An end to fast fashion? Consumer-focused, sustainable alternatives

Rapidly changing fashions increase the production and consumption of textiles and clothing. According to Finnish researchers, more sustainable production and consumption of clothing could be achieved if consumer values are used to rethink design and business strategies. For example, increased personalisation of clothing could increase consumer attachment to products.

Despite improvements in the environmental impacts in the manufacture of textile and clothing over the last 25 years, the overall volume of production and consumption of these products has increased. The relocation of manufacturing from Western countries to Asian nations and more efficient production has reduced the cost of clothing and textiles, but this has had the unintended consequence of increasing consumption and counteracting some of the environmental benefits of new manufacturing technologies.

In addition, the fast cycles of fashion and deliberately planning products to have a limited lifespan have shortened the life cycle of textiles and clothing. Garments have become cheaper, the quality reduced and clothes are typically worn for only a short time before disposal. Although reuse and recycling of clothing has also increased, this only partly offsets the increased levels of textile consumption, the proliferation of textile waste, and the environmental and social impacts, (such as where and how fibres are cultivated) associated with higher volumes of textiles and clothing production. However, the EU Ecolabel for textiles is another way for consumers to select products with better environmental performance.

To help address the problems in the fashion industry, this study explored different design strategies that increase the lifespan of textiles and clothing by making the consumer the centre of the innovation processes. It argues that innovative thinking about how consumers experience and value textiles and clothes is needed for more sustainable production and consumption.

For example, the use of a product could be extended if it is designed to be personalised. This would allow consumers to develop an emotional attachment with the garment or textile and can be achieved by mass customisation of products using fast digital manufacturing technologies that enable consumers to select from a variety of styles and colours to design their own look. Digital textile printers, embroidery and laser cutting machines can design products tailored to an individual’s specifications.

The manufacture of ‘halfway products’, for example, kits that offer consumers the opportunity to creatively assemble (and repair) the product could also increase attachment and usage, as could clothing designed with detachable parts that can be customised by the consumer. In addition, designers can co-create products with consumers to increase attachment to the product, for example, through the internet, with consumers making the final design decisions. Services that focus on consumer needs can also be used to extend the lifetime use of textiles and clothing and postpone product replacement. For example, high-quality garments that can be used in renting, leasing, lending or sharing schemes; and services that modify the garments can all be offered. New business opportunities could be found in this switch to a services-orientated economy; manufacturers can offer higher quality garments, increase customer satisfaction and extend the use of the product.

Online questionnaires were used to assess consumer opinions about reducing consumption and the environmental impact of the fashion and textiles industry in Finland, and were completed by 341 respondents. The respondents indicated that they are concerned about ethical consumption and the environmental impact of textiles and clothing across their lifecycle and were interested in new approaches to design textiles and garments.


Contact: kirsniinimaki@aalto.fi

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