, we propose sustainable business growth is more critical to both the long-term success of companies and society at large (Bonini & Swartz, 2014). If consumers are buying fewer clothing items by purchasing classic clothing, they may be more

Table I. Summary of Proposed Research Questions

Product Level Characteristics	Consumer Level Characteristics
<p>Hedonic-Utilitarian Do consumers with hedonic shopping motivations choose trendier clothing? Can making utilitarian shopping intentions salient increase choice of classic styles?</p> <p>Material-Experiential Do experiential purchases lead consumers to select trendier styles? Can framing purchases as material increase preference for classic clothing?</p>	<p>Self-concept clarity Does lower self-concept clarity increase preference for trendy clothing? Can marketing techniques to temporarily increase self-concept clarity increase preference for classic styles?</p> <p>Self-concept continuity Do consumers with lower self-concept continuity prefer trendier clothing? Will marketing communications that elicit self-concept continuity increase choice of classic styles?</p> <p>Consideration of Future Consequences Does having lower consideration of future consequences relate to a greater preference for trendy clothing? Can marketers emphasize future consequences to increase preference for classic clothing?</p>

inclined to also purchase higher quality items and have a greater willingness to pay for such items, thereby having minimal impact on the bottom line while substantially reducing the environmental and social consequences of clothing consumption.

Funding statement

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID

Hannah Elizabeth Smith

 | <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9010-6397>

Karen Page Winterich

 | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4190-4036>

Cite as

Smith, H.E., & Winterich, K.P. (2024). Trendy or Classic? Increasing Sustainability by Increasing Preference for Style Durability. *Journal of Sustainable Marketing*, 5(1), 66-76. <https://doi.org/10.51300/JSM-2024-120>

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LUMINOUS
INSIGHTS

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