

Wearing and sharing #wardrobechallenges: Finding inspiration when you have nothing to wear

Rachel Matthews

Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

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Abstract: Since the emergence of the fashion blogosphere, sharing personal fashion choices and inspirations using hashtags such as #OOTD (outfit of the day) have become commonplace. The speed and volume of this content has grown exponentially, providing a mediated view of self-fashioning as well as a common trope of marketing communications adopted by influencers. Recently, there has been a noted change in wardrobe activities being shared on social media, that focus on the challenges fashion users have as they navigate their existing wardrobe. User-generated content (UGC) tagged with #wardrobechallenge draws together diverse posts ranging from how to re-wear wardrobe items through techniques such as the 30 wears challenge, struggles with closet decluttering and laundry tips. This type of wardrobe work is predominantly an activity undertaken in private; however, when shared and mediated through digital channels it offers greater visibility on the use phase of garments. Recognising that the use-stage holds much potential to extend the lifecycle of garments (Gwilt & Rissanen, 2012), this paper explores UGC to understand whether the sharing of wardrobe challenges holds potential to drive sustainable behaviour change. With many fashion users mistrustful or confused by what fashion brands say regarding sustainability and little evidence of industry engagement with the post-purchase phases of fashion – the study asks if #wardrobechallenge content offers an effective way of communicating sustainable fashion practices. This is a socio-material investigation, that draws on data from Instagram and TikTok tagged with #wardrobechallenge. A typology of wardrobe challenge practices has been developed; its classifications offer inspiration for ‘doing’ fashion beyond consumption and designations of the fashion industry. The study concludes by discussing how this form of UGC could build new ways of socialising and supporting sustainable behaviour change.

Introduction

Design academic Jonathan Chapman stated, “Material consumption is out of control.... resulting in a harried and exhausted consumer” (Chapman, 2021, p5), and the rise in personal wardrobe management strategies suggest that some fashion users are taking steps to address the negative impacts of their material consumption habits. Social media platforms have been spaces used for sharing individual fashion choices and preferences for almost two decades. These practices – typified by outfit of the day (#OOTD), have become commodified and co-opted as marketing communications through the growth of fashion influencers. The format and aesthetics of sharing fashion choices on social media are as a finished and perfect outcome, the messy indecisive processes of selecting ‘the outfit’ are seldom revealed in this genre.

Recently, there has been a change in the visibility of wardrobe work on social media; activities are being shared that focus on the challenges fashion users have as they navigate their existing wardrobe in search of ‘something to wear’. The content captures approaches adopted to change material consumption habits that have come to feel compulsive, overwhelming or unfulfilling. Previously experiments in reducing fashion consumption have been undertaken as a ‘fashion detox challenge’ in academic settings in both USA (Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015) and in UK (Ritch et al., 2020). Similarly, current online wardrobe work takes the form of a fashion ‘challenge.’ The concept of an online ‘challenge’ is an invitation or call to action, to participate in a competitive situation, and tagging social media content with #wardrobechallenge is the way for individuals to share their “experiments in voluntary reduction of apparel consumption” (Vladimirova

2021, p112). #wardrobechallenge data reveals various terms for these challenges, such as the *Rule of 5* (5 high quality new garments per year + 4 second-hand), *10 X 10* (pick 10 garments from your wardrobe and wear only these for 10 days), *30 wears* (only buy something new only if you can wear it 30 times), *Project 333* (33 garments only for 3 months, excluding jewellery, underwear, sleepwear, gym gear) and *75 day hard style challenge* (track what you wear for 75 days and buy nothing new). All focus on intentional wardrobe tracking to reset existing wardrobe habits and all require a familiarity with existing wardrobe contents.

There is a growing body of research into wardrobe practices, supported and advanced through the establishment of wardrobe methods (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017), a field of research designed specifically to understand the use phase of garment life, something that is usually undertaken in private. Because of changing social norms, there is a willingness to 'work things out online', resulting in a digital corpus of wardrobe work. Much research on sustainable behaviour change in fashion has focused on purchase behaviours (Sumner, 2018 for example); however, the rise in user-generated content documenting wardrobe management practices offers an alternative avenue for the study of user behaviours beyond just acquisition. The remediation of user experiences and perspectives on social media has limitations (Rocamora, 2023; Hipfl, 2018) impacted by algorithms, filters, self-censorship. Nevertheless, this is an era where the mediatisation of production and consumption of fashion is normalised and embedded in daily life and can influence and socialise change.

The study seeks to contribute to wardrobe studies, whilst situating this investigation within fashion communications; this is an influential field still struggling to counter messages that perpetuate overconsumption or empower fashion users to make sustainable behaviour change. Below, the research design sets out the theoretical framing, data collection and analysis used. The findings detail patterns and themes revealed through analysis, subsequently developed in a typology of #wardrobechallenge practices and a map of contextual factors of the study. These generate a view of users re-negotiating notions of novelty in fashion, devising creative constraints and connecting through shared experiences. The

article then discusses how #wardrobechallenge practices reveal nascent fashion and clothing systems, designed to both promote and support sustainable behaviour change. It concludes by discussing how, through the promotion of new experiences to be had with fashion, we may be able to create a pathway to Chapman's (2021) vision of a future that is rich in experience, whilst being light on materials.

Research methods

The study is a qualitative, interpretative project, with the data collected from Instagram and TikTok, tagged with #wardrobechallenge. It adopts a socio-material perspective to examine the mediation of wardrobe work in this data. This approach has its roots in Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005) and views materials as dynamic and entangled with human activity. It considers socio-material objects as heterogeneous assemblages, where all things (human, non-human, technology, systems) become linked in webs of activity that decentre the predominance of the human agency (Fenwick et al., 2015) and generate knowledge. Socio-materiality considers whole systems, not separating out human relations from material objects, rather recognising how understanding is enhanced and deepened by our relations with stuff. This viewpoint accepts the fundamental uncertainty, fluidity, and messiness of everyday life (Orlikowski, 2007). Socio-materiality enables analysis of the disparate elements as they interconnect; the approach underpins the analysis of the UGC on social media tracing practices that create meaning and engagement with objects (Hipfl, 2018).

Data collection has focused on social media platforms Instagram and TikTok. These two popular, interactive communication channels have been instrumental in creating the #wardrobechallenge phenomenon (Kwon 2018). Posts on Instagram and videos on TikTok were collected manually during October 2024. Only content in English language was selected. #wardrobechallenge was the central anchor for identifying relevant data; however, this hashtag is used on a variety of content, so further exclusions were applied to ensure the data captured concerned personal wardrobe organisation and self-fashioning practices (not advertising). 120 Instagram posts were captured on October 16 and 17 2024 and 120

TikTok videos were captured October 25 and 26 2024 all tagged with #wardrobechallenge amongst hashtags (see Table 1). Each was considered as a digital artefact - a unit of analysis comprising of image / video, written post, hashtags. The process of analysis employed mixed methods, adopting a layered semiotic approach to analyse images, context, and text (Barthes, 1991). Having refined the data sets to ensure the content was concerned with personal wardrobe practices, image and text were considered together, paying particular attention to the coherence of the message delivered through visual and textual means.

Platform	Gender presentation (from observation)	Approx. age (from observation)	Location (where included)
Instagram (120 posts)	M: 1 F: 119	Millennials and Gen X	US, UK, Malaysia, Germany
TikTok (120 videos)	M: 3 F: 117	Gen Z and younger Millennials	US, UK, Singapore

Table 1. Details of user-generated content (UGC) collected from social media platforms.

Content analysis was combined with visual mapping techniques to analyse the elements converging in the content. Experimental assemblages were created, which grouped types of images used and to document reoccurring features of the data. The techniques for tracking and visualising findings as a means of analysis are taken critical cartography (Cosgrove, 1999; Butler-Kisber & Poldman, 2010), where mapping techniques enable multiple elements to be viewed in relationship to each other. Here mapping deconstructs a linear readings of social media feeds, disrupting algorithms and automated formatting that remain invisible yet shape what/how we see the data. Content analysis and visual mapping became integrated through iterative and relational analysis techniques (Orlikowski & Scott, 2016). Subsequently thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the data was undertaken and iteratively refined, this revealed common motivations in the types of #wardrobechallenge content being shared. The themes are detailed in the typology (see Table 2 in the appendix).

In addition, situational analysis was undertaken to consider the broader relational context for the research. It is important to acknowledge the complexity of researching social and socio-material phenomena, and resist limiting the study to a single specific focus to see the

assemblage of actants at work. Self-fashioning and fashion consumption practices are shaped and influenced by a range of entangled factors and actants. Situational analysis provides a methodological approach that retains and manages the complexity the situation being researched, a view of the arena in which meaning is being negotiated (Clarke, 2014). This analysis was undertaken using academic sources, industry data and grey literature to build a picture of political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal context of the study with a view to surfacing various actants. Findings from the situational analysis enable a meso-level view - a 'social world' (Clarke, 2014) against which to view of the UGC. Figure 1a. sets out significant factors relevant to the study.

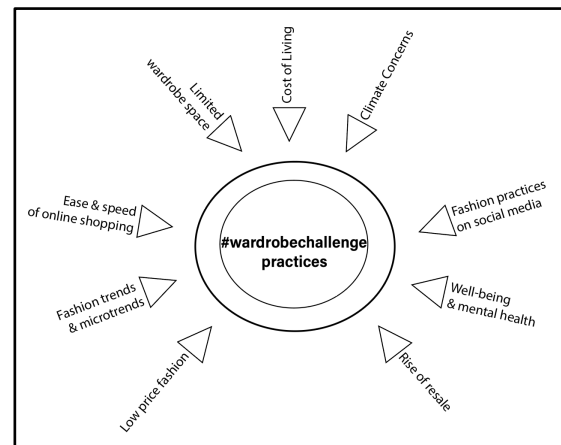


Figure 1a. Mapping of situational factors of #wardrobechallenge (© Matthews, R. 2024).

Findings

The motivations to participate in wardrobe challenge activities ranged from struggles with storing wardrobe contents, desire to develop more confidence in personal style, guilt about volumes of unworn clothing (or fabrics purchased to make clothing), a need to curb shopping habits for financial, body image and fit issues. Some content was explicitly linked of sustainability as #slowfashion or #sustainablefashion as well as strategies for managing too much choice and availability; but the overarching objective appeared to be motivated by a desire to change their relationship with fashion. Through more systematic analysis of #wardrobechallenge data, characteristics in the types of wardrobe challenges emerged. These have been developed as a typology of

#wardrobechallenge practices (see Table 2 in the appendix). The classifications group socially negotiated use phase strategies being employed in everyday self-fashioning, by types of online communities. The typology contributes a perspective on use practices, often designed to manifest a less chaotic and more joyful relationship with fashion and clothing over time, deepen connection with wardrobe contents and extending garment lifecycles.

Makers & Menders

The wardrobe challenge for this group is that they make or modify garments, but don't wear them as often as they would like, so they post about finding ways to increase the number and the ways they wear the things they have made themselves. The group connects through a love of making, knitting, mending, re-modelling or adjusting garments at home for themselves. They post prompts and motivations for themselves (and others) to wear more of what they have made and adapted rather than buying new clothing as well as describing processes and sharing recent making projects.

De-clutterers

The wardrobe challenge for this group is managing quantities of wardrobe contents in ways that make storing and finding items easy. The group share solutions for more ordered, less chaotic relationship with garments and their wardrobe space through a 'less is more' mantra. They post practical interior design tips on decluttering wardrobe spaces, efficient storage, quality of hangers and fixtures and appear to be particularly concerned by what constitutes a 'capsule' wardrobe.

Style experimenters

The wardrobe challenge for this group is concerned with notions of personal style and identity expression through self-fashioning. The group is motivated by a desire to feel more confident and less reliant on fashion industry trends. Many post their style experiments to test, receive feedback and seek approval from others, as if getting dressed with a close friend. Others in this group promote 'dress to please yourself' message encouraging others to look beyond social norms and expectations and liberate themselves from fashion trends.

Fancy dressers

The wardrobe challenge for this group is akin to fancy-dress competition. The group use their wardrobe content like a dressing-up box to compose outfits to resemble the style of their current favourite inspiration, paying homage to certain celebrities or characters. The characters / personalities that inspired the fancy-dressers in the data captured for this study ranged from Iris Apfel, Michelle Obama and Emily in Paris through to Disney and Anime characters.

Fashion refrainers

The wardrobe challenge for this group is their overconsumption, always shopping for new items rather than wearing what they already own. The group are on a shopping diet, and post to keep themselves accountable. They share prompts and motivations to refrain from buying new clothes, such as promoting the idea of shopping in your closet. Many follow the wardrobe challenge strategies such as the Rule of FIVE or Project 333.

There are underlying tactics in #wardrobechallenges typology: the renegotiation of novelty in fashion, the creative use of constraints and sharing and connecting through socio-material experiences (see Figure 1b.). The insights build a view of alternative problem-solving strategies users are employing to 'do' fashion beyond consumption and the designations of the fashion industry; approaches that counter the usual dichotomous (sometimes judgmental) statements about deficit or limitations in some sustainable behaviour discourse (Tham, 2010).

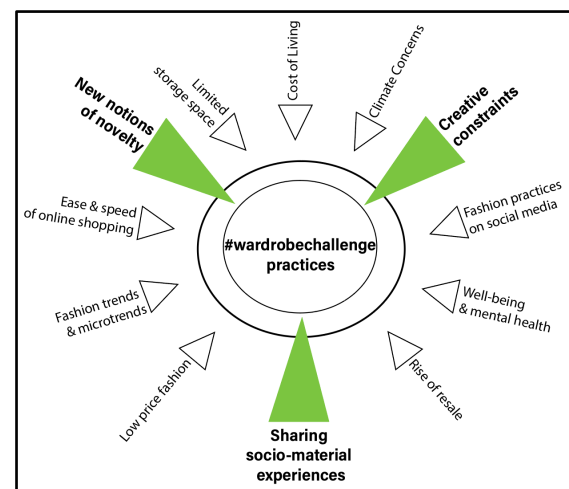


Figure 1b. Mapping of situational factors and key characteristics of #wardrobechallenge (© Matthews, R. 2024).

New notions of novelty

This captures the way groups are renegotiating ideas of newness in their existing wardrobe contents. The examples reveal a variety of (non) consumption fashion practices, where shopping and trend-driven newness is replaced with socially negotiated experiences with fashion and clothing. Ideas of newness are re-shaped from a user perspective and contain a spirit of resourcefulness / inventiveness that is not motivated by commercial imperatives. Further, this sense of liberation from fashion is reflected in activities such as 'fashion week bingo' or 'fashion roulette' where users parody industry tropes. Examples from the data:

"Its Monochrome Monday"(IG007)

"Today I styled looks from the floor up! Yep, started on the shoes and built a look from there!" (TT054)

"Fun fact: I'm actually wearing it backward! The front is a higher scoop neck, but the v on the back and the cut of the shirt makes it versatile enough to wear both ways. Have you ever turned a piece of clothing around?" (IG073)

Creative constraints

The use constraints here are not as a negative or a deficit. They are creatively employed to prohibit acquisition. According to Bogost (2016) in his analysis of play, rules and reduced options do not limit the joy of experience but rather provide structure for interesting and creative choices and experiences. It is in this spirit that constraints are employed in the #wardrobechallenge data. Numerical or temporal constraints are utilised, as over time the new ways of thinking, feeling and acting in relation to fashion becomes habitual (Saunders et al., 2024). The findings illustrate creative remaking rules and systems around fashion and clothing from user perspective. Examples from the data:

"No buy July" (IG012)

"100 days and no repeats...and you must donate what didn't get worn in 100 days" (TT034)

"If you didn't touch it last season, it's time to sell it or donate it" (TT023)

Sharing of socio-material experience

Another feature of the data is how wardrobe choices are entangled with life events and social interactions, illustrating the tacit emotional connections we have with our wardrobe. The sentiment is shared as a justification of choice, while connecting the emotional and tactile / haptic experiences involved in self-fashioning. This content builds visibility of the multiple actants converging in self-fashioning. Examples from the data:

"I know its boring talking about the weather but a wool jumper in July?? Getting dressed is definitely challenging right now. I'm currently aiming to build my outfits around one summery item along with the warmer ones I need to stay warm. That way at least some of my summer wardrobe is getting worn" (IG067)

"Fuss free look for an unmotivated day. I am so tired today, I genuinely can't wait to go to bed" (IG061)

"I haven't felt much like posting yet this month wading through sadness at the loss of a beautiful friend. But she always admired my me-mades, and her last ever message to me was to say how happy she was for me starting my new job (emoji heart / cotton reel) wearing the snuggliest hug of #cardiganno4" (IG090)

#wardrobechallenge participation has allowed fashion users to make space - physical, temporal or mental space (Martin-Woodhead, 2022) to test different relationships with fashion. By 'working it out' on social media, users have encouraged others to participate, tell their stories, generating alternative ways of thinking, feeling and practicing self-fashioning. Although, the study analyses only a small sample, the variety of voices and sense of enjoyment with fashion is evident, often articulated by those who may have felt alienated by the fashion system. The implications of these findings and the potential to socialise and support other types of fashion and clothing systems is discussed below.

Discussion

Communicating about sustainable fashion and clothing is complex and difficult to pin down (Saunders et al., 2024). Sustainable fashion is not a singular or stable concept (Fletcher, 2013). It is a "tricky" expression (Payne &

Ferrero-Regis, 2019, p180) because the very meaning of fashion – continuous change predicated on newness – negates the possibility of sustaining sustainability. Users' experiences with fashion are also difficult to pin down, being neither homogenous nor static. To evolve a discourse in this space requires the negotiation and co-creation of language and forms of representation. With little evidence of the industry's willingness to engage with the use phases of fashion and clothing, we must look elsewhere for trusted and engaging communications that supports users to rethink material consumption.

The study provides insights that suggest ways for fashion communication practices to build counter-narratives to the 'new is always better' message that remains a feature of fashion media. Further, the online discourse around 'doing' fashion sustainably often invokes feelings of guilt rather than enjoyment or side-steps genuine use practices. To gain traction, mediations of sustainable behaviour change need to be appealing and feel achievable; the content captures mood-boosting DIY approaches to fashion, used to disrupt norms and reshape former behaviours towards material consumption. Shared online, this becomes a form of fashion media that opens ways to speak about individual experience and socialise alternative interactions with material worlds. It elevates use practices and experiences with fashion, making visible a nascent pluriverse of fashion and clothing systems, where shopping and trend-driven newness is replaced with socially negotiated experiences. The content begins to evolve a more democratic discourse where sustainable use practices come with guidance and a support network. This suggests how networked communities can grow decentralised, autonomous 'Commons' (Bollier, 2014), where individuals share assorted fashion-abilities (Von Busch, 2022) as the open-source resources. These networked groups stimulate ways to decentralise, undermine and dismantle constructs of fashion built on commercial drivers. Viewed collectively, a genre emerges, co-created communications capable of mediating different sustainable behaviours and practices.

It is important to acknowledge that social media content is influenced by multiple interacting factors (from platform and algorithmic

limitations through to micro-trends), recognising the "moulding power of media" (Rocamora, 2023) despite individuals' intention. There are restrictions when trying to gain ground or bandwidth within digital platforms such as Instagram, designed to prioritise paid for content and advertising. However, it remains possible for online collectives or media-related pioneer communities (as described by Hepp, (2016)) to drive change in culture, by amplifying different voices and perspectives in an evolving communications landscape. The enactment and sharing of novel experiential approaches to sustainable fashion use online, can generate communication networks that both promote and support behaviour change. In doing so, effective ways of speaking about and representing Chapman's (2021) vision for a future enriched by experience while drawing lightly on material resources emerges.

Conclusions

This paper has investigated UGC tagged #wardrobechallenge to better understand whether the sharing of wardrobe challenges holds potential to drive sustainable behaviour change. Analysis revealed groups of individuals seeking less chaotic and more harmonious relationships with fashion through wardrobe management; these groups encouraged others to participate and in doing so co-created spaces for discussion of fashion and clothing systems operating beyond consumption and designations of the fashion industry. Recognising that fashion communications is powerful yet currently ineffectual in driving sustainable change, the paper envisions the findings as a communication strategy designed to support a fashionable future shaped through novel experiences not material consumption.

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Appendix

Type / typology #wardrobechallenge	Wardrobe challenge	Characteristics	Novelties & constraints
1. Makers & Menders #DIYwardrobe #memade #sewersofinstagram	A desire to wear more things that they have made themselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel guilty about fabric hoarding • Pride & satisfaction in their making • Themes: fabrics, patterns, sizing, fitting & construction tips • Clothing maintenance, repairs, recutting, upcycling • Telling garment stories • Overall, discourse invites feedback & comments of self-made pieces & edutainment on pattern, fit & make 	Months of year / days of the week to wear only self-made items Colour or pattern related themes Some reference to fashion trends (barbie core, cottage core)
2. Declutterers #getorganised #capsulewardrobe #cluttertocapsule	A desire for a neater and more organised wardrobe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical and organisational focus • Connection with health & well-being through order and control (escaping chaos and overwhelm) • Themes: interior design including fixtures & fittings, efficiency & functionality of wardrobe spaces, packing & storage tips, what to do with excess clothing • Lots of before and after content or timelapse, overall discourse about advice & tips 	Numbers and formulas for “capsule wardrobe” Strategies & definitions of wardrobe “staples” Specific times of the year for seasonal declutters and wardrobe re-organisation Marie Kondo type guide decluttering
3. Style Experimenters #stylechallenge #fashionover40 #shopyourcloset	A desire to find personal style & be more creative in self-fashioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal style as a means of freeing themselves from ‘fashion’ trends or social norms • Make connection with building self-confidence through style • Despite wanting to be free of fashion trends, inspiration sometimes refers to trends • Not really about restraint, more about having fun, liberation and finding inspiration themselves • Overall discourse is about style & enjoyment, seeking feedback and approval, occasionally competitive tone 	Mostly about styling, inspiration and style challenges (styling version of Project 333) Themes: outfit planning, styling details tips, sharing insecurities (age, body shape), French girl, nautical, events such as WFH Games like fashion roulette, fashion week bingo
4. Fancy-dressers #disneybounding #irisyourcloset #eglwardrobechallenge	A desire to use their wardrobe to pay homage to celebrities / characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wardrobe as dressing-up box • Special interest groups, such as cosplayers, fans of celebrities and fantasy characters • Inspiration through dressing up as other people - fantasy and escapism • Overall discourse social connection through fandom 	Themes: Iris Apfel, Disney characters, Elegant & Gothic Lolita's, Emily in Paris, Barbie, Michelle Obama
5. Refrainers #nobuyjuly #fashiondetox #75hardstylechallenge	A desire to wear what they own more, rather than buying any new clothes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting themselves on a fashion diet – comments like ‘a fast from fashion’ and ‘fashion detox’ • Confessions of struggles with fashion & shopping (like addiction) • Disenchantment with clothes shopping, guilt / shame about volume of clothing they own and about clothing they own and don't wear • Discussion of events or activities that proved easier / harder because they weren't allowing themselves to shop for new products • Overall discourse, seeking encouragement and accountability as they refrain from shopping 	Lots of use of the wardrobe management formulas – quantitative or temporal - #ruleof5, #30wearschallenge, #75daystylechallenge, 10X10challenge Wearing items that haven't been worn for a year

Table 2. Typology of #wardrobechallenge practices (© Matthews, R. 2024).