

Female Consumers' Involvement in Intentional Non-Sustainable and Unintentional Sustainable Apparel Decisions: An Emerging Market Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study is aimed at determining consumers' sustainable apparel involvement in the purchasing or disposing of apparel in an emerging market context (EMC). Consumers in developed countries show increased interest in sustainable apparel behaviour, contrary to emerging markets such as South Africa, which is indicative of the lowest level of sustainable apparel consumption. An exploratory descriptive qualitative research design was used to determine consumers' involvement and was facilitated through eleven digitally recorded small focus groups with female apparel shoppers who make use of a custom-made apparel designers. The findings reveal intentional non-sustainable apparel decisions manifest through eco-uninvolved in-store purchases and once-off commissioned designer apparel orders. Unintentional sustainable

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apparel behaviour is characterised by (1) in-store apparel purchases: signifying quality clothing, observed in the material and stitching, resulting in clothing items worn for longer and handed down from generation to generation, sensitivity to the origin of the garment and (2) apparel disposal behaviour such as (a) keeping apparel as cleaning material and repurposing into wearable apparel; (b) permanent disposal through handing down items and (c) temporary disposal through exchanged items. Applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model, it was possible to explain the lack of elaborated involvement in sustainable apparel practices resembling the peripheral route of the model. Unintentional sustainable practices have not been identified in the South African context, indicating the valuable contribution consumers in an emerging market context (EMC) can make if better awareness is created by the government and the retail sector specifically to address intentional non-sustainable purchasing behaviours in future.

JEL classification: M00, M30, M31, M21

Keywords: Elaboration Likelihood Model, emerging market, apparel, sustainability, disposal, purchasing behaviour

1. INTRODUCTION

To many consumers, sustainability has become an important factor during the purchase decision (Gazzola et al., 2020) as it represents the balance between human activities and the resultant impact of these activities on the natural environment (Sesini et al., 2020). These activities or actions are indicative of what may be referred to as consumers' behaviour towards sustainability. In essence, consumer behaviour is the way consumers react and respond to products and services offered to them (Roberts-Lombard et al., 2022) as a reflection of their thinking and subsequent decisions concerning the product. Sustainable apparel behaviour on the other hand is not a new concept, it not only refers to in-store sustainable apparel purchases but recognises several sustainable fashion alternatives which include green and ethical fashion (Shen et al., 2013), second-hand clothing (Yang et al., 2017), caring for clothing in less impact-intensive ways (Roos et al., 2017) and the responsible disposal of apparel items (Jacoby et al., 1977). During these sustainable actions, consumers may either intentionally rationalise their decisions for behaving sustainably by becoming involved with already existing knowledge on sustainability on which their sustainable decision is based or unintentionally act sustainably without thinking about it and thus not knowing that they are acting sustainably. The problem is that very little is known about the involvement apparel consumers show when engaging with apparel purchases or disposal of apparel. Therefore, sustainable apparel is intended to serve the environment and its people (Dickenbrok & Martinez, 2020) by minimizing the impact of apparel, environmentally, socially and ethically (Rahman & Koszewska, 2020), yet many consumers in an emerging market context (EMC) may not become consciously involved in environmental sustainability when purchasing or disposing of apparel.

Consumers in developed countries have shown an increased interest in recycling (Park & Lin, 2020), ethical fashion (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018) and sustainable fashion solutions (Kim & Oh, 2020; Vehmas et al., 2018; Todeschini et al., 2017; Kozlowski et al., 2018), which is contrary to some evidence that suggests that this is still not the case in EMCs (Park & Lin, 2020). Emerging markets such as South Africa have lagged behind in implementing sustainable consumption behaviour (Schroeder & Anantharman, 2017). As a result, South African consumers have been classified at the lowest level of sustainable apparel consumption behaviour. Hasbullah et al. (2019) suggest that this behaviour is attributed to the irrelevancy of sustainable apparel concepts in [South African] society, a lack of knowledge and a lack of available sustainable

apparel products in the market. Existential factors such as these may signify the low perceived benefit consumers find in purchasing sustainable fashion (Sheoran & Kumar, 2020) and more so for consumers in an EMC. In light of these facts, non-involvement in sustainable apparel purchases or disposal of apparel may be justified. However, currently little is known of EMC consumers' involvement in sustainable apparel purchasing and disposal behaviour and if this behaviour is intentional or unintentional where sustainability is concerned. Therefore, the question this study aims to answer is how involved consumers are in the sustainable purchasing or disposing of apparel products in South Africa as an EMC. It is further questioned what sustainable thinking or elaboration South African consumers show when purchasing or disposing of apparel and what meaning sustainable apparel has to them. Through this exploration, it will be possible to identify the current position of South African consumers towards sustainable apparel and if a lack of knowledge and awareness and resource constraints are contributing factors to their involvement in sustainable apparel behaviour.

Through the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), this study aims to explain the sustainable apparel consumption involvement of consumers from an EMC, specifically South Africa. This model proposes two different pathways (central or peripheral) of elaboration or thought that consumers use when considering a particular concept. The central route resembles a person's critical thinking and high elaboration about a matter (e.g. sustainable clothing) with the true opposite to the peripheral route where little thought is given to the matter or a low elaboration level occurs (Kitchen et al., 2014) as the matter is also of little personal relevance to the person (Manca & Fornara, 2019). The ELM suggests that people vary in their ability and motivation to receive and consider a matter which influences their likelihood of elaboration (Lien, 2001). Therefore, people who have a higher ability and motivation as regards a matter will become involved in the matter through continuous thoughts and elaboration, more so than a person with a lower ability and motivation (Esfahani et al., 2015). Lien (2001) points out that various factors influence the likelihood of elaboration, these include message repetition, prior knowledge, self-referencing, arousal and the media type through which information is communicated. These factors may play an important role in consumers' elaboration and involvement in sustainable apparel within an EMC. By applying the ELM to this study, it will fill the gap in explaining the involvement consumers in an EMC have with sustainable apparel when purchasing or donating apparel. Moreover, Tseng et al. (2016) indicate that there is little research that exists on sustainable consumption models for emerging markets, and even less on sustainable fashion within the South African EMC. A further concern is that the ELM has not been applied to explain consumer involvement in sustainable apparel purchases and disposal behaviour, specifically in an EMC. The purpose of this study is therefore to describe the sustainable apparel involvement of consumers in the purchasing or disposing of apparel in an EMC by using the ELM to explain this behaviour.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Sustainable Apparel Contextualised

Lundblad and Davies's (2016) broad view of sustainable apparel suggests that the concept includes an array of ethical, environmental, social, production and consumption issues, to which Roozen et al. (2021) add organic textiles and fibres. Orminski et al. (2021) opt to contextualise sustainable apparel within the three domains of sustainability (environmental, social and economic), including the production and consumption of apparel. Nonetheless, the fundamentals of sustainable apparel consumption remain true to the ethos of clothing behaviour that is less damaging to people and the environment (Mukendi et al., 2020). For clarification in this

instance, consumption represents the acquisition, usage and disposal (Goworek et al., 2020) of apparel. In light of the fact that current clothing consumption patterns of developed countries are unsustainable (Hur & Cassidy, 2019), sustainable apparel consumption behaviour is suggested as an alternative to improve apparel consumption practices and alter the way in which consumers purchase and use apparel (Jung et al., 2021). In an endeavour to support this proposal, consumers from developed countries are increasingly demanding products with a low environmental impact (Jacometti, 2019) as their interest in sustainable fashion systems peaks (Ertekin & Atik, 2020). Subsequently, some fashion manufacturers have adhered to the demands of these consumers by producing sustainable fashion items (Kong & Ko, 2017) as an alternative to the over-consumed fast fashion apparel option. Although sustainable apparel is an established concept in developed countries, it may not be apparent and obvious to consumers in an EMC, resulting in the lack of involvement in sustainable apparel behaviour within these contexts.

2.2. Sustainable Apparel Consumption Within an EMC

It is well known that consumers from developed contexts show voluntary sustainable consumption behaviour related to an altruistic concern for the environment (De Groot & Steg, 2008) whereby the consumer recognises the effect of their consumption habits on the environment and on broader society (Sigala, 2014), which may be of little concern to the consumer in an EMC. Furthermore, the implementation of sustainable consumption behaviour is dependent on the lifestyle, consumer culture and, to some degree, the social pressure exerted on the consumer (Sharma & Jha, 2017) to become involved in sustainable apparel behaviour. The reasons an emerging market such as South Africa shows little sustainable consumption uptake in general and more specifically in terms of apparel are attributed to inadequate infrastructure, preference for affordable products (Sheth, 2011), unemployment, poverty, low to irregular income and extreme socioeconomic population variation (Pels & Kidd, 2012) resulting in the rationalisation of goods and services to satisfy basic needs (Quoquab & Sukari, 2017) rather than consideration for the environment. Subsequently, the resource-constrained environment of an EMC (Nkamnebe, 2011) becomes a favourable destination for unsustainable apparel production (Cimatti et al., 2017) with very few policies and government regulations in place to govern sustainable apparel supply chains (Quoquab & Sukari, 2017). However, due to the differences in resource availability and infrastructure between developed and developing countries (Cantú et al., 2021), low consumer acceptance (Camacho-Otero et al., 2018), low demand and little financial benefit to businesses (Tumpa et al., 2019), the adoption of a circular apparel economy in EMCs is challenging (Patwa et al., 2021). Contrary to developed contexts which regulate and create conditions that encourage circular economies (Cantú et al., 2021), EMCs are characterised by exploitative political barriers and numerous government-owned and government-operated enterprises with monopolistic powers (Pels & Kidd, 2012) that create barriers to the development and implementation of circular apparel economies. As a result, EMCs rely on a domestic consumer market to ensure economic development and stability (Schroeder & Anantharaman, 2017) and less preference is given to building a sustainable product consumption culture that supports sustainable apparel behaviour. In an EMC, these markets need to grow the economy (Patwa et al., 2021) by allowing fashion manufacturing industries, although not necessarily green industries, to set up production establishments that bring about job creation (Nguyen et al., 2020) although this could be to the detriment of the environment and to the sustainable apparel consumption progress in the EMC. In South Africa, many of the local fashion industries closed down due to the import of fast fashion produced at a lower cost by Chinese manufacturers, resulting in job losses and unemployment in the South African apparel industry. Consequently, the South African consumer has been left with very little choice other than to continue with non-sustainable apparel consumption practices as this type of fast fashion dominates the apparel supply chain. Consumers in EMCs are challenged

when it comes to sustainable consumption (Tseng et al., 2016) as consumers' continuous support of unsustainable fast fashion retailers is indirectly supporting the environmental degradation associated with the fashion industry (Zhang et al., 2021). However, it is not certain how involved South African apparel consumers are in thinking or elaborating on sustainable apparel consumption when purchasing apparel, and how this involvement influences their purchase and disposal apparel decisions.

2.3. Sustainable Apparel Awareness Within an EMC

In developed contexts, a gradual shift away from fast fashion to sustainable and socially responsible fashion has spurred on fashion manufacturers to create awareness and demand for sustainable fashion (Kim & Oh, 2020; Khandual & Pradhan, 2018). In-store signage, advertising, promotional campaigns (Di Benedetto, 2017), documentaries, public campaigns, the use of celebrities, political figures (Khandual & Pradhan, 2019) and social media (McKeown & Shearer, 2019) have been used as agents for sustainable fashion awareness. Of late, apparel labelling (Dhir et al., 2021) and brand associations (Kim and Oh, 2020) have also been used to inform and create consumer awareness of sustainable fashion apparel. However, Cavender and Lee (2018) suggest that although these agents have contributed to increased consumer awareness, messages that could limit fast fashion consumption have not been forthcoming. Through better awareness, consumers have changed their apparel habits and increased their preference for sustainable fashion as an alternative to fast fashion (Todeschini et al., 2017). However, since sustainable fashion awareness is at its nascent stage (Todeschini et al., 2017), it has complicated the progress of sustainable fashion awareness (Peirson-Smit & Craik, 2020) and reduced consumers' ability to make a clear distinction between sustainable products and greenwashing (Di Benedetto, 2017). As a result, sustainable fashion is still not as popular as fast fashion (Khandual & Pradhan, 2019) nor is it earning mass acceptance (Dhir et al., 2021). However, Cavender and Lee (2018) found that sustainable awareness positively influenced consumers' orientation towards slow consumption. According to Shen et al. (2013), awareness must precede the adoption of sustainable fashion if any improvement to consumers' habit of sustainable fashion adoption is to be expected. The ineffective use of awareness creating agents in EMCs may result in consumers' lack of sustainable apparel awareness and ignorance, as Quoquab and Sukari (2017) found to be the case with Malaysian consumers. Consumers' lack of awareness in an EMC can be attributed to poor communication infrastructure to disseminate the information (Sheth, 2011) and create better awareness of sustainable fashion. To ensure successful sustainable fashion awareness, consumers must be able to perceive the long-term benefit of sustainable fashion (Kong & Ko, 2017). To this end, a consumer's decision to purchase a sustainable product often relies on the heuristic process of using a recycled product or purchasing a used clothing item, as the lack of information about sustainability and the relevance of this information to the individual may hamper the purchase decision (Ritch, 2019).

2.4. Disposal as a Sustainable Apparel Practice Relevant to an EMC

In pursuing sustainable consumption, it is not only necessary to consider how much consumers purchase but how they use and dispose of fashion products (Niinimäki & Hassi, 2011). Apparel disposal, from a consumer's perspective is the act of getting rid of clothing that the wearer considers at the end-of-life stage (Laitala, 2014). According to Paço et al. (2021), the act of disposal should also include recycling (disposing of products to be used in the production of new products) or reuse of apparel or textiles (to be used by another owner for another purpose). Jacoby et al. (1977) propose three disposal options which consumers engage with: (1) to keep (includes converting the item to another use), (2) to dispose of the item permanently (to give it

away to family or friends, or donate, abandon, sell or trade the item) or (3) to dispose of the item temporarily (options such as loaning or renting to others). From a production perspective, apparel disposal pertains to inferior quality apparel being disposed of during the production process or the disposal of unsold merchandise by the retailer (Lewis, 2015). Laitala's (2014) synthesis of disposal options identified binning, donating, selling, giving away, swapping or exchanging, and keeping for reuse purposes as the most common apparel disposal practices. Bick et al. (2018) suggest that consumers in high-income countries have a role to play in shopping at second-hand stores and repairing clothing they already own. The disposal practices listed by Laitala (2014) further underpin the notion that second-hand clothing can either be recycled or reused, thus contributing to the circular economy. As second-hand clothing refers to previously owned clothing items showing minimal wear, it is a beneficial option to consumers in an EMC, as this type of clothing is a cheaper affordable alternative to lower-income consumers (Pierce & Paulos, 2011; Sorensen & Jorgensen, 2019) and in many instances, its availability is indicative of an EMC. It could be argued that although the latter (the purchasing of second-hand clothing) is a sustainable fashion option, in an EMC it may not be for the purposes of sustainable fashion consumption, but because of the lower price point. It is not certain if the disposal practices of consumers in an EMC are consciously driving apparel purchases or if their involvement with apparel disposal is motivated without them being aware of their contribution to sustainable apparel consumption.

3. DATA AND METHODS

3.1. Study Design and Sampling

An exploratory descriptive qualitative (EDQ) study was designed through which to obtain forthright descriptions of experiences and perceptions of those directly involved with the phenomena (Sandelowski, 2010), particularly where little is known about the topic under investigation (Doyle et al., 2020). The EDQ design allowed the researcher to recognise the subjective nature of the problem and discover the phenomenon through the different experiences participants have (Bradshaw et al., 2017), thus bringing about a better understanding of their involvement with sustainable purchasing and disposing of apparel. The inductive approach to this study, underpinned within the qualitative descriptive nature of EDQ, facilitated through the exploratory approach of the study, enabled a description of consumers' behavioural involvement with apparel. Purposeful sampling, typical of an EDQ design (Sandelowski, 2004), was used to recruit participants for this study. The inclusion criteria for participating in this study required female apparel shoppers who also make use of a custom-made apparel designer (a local term used to define a popular custom among many female South African consumers who engage a small-scale fashion designer to produce once-off outfits for cultural occasions or special events) to participate in the study. Of importance to this study was the use of a custom-made apparel designer by participants, as custom-made apparel is considered a slow fashion application that participants may either use for this purpose or for other purposes which were explored. Convenience sampling was further used to recruit female participants employed at a university in South Africa who complied with the inclusion criteria.

3.2. Data Gathering

Focus groups which are a recognised data collection method in EDQ (Hunter et al., 2019) provide a coactive process in which participant engagements contribute to the clarification of individual opinions and through which insights about the topic emerge that would not be achieved without this group interaction (Doyle et al., 2020). Furthermore, focus groups allow

the researchers to obtain a broad range of information about the phenomena and are one of the recognised interview techniques associated with EDQ during which structured open-ended questions are posed to the participants (Sandelowski, 2000). Therefore, through the use of focus group interviews, the researchers could explore consumers' involvement in sustainable apparel purchasing or disposing behaviour. Eleven digitally recorded small group focus discussions, resulting in 31 female participants, were held, each being facilitated by an experienced moderator. Each focus group session was directed from an interview guide that contained three key topics for discussion which was to explore: (a) the meaning of the term sustainable clothing, (b) the approach to apparel purchasing and (c) the approach to apparel disposal. To explore the meaning of the term sustainable clothing, the participants were asked the question "when you hear the word sustainable clothing, what comes to mind?". The participants' approach to apparel purchasing was based on a scenario sketched by the moderator which typified an encounter with a denim jacket which attracted the participants' attention. After close inspection, the participant identified the jacket as a product made from recycled jeans. The participants were asked if they would purchase the jacket and what was the reasons for purchasing or not purchasing the jacket. After discussing their approach to this item, they were asked to explain their approach to selecting apparel in a retail environment, if sustainability of the apparel item was considered and what their purchase decision was based on as well as their approach to organic and locally produced branded clothing. To generate discussions about their approach to apparel disposal, as little information as possible was volunteered by the moderator about the meaning of sustainable clothing. The participants were asked to explain their approach to the reuse or repurposing of apparel and their approach to mending and donating apparel. Through these discussions, the participants' shared their experiences which were further probed to gather explanations on the behavioural ideas raised by the participants. The duration of each focus group was approximately 60 minutes. Thematic saturation was used to guide the sample size, allowing the researcher to explore the development of conceptual categories until a detailed understanding of the ideas and thoughts consumers had on the purchasing or disposal of apparel was reached. Five follow-up interviews were held with the participants to clarify their involvement with environmental sustainability when donating apparel. The participants were aged between 18 and 65 years, although age was not a criterion for study inclusion. Before data collection commenced, the participants were provided with a participation sheet and consent form which they could read in their own time, after which they were reminded of the purpose of the study, the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time, that their participation was voluntary, and how confidentiality and anonymity of information were addressed, as well as a reminder that the sessions would be digitally recorded. Thereafter, informed consent was signed. The study received ethics clearance from the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences Health Research Ethics Committee (2018/CAES/114) prior to the commencement of the research.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim, followed by an inductive approach to thematic analysis, whereby an emic stance to the words of the participants was used, particular of an EDQ design (Bradshaw et al., 2017), in search of the salient themes emerging from the data. Thematic analysis is the identification, analysis and reporting of data patterns, allowing for a rich description of participant perspectives (Brawn & Clarke, 2006). Following Kiger and Varpio (2020), the process of data analysis that was applied entailed familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, developing and reconsidering categories and themes, and reporting the findings. Manual open coding was first applied to the data to identify distinct concepts, after which codes were grouped to form categories that best represented the codes. Manual axial coding was then applied to form the categories that best represented the similarities, differences and the relationships

across the categories. Both coding systems also applied in the thematic analysis and referred to as the generation of initial codes and reconsideration of categories and themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) were used to inductively organise and refine the data in order to develop the overall story that was emerging from the data. As a result, broad themes could then be assigned to the categories that were developed from the opinions of the participants. Johnson et al. (2020) stress the importance of rigour and the quality of data in qualitative research. To address these issues, the trustworthiness criteria summarised by Nowell et al. (2017) were applied. *Credibility* was achieved through prolonged engagement with the data and the participants in the study, and *peer debriefing* during code generation and *member checking* during the focus group interviews. The thick descriptive data obtained ensured *transferability* and through a logical, traceable and documented research methodology, *dependability* was addressed, which contributed to the *confirmability* of the data. *Authenticity* was achieved through audio recording and the verbatim transcription of the interviews with quotations specific to the responses of the participants used in the presentation of the data.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Defining Sustainable Clothing Within an EMC

To understand consumers' involvement in the apparel purchasing or disposing behaviour, it was necessary to firstly determine the meaning of the concept sustainable clothing. Findings from these data resulted in four themes, as indicated in Table 1, signifying the participants' general thinking and conceptualisation of the notion of sustainable clothing. Although most participants recognised the term sustainable clothing, it was not a concept that intrigued them or captivated their attention as some indicated that they "*just never read that much into it*" or "*haven't given much interest to...it*" and to which this participant attributes the way in which her clothing purchases are made by explaining:

you buy something, you don't follow that history of it, you just love it, whether it's sustainability or what. It's because you like it....

Different connotations of the concept of sustainable clothing emerged. The one that resembled the concept of sustainable usage and was reflective of refurbishing apparel (Soyer & Dittrich, 2021) was the first theme. In this instance, sustainable clothing meant **rejuvenating clothing**, where useless clothing is converted into new product items (Cassidy & Han, 2013). This is explained in terms of clothing that has lost its fashion appeal when this participant says:

if you can be able to adapt the clothing, whenever you feel like to make it more usable or to make it more modern.....

To this participant, the rejuvenating process is also a creative opportunity to:
change [clothing] into a different design, like if it was a skirt ...it could be a trouser...you can make it whatever that you want.

Table 1

Meaning of sustainable clothing

Theme 1 Sustainable usage	Theme 2 Clothing quality	Theme 3 Disposal	Theme 4 Naturalness
Rejuvenating clothing	Colour fastness	Handing down	Natural fibres
Off-cut material use	Material use and production quality	Functional repurposing	
	Timeless fashion		

Participants further expanded on the sustainable usage of clothing by accentuating their observations of **off-cut material use**, resulting from the construction of garments, when “*they (referring to custom-made apparel designers) take those small pieces and make bags or something so there’s no wasting*” or “*make pillowcases ...a small blanket...*”, thereby noting that “*now you are using it for something else.*” Proactive improvement of apparel design can contribute towards minimising off-cut waste through which surplus apparel products are created (Rukhaya et al., 2021), this principle should be applied by custom-made apparel designers in emerging markets. However, it should be noted that off-cut usage may not necessarily result in the construction of new clothing items.

The second theme represented is clothing quality. Although Harris et al. (2016) suggest that clothing quality and durability is difficult for consumers to assess at the point of purchase, the participants in this study assessed sustainable clothing quality over time. This meant that **materials, including the dye, the caring of the item, the process used to produce the material and the production techniques** used to construct the clothing item were measures of clothing quality, as explained by these participants:

...sustainable clothing for me is that quality you know. I want to buy something that I can wear for the longest time, wear and tear, you know, when I wash it I still want it to look blue, it was blue when I bought it...

Another participant explains:

I remember I had a white dress that my aunt bought for me, I was 14 or 15 and when I was 26 I was still wearing that and it was white....so for me that’s quality. To stay with you for longer....”

Therefore, the participants recognise **colour fastness** as an important measure of clothing quality as further explained.

So if the garment....can’t keep whatever colour it’s been coloured with, then it will also impact on the environment and again, I cannot keep a garment for longer; if each time I wash it, it’s losing its colour.... You know, I’m going to dispose it early...

According to Harris et al. (2016), there are consumers who are prepared to invest in more expensive clothes of which they then take better care, resulting in a longer relationship with their clothing. In particular, one participant explained this principle when she said:

I believe in buying something that I can wear for the longest time...That is why you find that someone wears something that says, dry clean only, but they buy it and then they wash it ... after a certain period it’s worn out, because they didn’t take care of it the way they should... I don’t think they.... even read those labels...

Timeless fashion was further emphasised as a measure of quality clothing because the participants recognised the effect of the fast fashion industry as explained: “*fashion today it’s here, tomorrow its gone*” and “*...changing all the time.*” This participant explains the value of timeless fashion:

If you see me in the same outfit five years.. you will not say she is seen in this old fashion. It still looks good...there are designs that don't change, they are eternal classic and the materials are such that they don't wear with time...

Timeless fashion also gave impetus for having items worn for longer periods, which represented the third theme in the conceptualisation of sustainable clothing as confirmed by Pereira et al. (2021), who suggest that this does not mean that consumers are eliminating fast-fashion items but are rather showing willingness to do so. This participant explains how clothing that can be worn for longer is considered as “*decent clothing*” that “*can last for a long time [because] it's about wearing that garment for longer years, for many years, instead of just that one occasion.*” Therefore, timeless fashion supported by the colour fastness of the garment as well as material used in producing the item contribute to the creation of a timeless apparel item of good quality that can be worn for longer and is therefore more sustainable.

A further expansion of the concept of sustainable clothing resulted in the disposal of clothing as the third theme specifically attributed to the quality of clothing which could then be **handed down**, as this participant explains: “*clothes that you can give to your kids.*” Paço et al. (2021) suggest that the reuse of clothing amongst family and friends should be encouraged as this behaviour would have a significant influence on the effect of clothing production on the environment. Clothing disposal further resulted in the **functional repurposing** of clothing items for household purposes, as this participant explains:

you know when you have those tights that have holes ...you use it as cloth to clean... just use them in the house...when I need a cloth to dust or to skrop[scrub] the floor, I have those...all over the house, you also use ...the shirts you can cut it up to make a press lap [rag]....

Sustainable clothing was further identified as clothing with naturalness, and as the fourth theme of this study, whereby less chemical processing is the expected result of natural fibre use. Kim and Oh (2020) found that female consumers in South Korea, one of the emerging markets, identified eco-friendly textiles as an important factor in building a sustainable fashion brand image. This was an important aspect also mentioned by the participants in this study as seen when this participant says:

like natural fibres....it is coming from renewable sources and you are using less of chemicals or dyes in the processing of that....so I'm thinking natural that you can process without having to go through chemical intensive processes

Evident from the participants' conceptualisation of sustainable clothing within an EMC is the inclusion of sustainable use and disposal features which are synonymous with sustainable apparel in general. Added to these aspects is clothing quality that results in apparel being worn for longer and supported by the material used to produce the apparel item, as well as the production quality of the item. Through participant descriptions synonymous with sustainable apparel, the concept was found to exist although not necessarily through a showing of conscious involvement by participants. This suggests that sustainable clothing behaviour is conceptualised without any reference to the actual context of sustainable clothing, signifying non-involvement specific to the peripheral route of the ELM.

4.2. EMC Consumers' Intentional Non-Sustainable Apparel Behaviour

The next section of the data analysis will present the findings on the purchasing behaviour of the participants in order to determine how involved participants were with sustainable apparel when deciding on purchasing an apparel item, be it from a retailer or a custom-made apparel designer. From the analysis, intentional non-sustainable apparel purchasing behaviour emerged as a theme that represented eco-uninvolved in-store purchasing and once-off designer

outfit purchasing as two different behaviours towards apparel purchases that are not consciously directed towards environmental sustainability (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Intentional non-sustainable and unintentional sustainable behaviour



Eco-uninvolved in-store behaviour

From the findings, it emerged that the participants did not consciously elaborate on sustainable apparel when faced with an in-store fashion item, resulting in an eco-uninvolved behavioural approach (see Figure 1). According to Moon et al. (2015), this behaviour expresses how little consumers care about whether a product is environmentally sustainable. This is explained by the participants who mentioned that they “*never thought about that [referring to sustainable apparel]*”, and that to them sustainable apparel was “*immaterial*” and that “*I don’t really mind. I don’t really care*”, which was a theme, as this participant emphasised: “*I don’t think about those things [referring to sustainable apparel]*” when in store, further adding: “*With me...when I see this particular item, when I like it, I become biased and I don’t think about those things [referring to environmental sustainability] I just want this thing.*” The scope of eco-non-involvement is explained by this participant who says:

it’s me and this garment. I don’t think about it [referring to environmental sustainability] unless I would read the label and it would say it’s...sustainability pillow, or the processes it went to and as much as I’m trying to teach myself on this sustainability and contributing to it, believe me,...it’s me and the garment and how am I’m going to look in it.

Eco-non-involvement may not necessarily mean that the participants are not aware of sustainable apparel, it is rather reflective of their disengagement with the sustainable apparel concept as a result of the overpowering effect of the apparel item being considered, as this participant explains: “*I just look at it and if it looks beautiful and I like it I’m taking it and that’s it.*” Therefore, when in store, the participants little engage with the concept of sustainable apparel as indicative of the route of elaboration.

Eco-unsustainable once-off designer purchases

Intentional non-sustainable apparel behaviour was also found with participants who made use of personal designers to create unique outfits for special occasions, as seen through participant statements: “*going to a wedding, to a party...I needed a specific dress*” (see Figure 1). In these instances, the participants mentioned that these outfits may be designed to follow a particular theme as explained here: “*I realised I’ll go to the wedding and the dress fits the wedding and the theme and after that I wouldn’t wear it*” and that this may be driven by its uniqueness created through a personal designer who assists the participants in being “*uniquely identifiable.*” Subsequently, many outfits which have only been worn once fill cupboards because “*they cannot see me again at the wedding in the same dress, you know*” and also because of their uniqueness which is explained by this participant who says:

...so most of our outfits we only worn them once, I’ve got so many of those in my wardrobe that I just worn them once...because they were designed...

These occasional items are rarely worn again, which is not a sustainable practice, as they were designed for a specific purpose and are not suitable for wearing on other occasions. These types of items are also items participants indicated as being difficult to part with, in terms of donating, upcycling or any other way in which the clothing item can be put back into circulation because:

it’s just so easy to give away the things (clothing) we buy but made by designer, maybe it’s because they are unique.... they have that uniqueness that you don’t want to part with, because you willnever see another person wearing such, specially which they have designed, custom made....

In this instance, the creation of once-off designer outfits within an EMC does not support sustainable apparel behaviour as these items are not worn for longer time periods, which was one of the criteria participants attributed to sustainable clothing. Although once-off designer outfits do not support sustainable apparel behaviour, the quality of these items does render them the potential to be worn for longer time, thus their increased likelihood of contributing to sustainable apparel. The participants in this study did not directly associate custom-made designed items with sustainable apparel. Saricam et al. (2017) found that amongst consumers in Turkey, which is an emerging market, this was also one of the aspects related to sustainable apparel that was less understood or not thought of as having a direct influence on sustainable apparel. Further to this, the participants in this study are not consciously involved in considering the sustainability of these outfits, which may be attributed to a lack of awareness. Therefore, it was concluded that designer outfits also result in participants’ low involvement with the concept of sustainable apparel, which is indicative of the peripheral route of elaboration.

4.3. Findings on EMC Consumers’ Unintentional Sustainable Apparel Behaviour

The findings in this section highlight the theme of unintentional sustainable apparel behaviour that emerged in relation to apparel purchasing and disposal practices. The theme represents the participants’ behaviour derived from discussions on how they purchase and dispose of apparel items from which the unintentional sustainable apparel behaviour emerged (see Figure 1). When considering apparel purchasing, unintentional sustainable apparel behaviour was highlighted through the categories of clothing quality and the origin of the material.

4.3.1. Apparel purchasing

Unintentional sustainable apparel behaviour was evident when purchasing apparel, as the participants were not involved in examining the clothing items in relation to their contribution to sustainability, as seen when participants vehemently responded to whether they were thinking

about sustainability during apparel purchase: “no, it doesn't I just look at it and if it looks beautiful and I like it I'm taking it and that's it. I never think of it, it never crosses my mind.” Thus it was evident that sustainability was not consciously considered during apparel purchases. However, when judging the external attributes of the clothing item, unintentional sustainable apparel behaviour emerged in relation to **clothing quality** (see Figure 1). This was previously identified as an important indicator of sustainable clothing, and also features in eco-conscious Slovenian consumer apparel purchases (Žurga et al., 2015), as it unintentionally emerges as a determinant in the decision to purchase. Therefore, the material from which apparel items are made is an important quality measure as this participant explains:

we sometimes you never know what triggers it, but sometimes it happens, you look at it and you're thinking, feels like there is something wrong with it, and you start having those thoughts in your head but it is not something that happens often but it does happen...you have that feeling....you stop you look at it, is it the fabric?

These participants were also customers of custom-made apparel designers and the quality of the material that was used for these garments was of particular concern to them, as this participant explains: “first the material, it must not look cheap.” When looking at quality outfits from custom-made apparel designers, the participants also took into consideration the quality of the stitching used to produce the garment, as explained: “it's the stitch of a garment, because remember a stitch holds the garment together, so the total outcome of the garment relies on the stitch” and “trim the inner part, the edges of the material...to prevent those threads.”

By considering the quality of the apparel, whether it is a retail item or it comes from a custom-made apparel designer, the participants were suggesting that inferior material and manufacturing would not last as long as good quality material, which is attributed to sustainable clothing. Clothing quality was an important feature that participants looked for when purchasing clothing items, as it was necessary for them to be able to wear the apparel item for as long as possible, thereby ensuring that fewer items with shorter life spans are bought because “that is why I buy quality stuff, I want to wear it for a long, long, long, time” and this is possible through the purchase of “proper clothes that can sustain me for longer” as indicated by this participant. The participants were unintentionally seeking sustainable apparel through quality features in the apparel they were purchasing.

The participants also associated quality clothing with items that remain fashionable for longer because “most of them are classic, ...you can wear them anytime and you can change it with something else”, which is similar to what eco-conscious Slovenian consumers purchase (Žurga et al., 2015). Subsequently, these items can be worn again at a later stage when a resurgence of a previous fashion trend occurs, as this participant explains: “yes, and its coming back now, most of the things that our parents use to wear, its coming back.” Importantly, the quality of the fashion item results in generational wearing, as seen in this instance when a participant explains that “they are good quality....I still have my great grandmother and my grandmother's dresses....the material is so good.” This participant explains the process of generational wearing as items being handed down when she says:

I got a jacket that my mum bought me, now my daughter is wearing it, and it's beautiful, all the time, ...so if it's quality it stays ...my children give it to my children's children....

The quality is further ensured through the care of the garment, as this participant explains:

I watched my grandmother washing clothes. It's how they take care of their clothes in washing them, not too much exposure to the sun and packing them and ensuring that they are out of moths and all that....taking care of your clothes....

During apparel purchases, the origin of the garment was another quality indicator that unintentionally contributed to sustainable apparel when this participant says: “but what comes

to mind, I always look at whether the fabric was imported, whether it is from SA or whether the garment was made in South Africa.” This participant emphasises the extreme to which they question the origin of the clothing when she says:

But I always have the curiosity of knowing where does the material come from that they used....across the borders, ...I'm thinking have they bought this material from China...we hear that most material are produced in China, so ...did they also purchase this one from China?

Although participants did not question the origin of the garment and fabric in relation to them lowering the environmental footprint of the garment by purchasing locally produced garments, their unintentional behaviour indirectly addressed an important part of sustainable apparel. This unintentional behaviour is brought about by the participants' low involvement with the concept of sustainable apparel when purchasing apparel and is indicative of the peripheral route of elaboration.

4.3.2 Apparel disposal

Unintentional sustainable behaviour emerged during the disposal of apparel as participants were not consciously disposing of apparel in terms of its effect on the environment, as these participants explain: “*the environmental sustainability aspect is, it's not the primary focus at the time and I don't think about that. I just think about the people who are in need and trying to meet their needs*” (see Figure 1). Disposal of apparel items is an important part of sustainable apparel behaviour of which Jacoby et al. (1977) propose three options that consumers engage with: (1) to keep (2) to dispose of permanently or (3) to dispose of temporarily (behaviour such as loaning or renting) that will be used to discuss the most salient disposal behaviour in this study.

Keeping apparel items: It is evident from the findings, and aligned to the keeping of apparel items, that the participants unintentionally followed a sustainable practice by repurposing old clothes as these items were considered not worthy for donation and could therefore be used as cleaning materials, as this participant explains when she says: “*you clean with them, a worn out T-shirt. You can't give it away. We use it to clean the house*” and as this participant says:

my old T-shirts I can cut and use as swobs for cleaning, so I know people say these age have that cotton cloth, why do you use your own clothes? But somehow it is my pillowcases...I usually always use them for cleaning the cars and the windows. I throw away when I feel it is no longer suitable for any other use around me.

Repurposing was also applied to creatively generate new wearable apparel items, as this participant explains:

I recently cut my jeans and made them shorts I've also taken a dress that has a ..inner... so it's a shear dress andso I removed the lining and used it as a beach cover...so I do find ways to repurpose my outfits.

However, the repurposing of apparel is subject to the availability of a seamstress or custom-made apparel designer who can convert the apparel item into a new wearable clothing item, as this participant explains that not everyone can do it themselves:

...It's just that ...most of the time it becomes difficult to get people who are willing [to repurpose an item for the participant]. Most of them they just prefer to, the good ones, they prefer to start a garment from scratch. Then others who are willing, you find out that they end up messing up your....it's not always practical.

Although done unintentionally, by actively repurposing apparel items, the participants were contributing to sustainable clothing practices with little involvement in considering their effect on the environment. Items that were kept also included items to be mended in order to ensure

the continued wear of the item. The participants specifically pointed out that “*I have it fixed*” and that such repairs were “*just small things, then I can just do it myself, if it is something that I see is complicated I can take it to them (seamstress or custom-made apparel designer) to do it for me.*” Important to the action of mending a clothing item was whether or not the participants would wear the item after it was mended, and it was apparent that there was no hesitation in wearing such items, as this participant explains: “*you make sure that it is as neat ...like nobody sees it and you forget, I forget, I even forget that its patched, I wear it without a problem*” and this participant who also explains: “*I took it [a skirt] to be tailored, to be fixed nicely and I’m still wearing it.*”

Permanent disposal: Throughout the discussions, the participants reflected on the permanent disposal of clothing through donations, which is unintentionally related to sustainability, in order to ensure that “*it goes to somebody who can be able to make use of it.*” The items are mostly handed down to family members, as these participants mention “*I have a sister...so I always give out for them*” and as this participant mentions:

same with my sister I would give her stuff and she would wear them...there are things that she gave me, because she has not been wearing it for too long....

The generational effect of handed down clothing contributes to a sentimental value attributed to such clothing items, as this participant explains:

But the clothes that I have a sentimental value for me, for example, I had two coats, winter coats that were given to me by my mom, you know, and the other one was given to her by her gran, by her mother so that’s my grandmother, you know so, there was a sentimental value to it. So when I gave those away, I gave them to a relative, to someone that I knew would actually take care of them the same way I did, you know and the only reason I gave them away is because they were small, I couldn’t wear them anymore, but I still loved them and it was something that I couldn’t give to someone I don’t know.

Clothing donations were also made to specific groups of people in need of clothing, as this participant mentions: “*my mom knows lot of people....people they are sufferingI’ll take it to my group...*”, or the clothing items are given to “*other people who have younger cousins who can also use the clothes so I just give them to those people*” as well as to church or community groups mentioned by this participant who says that she takes them “*to the shelter for abused women [or] our community ...sub-group...who takes care of kids...I just put it on the [WhatsApp] group and somebody will contact me to take it to such and such a place.*” These donations were not conscious decisions of sustainable behaviour, but consciousness of someone’s need that the participant could address through clothing donations, as stated here: “*the reason behind giving it out ...you don’t use them anymore and there’s somebody who needs them more than you*” and by this participant who says: “*so, for me it always have that thing that there’s somebody who could be using this thing instead of it lying for the whole year.*”

The participants were very specific in terms of the quality of items that were donated, which meant that clothing items being “*still in good quality*” were donated because “*when you’re giving it to someone, it’s not something that is worn out.*” The value system in which donation is imbedded is explained by this participant who says:

I tell my kids, my mom taught us to say, you cannot give someone something that you don’t like anymore, it must either be that it does not fit you anymore, or you know that person needs it more, but you cannot give them something wrecked, you know it is not right, I mean it is torn and you’re giving it away, really now, no, no...

The distinction between when to donate and when to repurpose a clothing item was very specific in that participants would not donate anything “*that is too worn out*” and would rather cut up clothing items or “*just burn them.*” Clothing was burnt because the participants felt

uncomfortable donating such items, as the quality of these items was not good enough to donate, which is explained by this participant:

I can't have my things that I wear lying on the waste, so I'd rather cut them and I burnt them because I was like even if I throw away these types of pants, I can't throw them away for somebody to pick and wear something that I can't wear myself, so just out of guilt I burnt it.

Although permanent disposal is practised by the participants, this behaviour – as revealed in the conversations held with the participants – is not guided by sustainability consciousness. It emerged that different ways of clothing disposal were explored through processes in which the participants internalised disposal practices and took control of clothing disposal by specifically cleaning out their wardrobe. Some participants used a seasonal approach whereby unworn items within a specific time period were disposed of, as this participant explains:

I do that every season....I've got a rule to say that if I haven't worn something in three months, then changes are...I'm talking about every day work and every day wear. If I haven't touched it for three months, then I'll get rid of it, it's easy for me to clear my closet.

For other participants, the time frame may be longer such as “*something that you don't wear for 2 year, 3 years.*” However, Yan et al. (2021) did not find a relationship between the amount of apparel purchases made every month and the perception consumers had of themselves owning more clothes than they needed, which in turn did not impact on how long they kept their clothes before disposal. The significance of the time frame that the clothing is kept relates to participants questioning the number of times they had worn a clothing item which is correlated to their need to dispose of the apparel item, as this participant explains:

[A]nd I ask myself how many times have you worn this skirt this year. And I would be like, you haven't so you don't need it. Then I will give them away.

In other instances, unworn items were disposed of due to weight gain, as “*they are no longer fitting so I had to part.... And I can't lose weight, [and] I mean I no longer fit in it, no matter how, whatever diet you may try, you no longer going to get there*”, which results in the justification for the participant's disposal of the clothing item. This participant further mentions: “*But now you have to let it go [the clothing item that does not fit].*” Laitala's (2014) literature synthesis of consumers' clothing disposal behaviour found that clothing fit was one of the common apparel disposal reasons.

The participants shared their ability to override their reluctance to dispose of, or part with, clothes they had bought or designed, especially when there was an emotional attachment to the item that made it difficult for them to dispose of the clothing even when confronted with the reality that the item no longer fits them and is therefore no longer of any use to them, as this participant explains:

There are some items that you don't necessarily want to give away, but you realize that they are too small. I'll never ever fit into this, but for the money that I paid for those and ...that it's still gorgeous...so I have that issue ...I have to give it away...it's painful....

Contributing to this resistance, in particular, was the monetary value attached to the clothing item, the significance of this relationship is explained by this participant who says:

[I]t was difficult to give the ones that were expensive, that I bought them with lot of money, so I held them close and very dear to me, so but I had to teach myself by giving my best....

Temporary disposal: Temporary disposal is an underexplored disposal method used by participants, specifically explained by this participant who captured the essence of how it works as seen in this specific exchange situation when she mentions:

There's this one thing that I went to, they call it exchange what?...ladies come on a Saturday, they bring whatever that they like, 3 garments, that you like, then there's a big rail, and we

exchange, you shop, you put yours and another puts, and you shop, oh I like this one and I like that one, that's how we exchange....you put three you get three back....

This disposal behaviour as categorised by Jacoby et al. (1977) emerged through conversations with the participants, and although possibly significant to the South African EMC, it is behaviour that is unintentionally pursued as a sustainability practice. However, Bianchi and Gonzalez (2021) found that this behaviour is synonymous with eco-conscious female consumers in Chile, one of the smallest emerging markets in the Americas. Specifically, this behaviour resembled the participants' non-involvement with sustainable apparel, which follows the peripheral route of elaboration.

5. CONCLUSION

Within an emerging context, consumers' involvement in the apparel purchasing or disposing behaviour seems unintentionally directed at supporting sustainable apparel practices. By applying the ELM, it was possible to inductively explain the lack of elaboration related to sustainable apparel practices that resemble the peripheral route of the ELM. However, these findings are limited to the South African context and may not be transferable to other contexts. Better awareness of sustainable apparel is likely to improve consumer involvement in sustainable apparel behaviour in an emerging market context, as this will lead to purposive elaboration and consciousness in apparel purchases and disposal. Unintentional sustainable apparel practices overlap with what consumers in an EMC think sustainable apparel means, such as addressing sustainable usage, insistence on quality clothing items, items being worn for longer, disposal practices and the usage of natural materials. Although consumers in an EMC are not able to contextualise these concepts within the sustainable apparel field, they are to be commended for their decisive behaviour which has indirectly contributed to sustainable apparel. Education and awareness about sustainable apparel practices need to be supported by governments, retailers and custom-made apparel designers in EMCs to ensure that consumers are able to make meaningful contributions that signify their involvement in improving their sustainable apparel behaviour. Apparel purchases and disposal practices will allow consumers to find purpose in their purchasing behaviour, as they can then relate these behaviours to them making more informed decisions about environmental sustainability. More research is needed to understand the impact that consumer education and awareness will have on sustainable apparel behaviour in the South African EMC. In light of the exploratory nature of this study, demographics such as age was not used to classify the behaviour of consumers in relation to their intentional and unintentional sustainable apparel purchase and disposal behaviour. Future studies of a qualitative nature may want to consider establishing the age groups particular to intentional and unintentional sustainable apparel purchasing and disposal behaviour, which may identify the target markets for consumer education programmes. Through this study, consumers' involvement in sustainable apparel behaviour could be described, thereby giving further insight into already existing sustainable behaviour which consumers did not consciously relate to sustainable practices. However, the findings of this study are limited by the qualitative exploratory approach to apparel which may not yield the same behavioural involvement where other product categories are concerned and are in need of further investigation. The findings from this study can be used to support and encourage sustainable apparel behaviour in South Africa, as it is underemphasised and not receiving the same amount of attention as the recycling of plastics, paper and glass receives. This attention to sustainable apparel behaviour will improve consumer awareness and involvement in the sustainable purchasing and disposal of apparel items, in South Africa in particular and in EMCs in general, by enabling consumers to make more meaningful contributions to environmental sustainability. The fact that this study is limited to the intentional and unintentional sustainable apparel purchasing and disposal behaviour

of South African consumers in an EMC does not make it representative of all EMCs. Future research may find value in duplicating the study to determine if other EMCs have similar or the same sustainable behavioural involvement.

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