

Feeling good by wearing sustainable: Advancing the well-being paradigm in sustainable consumption practices

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# **Feeling good by wearing sustainable: Advancing the well-being paradigm in sustainable consumption practices**

## **Abstract**

Consumers are paying more and more attention to the negative effects of their consumption choices, and they are increasingly adopting sustainable consumption practices. Previous research has shown they are driven not only by altruistic and ethical motives, but also by the need to feel good. Through the perspective of individual well-being, this paper aims to explore and identify the main elements underlying consumers' sustainable practices related to fashion products. A qualitative study based on the photo elicitation technique was developed. Findings showed three main categories through which consumers experience well-being as a result of sustainable consumption choices for fashion products: positive emotions and affective reactions; consumer value and self-enhancement; search for meaning. Conclusive considerations position our findings in the current theoretical debate and provide interesting insights for future research.

*Keywords: sustainable consumption, psychological well-being, fashion industry*

*Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics*

## 1. Introduction

Recent research shows that when making purchasing decisions, an increasing number of consumers take into account how products are made and marketed (e.g., Grappi et al., 2017; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Consumption decisions can be driven by ethical motivations (Hoffmann & Hutter, 2012; Klein et al., 2004), leading to sustainable consumption behaviours. Sustainable consumption, as a set of actions aimed at reducing negative impacts of consumption choices, is a long-studied phenomenon in the marketing field; for example, it is considered a key factor in reducing negative environmental impacts (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Peattie & Peattie, 2009). Companies adopting sustainable business practices in an attempt to satisfy the increasingly urgent demand for sustainability (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014; Mont & Plepys, 2008) have achieved long-term strategic advantages (Banerjee et al., 2003).

This helps in explaining why the concept of sustainability is becoming a crucial issue for a growing number of companies, especially in certain industries that urgently require development in this area. The fashion industry falls into this category, as it is among the industries having the greatest negative impact on the environment (Pal & Gander, 2018; Vehmas et al., 2018; Shrivastava et al., 2021). A new megatrend is emerging as an increasing number of consumers adopt sustainable fashion practices in response to the traditional (unsustainable) fashion business models (Machado et al., 2018). Thus, understanding how consumer sustainable consumption choices evolve and what elements underlie them could help in developing new and successful company business models based on sustainability.

This paper aims to explore consumer sustainable practices through the perspective of individual well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Previous research examining sustainable consumption has adopted various approaches and reached divergent conclusions. Some studies show that sustainable consumption can be perceived as an individual sacrifice too big to make (e.g., Longo et al., 2019), others suggest that sustainable consumption is considered a prosocial action (e.g., Habel et al., 2016), while others highlight how this kind of consumption can be a way to reach self-enhancing goals (e.g., Trudel et al., 2020). These fragmented results demonstrate the need to examine sustainable consumption through a theoretical perspective able to consistently gather the different elements of the phenomenon. To this end, this work adopts the positive psychology perspective (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000) and the psychological well-being approach (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Recent research (Carù & Cova, 2003; Mugel et al., 2019) applied this approach for examining specific sustainable consumption choices (e.g., responsible purchasing of food products), but this field of research

is still largely unexplored. The present study aims to investigate this topic by exploring how consumers' well-being can develop through their sustainable consumption choices, thus advancing the well-being paradigm in the field of sustainability and, at the same time, contributing to analysis of sustainable consumption through the identification of important elements underlying these practices. Fashion is the specific context of our study. The growing number of consumer sustainable practices in this context (e.g., sharing, swapping, second-hand use of garments) proves this to be the ideal setting for the analysis.

## **2. Psychological well-being and sustainable consumption**

Until now, sustainable consumption has been studied mainly within a trade-off perspective between individual and collective benefits (Ianole et al., 2020). Many studies underlined how sustainable consumption choices are perceived as an individual sacrifice too big to make, leading consumers to prefer unsustainable consumption practices, with a consequent negative impact on their self-concept (e.g., Longo et al., 2019). Other studies focused on collective well-being, which is considered able to outweigh selfish needs and thus favour sustainable consumption practices (e.g., Halder et al., 2020) motivated by the desire to help others (Habel et al., 2016). Rahman (2019) showed that most of the research looked at sustainable consumption goals as either pro-self or pro-others, interpreting them as individualistic versus collectivistic goals, confirming the dichotomous perspective that has guided research so far.

Currently, however, consumers are increasingly exposed to messages proposing sustainable products and practices from a win-win – rather than trade-off – perspective (e.g., refillable packs, instead of more expensive biodegradable packs of the same product). This is in line with recent research suggesting that ethical consumption decisions are not driven purely by altruistic motives, but rather by “caring for the self, for community and for nature” (Trudel et al., 2020, p. 47). Ethical and sustainable consumption is perceived as an individual choice in favour of the community as well as a way to reach self-enhancing goals and activate self-restorative processes (Trudel et al., 2020). While most research on ethical consumption has involved prosocial motives (e.g., Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; De Groot & Steg, 2009; Trudel & Cotte, 2009), Trudel et al. (2020) demonstrated that such behaviours can address consumers' need to feel better about themselves, which is consistent with the literature assuming that feeling good is a fundamental human psychological driver (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988). This highlights the need to apply a systemic perspective to examine the

different aspects of sustainable consumption. To this end, we adopted the positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000) and psychological well-being approaches (Ryan & Deci, 2001) to analyse consumer sustainable practices. The concept of well-being refers to individual optimal psychological functioning and experience (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Two perspectives were developed for analysing well-being, revolving around two distinct philosophies: the first is labelled hedonism (Kahneman et al., 1999) and reflects the view that well-being consists of a state of pleasure; the second is labelled eudaimonism (Waterman, 1993) and claims that well-being consists of more than just pleasure and lies in the actualisation of human potentials, thus consisting of fulfilling one's true nature (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The eudaimonic approach refers to well-being as a harmonic coexistence of individual values within a holistic perspective. This affects how individuals pursue their own self-realisation (Bhullar et al., 2013; Seligman & Pawelski, 2003) through practices enabling them to feel autonomous and competent in reaching their goals and to relate to significant others in their self-enhancement processes (Ryan & Deci, 1991, 2001). Well-being is thus interpreted as "a process based on the search for values with which the subject identifies himself consistently" (Raibley, 2012, p. 1122). This is also in line with research that included individual goals and motives in explaining how people's experiences of well-being are shaped (Emmons, 1986; Little, 1989; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Well-being is achieved when individuals develop actions consistent with their own goals and values, which often also concern collective values.

Within this perspective, people can achieve well-being through sustainable consumption choices. Our work examines consumer sustainable practices as a means to individual well-being. The goal is to map the main elements underlying consumer sustainable choices, and to identify the different paths followed by each element to well-being (not only in terms of pleasure, but also of self-realisation, personal growth and self-enhancement). To this end, individual sustainable practices in fashion and clothing choices are examined.

### **3. Fashion consumption and sustainability**

The fashion industry is considered one of the world's largest polluters (Pal & Gander, 2018; Vehmas et al., 2018; Shrivastava et al., 2021; Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020), and its negative impact has been further accelerated by fast fashion (Gazzola et al., 2020; Hur, 2020). In addition, huge amounts of fashion products end up as waste in landfill or are incinerated (Pal & Gander, 2018). Thus, sustainability is currently a crucial issue for the fashion industry

(Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020), and the transition from linear to circular business models is crucial (Gazzola et al., 2020). The sharing economy and collaborative consumption are examples of circular business models (Bocken et al., 2016; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Lewandowski, 2016). Collaborative fashion consumption includes gifting, lending, sharing, swapping, renting, leasing and second-hand use (Iran et al., 2017) to help recirculate goods, which are all examples of sustainable consumption (Camacho-Otero et al., 2019).

Academic research on fashion sustainability and the circular economy is still emerging, and relatively little is known about consumers' motivations for participating (Benoit et al., 2017). What has been revealed, however, is that consumers are more and more aware of the effects of their consumption behaviours, and they are paying increasing attention to how their used clothes are disposed of and how they can reduce their consumption of fashion products (Vehmas et al., 2018), with young consumers particularly interested in these topics (Gazzola et al., 2018). The new affluent generations are more socially and environmentally conscious, sharing higher expectations about fashion brands to be sustainable in their production processes (Deloitte, 2019). Recent research (Machado et al., 2018) on consumers' motives for purchasing second-hand fashion products showed that people shop at thrift stores also to feel good, suggesting that sustainability in this context also includes the pursuit of well-being, as assumed here.

#### **4. Method and procedures**

In order to explore how consumers' well-being can develop through their sustainable consumption choices for fashion products, a qualitative study has been developed. This study used a photo elicitation technique, a method based on the selection of images to elicit enriched qualitative information concerning events as participants perceive them (Heisley et al., 1991; Ferber et al., 1958). This method is useful for making participants reflect on their points of view, by making them attribute their personal, social and cultural values to the images (Heisley et al., 1991). Thanks to this method, it is possible to make explicit what participants think, highlighting their vision of reality.

Thirty-eight Italian consumers, selected for convenience, participated in the study (84% female, mean age 27). First, we clarified what we mean by "sustainable consumption practices related to fashion products" in the instructions. We then asked participants to send us an image (taken by them or from other sources such as, for example, the web or a magazine) that would best represent the sentence "I feel good when I use/buy fashion

products in a sustainable way”, and to write the reasons for their choice. We then proceeded to qualitative analysis of the responses collected.

## 5. Results

Findings showed the main categories through which consumers’ well-being develops as a result of sustainable consumption choices for fashion products: positive emotions and affective reactions; consumer value and self-enhancement; search for meaning. Figure 1 summarises the main findings, which are detailed below.

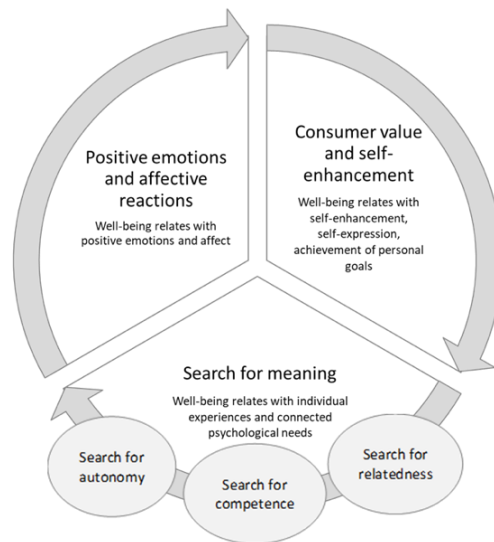


Figure 1. Sustainable consumption choices for fashion products: Well-being building blocks.

### 5.1. Positive emotions and affective reactions

We found that many (23%) of the descriptions collected were related to positive emotions and affective reactions. For example, many referred to the well-being derived from sustainable practices, speaking of happiness and joy (“*It gives me a sense of joy*”; “*It makes me happy*”), affective value (“*I feel good*”), the pleasure of reliving memories (“*By wearing her clothes, I relive the memories I have of her and I’m feeling delighted*”) and the pleasure of exploration or treasure hunting (“*I love to go in search of those beautiful little stores that are disseminated in hidden streets*”; “*I love to explore thrift stores and the feeling of “love at first sight” for what I find there*”). These results are in line with recent research (Camacho-Otero et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2018) that showed the role of pleasure in consumer experiences. In line with the hedonistic approach, we found the affective side of these practices in the responses. Within this perspective, in fact, well-being consists of pleasure and happiness, and thus positive emotions play an important role (Kahneman et al., 1999).

### 5.2. Consumer value and self-enhancement

Many comments related to the need for self-enhancement, self-expression and the achievement of personal goals (26% of the responses belonged to this category). Among these, for example, well-being was often linked to feeling useful by taking part in good causes (“*It makes me proud to know that I supported a good cause*”), feeling more rational by making conscious choices (“*Making a choice with the greatest degree of awareness possible*”), feeling unique (“*I feel different and, at the same time, unique*”) and relieving the sense of guilt or activating a self-restorative function (“*It makes me feel good about myself; it alleviates my guilt*”). What emerged is consistent with recent research (e.g., Trudel et al., 2020) and, in general, the literature relating to positive psychology and specifically to the concept of goal pursuit. According to positive psychology, feelings of competence or efficacy with regard to life goals should be associated with greater positive affect and well-being, as people’s well-being is shaped by their goals and the motivations for fulfilling them (Emmons, 1986; Little, 1989; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Feeling competent and confident with respect to valued goals is associated with enhanced well-being (Carver & Scheier, 1999, McGregor & Little, 1998). Furthermore, goal progress predicts enhanced well-being, particularly for goals that are rated as important (Brunstein, 1993) and those that are self-concordant, as they are able to fulfil basic needs and are consistent with one’s true self (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

### 5.3. Search for meaning

Finally, most of the comments (51%) relate to a search for meaning in order to find well-being. In this case, well-being is not the achievement of a state of pleasure or of desires or goals, but something broader that refers to the whole individual experience and to the connected psychological needs. This is in line with the literature defining well-being as “being fully functioning” (Rogers, 1963), rather than as simply attaining desires (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Well-being is considered from the eudaimonic point of view as a harmonic coexistence of individual values, able to affect decisions on how to pursue one’s own self-realisation (Bhullar et al., 2013; Seligman & Pawelski, 2003; Waterman, 1993) and achieve one’s potential (Ryff, 1995). Within this perspective, well-being is grounded in the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 1991; Ryan, 1995), which posits that well-being is based on the actualisation of the self, accomplished by three basic psychological needs: autonomy; competence; belongingness or relatedness. Three different aspects of the search for meaning were identified in our responses, in line with the three basic needs.



*Search for autonomy.* Some participants described a feeling of gratification when they are protagonists of their behaviours – for example: “*I give new life to a dress by avoiding throwing it away*”; “*I feel like I am making a small step that could save the world*”; “*I made my contribution, even if small, with my choice.*” This set of comments expressed the idea of autonomy, of being a protagonist. In line with recent research (Mugler et al., 2019), participants highlighted their personal contribution and feeling autonomous as they are masters of the environment.

*Search for competence.* Several participants referred to feeling good when a concrete goal is achieved that can lead to tangible results. In these responses, the effect of the individual’s action is evaluated. Feelings of well-being are associated with individual competence in contributing to the achievement of certain goals. The responses referred to either individual or collective outcomes, and they highlighted competence for specific tasks useful for reaching ultimate goals – for example: “*I save a lot [money]*”; “*I helped our planet by avoiding the useless consumption of raw materials*”; “*This purchase [...] did not involve additional environmental costs*”; “*There are immediate positive outcomes in terms of the environment and consumption reduction.*” These responses are consistent with the need for competence to effectively reach expected outcomes (Reis et al., 2000).

*Search for relatedness.* Finally, some comments refer to the interpersonal dimension and connections with others. These connections can be both concrete and symbolic. For the former, participants refer to actions allowing them to relate with other people by joining pleasant activities (sharing sustainable practices with others, swapping, collective participation, etc.) – for example: “*I often swap my clothes with friends and relatives*”; “*It has a positive impact on well-being for society, [...] it generates moments of aggregation and exchange.*” For the latter, participants refer to practices allowing them to connect with others in an abstract and metaphorical way, including symbolic sharing beyond time and place, across different generations – for example: “*These clothes tell a different story, a story that I can wear and live for a few hours*”; “*My grandma donated her vintage dresses to me.*” These sharing practices even extend to unknown people – for example, by donating a garment (“*I wish someone would like it as much as I did*”). The responses are consistent with the need for relatedness or belongingness expressed by Ryan and Deci (1991), which refers to the feeling that a person is close and connected to significant others (Reis et al., 2000). In particular, responses describing sustainable practices associated with fashion reported a wide range of relatedness sources linked to the literature: from communicating with others (Parks & Floyd, 1996), to participating in shared activities (Duck & Wright, 1993).

Thus, within the examined sustainable practices, we found the tripartition proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000) and also shown in recent research (e.g., Guillen-Royo, 2019; Mugel et al., 2019), defining the three basic psychological needs for the achievement of well-being within a eudaimonic perspective: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

## **6. General discussion**

This research extends the concept of well-being to sustainable consumption practices, adopting a consumer-centric perspective. Our findings showed that it is possible to reconnect the elements through which consumers develop their well-being in sustainable consumption choices for fashion products to the main aspects identified in the well-being literature: the first reflected the view that well-being consists of pleasure and happiness (Kahneman et al., 1999); the second revolved around how people's experiences of well-being are shaped by attributes of their personal goals and their motives for pursuing them (Emmons, 1986; Little, 1989; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995); the third described well-being as something related to the actualisation of human potential and consists of fulfilling one's true nature (Waterman, 1993). Thus, this work, although exploratory, advanced the well-being paradigm into sustainable consumption practices, mapping the main elements composing the well-being experienced by consumers engaging in sustainable fashion consumption practices. Results showed the building blocks of the well-being experiences (hedonic; eudaimonic; connected with goal pursuit and progress).

This study showed that sustainable practices involve a wide spectrum of individual dimensions – ranging from pleasure attainment to pain avoidance, and from individualistic to collective goals. Sustainable practices concern the whole psychological functioning of an individual, favouring an ongoing pursuit of actualisation of human potential and personal goal fulfilment. This has interesting practical implications, especially for the context here analysed. Since sustainable consumption practices are rapidly growing in the fashion industry (some are managed by companies, such as virtuous production cycles, while others are conducted by consumers, such as renting, lending and second-hand selling), companies should carefully consider the well-being activation connected with these sustainable practices in order to better understand them. Knowing that each sustainable fashion purchase is not merely a matter of costs and benefits for consumers, but also a way to find pleasure, meaning and self-realisation, can help companies to better shape successful connections with their customers and to develop new business models.

This work, exploratory in nature and based on qualitative methods, was intended to stimulate additional research into how to better understand consumer sustainable practices based on the foundations suggested here. The study has various limitations that indicate further research avenues. First, while qualitative methods appear to be best suited for gaining insights into the well-being experienced by consumers, future studies (both qualitative and quantitative) would provide a useful complement to these preliminary findings, such as identifying the antecedents, processes and consequences of these specific consumption patterns. Second, this research was conducted in Italy, which has particular cultural features. Future research should extend the spectrum of well-being elements experienced in sustainable consumption practices by undertaking an international study.

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