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Marilyn Delong

University of Minnesota, mdelong@umn.edu

Mary Alice Casto

University of Minnesota, mcasto70@hotmail.com

Yoon Kyung Lee

University of Minnesota, pollinallee@gmail.com

Seoha Min

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, s_min@uncg.edu

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Sustainable Clothing from the User's Perspective

Marilyn DeLong, Mary Alice Casto, Yoon Kyung Lee, University of Minnesota

Seoha Min, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

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Introduction. Disposing of garments has become a major issue in the United States since 14.3 million tons of textiles were dumped in landfills in 2012, which represents almost 6% of all landfill space (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2014). This phenomenon has accelerated as the number of fast fashion stores has increased. Birtwistle and Moore (2007) explained how fast fashions offer trends that change quickly and generate a “throwaway fashion attitude” in the consumer, which disregards the importance of recycling (p. 211). It is worthwhile to explore how users perceive their use of clothing since their perspective involves ways to continually find new value in their experience of the clothing they wear. The purpose of this study is to explore sustainability through the user's perspective as to their use and retention of clothing.

Literature Review. 1) *Sustainable Concept in Fashion Movements.* In their conceptualization of sustainability, design, and consumption, Dobers and Strannegard (2005) conclude that sustainability must be perceived as intertwined with social processes such as fashion, identity, and identity construction (p.324). In this sense, co-design is not just about up-cycling from the perspective of the design or the designer, but also will involve the user's perspective in exploring ways to continually find new value in clothing they wear. The fashion industry's current emphasis on the fast fashion business model, which emphasizes frequent purchase and disposal of inexpensive clothing, further exacerbates not only environmental problems but the user's perception of the value of clothing (Joy et al., 2012). An alternative is the slow fashion movement which involves the user knowing: where materials are sourced and how clothing is made; that clothing is of high quality; that workers are fairly paid and protected from human rights violations; and that the care and disposal of the garment is environmentally friendly (Fletcher, 2014). 2) *Favorite and Long Wearing Clothing.* One possible strategy to slow down product life cycles is to study peoples' experience of the garments they use and own (Fletcher, 2014). Niinimaki and Armstrong (2013) explore various attachments to categories of clothing based upon their belief that encouraging person-product attachment postpones disposal. Exploration of response to specific extended wear clothing is needed.

Methods Users' experiences with specific extended wear clothing are explored through interviews with 20 women over age 50. Participants were selected based upon their responses to a survey. Recruited from two urban areas in the United States and South Korea, they were initially chosen based upon contrasts on five dimensions of national culture which are “Power Distance,” “Individualism/ Collectivism,” “Masculinity/ Femininity,” “Uncertainty Avoidance,” and “Long-/Short-Term Orientation” (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011). Interview questions explored reasons for the extended wearing of the garment selected in the survey, such as characteristics of long wearing garment; specific situations of wearing (frequency, public,

private events); changes in the way it was worn or altered over time. They were asked: what would be reasons for discarding this extended wear clothing? Photographs were taken of specific garments participants had kept from 10 to 40 years. Even though frequency of wear shifted over the years, all garments chosen by users were still maintained as part of their working wardrobe.

Results and Discussion Themes from the interviews included: extended wear means good quality and versatile in wearing; body size has not changed instrumentally so garment still fits; when purchased the garment expressed the wearer's personal style and continued to do so; the garment accentuates favorably perceived figure attributes while disguising perceived figure flaws. Alterations ranged from relining a coat or jacket to hemming. While several selected complete ensembles, many selected one item explaining how it was worn differently from the way it was purchased or was combined with up dated clothing items. Frequency of compliments from family and others on the attractiveness of the garment when worn was also mentioned.

Conclusion Though the users originated from two cultures contrasting in key dimensions, participants' responses generally were more similar than different in how they related to favorite and long wearing items of clothing. The majority of users, in both countries, continue to wear garments that still meet both their utilitarian and aesthetic dress needs. Responses included clothing: made the user feel good and happy, was comfortable both physically and emotionally, continued to be stylish, and attractive. Users typically located the ability to meet these needs in the formal attributes of the garment design: how it was cut; the fabric or material; the color; and silhouette. Some users also had associated memories of a particular notable occasion for which the garment was purchased or if a gift, memories of the person who gifted the item.

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