

The Clothing Swap: Social, Sustainable, and Sacred

Mary M. Long, mlong@pace.edu*
Deborah Fain, dfain@pace.edu

Introduction

While there is much focus on recycling household waste such as paper, plastic, and metal, there is less focused attention on the waste produced by clothing and textiles. As noted by Joung (2013), consumers dispose of clothes by recycling, donating to charities, or giving to friends and family. But when individuals are not motivated to do this or are unaware of recycling options, they simply discard unwanted clothing where it ends up in landfill sites.

Motives for recycling clothes can range from altruistic (e.g., donating to a clothing drive for the poor or victims of a natural disaster) to economic (e.g., selling clothes online, at a consignment shop or donating to obtain a tax deduction). Yet other individuals might be motivated by concern for the environment. Patagonia, an outdoor clothing retailer, appeals to this motivation with its reuse and recycling initiatives. Consumers are encouraged to send in their worn out Patagonia clothing for repurposing or recycling and to buy used Patagonia clothes. In an unusual twist, Patagonia's Black Friday advertisement in the New York Times in 2012 proclaimed "Don't buy this jacket" with an explanation of the natural resources and environmental costs of manufacturing one of their jackets (Patagonia 2015).

One of the more novel ways to dispose of used or unwanted clothing is by attending a clothing swap. A recent search on Meetup.com revealed 106 groups with 17,000 plus members in 15 countries. While these swaps can occur informally among a group of friends, one can also pay a fee to attend a swap run by an organizer.

This paper reports an exploratory study of participant behavior at a clothing swap. The purpose is to uncover the motives of those who attend clothing swaps and to aid in understanding why this form of recycling and reuse continues today, even when simpler options for recycling clothing exist.

Method and Findings

The study involved a qualitative design employing participant observation. Participant observation is an appropriate research method when the research problem is concerned with human meanings and interactions viewed from the insiders' perspective (Jorgensen 1989) and has been used in numerous consumer behavior studies with a variety of products and services (e.g., Belk, Sherry & Wallendorf 1988, Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry 1989, Wallendorf & Arnould 1991, Arnould & Price 1993, Schouten & McAlexander 1995, Bowen 2002).

Clothing swaps among the same group of women were observed on two different occasions. The clothing swap had originated among a group of young, professional female friends as an economical way to find new clothes. At the time, the participants held professional jobs requiring a certain style of corporate clothing which could substantially cut into their budgets. While the swap originally was a way to help one another in dressing for work and secondarily a social event, the ritual remained as a key social event in later years after the economic reasons for swapping clothes were no longer important. Key findings that emerged from these observations are discussed below. These include rules at the swap, reasons for giving away clothes, and the distinction between sacred and profane clothes.

Procedures and Rules

The swap occurred about twice a year at one of the participant's homes. Participants sat in the living room in a semi-circle while each woman took a turn displaying the clothes she had brought. Holding up an article of clothing, a participant would state what the item was (e.g., "*this is a basic purple skirt, size 8*"). Additionally, she might add who she thought the item would look good on (e.g., "*Andrea, you wear size 8, you should try these*"). Other participants could also make recommendations as to who they thought should have particular items based on the color or size -- "*Alice, this is your color, try it on*"; "*Anne, you're tall, that (long skirt) would look good on you.*"

The rule the group had adopted was that anyone could try on an item, and it should go to the woman it looked best on. Another rule was that everyone should get at least one item of clothing, and someone might defer to another who had not yet found something. Clothes could also be claimed for friends and relatives, but only if no one at the swap wanted them.

Participants stripped down to their underwear, passed clothes around the room, and commented as to whether or not items looked flattering on others. The women stated they liked the swap because others convinced them to try on clothes they might not normally consider and were pleasantly surprised:

"I've never had anything made of plethora." (Alice, financial consultant)

Clothing ranged from inexpensive (e.g., Conways, Dress Barn) to expensive brands (e.g., Saks Fifth Avenue, Barneys). Some items looked worn while others still bore their price tags.

Why These Clothes?

Participants gave multiple explanations for why they were giving away their clothes. There were several rationales including a change in body size. Participants told stories of their changing body images:

“Remember the year I gained weight and I had to give all my clothes to Diana at the swap?” (Andrea, fundraiser)

“These skirts are too big for me. I’ve been going to the gym and a personal trainer.” (Alice, financial consultant)

Participants also gave away clothes they categorized as purchase mistakes. At times, the tone was confessional regarding purchase mistakes:

“I bought these Steve Madden shoes to go with an outfit but the heels are too high.” (Kristen, banker).

Another participant commiserated:

“I thought I was the only one who did that. I’ve bought (high heeled) shoes just so I can wear pants that are too long.” (Debora, high school teacher).

Some clothes still had the price tags in place, a clear indication of a purchase mistake:

“I don’t know why I bought this.” (Kristen, banker).

Again, other participants confessed that they had made the same kind of error and gave away unworn clothes with the tags still intact.

Other reasons for giving up the clothes varied from fit to function – *“I changed size,” “it shrunk,” “it was inappropriate for work,” “I work from home now and do not need as much,” “I’m tired of it,” “these sandals gave me blisters,” “I bought this just to go with a dress I no longer wear”*.

Sacred Versus Profane Clothes

Another distinction that emerged was that some clothing items were sacred and some profane (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry 1989). Profane (i.e., ordinary) clothing items did not elicit a story or strong selling pitch:

“Here are some t-shirts that would be good for working out. I don’t have to hold everything up, just go through the pile if you are interested.”
(Diane, media rep)

Sacred clothing items were elevated to a special level. The giver conveyed sacredness by telling a story about the item that went beyond an ordinary description of color and style:

“I wore this sweater on my honeymoon. It kept me really warm when we drove around California.” (Alana, writer)

Sacred clothes were more important and not to be lost outside the group:

“This jacket is vintage, I bought it in Indiana, bring it back to me if you decide not to wear it.” (Heidi, computer programmer)

Participants expressed excitement and satisfaction over finding a new home for sacred clothes and disappointment if no one took an item and it went into the “reject” pile (these clothes were donated to charity):

“I’m really glad that fit you. That was my top, I’m glad you like it.”
(Anne, therapist)

Discussion

The clothing swap can be viewed as a unique way to engage in a social and sustainable activity. While it is clear that those who attend a swap do so for social reasons, they are also concerned that their discarded garments do not go to waste. Unwanted items were donated to charity. Interestingly, several participants stated that if someone changed her mind about an item she took, it should be brought back to the next swap to give others a chance to wear it. This again indicated that some clothes are more sacred or special than others. A swap is an environmentally friendly way to recycle unwanted items. Specialized swaps, such as a clothing swap, allow one to recycle sacred items to other like-minded individuals who will appreciate them.

Future Research

The women who participated in this swap were young baby boomers and did not grow up with social media. While one might expect this type of activity to fade away as commerce, networking, and socializing move online, a quick search on the internet shows that these swaps are still popular with a segment of millennials. But are the motives behind attending a swap the same across different generations? Are environmentally conscious younger consumers more interested in swaps as a way to recycle clothes or are they more interested in the social aspect? Do they also want to see their sacred items go to a good home? Given the options for swapping and selling online, how do consumers make their choices for disposing of unwanted clothes or other consumer products? Further research is needed to shed more light on this topic.

References

- Arnould, Eric J. & Price, Linda L. (1993) River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 20 (1). p. 24-45.
- Belk, R. W., Sherry Jr, J. F., & Wallendorf, M. (1988) A naturalistic inquiry into buyer and seller behavior at a swap meet. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 14 (4). p. 449-470.
- Belk, R. W., Wallendorf, M., & Sherry Jr, J. F. (1989) The sacred and the profane in consumer behavior: Theodicy on the odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 16 (1). p. 1-38.
- Bowen, D. (2002) Research through participant observation in tourism: A creative solution to the measurement of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (CS/D) among tourists. *Journal of Travel Research*, 41 (1), 4-14.
- Jorgensen, Danny L. (1989) *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies*. London: Sage.
- Joung, H. M. (2013) Materialism and clothing post-purchase behaviors. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*. 30(6). p. 530-537.
- Patagonia (2015) *Don't buy this jacket patagonia's black friday ad, the new york times, 2012*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.patagonia.com/us/worn-wear> [Accessed: 15 July 2015].
- Schouten, J. W., & McAlexander, J. H. (1995) Subcultures of consumption: An ethnography of the new bikers. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 22 (1). p. 43-61.

Wallendorf, M., & Arnould, E. J. (1991) "We gather together": Consumption rituals of thanksgiving day. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 18 (1). p. 13-31.

Keywords: *sustainable, clothing, consumer behavior*

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This paper provides insights into consumer motives for participating in clothing swaps.

Author Information:

Mary M. Long is a Professor of Marketing and Department Chair at Lubin School of Business, Pace University.

Deborah Fain is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Marketing at Lubin School of Business, Pace University.

TRACK: Green Marketing/Sustainability