

Less is more (degrowth) – focusing on durability to consume and produce less fashion items.

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Introduction

The fashion industry, globally, continues to be criticized for its negative environmental and social impact (Bryges, 2021). One of the main reasons for this criticism is because consumers purchase too many items with a limited duration, which are discarded rapidly.

Along with overconsumption is the obvious overproduction and inexpensive items, mostly made from synthetic materials by underpaid employees from developing countries. There seems to be a tremendous opportunity to improve the environmental and social impact of the fashion industry by building a case that could motivate both consumers and producers to buy and make less, valuing degrowth instead of growth. In other words, less is more.

From an ESG (Environment, Social and Governance) perspective, degrowth in the fashion industry may seem like an interesting proposition. Producing and consuming less fashion items should result in less waste with less harmful chemicals impacting the planet. In addition, with degrowth, a higher paid workforce could be trained to work on fashion items with higher quality production and materials. However, notwithstanding the beneficial environmental and social impact of degrowth, from a financial perspective, a degrowth strategy may seem unattractive for producers, who financially benefit from increased volumes – or at least it is believed so. A degrowth strategy may also seem less attractive for consumers that believe a wider choice of items provides an opportunity to purchase low-cost items, resulting in financial savings.

The objective of this research project is present an argument suggesting that if less fashion items were consumed and produced, then both consumers and producers could in fact gain financially – these financial benefits could add to an effective ESG strategy along with environment and social benefits.

Background

To help develop this argument, we further explore the concept of durability and we explore how a better communication about the different facets of durability may highlight the financial benefit of degrowth for both the consumer and the producer *of* fashion items. To motivate our research objective we asked 78 participants to answer questions regarding fashion items. We received 50 responses. Most of the responses confirmed that the participants held on to their items for mostly emotional reasons such as anniversaries, or memories of vacations or items previously owned by family members.

Almost all the participants had no idea about the production process, or the labour involved, and a few mentioned the material content, but surprisingly this was not important. Some kept the items for functionality. But what was predominant was the participants all had something they liked, in other words they had a relationship with their fashion items. This is consistent with the research by (Neto and Ferreira 2023)

The following are some examples from our participants.

Participant 1 :

Purchased a coat and held it for 4 years because the item was considered timeless. It was only sent to the drycleaners for cleaning because it was considered important.

Participant 48:

Purchased a shirt 2 years ago in a frippery and he is keeping it because it reminds him the vacation he was on when he bought it. Knows that it is 100% cotton and knows nothing about who and how it was made.

Participant 26

A bag that was purchased in about 2000 by her farther and then given to her mother and then passed down.

Participant 28

Bought a black Channel bag and I have kept this because it belonged to my grandmother as well as being part of the history of Channel, I think the material from sheep leather and it is maybe made by hand

Participant 44

It is made from silk, and I believe the labour was quite inexpensive compared to the price. I have no idea of the origin or how it was made.

These preliminary results suggest that producers could benefit by communicating a better story to consumers to build an emotional bond with a fashion item. This could provide producers the opportunity to increase their selling price and reduce the cost of quantity (the concept of value over volume used in the fashion industry). In turn, consumers could buy items that had a more compelling story better story, resulting in a stronger emotional bond by consumers. The consumer could then be motivated to buy fewer items, resulting in overall cost savings. The preliminary results of this study offer a new financial perspective to degrowth, showing that less may be more.

To add to these preliminary results from our students, we looked to the literature for insight on the concept of durability in the fashion industry. Vanacke et al. (2022) present a literature review to conceptualize different dimensions of durability in the fashion industry. They refer to the concept of upstream and downstream, producers and consumers. The authors claim there is an important lack of consensus on the concept of durability in the literature, arguing that the durability of products should also include the resilience of a product and that both durability and resilience have intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. Intrinsic value is defined as features of the fashion item that could be traced to the actual item such as the wear and tear of material. The extrinsic dimensions instead include concepts of durability outside of the item's features such as fashion trends as well as emotional and immaterial influences of a product.

The lifecycle is then discussed from downstream to upstream, and included in the life cycle are the different stages such as the design, raw materials, production, distribution, use and end of life. The authors claim that sellers focus most of their durability on physical attributes (intrinsic) and emotional attributes (extrinsic). Vanacker et al (2023) continue their study on durability and find that durability is the result of an interaction between the garment and its

changing environment, where people are the key factor behind durability by assuring proper care and repair of items.

Jacobs (2022) cites Orsola de Castro, founder of Fashion Revolution and author of *Loved Clothes Last* also stresses that the solution for durability of fashion items is to extend the life of garments by buying secondhand and repairing our clothes. She also stresses the importance of washing clothing less and with less heat. Orsola de Castro claims that we need our culture to wear the same items over again and care for them – she says how it is about developing a relationship with our fashion items (learning to repair an item may help us develop such a relationship).

Other researchers develop the concept of relationships with our clothing through interpersonal love-theory (Neto and Ferreira, 2023). The authors compare our relationship with clothes as similar to relationships. The characteristics of interpersonal relationships are compared to our relationship with clothing and what makes us keep clothing versus discarding clothing. Interestingly the results of interviews suggest that the same characteristics that determine a successful, happy relationship between two parties help to explain the relationship we have with our clothing. In other words, what causes relationships to fail could also be used to why we discard our clothing. The same reasoning is used to compare successful long-term relationships with keeping clothing for a longer period. Moreover, the results encourage clothing designers to consider clothing designs beyond the usual clothing attributes.

This is consistent with Kim and Sullivan (2019) who say that by attaching emotions to brands, (emotional branding), sales could be increased by adding emotional branding strategies, including storytelling. Sun et al (2021) show that durability is as important as price for clients and that marketers of fashion items should be promoting the durability of fashion items.

From the production perspective less is also more. Recent trends in fast fashion have shown that companies that provide a wide variety of low-cost items is not necessary a profitable approach. The recent state of fashion highlights that assortment complexity (large inventories with different sizes and colors – SKUs) at low prices could cause companies to be less flexible and less profitable. There seems to be a benefit for companies to hold less inventory and less variety (State of Fashion). Overstocking is a problem and the problem seems to cause price discounting instead of focusing on value over volume with less discounting.

The above-mentioned results from a class survey and our review of the literature on durability motivated our research objective to deepen our understanding of what items consumers keep for a durable period of time and for what reasons ?

Methodology

To answer this research question, three research assistants each booked ten people from their network with a wide variety of demographic characteristics to have the widest variance possible of potential interviewees. All 30 potential participants are waiting to be interviewed by two other research assistants, who both have an extensive experience in the fashion industry. The two research assistants will base their interviews on the interview guide presented in annex 1. The interviews will then be transcribed by another research assistant. The two main researchers on this project will code and interpret the interview transcriptions.

Anticipated results from additional interviews

It seems that not only is there a focus on durability from a consumption and production perspective, but a less-is-more philosophy is not only environmentally and socially but may also be more economical for both producers and consumers. The initiative of assuring durability in fashion may need to involve a multidisciplinary team since durability touches so many areas.

Our initial survey results suggest that it may first require that a consumer becomes emotionally attached to a fashion item. This emotional bond may need to be designed into the product by producers by understanding what motivates clients to bond emotionally with products. Our additional research is required in order to explore further the area of what motivates clients to keep items longer and then work backward to establish the value of durability and how to communicate this value to both consumers and producers of fashion items.

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire

Demographics:

How old are you?
What is your gender?
What is your occupation?
What is your yearly income?

Context:

Think of one or some fashion items that you've had in your possession for sometime and for whatever reason, don't see yourself getting rid of. Please briefly describe what that item is.

1. How long have you possessed this item?
2. Why did you buy this item or why was it given to you?
3. What was the cost (\$) of the item?
4. Do you think the value of this item has risen or fallen?
5. Please describe any reparation and conservation efforts that you have put into your item (time, cost)?
6. Why have you kept this item? (really elaborate on this one and ask follow ups)
7. For what reason would you ever get rid of the item? How would you dispose of it?
8. Do you know what materials were used to produce your item?
9. Do you check care labels for materials when shopping?
10. Do you know any information about the craftsmanship or production of this item?
11. Are the materials and manufacturing processes important to you?
12. Do you have any concerns about the fast fashion industry?
13. If you were able to know who made your items and in what environment, do you think your consumer behavior or opinions would change?
14. Do you have a preference for locally made items or items from developed countries?
15. Would you be willing to pay up to 20% more per item for production transparency and or local production?