

# ORDINARY FASHION CONSUMPTION

INVESTIGATING THE PRACTICES OF CLOTHING PURCHASE,  
USE AND DISPOSAL IN DANISH AND UKRAINIAN CONTEXTS

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## Abstract

Through the lens of the theory of fashion consumption temporalities and by employing wardrobe studies with two different age groups of consumers in Danish and Ukrainian contexts, this paper investigates how ordinary practices of purchase, use and disposal have evolved over time due to the transformations of the societal macro characteristics. The study details the peculiarities of the consumption patterns of different participant groups and highlights the differences in interpretations of sustainable clothing consumption practices at specific historical periods. Moreover, the present research demonstrates that due to the characteristics of the transitional temporality of consumption (from fast to slow), which combines the macro and micro characteristics of fast and slow temporalities in different ways, the consumption patterns of Danish and Ukrainian participants present certain similarities. The transitional temporality of consumption (from fast to slow) has emerged during this research, challenging the previous studies, and it is particularly relevant for those studying transitions towards sustainability in fashion. It is because this temporality sheds light on both sustainable and unsustainable behavioural consumption patterns within temporality and can inform practical strategies, which can provide the practice elements of which the desired ways of consumption can be made.

**Keywords:** *Ordinary Fashion Consumption; Clothing Consumption Temporalities; Scandinavian And Post-Soviet Contexts; Transition Towards Sustainability*

## INTRODUCTION

Before the 1980s, fashion consumption studies primarily concentrated on the spectacular and visual aspects of consumer behaviour, the symbolic and semiotic significance of commodities and their role in constructing individual and group identity (Baudrillard, 1970; Gronow & Warde, 2001). At the same time, the less flamboyant and visible practices were typically ignored (Campbell, 2005; Watson & Shove, 2008). This unbalanced account of consumer behaviour was challenged by several authors who observed that a significant part of consumption is “ordinary” (see Gronow & Warde, 2001) and occurs “as items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular practices” (Warde, 2005, p. 131). Accordingly, by the end

of the 1990s, the images of consumers as passive subjects manipulated by the market forces were progressively exorcised (Gronow & Warde, 2001), and consumers started to be seen as active, creative, self-reflexive agents who, motivated by a desire for self-expression, bring their “skills implied in the use, integration and desiring of items required for the effective accomplishment and performance of daily life” (Watson & Shove, 2008, p. 3). Simultaneously, also the concept of “slow fashion”, which implies valuing local resources and transparent production systems with fewer intermediaries between producers and consumers, was brought to the foreground and started to permeate mature capitalist societies. Within such a framework, resourceful clothing consumption

practices are seen as one of the possible small-scale and personal responses to the overwhelming problems of fast consumption and waste (Fletcher, 2016; Fletcher & Tham, 2019). Moreover, “slow fashion” presupposes that “fashion objects should be considered an investment” (Gurova, 2015, p. 140), and clothing longevity, durability, and practicality should be valued, as it was in societies of the past (Holroyd et al., 2023).

### THE CONCEPTS OF CLOTHING CONSUMPTION: PERMANENT, TRANSITIONAL, FAST, AND SLOW

The links with the past were then further explored by Gurova (2015), who analysed the temporal rhythms of clothing consumption and the transformation of consumers’ daily practices in Russia within different social groups, depending on the macro characteristics of societies at a specific historical period. Gurova argued that temporality can be understood on both the macro-level (type of society, the institutional conditions, the economic conditions, and the development of retail markets) and the micro-level (individual clothing consumption practices of purchase, use and disposal of fashion objects). The interaction of micro and macro factors produces a certain fashion concept within a particular temporal regime. As a result of this research, Gurova distinguished four concepts of clothing consumption:

- *Permanent*, where due to the inefficiency of the Soviet planned economy, consumers continuously repair and revitalise their clothing, extending their use phase to the extreme.
- *Transitional*, where, within the transition to the market economy, consumers have the access to low-quality foreign goods, which reduces the service lifespan of clothing.
- *Fast*, where due to the low prices of fast fashion brands, it is easier to replace worn-out things with new ones instead of prolonging their lifespan within the home.
- And *slow*, where consumers take a more responsible position towards environmental issues and return to do-it-yourself practices.

The theory of consumption temporalities demonstrates that permanent and slow concepts of consumption present certain similarities while occurring for different reasons. The consumption patterns of the permanent temporality are dictated by the State (see Fehér et al., 1983), while the

patterns of the slow temporality are a consequence of the consumer’s choice. Despite these macro-differences, both concepts imply handmade and local production, repair and maintenance, upcycling and downcycling, personalisation, circulation of clothing and shopping in second-hand stores. Although Gurova’s findings result from the study of (post)-Soviet societies, rhythms and routines have spatial qualities, and every society has its unique concept of time and prevailing rhythm inherited in the everyday practices of its members. Shove et al. (2009) suggested that a greater focus on multiple rhythms and temporalities can be a promising way to promote more sustainable behaviour related to consumption. On these premises, and through the lens of the theory of clothing consumption temporalities, I propose to draw a parallel between the rhythms of clothing consumption in Western and (post)-Soviet contexts (specifically in Denmark and Ukraine) and to investigate how ordinary consumption practices of purchase, use (in particular mending practices), and disposal of clothing have evolved over time in both contexts.

### INVESTIGATING CLOTHING CONSUMPTION PRACTICES THROUGH WARDROBE INTERVIEWS

The present qualitative study employed wardrobe interviews—a methodological approach that links the material and the social life of clothes and helps to understand the materiality of clothing practices, which are difficult to grasp and verbalise by asking the questions alone (Klepp & Bjerck, 2014; Fletcher & Klepp, 2017). Since age is one of the key characteristics in defining consumption (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979), the 14 participants of this study were divided into two groups: those aged 50 – 65 — ‘mothers’, and those aged 20 – 35 — ‘daughters’. This division helped to identify the main differences defining the clothing consumption cultures, as well as how the consumption cultures have evolved over time in two selected contexts. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), and among the selection criteria were age, cultural background, level of education, and practicing mending on the regular basis.

The wardrobe interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes in 2021 and were documented by audio and video recording and by photographing every mended garment found in the wardrobes



Fig. 1

(fig. 01). The data was analysed by employing the essential grounded theory methods as defined by Birks and Mills (2015). In the next section, I will present and discuss my findings based on the narratives of four participant groups.

### POST-SOVIET ‘MOTHERS’: “I TREAT MY CLOTHES CAREFULLY AND USE THEM FOR A VERY LONG TIME”

Due to the inefficiency of the planned economy, the manipulations with clothing during the Soviet times were very popular, and consumers “sewed clothes, repaired them, constructed new ones from the old, and beautified ready-made items” (Gurova, 2015, p. 137). Simultaneously, goods produced and sold abroad were a synonym for high quality and the object of desire. However, acquiring them was an uneasy endeavour.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, foreign goods suddenly saturated “poor and extremely polarised” post-Soviet countries (ibid.: 2015, p. 140), and the rich could finally purchase overpriced luxury fashion items sold in boutiques, while the poor had to satisfy their “hunger” for foreign novelties by buying cheaper low-quality imitations of branded clothing. Accordingly, consumers who could not afford anything other than fake brand clothing in the 1990s still today perceive the novelty and quality of clothing as a marker of success or failure in social life and are reluctant to second-hand shopping:

“There was a time when I was buying whatever I

could... But then the quality was so poor... Today, I can buy differently... I look at the quality first. I always examine the quality of the seams and fabric quality... No, I do not buy my clothes second-hand because when I was young, buying second-hand clothing was associated with poverty” [Elena, 59 y.o.].

As during adulthood, the group of “mothers” assimilated the values oriented towards conspicuous consumption, they associate practices of mending and handing things down with necessity. Even so, these participants mend clothes when necessary, and one of the main drivers for mending is the extension of the clothing use phase: “It is not that I cannot afford new clothes. But if you buy something, it means that you like this thing, right? That is why I treat my clothes carefully and use them for a very long time. Sometimes old, mended clothes are even better than new ones” [Marina, 65 y.o.].

As evidenced by this quote, the participants of this study group reside within the transitional temporality of consumption, where the desire to get comfortable things that fit and last over time (permanent temporality) and the desire for newness (fast temporality) coexist. In their endeavour to maintain clothes’ original appearance, the post-Soviet “mothers” make good use of their advanced wardrobe maintenance (e.g. washing, stain removal, ironing and proper storage) and DIY skills, which are praised and described with epithets

such as *masteritsa na vse ruki* [woman particularly good at doing things with her own hands]:

“These pants were mended by my friend Valushka because the repair required a high level of mastery, which I do not have. Since she is such a *masteritsa na vse ruki*, she just helped me... I would not be able to do such fine work” [Elena, 59 y.o.].

As for the final disposal of clothes, throwing things away does not belong to the consumption patterns of “mothers”. When clothes lose their *vnesnij vid* [their ability to look good and be socially appreciated or accepted] and cannot be worn in public any longer, they undergo different stages of clothing use. Initially, they are worn at home and later utilised as clothing for outdoor activities at *dachas* [summer houses] or given to acquaintances or relatives who live in the countryside since their clothing is not subjected to the urban norms of *kulturnost* [culturedness]. Finally, when clothes cannot be worn any longer, they are not thrown away either but stored for further potential use as something else:

“I have a lot of sweaters and shirts that lost their *vnesnij vid*. For example, when the material is worn, or the colours are faded, I wear these clothes at home. And if they are too worn even for home, I send them to the village. There, they are used until their end” [Tamara, 50 y.o.].

### POST-SOVIET ‘DAUGHTERS’: “THERE IS A SECOND-HAND BOOM... BUT MENDING IS NOT FASHIONABLE”

Post-Soviet participants aged 20 – 35 grew up in a market economy and experienced socialism only through the memories of their relatives of older generations. Since their childhood, the “daughters” consumed clothes in a fast way. Despite this, they partially inherited their parents’ values of permanent consumption and, therefore, participate in several care practices, which today are considered sustainable (e.g. mending, swapping and handing clothes down to others). However, such practices for them are “intuitive” (Tania, 34 y.o.) and rarely motivated by environmental concerns. It can be said, therefore, that these participants reside within another transitional temporality (from fast to slow), where the desire for unique fashion items coexists with the inherited values of care:

“Sometimes, we organise swap activities... with these exchanges, it is possible to find something unique and, at the same time, find someone interested in giving my clothes a second life” [Tania,

34 y.o.].

Giving a second life to clothing by enacting slow fashion practices does not occur only physically since Internet technology often facilitates such practices today. The “daughters” in the post-Soviet context make great use of online platforms and social media to buy and sell second-hand clothing: “I got this dress from a person who posted a photo on the group of our housing complex... Sometimes, I buy and sell second-hand clothes through different apps. Usually, I discover such things on TikTok. There are many people who buy second-hand, customise, and then resell things again” [Diana, 21 y.o.].

Such consumers, who are both participating in the consumption and production of what is consumed, were defined by Campbell as “craft consumers” (Campbell, 2005, p. 24). Stemming from a desire for self-expression, “craft consumers” purchase mainly to engage in creative actions to “mark off” mass-produced goods from “identical twins” (Campbell, 2005, p. 32). In doing so, craft consumers utilise their “skills, judgment and passion” (ivi.: 23) both for the selection of second-hand products and for their transformation. Although this group of participants enact several craft consumption practices, mending is not considered creative or fashionable. Still today, it carries the stigma of practical necessity and is regarded as a “boring” activity rather than an opportunity for self-expression:

“Our people always try to be trendy and stylish, and there is a second-hand boom in Ukraine. But mending... not really. It still should be presented as a cool and fashionable activity” [Ksenia, 26 y.o.]

In contrast to their relatives of older generations who value good quality and are used to praising DIY skills and mend clothes rigorously, this age group accepts imperfections more easily, does not value high-quality clothes and rigorous mends.

These participants, therefore, have a rather rough approach to mending (when they mend themselves and not with the aid of a professional) (fig. 02):

“My mother does everything rigorously and with great care... she always has perfect stitches. If she does not like something, she can leave it for a while and then return to it and do everything perfectly. But I can do things roughly and will not feel bad about that” [Marta, 24 y.o.]

Since, in the Ukrainian context, mended clothes are not used to be worn in public, such roughly mended clothes are then worn at home until they



Fig. 2

undergo other use stages already described in the previous section:

“Usually, if clothes are not wearable anymore, like if they are really worn out... then I wear them at home for some time until they are sent to the village. What a fashionable environment the village has become! Every week is just like fashion week [laughs]” [Marta, 24 y.o.].

#### WESTERN ‘MOTHERS’: “IF I LIKE SOMETHING, FOR ME, IT IS WORTH CARING FOR IT”

The formative period (a period of adaptation to adult life (Yatina, 1998)) of the Western participants aged 50 – 65 occurred in the 1980s when sustainability concerns started to be pronounced and began to permeate various aspects of Danish welfare capitalist society. Therefore, the enactment of sustainable clothing consumption practices of Western “mothers” is motivated by environmental concern, and generally, these participants assign high value to their favourite clothes and care for them:

“The motivation that guides me in this way of consuming is that I would like to avoid throwing away things, generating garbage, and exploiting natural resources. [And] then... if I like something, for me, it is worth caring for it” [Hanne, 58 y.o.]. Buying relatively expensive brand clothing for this age group means obtaining a higher quality, constituted by timeless design, superior craftsman-

ship, premium materials, and meticulous attention to detail. High quality, therefore, is an important factor in the decisions of their purchase, which does not occur exclusively in physical stores. Similarly to post-Soviet “daughters”, the Western “mothers! engage in online second-hand shopping (even if it is not the main channel of their clothing purchase):

“It is not how I usually buy my clothing. I buy second-hand only if it is something very special, like [this] velvet kilt... It comes from shopping in New York” [Marianne, 57 y.o.].

As for the practices of clothing mending, in contrast to post-Soviet mothers, who mend almost everything, the Western participants of the same age mend only clothing they are emotionally attached to, while other clothing is easily replaced: “I do mend my clothes, but I do not spend time mending basic items, like tank tops. It is not worth it...I do not mend my socks, either. I throw them away and buy new ones...” [Marianne, 57 y.o.].

It can be said, therefore, that the consumption patterns of this group present both traces of fast temporality, since some items (i.e. socks or tank tops) are not mended and are easily replaced, and slow temporality, since one of the main motivations for mending lies in their commitment to sustainability. In line with the patterns of slow consumption, which presupposes “enjoyment of creativity and longevity of material objects” (Gurova, 2015, p. 149), the mending practices of

this participant group are not guided by necessity and often acquire the meaning of creativity and self-expression. Even so, an expressive approach to mending is not prioritised. Contrary to the post-Soviet participants of the same age group, the invisibility of mending for Western ‘mothers’ is not motivated by associations with low socio-economic status but is driven by the characteristics of the damage, characteristic of the garment design, and characteristics of the overall wardrobe:

“This is my beloved old dress... And there is wear and tear in the armpit. It is right next to the seam. It has ripped. So, the mend is pretty invisible because it is under the arms, so... I did not want it to look lumpy and to attract attention...” [Marianne, 57 y.o.].

Regarding the different stages of clothing use, in contrast to post-Soviet participants of the same age group, Western “mothers” rarely differentiate between clothes for external and home use. When clothes lose their functional value, these participants transform them into something with another function:

“I use them [clothes] till they are absolutely rags and then... I use them for polishing the windows... or I turn them into rugs” [Marianne, 57 y.o.].

#### WESTERN ‘DAUGHTERS’: “I WAS RAISED TO CARE ABOUT THE WORLD... SO, [I] TAKE CARE OF THINGS”

The Western “daughters” aged 20 – 35 absorbed their parents’ sustainability values, and since their childhood learned how to care for the environment. These values were then reinforced by the increased attention to sustainability, which occurred during the formative period of this age group:

“I was raised to care about the world, the people, and the environment, so it is natural for me that I do not throw things away but fix them. My whole family taught me how to take care of things” [Tea, 35 y.o.].

These participants reside within the slow temporality of consumption and associate slow fashion practices with creativity, self-expression, and commitment to sustainability. Accordingly, they purchase second-hand, swap, wear clothes handed down to them, upcycle, alter, customise, and repair. In particular, second-hand shopping is pivotal in their clothing consumption patterns since it is the main channel of their clothing purchase:

“Most of my clothes are thrifted. I would say probably 80% of my clothes are thrifted... When

I buy clothes from thrift stores, which I almost exclusively do, they are already worn. So, I buy them with the idea to mend, to extend the life of things. That is why I mend and alter; I know how I want my clothes to look and fit me. And I can create that by mending and altering” [Emilie, 26 y.o.].

Similarly to Western “mothers”, this group of “daughters” values high quality and appreciates good design, craftsmanship and natural materials. They recognise that high quality is essential for the physical durability of clothing, and it can allow clothing to defy time. Despite this fact, when these participants buy second-hand clothing, they take into account their overall lifecycle, and driven by a desire to reduce waste and prevent things from landfill, they buy even low-quality items:

“The thing about quality... it is important to me. I appreciate when it is natural mono material. But when you search for second-hand clothing, you also find a lot of H&M clothes or other cheaper clothes. I think that it is nice to buy them anyway, at least you prevent them from a trash bin”

[Gerda-Marie, 29 y.o.].

Unlike the ‘mothers’, who mend only the clothing items they are emotionally attached to, this group of “daughters” repairs absolutely everything until clothing items fall entirely apart. Naturally, mending until the items fall completely apart can result in particularly distressed aesthetics, which, in the Western context, increase the “social status of those who are able to mend” (Middleton, 2015, p. 265):

“I love mending clothes, altering clothes, sewing clothes, decorating or whatever. Because you wear a unique “new” thing and receive so many compliments” [Emilie, 26 y.o.].

Although the mending practices of this participant group often transform the damaged areas into unique design features with the aid of different craft techniques (fig. 03), like their ‘mothers’, the ‘daughters’ prioritise a discreet approach to repair: “I think that I like a bit of a cleaner look, and it is also hard to put embellishments in places where I would rather not put them... But when there is damage that cannot be mended invisibly, I would make it decorative. But I would always do the invisible mend first” [Emilie, 26 y.o.].

Finally, the approach of this group of “daughters” to wear clothing until it literally falls apart does not leave much space for different use stages. Like the Western “mothers”, “daughters” wear the same



Fig. 03

clothes both at home and in public, and when clothes lose their use value, they are disassembled, and their elements, such as fabric scraps, zippers, buttons, and elastics, are utilised for future DIY projects. Such an approach to mending, which lacks the idea of disposability, is very similar to the mending practices of permanent temporality of consumption.

## CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates how studying everyday clothing consumption practices of different age groups in the Danish and Ukrainian contexts through the lens of clothing consumption temporalities allows us to understand how the macro characteristics of Western and post-Soviet societies at different historical periods affect individual clothing consumption practices of purchase, use and disposal of fashion objects. The results of this research are summarised in fig. 04, which highlights that the consumption patterns of the groups of post-Soviet “mothers” and Western “daughters” are consistent with the patterns of consumption temporalities distinguished by Gurova (2015) (transitional (from permanent to fast) and slow, respectively). Post-Soviet “mothers”, who used to live in the Soviet society characterised by scarcity, still associate resourceful clothing consumption practices with necessity. In contrast, Western “daughters”, who live in a time of eco-anxiety, associate the same practices with

sustainability. Despite these macro differences, both participant groups assign a high quality to clothes and extend their use phase by enacting several sustainable clothing consumption practices. Although Gurova (2015) has distinguished four temporalities of clothing consumption: permanent, transitional (from permanent to fast), fast and slow, within my analysis, another transitional temporality (from fast to slow) has emerged. It is characteristic to the group of post-Soviet “daughters”, aged 20 – 35, and the group of Western “mothers”, aged 50 – 65. The consumption patterns of these two groups include the peculiarities of both fast and slow temporalities but in distinct ways, resulting in additional transitional temporality. The idea of this additional temporality of consumption is plausible both in consideration of another transitional temporality (from permanent to slow) distinguished by Gurova (2015) and in consideration of Shove, Trentmann, and Wilk’s statement that transitions from one temporality to another are not characterised by the “wholesale shifts” (2009, p. 4). Recognising that this additional temporality exists, as well as recognising that its boundaries are fluid due to different combinations of macro and micro characteristics is important for those who study transitions towards sustainability in fashion. It is because this temporality sheds light on both sustainable and unsustainable behavioural consumption patterns within a temporality and can inform practical strategies, such as the development of circular infrastructures, which can provide the



	POST-SOVIET PARTICIPANTS		WESTERN PARTICIPANTS	
	50-65 y.o.	20-35 y.o.	50-65 y.o.	20-35 y.o.
<b>Temporality</b>	TRANSITIONAL (FROM PERMANENT TO FAST)	TRANSITIONAL (FROM FAST TO SLOW)	TRANSITIONAL (FROM FAST TO SLOW)	SLOW
<b>Purchase of s-h</b>	Avoid alternative retail channels	Social media s-h platforms Vintage and charity s-h Swapping and hand-me-downs	Social media s-h platforms Vintage and consignment s-h	Thrift stores and flea markets Swapping and hand-me-downs
<b>Mending culture</b>	Association with poverty No pleasure in the process of making Discreet mending Mended until losing 'vnesnij vid' Mended clothes are not worn in public Motivation: extension of the use phase Everything is mended Do not accept imperfections High quality and rigorous mends	Association with poverty No pleasure in the process of making Discreet mending Mended until losing 'vnesnij vid' Mended clothes are not worn in public Motivation: emotional attachment Only favourite items are mended Accept imperfections (but not easily) Low-quality and non-rigorous mends	Ass. with sustainability and creativity Pleasure in the process of making Discreet and expressive mending Mended until fall completely apart Mended clothes are worn in public Motivation: emotional attachment Only favourite items are mended Accept imperfections (but not easily) High quality and rigorous mends	Ass. with sustainability and creativity Pleasure in the process of making Discreet and expressive mending Mended until fall completely apart Mended clothes are worn in public Motivation: extension of the use phase Everything is mended Accept imperfections easily High-quality but non-rigorous mends
<b>Disposal format</b>	Different use phases: home, outdoor Transformation into something else Reuse of materials for DIY projects	Different use phases: home, outdoor Transformation into something else	Transformation into something else Reuse of materials for DIY projects	Transformation into something else Reuse of materials for DIY projects

Fig. 04

elements of which the desired ways of consumption can be made.

Although this research provided fresh insights into the practices of clothing consumption and studied them in-depth, I do acknowledge that the research was affected by the particulars of its research design and the participant sample. Therefore, there are some limitations to the study. The most obvious limitation is that the research was context-specific, and it was conducted in two countries (Denmark and Ukraine), where the conceptualisations of sustainability vary significantly. Another obvious limitation is the size of the sample; the analysis was based on the experiences of 14 participants. Accordingly, their experiences cannot be regarded as generalisable. However, this limitation is common to all qualitative studies that aim to gather textured information relevant to the phenomenon under investigation and support the depth of analysis. Finally, although the study call was open to participants of both genders, all those who chose to participate were women. To represent the consumption patterns of an overall specific context, the experiences of both genders should be included. Nevertheless, although the mentioned weaknesses regarding the context, sample size, and gender limit the generalisability of a study's conclusions, they also surface possibilities to think about complex issues in different ways and present many avenues for future research.

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## CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Video recording of wardrobe interview. Credits: Emile Bech.

[Fig. 02] Participant's rough approach to mending. Ph: Iryna Kucher.

[Fig. 03] Participant's transformation of clothing damaged area into a unique design feature. Ph: Iryna Kucher.

[Fig. 04] Summary of research findings. Table: Iryna Kucher

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