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Hyejune PARK

Oklahoma State University, june.park@okstate.edu

Cosette M. Armstrong

Oklahoma State University, cosette.armstrong@okstate.edu

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Defining Collaborative and Sustainable Apparel Consumption: Laying the Groundwork for Empirical Investigation

Hyejune Park and Cosette M. Armstrong
Oklahoma State University, USA

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The sharing economy allows people to “share” otherwise underutilized resources ranging from everyday goods (e.g., cars, toys, clothes) to non-product assets (e.g., space, skills) for monetary or non-monetary benefits, mainly through the Internet (Belk, 2014). This emerging economy has been partly fueled by a growing concern over the ecological and social impacts of consumption, because sharing resources is considered more sustainable than buying and accumulating. The apparel industry has been plagued by sustainability concerns due to its detrimental impacts on the ecological environment and society. Thus, the sharing economy may offer value through sustainability and address the environmental and social challenges facing the consumption of textiles and apparel products. Apparel businesses leveraging the sharing economy, such as clothes-swapping (e.g., Yerdle), renting (e.g., Rent the Runway) and apparel resale businesses (e.g., Tradesy) have begun to emerge in recent years. However, academic research on “sharing” consumption (collaborative consumption in this study) in the context of apparel is extremely limited. Further, the terminology and definitions of theoretical constructs has not been adequately formalized to facilitate consistency in empirical investigations, which are needed to understand these emerging phenomena. Therefore, this study aims (a) to develop a theoretical framework of collaborative apparel consumption specifically articulating the evaluation of the potential sustainability of the various consumption modes and (b) to identify viable proposals for future research in this area with relevant research propositions.

A metatheory approach was utilized to analyze primary studies for the implications of their theoretical orientations and to propose a series of research propositions. This study builds on the framework of multilevel consumption (FMC) that separates the consumption modes (possession and access) from the consumption object (Chen, 2009). FMC challenges the traditional presupposition that personal ownership is the only way to establish a relationship with an object and explores the impact of possession and “access only” depending on different consumer desires. Researchers (e.g., Belk, 2014; Bhardi & Eckhart, 2012) have also frequently asserted that engaging in collaborative consumption may transform the consumer’s relationship with the product, with the relevant others who are involved in the sharing scheme, and with the service provider or organization, where applicable, when contrasted with traditional personal ownership. Therefore, the FMC in this study has been adapted and expanded to explore a wider range of factors embodied within these three focal areas: consumer-product, consumer-consumer, and consumer-organization relationships.

In exploring the concept of collaborative consumption, this paper is solely focused around collaborative consumption as defined by Belk (2014): “People coordinating the

acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation” (p. 1597), which may include, trading, bartering, or swapping activities, where giving and receiving may include non-monetary exchange. In a comprehensive analysis of current apparel consumption modes that align with this definition, we find that two distinct consumption modes are highly relevant to the context of apparel. One is use-oriented only and involves the access to or utility of a material good by a customer (Reim, Parida, and Örtqvist, 2014) while the other mode involves the personal ownership of a redistributed, second-hand good (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Notably, neither consumption mode necessarily involves the production and sale of a new material good. We add this categorization to the framework, labeling each of these consumption modes utility-based non-ownership and redistributed ownership respectively. *Utility-based non-ownership* consumption modes include online apparel renting schemes where personal ownership is absent, and therefore, the product is not fully consumed, though the duration of access may vary but is defined (Reim, Parida, and Örtqvist, 2014). The *redistributed ownership* consumption modes include online apparel consignment, auctions, resale, or swapping in which used goods become owned once again to be completely consumed, and the access period is undefined (Botsman & Rogers, 2010).

To conclude, this paper will illustrate the developed framework that explores these two major Internet-supported consumption modes (utility-based non-ownership and redistributed ownership) manifest in an apparel context using real industry examples, and then explore the implications of each consumption mode and business model for the consumer’s relationship with the product, peers, and organizations involved in these sharing schemes. This exploration highlights key factors that should be scrutinized for evaluating the potential sustainability of collaborative clothing consumption. Some examples of the primary factors that emerged from the literature are the time that a good is utilized, sociality (anonymity vs. communality experienced during consumption), formality/institutionalization manifested in consumption, and social capital that may be fostered via collaborative consumption. These factors and related attributes relevant to each relationship are identified via a systematic content analysis of the literature. Finally, this paper will conclude with a series of research propositions for future research, which beg investigation. These propositions are framed based upon the aforementioned three focal relationships.

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