

# The Clothing Consumption Process of the Vintage Consumer and Sustainable Practices for Mainstream Consumers

The purpose of this study was to reveal how vintage consumers acquire, maintain, and discard their clothing and to establish whether their consumption habits may be perceived as a strategy of *slow fashion*. To achieve this objective, qualitative data collection from vintage consumers occurred in summer 2016 in a Southeastern college town. The findings reveal the unique and sustainable ways vintage consumers acquire, maintain/care/store, and discard clothing, and suggest that the vintage clothing consumption process includes the following phases: shopping, discovery, ownership, and new life. Implications suggest that such practices are more sustainable than *fast fashion*.

The predominance of *fast fashion* has led to a consumer behavior of buying cheap clothing, disposing of less than perfect items, and re-purchasing more cheap clothing (König, 2013). The fast-fashion consumption process—apparel produced at high volume and low price—is straining our global natural resources and taxing social systems (Fletcher, 2013). In the United States, a “throw-away fashion” behavior has led to 14 million tons of clothing being thrown away each year, double the amount thrown away years ago (Wicker, 2016). As a response,

*slow-fashion* consumers seek to participate in small-scale production, preservation of traditional crafts, and utilization of local materials or resources (Clark, 2008). The vintage consumer may be a slow-fashion consumer who chooses to buy existing quality clothing over a large quantity of mass-produced clothing (Watson & Yan, 2013).

## Vintage Consumers

*Vintage clothing* is defined as “clothing that is 20 years old or more, with a recognizable decades-old look” (Fischer, 2015, p. 48). Vintage is differentiated from historical, antique, secondhand, consignment, reused, and resale clothing (DeLong et al., 2005). Although vintage items are often secondhand, the most desirable items have rarely or never been worn (Mackinney-Valentin, 2010).

The vintage community is created around the mutual appreciation and valuation of vintage clothing (Peters, 2014). Individuals who consume vintage purposefully acquire knowledge and develop deep appreciation for vintage pieces (Duffy et al., 2012). Gaining knowledge on historic dress, learning to identify

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vintage clothing, and shopping for vintage pieces, referred to as “treasure hunting,” take significant time and effort (DeLong et al., 2005). The knowledge, appreciation, and time involved in consuming vintage clothing create a strong relationship between consumer and clothing.

Research on vintage consumers has focused primarily on consumer shopping motivations. Research has revealed that vintage consumers’ motivations include value (Peters, 2014), uniqueness (DeLong et al., 2005), nostalgia (Fischer, 2015), eco-consciousness (Shen et al., 2013), and need for status (Baker, 2012). A vintage consumer’s shopping motivations differ from a fast-fashion consumer’s motivation. The latter includes brand association, trendiness, price, availability, size, and fit (Kasambala et al., 2015; Watson & Yan, 2013). Although previous research has identified the motivations for buying vintage, little research has explored the actual consumption process of such consumers, limiting the ability for others to understand and emulate potentially sustainable practices associated with vintage consumption.

### **Clothing Consumption Process**

Introduced by Geitel Winakor in 1969, the clothing consumption process has been the foundation for clothing consumer behavior (Kunz & Garner, 2011; Norum, 2015). The clothing consumption process includes: (a) acquisition, (b) maintenance, use, inventory, and (c) discard (Winakor, 1969). As a result of fast fashion, consumers move through this process at an unsustainable pace. As a response to the United Nations goals (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>) for sustainable development by 2030, Norum (2018) connects each phase of this process to potentially more sustainable practices for consumers. In the acquisition stage, she recommends buying higher quality garments or buying less. She states that consumers lack the time and skill in household production activities for the maintenance, use, and storage phase. In light of this, she suggests that consumers reduce their stock of clothing, go longer between laundering, or discard a piece of clothing when a new piece is purchased. Last, she urges consumers to donate or reuse their discarded clothing as opposed to the normative practice of trashing.

On the surface, vintage consumers seem to participate in sustainable consumption habits. They tend to avoid fast fashion and limit such purchases. However, vintage consumers have a unique appreciation of clothing (Peters, 2014) and therefore their clothing consumption process may deviate from that of mainstream consumers. The aim of this study was to explore how vintage consumers move through the clothing consumption process—as outlined by Winakor (1969)—through the lens of sustainable consumption as recommended by Norum (2018). This exploratory, qualitative research was guided by the

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following goals: (a) to determine possible ways U.S. vintage consumers shop, acquire, care for, and discard their clothing; and (b) to discover how U.S. vintage consumers experience the clothing consumption process.

### Method

Previous literature on vintage consumers has focused on shopping motivations and culture. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). The research process was designed to elicit rich data from eight, in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2016 in a small U.S. Southeastern college town. During the interviews, artifact elicitation also was utilized. Purposive and snowball sampling was used for the selection of participants by initially contacting the researchers' network, then collecting referrals for additional participants. After the approval of the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were contacted, and the interviews were scheduled. Interviews lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and began with collecting demographic information. (See Table 1.)

Next, the participants were asked about their interest in vintage clothing and the percentage of vintage pieces in their wardrobe. Artifact elicitation was used to evoke memories associated with two pieces of clothing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). Participants were asked to bring one vintage and one fast-fashion garment to elicit memories and feelings of shopping behavior, care and storage,

and disposal. The questions aimed to discover how participants shop for and find their clothing, as well as how they care for and discard both vintage and fast-fashion clothing. It also was important to find out how such experiences made the participants feel, which could give further insight into consumption motivations and potential sustainable practices beyond just clothing consumption behavior. By the eighth participant, emergent themes became repetitive, indicating further interviews were unlikely to provide unexpected or new information; thus, data saturation was achieved (McCracken, 1988).

### Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed and coded for emergent themes using comparative analysis, which allowed for identifying similarities and differences among the participants (Creswell, 2007). Data were holistically interpreted and analyzed between texts and across theme categories. Validation strategies of triangulation of method and data, and low inference descriptors were utilized (Creswell, 2007). This was accomplished by gathering and synthesizing data from interview transcripts, researcher's field notes, and artifact elicitation. Further low-inference descriptors helped to keep the participants' response in context.

### Findings

The clothing consumption process (Winakor, 1969) outlines how consumers acquire, maintain/care/store, and discard clothing. The findings of this exploratory study revealed that vintage

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants

PARTICIPANT	AGE	GENDER	ETHNICITY	OCCUPATION	YEARS IN VINTAGE
Kira	33	Female	Caucasian	Stylist	15
Frannie	32	Female	Asian American	Local vintage store owner	25
Freddy	20	Male	African American	Student/works at local vintage store	4
Grace	26	Female	Caucasian	Manager at used book and electronics store	18
Cyndi	34	Female	Cuban American	Vintage seller	23
Marilyn	40	Female	Caucasian	Communications manager at university	30
James	46	Male	Caucasian	Vintage and antique dealer	Entire life
Vivian	27	Female	Caucasian	Vintage seller	Entire life

*Note.* All participants' names are pseudonyms.

consumers have an expanded clothing consumption process with sustainable practices. Four theme categories were found: (a) shopping, (b) discovery, (c) ownership, and (d) new life. Within the ownership category, three subthemes emerged: (a) wearing (b) storing, and (c) mending.

**The findings of this exploratory study revealed that vintage consumers have an expanded clothing consumption process with sustainable practices.**

### **Shopping**

For vintage consumers, the act of shopping in thrift, second-hand, and vintage stores is a long process, resulting in few purchases. Most of the participants described going to numerous locations, often multiple times per week, searching through an abundance of items just to find a few worthy pieces. Vintage consumers described dedicating long days to shopping, often to exhaustion. However, when the vintage consumer discovers a wanted item, the exhilaration keeps them going back for more. Kira, a 33-year-old fashion stylist, described her feelings toward the vintage treasure hunt this way: “A lot of blood, sweat, and tears go into finding items. It’s like treasure hunting. It’s spending an entire day digging in the sand until you come across that Rolex watch.”

### **Discovery**

The second theme category is discovery. A key trait of this phase is the emotional and physical response to discovery and the impulse for immediate purchase. All participants recalled their reactions to discovering that one unique clothing item, followed by big smiles during the interview. Vivian, a 27-year-old vintage seller, vividly described her excitement about the moment the item becomes “yours.” Freddy, a 20-year-old undergraduate, who works at a vintage store, expressed similar sentiments: “When I see vintage items that I’m in love with, I want to buy it because I do not want anyone else to have it. Moreover, I get a really good high.”

### **Ownership**

The category of ownership broke down into three subthemes: (a) wearing, (b) storing, and (c) mending. Participants described no specific order to when a garment enters these phases, and some garments may go through all three. However, some participants had vintage garments that have remained in one phase for the entirety of ownership. The amount of time a garment remains in the ownership phase varies widely, but six of the eight participants discussed clothing items that have cycled through each phase for a decade or more.

#### *Wearing*

In the wearing phase, the garment plays an active role in the vintage consumer’s wardrobe. Seven participants’ everyday wardrobe consists of vintage pieces. Vivian, whose wardrobe was made up entirely of thrift and vintage pieces argued that if the clothing item was a “comfortable vintage piece” and did not “scream super vintage,” she would wear it on a regular basis. When participants were not able to wear their vintage items, it was because of lifestyle or work requirements. Grace, a 26-year-old manager of a bookstore, stopped wearing her vintage dresses to work only because of the physical nature of her job and the fear that she might destroy them during work activities.

All participants had vintage items they considered “special.” These items were meant to make a statement. Wearing them less often was a deliberate strategy, more of a surprise. As mentioned by Freddy:

I got a designer 80s pink PVC jacket, and I saved up for it. That was an amazing piece! I feel like those pieces are more statement. I’m not going to wear it all the time, but when I do, I want people to be like Daaamn!

#### **Storing**

Participants described carefully storing their vintage items. Because of their relationship to the item and believing they own a one-of-a-kind, vintage consumers preserve their clothing. Frannie, who had “made a mistake years ago” by storing her garments incorrectly, only stores her vintage items in cool, dry, and dark places to avoid

damage. Displaying clothing at home as an art piece is another way of storage. Marilyn described her vintage items as “museum pieces.” The appreciation of the items’ uniqueness, age, and aesthetics drives the vintage consumer to not store their clothing so that it is “out of mind,” but to treat their closet as a museum vault. As Kira noted:

**Kira:** I have a chair positioned right outside my closet so that I can sit and stare at my collection. Sometimes I’ll just be sitting in the chair, and my boyfriend will walk in and be like ‘What are you doing?’ I’ll be like ‘Just staring at my clothes.’

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### Mending

Mending is the final theme in ownership. In contrast to the wearing and storing phase, a vintage item in this phase requires repair. Participants emphasized that a true vintage consumer always intends to repair or repurpose a vintage item. All of them described a pile of items needing mending. Although participants could not wear these vintage items, they “couldn’t get rid of [them],” which reveals an ongoing appreciation.

**Kira:** I have been waiting to go back through with dental floss [in place of thread] and fix [the garment]. But I keep pulling it out of the pile, wearing it once or twice with the dental floss and be like, something needs to be done, and I’ll put it back in the pile.

### New Life

The final theme category is new life. Vintage consumers do not discard their clothing items thoughtlessly. All participants intend for their vintage items

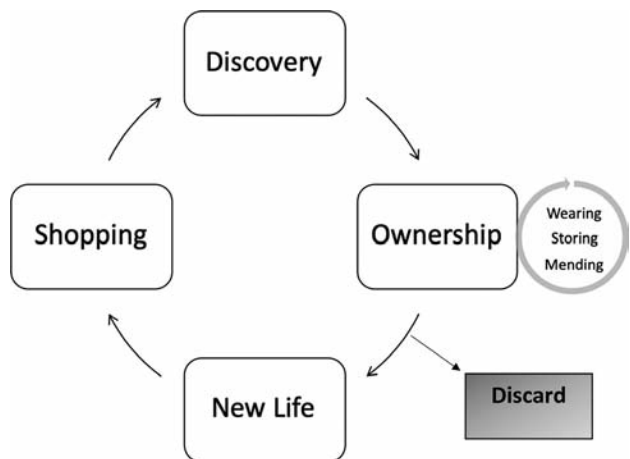
to continue to be used and not discarded. Because of the deep personal connection to the vintage item, getting rid of items is always difficult. Participants described wanting to find the vintage item “another good home, [with] someone that will understand and appreciate the value.”

Participants found a new life for their vintage items through reselling, giving away, or repurposing. Due to increased rates of acquisition, reselling their vintage items occurred frequently. However, participants were not focused on finances; they simply wanted the piece to go to a like-minded individual. Giving items away often meant donations to friends or clothing swaps. Finally, participants repurposed their vintage items. Some items were either purchased with the intent of repurposing or for their materials alone. Instead of disposing of unwearable garments, participants emphasized a conscious effort to not let the material go to waste.

From the findings, an original model of the vintage clothing consumption process was created. (See Figure 1.) The vintage consumption process is cyclical, as the new life phase feeds back into the shopping or discovery phases. Also, vintage items move slowly through the consumption process at a sustainable rate.

### Discussion

This study explored vintage consumers’ consumption process through the lens of sustainability. In contrast to Winakor’s (1969) findings, this exploratory study found that vintage consumers



**Figure 1.** The Vintage Clothing Consumption Process model.

move through the clothing consumption process at a different rate and in a cyclical pattern. Figure 1 illustrates the rate and pattern of vintage consumers' consumption of clothing, suggesting that they incorporate sustainable practices, which mainstream consumers could adopt. The clothing consumption process has been foundational in consumer behavior research. The data from this study suggest that vintage consumers deviate from this foundational process. First, shopping is vital to the vintage consumers' process, although not every shopping experience results in a purchase. Vintage consumers choose their clothing items carefully and develop an intimate relationship with them, which makes discarding clothing very difficult.

Norum (2018) recommends buying quality or buying less. Though the vintage consumer may buy more than slow-fashion consumers, they buy quality and develop a lasting emotional and physical connection with their clothing. This leads to a consumption strategy that mainstream consumers can emulate. By adopting similar attitudes, throwing away clothing may be minimized.

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Second, vintage consumers maintain and care for their vintage clothing by learning sewing skills and finding the best laundering method for each piece. This highlights how important it is for family and consumer sciences educators (FCS) to teach such valuable life skills in their curriculum. An additional advantage of such practical skills is the promotion of sustainability.

Because vintage consumers' garments rotate between wearing and storing, sometimes indefi-

nately, the best and most sustainable storage practices are followed. Vintage consumers perceive their clothing to have value, which affects the wearing, caring, and storing of these items. The perceived value of a vintage item makes it difficult to throw it away. Overall, the study's findings support Norum's (2018) recommendations for mainstream consumers to learn how to mend and care for clothing, which, in turn, may reduce the rate of throwing away clothing and adding to landfill waste.

Third, vintage consumers avoid trashing their clothing at all cost. Because the shopping and discovery stages evoke such positive emotions for vintage consumers, newly acquired clothing is not considered temporary or disposable. Every item in their wardrobe has a potential for new life. By repurposing the fabric, exchanging or reselling their clothing, they demonstrate alternative options. At times, mainstream consumers purchase trendy clothing they know will only be in their wardrobe temporarily. As an example of a sustainable practice, vintage consumers purchase clothing without the intention of over-donating or throwing away after wearing a few times.

Last, although the findings offer valuable insights from U.S. vintage consumers—an under-researched population—the generalization of the study's findings, because of the sample size, is not recommended. Expanding this study with more interviews to validate and further publicize the consumption process is recommended. A limitation of this study was that five of the eight participants worked in vintage retailing, which likely influenced sentiments and practices. Interviewing only vintage consumers could elicit additional sustainable aspects of the consumption process that may be applied to mainstream consumers. Additionally, the sample included six women and only two men, which also may have skewed the findings. Future studies may include a more balanced sample or even just a focus on a single gendered vintage consumer.

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