

# Experiencing Sustainable Fashion: Have Fun and Feel Clever

## A Case Study for Critical Design Literacy

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The consumption of clothes is increasing every year, which is a huge challenge for sustainability. Educational Design research have shown that the challenge cannot be solved unless we have critical literate consumers. By making the question of sustainable clothing a matter for critical design literacy, the aim of this case study is to examine the meaning making of an educational material produced for teachers in design and craft education. The educational material, entitled Sustainable Fashion, consists of 17 design projects and the analysis is made with the aid of practical epistemological analysis with a specific focus on aesthetic experience. Two ways of becoming a sustainable consumer of fashion have been identified – to have fun and to feel clever – and these two meaning making activities incorporate certain actions of what it means to be a sustainable consumer. From a critical design literacy perspective, these ways of becoming a sustainable consumer are crucial to acknowledge, as they include (and exclude other) specific sustainability actions.

Keywords: critical design literacy, sustainable clothing, fashion, educational material, Craft and Design Education

## Introduction

Clothing production is a major problem for sustainability. For example, it has a huge impact on the environment through water use, pollution, waste and carbon emissions. The low prices on garments are also forcing negative social impacts for garment workers with unsafe labour conditions, low wages and long working hours. In short, the clothing production is not sustainable. Yet, clothes consumerism is increasing every year which is a huge challenge for sustainability and, as design researchers argue, the challenge cannot be solved unless we have critical and informed consumers (Nielsen et al., 2015). By making the question of sustainable clothing a matter critical design literacy, the aim of this case study is to study the meaning making of sustainable clothing in an educational material produced for teachers in design and craft education. A number of Design Education researchers (Stegall, 2006; Fletcher, 2015; Lutnæs, 2019) have argued for the importance of acknowledging *the use* of designs and not only focus on the designs production. A key argument for designing for sustainability, put forward by Stegall (2006), is to “envision products, processes and services that encourage widespread sustainable behavior”. How we learn to behave with designs – also acknowledged as a design literacy – is however not a straightforward phenomenon. Rather there is a difference in both how and what one is becoming literate with. On this matter, Lutnæs (2019) identifies four narratives when designing for design literacy. The narratives acknowledge both the process, such as the making process or participating in the design process, and the outcome of what it means to be literate. Becoming literate, for example, is to be empowered for change and citizen participation or being able to address complexity of real-world problems. Accordingly, to design literacy can point both to the process and being able use designs. Fletcher (2015) also stresses the use of designs and in particular clothes literacy in terms of sustainable fashion. As fashion is so closely connected to consumerism, she argues that we need to “acknowledges the deep-rooted political and structural influence of the market and individualistic consumption on our ideas about fashion” (p.20), so we are able to see how it is influencing on us. Then, she continues, we need to stray outside this understanding where we can “re-appreciate the potential of fashion to nourish and foster other actions – to remake these charged political choices through our design and production decisions, through our wardrobes and as we dress” (p.20). In this way, we can, according to Fletcher (2015), broaden the agenda for



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fashion beyond production and consumption of new clothes.

Thus, the use in and of design are two core issues in Design Education research. But how are these matters taught when it comes to sustainable clothing? In this case study we are examining a particular educational material named *Sustainable Fashion*, which is produced by a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO); Swedish Consumers' Association (SCA). The educational material has been widely spread in Sweden and is free to download on their website. On their website one can read about the purpose with the educational material:

*Our idea with the educational material Sustainable Fashion is to start a discussion about textiles, clothing and sustainability in an engaging and creative way. We want to encourage and inspire young people to a more fun, smarter, more sustainable clothing consumption and we believe that it is through your teacher that we have the greatest opportunity to reach our message. (SCAa, 2017)*

The purpose with the educational material, as it is stated in the quotation above, is to encourage and inspire young people to a more sustainable clothing consumption. In this case study, we aim to illuminate the meaning produced in the material. By examining the meaning making in the educational material, we will show in what way sustainable fashion is promoted and what actions that are possible to take in becoming a "sustainable consumer".

### The case

The empirical data used in the case study is an educational material produced by a Swedish NGO *The Swedish Consumers' Association*. They are representing the Swedish consumer interests on national, regional and international level. The specific data that we explore consists of 17 design and craft projects that is designed for teachers to use when they education for to sustainable fashion (SCA, 2017). The analysis is made by using a practical epistemology analysis (PEA), which has been developed for the purpose of analysing the process of meaning making (Wickman, 2006; Wickman & Östman, 2002; cf. Hofverberg & Maivorsdotter, 2018). Four PEA concepts are used as an analytical framework: (1) end-in-view, (2) gap, (3) relation, and (4) encounter. The analysis is conducted as follows, using the four concepts:

In *the first step* (1), the ends-in-view in the educational material are identified (Dewey [1934] 2005). The ends-in-view is what the actions described in the educational material is directed towards, that is the goal with the activity. For example, the end-in-view to "feel clever as a sustainable consumerist" has been identified in the educational material developed by The Swedish Consumers' Association. This end-in-view opens up a gap between the fulfilment or not fulfilment of feeling clever as a sustainable consumerist.

*The second step* (2) in the analysis is to identify these gaps in the educational material. In order to fill this analytical gap, *the third step* (3) is to identify the various relations that are used in the text to fill the gap. Here, a relation that fills the gap refers to the statements or utterances that construe a connection between the entities of experience. The analysis only includes relations where aesthetic judgements are used showing the direction the meaning making is taking. Earlier studies (Maivorsdotter & Wickman 2011; Wickman 2006) have shown that people – in this case, the NGO who produced the text – make aesthetic judgements when making meaning of an experience that moves towards fulfilment (a positive aesthetic experience) or away from fulfilment (a negative aesthetic experience). For example, if the NGO makes the aesthetic judgement of "this will be perfect", they experience the action as moving towards the fulfilment of the ends-in-view. Aesthetic judgements thus provide the researcher with information about how the NGO judges the possibility to successfully become a sustainable consumer of fashion. For example, the relations such as "It is clever to only buy clothes that you actually need" show that being aware of one's personal preferences for clothes is an aesthetic experience leading towards the fulfilment of feeling clever as a sustainable consumerist. This can be understood as having a positive aesthetic experience as a consumer. In contrast, relations like "Buying clothes on impulse" lead away from fulfilling the end-in-view of feeling clever as a consumer and therefor is an example of a negative aesthetic experience.

In *the fourth step* (4), the encounters that are analytically constructed within the relations are described; for example, the relation of "It is clever to only buy clothes that you actually need" asks what encounters emerge in this relation. This can be both physical things, for example, garments, and also the mental aspects that might appear, such as someone's previous experience of knowing what a needed garment actually entails. The educational material from the NGO was analysed by the two authors, first separately and then together, where all the five steps were considered. The identified ends-in-view were then categorised. Steps one to four were elaborated during a workshop with researchers in education to confirm interpretations and conclusions. The two identified ends-in-view are presented below.

## Findings

Drawing from the end-in-view step, two ways of making meaning of the sustainable consumer of fashion have been identified in the educational material, namely, *to have fun* and *to feel clever*. The meaning making that is produced in the educational material out lined below.

### To have fun

The first category that could be identified as an end-in-view in the material is *to have fun*. Below will show the analyses with an example and then, the other ways that is directed towards the activity of having fun are listed. The first example points to the activity of visualising a dream jumper which is considered a fun activity:

*In the activity, the pupils will work out what their dream jumper is and how it will look. They will visualise the jumper by drawing, cutting and pasting. Write on the board that they can think about colour, pattern, material/fabric, and possibly the brand. (SCAb, 2017, p.3)*

The educational material also provides a number of questions and bullet points that the teacher should address as a starting point for a discussion:

*What do we think about when we buy clothes? If we are going to go out and buy our dream jumper, how do we make sure the dream doesn't come crashing down? Ordinary shoppers are usually not able to really test clothes before buying, so it's good to follow some guidelines. Before we buy an item, it is useful to think about the following things in order to find clothes that will last:*

- *How do I make the right choice?*
- *Stitching*
- *Material*
- *What are the washing instructions?*
- *Can it be mended?*

*Write these points on the board and go through them, letting the pupils make suggestions about each point.*

*How do I make the right choice? How can one know if one will actually wear the item of clothing? To begin with, it is important to always try on an item of clothing before buying it, as it is often the case that it just feels right. Does the item look good and feel comfortable on the body? Think about what you need and what it will be used for. The item will need to have certain characteristics if you are going to exercise, like in the clip, or if you are going to wear it to school or to a party. Next to the picture of their dream jumper, have the pupils to write the context they can imagine wearing it in. (SCAb, 2017, p.3)*

In the above, the pupils do not visualise just any jumper, but their *dream* jumper, which is considered as something fun. 'Dream' is identified as an aesthetic judgement and the *end-in-view* is to have fun. This end-in-view opens up a *gap* as to whether one is able to have fun or not. The relations that fill the gap, that is, whether one can have fun or not, are in the quotations that have been divided into three parts. First is to be able to visualise the dream jumper and thus design the dream. The *relations* that fill the gap is to draw the jumper, cut and paste, and have an idea of what the jumper looks and feels like in terms of colour, material, pattern, form and brand. Pointing to the second part of the text, to have fun also involves sustaining the dream so it does not shatter. The relations that fill the gap here is to have knowledge about the dream jumper in terms of how it is constructed, what it is made out of, how it should be washed and whether it can be mended. In the last part of the quotation, the relation that fills the gap is to know in what context the jumper is to be used. What the pupil is *encountering* in these relations is knowledge about materials, designing techniques, knowledge about personal preferences and knowledge about the social context one is taking part in. The other relations that emerge in this category with the end-in-view to have fun are stated in table 1.

Table 1. Shows the findings from “having fun”.

To have fun	Relations
	create a feeling of happiness without shopping
	make a clothes mob (where one garment is used by different people)
	to find your own style
	to feel for a garment
	to comment on politics through craft

In this first category, having fun is an end-in-view that it is used as an aesthetic expression when sustainable fashion is promoted. This in turn, encourages certain actions which includes certain ways of making meaning about sustainable clothing consumption (see table 1).

### To feel clever

The other category that that has been identified as an end-in-view is *to feel clever*. This category is larger, as we have identified 18 ways of feeling clever. We will present one example by using PEA and then list the other ways.

In the first example, the following passage in the “Sustainable Fashion” text points to feeling clever when one buys clothes that last, even though they may be more expensive. The project that the pupils are suggested to do involves half of the class making a bag based on quality (i.e. making it so it will last) and half the class is to make a bag based on quantity (i.e. making as many as possible). After the activity, the class is meant to discuss the results of the activity:

*Discuss the results of the different groups. How did they think about and what choices did they make when they were to create quality? How did those who were to create quantity decide what choices to make? Discuss why we should buy good-quality clothes. What do we gain from that? Can we be sure that a good-quality garment is also good for the environment and for those who have worked in the manufacture of the garment?*

*Often, better quality costs a little more. Illustrate the relationship between price and quality through this calculation, which shows how much a garment costs per use.*

- *Winter jacket: 1000 kr/100 days of use each year for 2 years = 5 kr per use*
- *Party top: 50 kr/2 times = 25 kr per use. (SCAc, 2017, p. 7)*

The *end-in-view* in this passage is to feel clever. This opens up a *gap* as to whether one is able to feel clever or not. The *relation* that emerges here is to buy clothes that will last, clothes that cost more, clothes that are good for the environment, and clothes that are good for people who have made the clothes and the clothes that one often wears. The *encounters* that can be identified in these relations are not only physical objects and entities, such as clothes, the environment and money, but also other people, for example, those who make the clothes. The encounters also point to ‘better quality’ (although it is not described in detail what that entails, but we can see that it costs more) and a habit of using clothes.

Other relations that emerge in this category with the end-in-view to feel clever can be divided into three different themes. The first theme is to have knowledge about clothes as consumption items, the second theme is to have knowledge about clothes’ fabric and the third theme is to have consumer’s knowledge and be able to take action based on that. In the table below all the relations identified are stated.

Table 2. Shows the findings from “feeling clever”.

To feel clever	Relations
Knowledge about clothes as consumptions items	not buy clothes based on impulse
	to have clothes that you actually need
	to think about what clothes you need
	to not to shop so much
	to not to buy wear-and-tear
Knowledge about clothes' fabric	to know that the garment will not break
	to have knowledge of the quality of the material
	to know how clothes are handled and mended
	to wash woollen garments by hand
	to have clothes that feels good on the body
Consumer's knowledge and actions	to not wash too often
	to save the receipt when buying
	to reward nice companies
	to send letters to responsible businesses and politicians
	to wear the same garment as a pursuit of sustainable fashion
	to buy clothes where the workers had good working conditions
	to write a debate article
to find out more about labels so that the environment workers or consumers are not harmed	

As one can see, there are many “clever” actions one can do, and they are all related to specific aesthetic judgements that point to different actions of feeling clever. As a conclusion, to feel clever is an end-in-view that promotes a certain meaning making about sustainable clothing consumption, which we now summarise with some concluding remarks.

### Concluding remarks: aesthetics experiences and critical design literacy

The aim of this case study was to study the meaning making of sustainable clothing in an educational material named *Sustainable Fashion* produced for teachers in design and craft education. Based on the analysis, we can conclude that the educational material reveals a “taste” for the informed and capable pupil acting on clothing sustainability. Two ways of becoming a sustainable consumer of fashion have been identified – to have fun and to feel clever – and these meaning making activities incorporate certain actions of what it means to be a sustainable consumer. For example, there are certain ways of having fun in the educational material (see table 1) and there are certain ways of feeling clever (see table 2). What the result shows is that the meaning making produced in the educational material provide certain norms and certain ways to act. When students are taking part in these design projects, the meaning making of having fun and feeling clever will be presented to them and they will learn whether they “belong” in the activity and how. That is, if they agree (or not) on the meaning making of having fun and feel clever and act accordingly. As they do, they will also learn whether (or not) they can be recognised as sustainable consumers.

By making the meaning that is produced through the aesthetic experiences in the educational material visible, we can more easily discuss other possibilities. For example, what other ways making meaning with sustainable clothing are possible? As Fletcher (2015, p. 20) reminds us, noted above, there is a possibility to re-appreciate the potential of fashion to nourish and foster other actions, as we dress. By making the meaning explicit in the educational material, we can critically discuss its outcome and based on that, open up for other possibilities that is of relevance for critical design literacy. After all, we all wear clothes and thus learning critical design literacy is essential for a more sustainable future.

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