
Exploring consumers' motives for and reflections upon their experiences in the wool& 100 Day challenge: an interpretive study

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Abstract

Purpose – We explored female-identifying consumers' experiences of engaging with the wool& 100 Day Dress Challenge, including their motives for and reflections upon their participation in the Challenge and the brand's social media communities. The Challenge is rooted in voluntary simplicity and requires participants to wear the same wool& dress for 100 consecutive days.

Design/methodology/approach – We adopted a qualitative, longitudinal approach, interviewing 12 participants in the Challenge across three data collection points spanning approximately three months, for a total of 35 interviews. Data were analyzed using constant comparison processes.

Findings – Participants shared four key motives to engage in the Challenge and five motivations to engage with the wool& social media brand-based communities, fulfilling both functional and hedonic needs and frequently reflecting sustainable values. The experience of engaging in the Challenge supported positive self- and body image for many participants, sparked in part by the realization that others did not notice what they were wearing. Participants took away many lessons from the Challenge, several of which related to values of voluntary simplicity and minimalism. Many of these practices endured beyond the end of the Challenge.

Originality/value – This work extends the application of the voluntary simplicity framework – traditionally examined in controlled, non-commercial settings such as among university students or within nonprofit initiatives – into a brand-sponsored consumption challenge.

Keywords Marketing, Consumer behavior, Women, Self-concept, Social responsibility

Paper type Research article

The rise of fast fashion, which gained momentum in the 1990s and early 2000s, has contributed to a culture of “disposable fashion” in Western societies, encouraging excessive consumption and waste (Sadashige and Gleeson, 2025). The environmental impact of fast fashion includes high water consumption, pollution, chemical contamination, carbon dioxide emissions and textile waste (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020). In response to these issues, alternative consumption models have emerged, including *voluntary simplicity* (VS), which emphasizes reducing material consumption as a means of mitigating environmental harm (Shaw and Newholm, 2002). VS, originally a spiritual movement (Gregg, 1936), has evolved into a lifestyle choice adopted by individuals seeking to minimize their environmental footprint through mindful consumption practices (Kuan *et al.*, 2020).

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One example of a VS practice in apparel consumption is the 100-Day Dress Challenge promoted by the sustainable apparel brand wool&. This Challenge invites consumers to wear one of the company's merino wool dresses for 100 consecutive days and rewards those who complete the Challenge with a \$100 gift card for future purchases (wool&, 2025). The purpose of this Challenge is to encourage participants to reduce their environmental impact on the planet, simplify their lives and "focus on what matters" and reconsider the role of clothing in personal identity. Participants of the Challenge are encouraged to share their experiences on dedicated social media pages, promoting a community around the Challenge (wool&, 2025).

Previous studies have examined VS practices in apparel consumption through qualitative explorations of apparel consumption reduction challenges (e.g. Armstrong *et al.*, 2016; Ritch *et al.*, 2020; Ruppert-Stroescu *et al.*, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2013). These studies suggest that participation in such challenges may enhance creativity, promote self-regulation and encourage a re-evaluation of consumption habits (Ritch *et al.*, 2020; Ruppert-Stroescu *et al.*, 2015). However, the wool& 100-Day Dress Challenge differs from previously studied apparel consumption challenges in that the Challenge: (1) requires wearing a single garment for 100 consecutive days rather than generally abstaining from apparel purchases, which may introduce a unique social stigma; (2) promotes participation through self-image appeals, such as reminders that "your clothing isn't what defines you" (wool&, 2025); (3) involves active engagement in social media communities that may shape the participant experience; and (4) is initiated by an apparel brand offering a financial incentive, possibly influencing participant motivations beyond altruistic or environmental concerns.

Although prior research exploring apparel challenges designed to reflect VS has revealed valuable insights about this consumption practice, this work has not examined the longitudinal impact of participating in these challenges or the social dimensions associated with participation in online communities related to such challenges. Additionally, existing research has not provided an in-depth analysis of the ways in which participation in these challenges may give rise to certain self- and body image perceptions, in spite of the fact that clothing, the self and the body are intimately connected (Entwistle, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore female-identifying consumers' experiences of engaging with the wool& 100-Day Dress Challenge, including (1) their motives for and reflections upon their participation in the Challenge, (2) their motives for and reflections upon their participation in wool&'s social media-based-brand communities (SMBBCs), (3) their perceived changes in their self- and body images based upon their participation in the Challenge and (4) their attitudes and behavior changes toward sustainable clothing consumption after their participation in the Challenge. We adopted a longitudinal approach so that we could explore how participants' experiences and behaviors changed across and beyond the Challenge.

Literature review

Voluntary simplicity and apparel reduction challenges

As noted, a handful of studies have examined VS practices in the context of apparel consumption. Most of these studies explore participants' experiences in various "challenges" designed to reduce apparel consumption (e.g. Armstrong *et al.*, 2016; Ritch *et al.*, 2020; Ruppert-Stroescu *et al.*, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2013). For instance, Wu *et al.* (2013) investigated participants' motivations for joining The Great American Apparel Diet (GAAD), a virtual support group for individuals seeking to reduce apparel consumption. Their findings identified three internal motivations (personal, financial and lifestyle) and three external motivations (social, economic and environmental) that influenced participants to engage in GAAD. Consistent with previous literature (Elgin, 1981), Wu *et al.* (2013) found that VS is a complex practice, with internal motivations, such as a desire for control, playing a key role in consumers' willingness to participate. Their study was among the few that highlighted the benefits of virtual communities in supporting participants' VS consumption lifestyles.

Researchers (Armstrong *et al.*, 2016; Ruppert-Stroescu *et al.*, 2015) have also examined VS in the context of an apparel consumption reduction challenge by exploring the Fashion Detox Challenge, an experiential learning activity in which US undergraduate students

voluntarily refrained from acquiring new clothing and reflected on their learning experiences via blog posts over a 10-week period. Barriers encountered during the challenge were witnessed at individual (compulsive shopping behavior, unmet clothing needs and retail therapy withdrawal), social (consumption envy and appearance consciousness) and cultural levels (temptation and relapse) (Armstrong *et al.*, 2016). Benefits shared by participants included a stronger sense of creativity as they restyled existing clothing in their wardrobes and increased levels of self-regulation, limiting their impulse purchases as they constantly evaluated their needs and wants (Armstrong *et al.*, 2016; Ruppert-Stroescu *et al.*, 2015).

Ritch *et al.* (2020) adapted the Fashion Detox Challenge model, launching it in Scotland and later globally. An analysis of participants' "Detox Diaries" revealed three distinct themes that emerged across participants' detox journeys: (1) awareness of clothing overconsumption; (2) a personal realization to limit clothing consumption based on a needs-versus-wants philosophy; and (3) a sense of empowerment to adopt more sustainable clothing consumption habits. The findings also highlighted one of the primary challenges in addressing clothing overconsumption – habit. Two specific habitual practices were identified: participants' attempts to satisfy non-material needs through clothing purchases and the misperception that they had "nothing to wear."

Taken together, then, this body of research suggests that VS in an apparel context can prompt participation in mindful consumption and minimalist lifestyles. The current study extends this line of research by examining how consumers' participation in brand-initiated consumption challenges such as wool&'s 100-day Dress Challenge can empower more intentional clothing consumption practices.

Social media brand communities

A brand community has been conceptualized as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). This concept signifies common lived experiences among community members based upon their consumption of a product or service, enhancing their bond.

With the popularity of social media, Habibi and colleagues proposed the concept of social media-based brand communities (SMBBCs), which allow marketers and consumers "to share their ideas, feelings, and consumption experiences of a common brand in any format (from text to multimedia) and in an efficient manner" (Habibi *et al.*, 2014, p. 129). Although many types of social media platforms exist, researchers have suggested that shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions and obligation to community are key components of SMBBCs (Habibi *et al.*, 2014, 2016; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Social media-based brand communities have been found to significantly impact consumer purchasing behaviors (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Goh *et al.*, 2025; Zaglia, 2013). For instance, according to Brodie and colleagues (2013), consumers tend to rely on community interactions for product recommendations and reviews before making their purchases. Ho (2015) found that a brand's community on Facebook positively influenced the strength of consumers' relationships with the brand community and with the company itself. Additionally, research has shown that the stronger the consumer identified with the brand community, the more likely they would exhibit behaviors that support the brand (i.e. making brand purchases or recommendations to others) (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Ho, 2015). Additionally, shared experiences and interactions within SMBBCs have been found to enhance emotional attachment to brands (Batra *et al.*, 2012). The engagement and emotional connections with a brand help foster a sense of belonging, satisfaction, trust and loyalty among consumers (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Santos *et al.*, 2022). With this work, we aim to explore why participants engaged with wool&'s SMBBCs and how this engagement shaped their experiences of the Challenge.

Clothing and self- and body image

Clothing is part of the embodied practice of dress and is used to express aspects of the self to others (Entwistle, 2015). Clothing may shape both self-image (Joung and Miller, 2006) and

body image (e.g. [Grogan et al., 2013](#)), which in turn are related to one another; body image is fundamental to self-image or how one experiences and evaluates the self ([Allport, 1963](#); [Eide, 1982](#)). Body image encompasses how individuals perceive, think about, feel toward and behave in relation to their bodies ([Cash and Pruzinsky, 2002](#)).

Research exploring linkages among clothing, the self and the body has frequently examined how individuals use clothing to manage body image. This work suggests that women adopt clothing strategically to cope with body distress and to sustain body confidence by camouflaging “problem areas” and/or highlighting “assets” to flatter the figure ([Frith and Gleason, 2008](#); [Grogan et al., 2013](#); [Kwon and Parham, 1994](#); [Tiggemann and Lacey, 2009](#)). These behaviors may fluctuate depending upon women’s perceptions of their body sizes as “fat” or “thin,” aligning with their aspirations of how they “should” look ([Frith and Gleason, 2008](#); [Kwon and Parham, 1994](#)).

The “spotlight effect” ([Gilovich et al., 2000](#)), a cognitive phenomenon whereby people “overestimate the extent to which their actions and appearance are noted by others” (p. 211), suggests that participants in the 100 Day Challenge might perceive that others are paying close attention to the repetition in their dressing patterns, which may be regarded as a violation of Western culture appearance norms (i.e. a stigma). This, in turn, may prompt self-consciousness or social anxiety, possibly impacting self- and body image. According to the theory, observers actually are less attuned to others’ shortcomings than they would expect, suggesting that if individuals understood how little attention their actions elicited from others, they would be better off, psychologically.

A burgeoning body of work has also explored the influence of engaging with social media on body and self-image (e.g. self-esteem). [Holland and Tiggemann’s \(2016\)](#) systematic review of 20 studies revealed that the use of social media is related to body image. Specific activities – such as seeking negative feedback from others, posting and sharing photos of oneself, viewing other photos and liking and commenting on others’ photos – were linked to negative body image outcomes ([Hummel and Smith, 2014](#); [Kim and Chock, 2015](#); [Meier and Gray, 2014](#); [Smith et al., 2013](#)). However, recently, researchers have also considered the impact of engaging with body-positive social media content (#Bopo), which emphasizes diversity and inclusiveness by challenging narrow appearance ideals, on body image. This work suggests that such media content may be beneficial for body image by reducing appearance comparison effects ([Rodgers et al., 2022](#)). Additionally, receiving positive/supportive social feedback on social media has been shown to benefit users’ self-image/self-esteem ([Krause et al., 2021](#)).

Thus, research suggests that what one wears and how they engage with social media can impact self- and body image. Of interest in the present work was how involvement in the wool& Challenge – including wearing an unvarying piece of clothing for an extended duration and engaging with wool&’s SMBBC – would give rise to participants’ experiences of their self- and body images.

Method

Research team

We adopted a longitudinal, qualitative (i.e. interpretive) research approach to explore female-identifying consumers’ experiences of engaging with the wool& 100 Day Dress Challenge. The research team included four female-identifying authors housed in two different academic fashion and textiles departments in the USA. The authors possess collective expertise in sustainable consumer behavior, merchandising, body image and qualitative research methods (i.e. interviewing, coding, etc.). All authors were involved in the development of the research design. The first and second authors collected the bulk of the data, and all authors participated in the analyses of the data and the preparation of the manuscript.

Participants

After securing human subjects’ approval from the participating universities, we recruited participants by posting a research announcement on the “wool& 100-Day Dress Challenge”

Facebook page (now called the “wool& Community: Wardrobe Challenges & Chat” Facebook page). Interested participants were invited to take part in a screening survey to assess eligibility for the study, based upon the following criteria: (1) being at least 18 years of age, (2) identifying as female, (3) residing in the USA, (4) having participated in the wool& 100-Day Challenge for between 40–60 days by the date of the first interview and (5) having posted in the company’s Facebook platform. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved with 12 participants, as determined through iterative analysis when no new codes emerged and existing codes were well-conceptualized and nuanced (Hennick *et al.*, 2017). A summary of participants’ background characteristics is provided in Table 1. To protect participants’ identities, we asked participants to select their own pseudonyms for use in this report.

Data collection

Our longitudinal study traced participants’ experiences across a time period of approximately three months. To this end, we conducted virtual, semi-structured interviews with each participant at the following junctures during their wool& 100-Day Challenge journey: (1) during the Challenge (i.e. 40–60 days mid-Challenge), (2) at the conclusion of the Challenge (i.e. within 20 days of finishing the Challenge) and (3) post-Challenge (i.e. at least 50 days after completing the Challenge). Participants provided signed consent prior to their first interview.

Table 1. Participant background information

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Self-identified ethnic/Racial identity	Highest level of education completed	Occupation/Work environment	US region of residence	Dress size
Ava	34	White/Caucasian	Master’s Degree	Financial Planning and Analysis Manager (Hybrid)	Western	M
Dorothy	46	White/Caucasian	Bachelor’s Degree	Executive Administrative Assistant (Hybrid)	Southern	XS
Eleanor	38	White/Caucasian	Master’s Degree	Student Affairs in Higher Education (In-person)	Northeastern	M
Jennifer	36	White/Caucasian	Bachelor of Arts	Stay-at-home Mom/Spouse	Southern	S/M
Julie	46	White/Caucasian	Nursing Degree (Associate’s)	Stay-at-home Parent	Northeastern	L
Kathy	47	White/Caucasian	Bachelor’s Degree	Software Project Manager (Hybrid)	Midwestern	M/L/ XL
Katie	46	White/Caucasian	College/University/Trade School	Yoga Therapist (Hybrid)	Western	XL
Margaret	36	White/Caucasian	Master’s Degree	Software Developer (Hybrid)	Western	S/M
Rita	32	White/Caucasian	Master’s Degree	Librarian at Public Library (In-person)	Midwestern	XL
Sally	48	White/Caucasian	Bachelor’s Degree	Bookkeeping Business Owner (Hybrid)	Southern	2X
Stella	33	White/Caucasian	Master’s Degree	Office Administrator (In-person)	Midwestern	M
Susan	57	White/Caucasian	Bachelor’s Degree	Account Executive (Remote)	Western	M/L

Interview questions were developed specifically to address each guiding research question for the study and were also informed by the literature reviewed for the study. Topics of questions included in each interview schedule are presented in [Table 2](#). Addressing some of the same topics within each of the interviews allowed us to see how participants' experiences unfolded and shifted across their wool& Challenge journeys. Interviews ranged in length from 20 to 101 min (mean = 60 min), with first and second interviews typically running longer than third interviews. At the conclusion of interview 3, participants received a \$60 wool& gift card for their involvement in the study. One participant did not complete interview 3, resulting in a data set of 35 interviews from 12 participants.

Data analysis

Each interview was audio recorded using the automated transcription feature available in the video conferencing software used to facilitate the virtual interview sessions. Transcripts were

Table 2. Key wool& 100-Day journey experience question topics for interviews 1, 2 and 3

Interview 1 (between 40–60 days)

- Demographic questions
 - Expectations for participating in the Challenge
 - Motives for participating in the Challenge
 - Motives for participating in the Challenge social media groups
 - Experiences of participating in the Challenge social media groups (e.g. relationships formed)
 - Lived experiences during the Challenge (e.g. wearing the same dress every day, responses of others, lifestyle adjustments)
 - Lessons learned from participating in the Challenge (e.g. changes in dress and consumption patterns)
 - Impact of participating in the Challenge on the self (e.g. appearance and body)
-

Interview 2 (Between 100–120 days)

- Expectations for participating in the Challenge – realized?
 - Motives for participating in the Challenge – changes across Challenge?
 - Motives for participating in the Challenge social media groups – changes across Challenge?
 - Experiences of participating in the Challenge social media groups (e.g. has engagement continued?)
 - Lived experiences during the Challenge (e.g. problems faced, responses of others, meaning of Challenge participation)
 - Lessons learned from participating in the Challenge (e.g. changes in dress and consumption patterns, learning about the self)
 - Impact of participating in the Challenge on the self (e.g. appearance and body)
 - Impact of participating in the Challenge upon connection to wool& and its products
-

Interview 3 (150+ days)*

- What Challenge participation reflects about the self
- What Challenge participation means to participant, changes across Challenge
- Lifestyle changes tied to the Challenge
- Lived experiences of participating in the Challenge social media groups (e.g. has engagement continued? any ongoing relationships?)
- Emotions about the Challenge being over and plans to participate in future wardrobe challenges

Note(s): *Interviews 2 and 3 at times included personalized questions tailored to each participant, based upon our conversations with them in the prior interviews (e.g. “You mentioned sustainability in your first interview. Since completing this wool& 100-day dress challenge, have your thoughts on sustainable clothing changed and how?”; “You mentioned during your first interview that you became more comfortable with your legs during the Challenge. Can you please recap what about the Challenge helped you feel that way? How are you feeling about your legs now?”)

checked for accuracy and were analyzed using coding steps associated with constant comparison processes, including open, axial and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Through these processes, a coding guide was developed and applied to the data and themes and subthemes were identified.

Trustworthiness

To build trustworthiness, throughout the data analysis process, all authors met so that we could cooperatively negotiate meanings emerging from the data, adjusting the coding guide accordingly (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). Additionally, we invited another researcher to audit our application of the coding guide to the data (6 transcripts, 17% of the data). Interrater reliability was 87%, and differences in coding decisions were iteratively negotiated (Guest et al., 2012).

Results and discussion

Analyses revealed four core themes related to participants' engagement with the wool& 100 Day Challenge. These themes are discussed below, with exemplary quotations from the interviews and links to prior literature provided to support our interpretations. Where possible, we gave consideration to how participants' experiences changed across their Challenge journeys.

Motivations to participate in the Challenge

Participants addressed motives to engage with the Challenge in the first two interviews, sharing four key motivations. First, most participants shared that participation in the Challenge helped them to eliminate decision fatigue about what they would wear every day. Many participants found that wearing the same dress every day made their life "simple and pragmatic" (Ava, Interview 3). A few participants equated the wool& dress to wearing a uniform, with one noting "I wanna be Steve Jobs" (Sally, Interview 1), reflecting that they did not want to spend a lot of time and energy thinking about what to wear. A handful of participants also elaborated on how wearing the same dress helped them to have "some additional time and mental capacity for other decision-making" (Ava, Interview 2), mirroring previous findings that emphasize the mental and emotional benefits of simplifying wardrobe decisions by decluttering, which in turn contributes to personal well-being (Vladimirova, 2021).

Second, several participants shared that their motivation to participate in the Challenge also stemmed from their concern about the environmental impacts of fashion and their attendant interest in participating in slow fashion and/or minimalist lifestyles (e.g. capsule wardrobes), confirming prior work linking these practices to sustainable clothing consumption (Bang and DeLong, 2022). As Sally shared,

... I was interested to see how this would affect my perception of ... fast fashion and sustainable clothing and a smaller wardrobe. (Sally, Interview 2)

For Ava, participating in the minimalist lifestyle promoted by the Challenge allowed her to be "intentional with garments" (Interview 1). The Challenge also served as "training wheels" (Interview 1) for her to determine if such a lifestyle was the right fit for her. Another benefit of the minimalistic lifestyle associated with the Challenge was the idea of maximizing cost per wear of a garment, which is consistent with previous studies that found motivations to save money were central to consumers practicing a minimalist clothing lifestyle (Armstrong et al., 2016; Vladimirova, 2021; Wu et al., 2013). Jennifer recounted:

... just financially it makes more sense to me to put more money into a piece that's going to last me longer, and I'm gonna [sic] be able to wear it a lot of different ways versus getting something cheap that I'm gonna [sic] wear once, and it's gonna [sic] fall apart. (Jennifer, Interview 1)

As the Challenge wore on, a couple of participants also mentioned the environmentally friendly/antimicrobial properties of wool that allowed for less frequent laundering (and thus, decreased water usage):

... It really took just getting into it and trying it and realizing ... the fabric ... is odor resistant. It's stain resistant. I wore it for days and ... didn't see any need to wash it. I'd slept in it a lot of nights, and it looked fine in the morning, like, I was amazed. (Dorothy 2)

Third, a few participants were motivated to engage in the Challenge by the financial reward of the \$100 gift card, noting that the incentive would allow them to purchase more wool& products:

I was interested in that Challenge mostly because I was interested in buying several pieces from wool&, and I could see that as a way to earn some money to put towards that. (Katie, Interview 1)

Interestingly, a couple of participants noted the hypocrisy of rewarding participants involved in a Challenge designed to minimize clothing consumption with a gift card to consume additional clothing. After redeeming her Challenge gift card, Jennifer (Interview 2) shared that she was going to refrain from purchasing additional clothing for a while, as making additional clothing purchases would contradict her newly acquired minimalist lifestyle. Ava proposed an alternative to rewarding Challenge participants with a brand gift card:

... would they ever consider an option where you could ... have that donated ... to some kind of nonprofit [that] helps women or sustainability? Or, maybe an equity fund to help provide their garments to people that can't otherwise buy into that price point? That would feel a little bit more aligned. (Ava, Interview 2)

Fourth, a few participants reported that they were motivated to take part in the Challenge for nonmonetary reasons centered around the appeal of the Challenge, curiosity and the opportunity for "self-experimentation" (Eleanor, Interview 1) to see if they could accomplish the task of wearing the same dress for 100 days. Some participants shared that they enjoyed the thrill of challenging themselves, similar to completing a half marathon and testing their limits. As Stella shared:

I love the idea of a reward and a challenge, so I'm like, "Okay, I'm up for that." Like I could do that, you know and my brain kind of engages with challenges in a different way than if somebody just told me to wear it for 100 days. I don't know if I would have responded the same way. (Stella, Interview 1)

Generally, findings extend the consumer motivation literature, demonstrating that participation in challenges is driven not only by financial gain but also by curiosity and the intrinsic excitement of taking on a challenge.

Although many participants were initially drawn to the Challenge by one or two primary motivations, some indicated that additional motivations (from the four identified) became salient to them later in their challenge journey. For example, later in their Challenge journeys, some participants also started to recognize the environmental benefits (e.g. reduced laundry demands) associated with the Challenge, which enhanced their motivation to continue and complete the experience.

Motivations to participate in social media associated with the Challenge

Participants primarily engaged with two wool& social media platforms: the wool& Facebook group and a wool& product resale group called, "wool& Buy, Sell, Trade," (referred to as "BST" by participants). By virtue of the eligibility requirements for the study, all participants had posted content on the wool& Facebook page at some juncture, but the degree of their wool& Facebook involvement varied somewhat, with some participants engaging on a regular, daily basis (e.g. posts and comments) and other participants preferring to primarily "lurk" (i.e. view others' posts). Participants were prompted to engage with wool& social media by five key motivations.

First, most participants identified seeking social support as a primary motive for engaging with wool& social media. In many cases, participants sought feedback about their dress choices and styling efforts. In response to these inquiries, participants received overwhelmingly supportive comments from fellow “woolie friends” or “woolies,” as they referred to themselves within the social media context, reflecting how consumers involved in social groups may develop identities that define who they are in relation to others within the same group (cf. Zhang *et al.*, 2010):

... People are very, very positive ... outstandingly positive comments of me in this dress are very, it's very encouraging. I think the first picture I posted had like 200 people commented ... (Katie, Interview 1)

Such comments – as well as other declarations of general encouragement – inspired participants to continue their engagement through the Challenge:

I just think the encouragement of the group kind of keeps everybody motivated and going. (Susan, Interview 1)

In characterizing the social support they received from engaging in the wool& social media page, participants also commented that the wool& social media community was well-managed, warm and welcoming – a “nice community” that made them feel “warm and fuzzy about the company” (Sally, Interview 2), aligning with prior literature suggesting that emotional attachment to brands can be enhanced through shared experiences and interactions within SMBBCs (Batra *et al.*, 2012).

Second, numerous participants engaged with the Facebook wool& group to seek practical clothing-related tips and information that made them feel more comfortable experimenting and trying new things. Participants frequently sought information about styling, laundering and maintaining wool& garments (e.g. preventing static cling) and selecting the appropriate garment size:

... when folks do post photos ... I like to look and see what they've done from an outfit perspective and get ideas. (Susan, Interview 1)

... There's tips on laundering ... or if you get a snag or different ways to mend it. So I think that's been helpful ... there's definitely a lot of people who would be willing to answer questions ... so that's nice to be able to have that support. (Kathy, Interview 1)

The motive to gather information from others emerged consistently across the three interviews. Early in the Challenge, however, participants were especially likely to seek advice on dress choices and sizing, as such information was valuable for participants starting their journey. As the Challenge progressed, guidance on laundry and maintenance became more relevant. These exchanges provided reassurance and empowered participants to move forward in the Challenge with confidence.

The group was really helpful because a lot of people have asked these questions before, and so I was able to read through other people's experience[s], and that, more than anything ... gave me the confidence to try it. (Jennifer, Interview 1)

Third, several participants shared that they were motivated to participate in the wool& social media groups in part by the opportunity to interact with people of diverse cultural backgrounds, as the group attracted users from around the world. This inclusive and globally connected culture encouraged participants to remain active in the group and to build meaningful connections with other users. Stella appreciated the opportunity to learn about other cultures from a group bonded together by a common interest in wool and woola& products:

There is a cool sense of community in that group ... we do have this common, like anything about wool in common, you know? And so that somehow brings together like strangers from different parts

of the world, which is kind of fun. I do feel like I learned a little bit about different cultures. (Stella, Interview 3)

Fourth, as most participants progressed through the Challenge, their motivation to “give back” and to be “cheerleaders” for other users became increasingly prominent. That is, their firsthand experiences in the Challenge inspired them to post more frequently and to offer words of encouragement and support to other users:

I respond to people that [sic] say, “Hey, I’m new here, and this is my first dress, or this is my Day One.” I try to definitely respond to those posts . . . to just be welcoming . . . because so many people did that to me . . . (Julie, Interview 1)

Such altruistic behavior is common in online social media communities and has been shown to enhance knowledge-sharing intentions and satisfaction within brand communities online, as suggested by [Ma and Chan \(2014\)](#).

Fifth, almost half of the participants were motivated to engage with the BST wool& group as a way to purchase, exchange or dispose of unwanted wool& garments. The company wool& offers regular “Mystery Sale” events where consumers can purchase final sale apparel without knowing the exact product(s) they would be receiving, resulting in the possibility of receiving products that do not meet their expectations in terms of aesthetics or fit. The BST Facebook page provides a platform where consumers could dispose of their unwanted wool& garments and exchange them for other styles they found more appealing:

I’m a member of the Buy Sell Trade group, and I did participate in the Mystery Sale . . . and I resold my dress that I got in that group . . . And then I . . . monitor the Buy Sell Trade . . . multiple times a day just cause there’s a certain dress that I’m keeping an eye out for, and I’m like, “It would be fun to find it.” (Stella, Interview 1)

Thus, participants’ engagement with wool& social media underscored how online brand communities fulfill both functional and hedonic needs, echoing [Ernst’s \(2015\)](#) observation of diverse engagement motives and aligning with [Dessart and Pitardi’s \(2019\)](#) framework of cognitive, affective and behavioral engagement. Through their online engagement with other “woolies,” participants jointly constructed “stories” of their wool& Challenge journeys and learned from one another’s story-telling, such that they came to experience a sense of support and community. These stories focused not only on the wool& products, but on the woolies themselves – the users of these products and how these products added meaning to their lives (e.g. allowing them to be more sustainable or to feel more personally fulfilled).

Overall, in some cases, the nature of their social media engagement evolved somewhat across the Challenge. Although some participants engaged actively across the Challenge, some initially participated by “lurking” on the Facebook page to learn from others’ experiences, as Margaret (Interview 1) explained when she sought inspiration on how to style the same dress in unique ways across situations, which initially felt like a difficult task. As such, even passive forms of engagement, like observing without direct interaction with other users, were helpful in shaping participants’ experiences during the Challenge.

Body and self-image experiences prompted by challenge participation

For many participants, engaging in the Challenge gave rise to increased acceptance of the body and self, supporting enhanced body and self-image. These positive body feelings took root during the Challenge, endured past its conclusion and often were characterized in terms of becoming “more comfortable in [their] own skin” (Katie, Interview 1) and “more accepting of [their] humanity” (Sally, Interview 2). Several participants specifically articulated how the Challenge supported increased body confidence and helped them to embrace a more compassionate lens through which to view their bodies and selves. Jennifer explained:

[Participating in the Challenge] . . . helped me to become more confident . . . to learn how to . . . dress for myself . . . and to recognize myself as an individual . . . to embrace . . . how I am built. (Jennifer, Interview 1)

Challenge engagement also allowed participants to value the functionality of their bodies, or what it allowed them “to do” rather than “hyper fixating on [their] appearance[s]” (Eleanor, Interview 3), aligning with attributes of positive body image, such as *body acceptance and love* (the capacity to articulate love and kindness toward the body) and *body appreciation* (valuing health and functionality of the body as well as traits that make a person unique) (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

The Challenge helped participants to move toward this more positive body and self-image in a variety of ways. In some cases, the requirements of the Challenge supported body-positive feelings. For instance, wearing the Challenge dress prompted positive feelings about the body for selected participants because it easily accommodated shifts in weight or was more “forgiving” or “flattering” to the body than was more fitted clothing, mirroring prior work to suggest that clothing can be used to support or manage body image (Frith and Gleason, 2008; Grogan *et al.*, 2013; Kwon and Parham, 1994; Tiggemann and Lacey, 2009):

These dresses . . . can be so flattering to so many . . . body styles . . . it does foster a little bit of comfort, like I don’t have to have the perfect body . . . So . . . I think there may be a little bit of a rise in self-esteem as well as just overall just a projection of confidence. (Dorothy, Interview 1)

In other cases, wearing the same dress everyday relieved the stress of “having to think about the body,” which provided a buffering effect in cases where participants characterized themselves as “not a body positive person” (Eleanor, Interview 2). Sally (Interviews 1 and 2) shared that because she spent less time deciding what to wear, she was able to dedicate more time to nurturing aspects of self (e.g. creative pursuits like art, being involved in a book club).

When some participants realized that others had barely noticed that they had been wearing the same dress for several consecutive days in a row – or came to recognize that they were not being judged as if under a metaphorical “spotlight” as they had previously perhaps believed (cf, Gilovich *et al.*, 2000) – this also afforded a protective self- and body image effect:

Nobody noticed my 100-day dress except for the people that [sic] knew about it . . . that really kind of [took] the stress out of [thinking about my body and clothes]. (Dorothy, Interview 3)

This finding counters that of Armstrong *et al.* (2016), who found that participants in the Fashion Detox experienced a sense of “appearance consciousness” (e.g. a concern about wearing the same clothing multiple times). However, participants’ paradigm shift in thinking about clothes does align conceptually in some ways with wool&’s self-image appeals to potential Challenge participants, suggesting that clothes may have less of an impact in “defin[ing] the self” (wool&, 2025) than they may think at the outset of the Challenge. Thus, it is possible that wool&’s marketing messages could have contributed to these particular participant experiences of their bodies and appearances, but if so, participants did not articulate this connection.

Finally, for several participants, taking the required daily photo for the Challenge helped them to normalize and accept the “ups and downs” of their bodily appearances and to embrace all of their bodily features as genuine and likeable parts of “self.”

I think part of that was the pictures . . . just looking at myself every day and saying, “This is how I look, and . . . it’s not bad.” (Sally, Interview 2)

Engagement with wool& social media also facilitated enhanced body and self-image across and after the Challenge. Here, participants referenced how advice posts and positive comments from other wool& social media users validated their feelings about their bodies and selves, contributing to enhanced body and self-acceptance (cf, Krause *et al.*, 2021):

People have given me overwhelming support for being queer, trans . . . They love how . . . feminine I am, like I fit right in with other . . . cisgender women . . . These positive comments, even on social media, have helped me to feel more accepted in my own community. (Julie, Interview 1)

Seeing other social media users post images of themselves – which represented diverse body shapes and sizes – and observing the support for these varied body forms also contributed to participants’ body-positive feelings:

It’s all shapes and sizes and everybody’s got a smile on our face and they’re happy . . . and . . . seeing that . . . it kind of rubs off on you. (Susan, Interview 3)

That these findings counter past work indicating that viewing others’ photos on Facebook is detrimental to body image (Meier and Gray, 2014) may be explained by the distinctive/body positive nature of the images and related dialogue on the wool& Facebook site (cf, Rodgers *et al.*, 2022).

Not all of the participants’ body- and self-image related experiences during the Challenge were positively charged. However, in a few cases, participants shared that their engagement in the Challenge prompted negative feelings about their bodies and selves. For instance, Ava shared that the Challenge dress she selected highlighted her arms, a body part about which she did not have a positive affect, which made her feel self-conscious in situations where she did not cover her arms with a shawl or sweater. Other participants also noted that they sometimes felt either too “dressed up” (Jennifer, Interview 1) or “frumpy . . . or too casual” (Kathy, Interview 1) when wearing their Challenge dress, depending on the occasion. Here, again, this sometimes gave rise to feelings of self-consciousness. Finally, for a couple of participants, taking the daily Challenge photo contributed to negative body- and self-image:

. . . taking a picture every day has helped me beat myself up . . . it’s giving me . . . an everyday picture of, “Oh, you need a haircut, you’re feeling bad about yourself because you need a haircut.” (Eleanor, Interview 1)

Thus, participants experienced the daily photo-taking – though not required to be shared on social media—in varied ways, with some considering it affirming and others finding it detrimental, both conflicting with and confirming prior work suggesting that photo-based activities may contribute to negative body image outcomes (Kim and Chock, 2015; Meier and Gray, 2014).

Interestingly, participants’ negative feelings about the body and self were addressed only in interviews 1 and 2, suggesting that they did not have a particularly enduring quality, perhaps because of their link to requirements of the Challenge. Also important to note is that (1) some participants – such as Eleanor – who shared negatively-charged body experiences associated with the Challenge also recounted positively-charged experiences and (2) participants of diverse dress (i.e. body) sizes experienced positive and/or negative body- and self-related experiences. These findings reflect how the journey to positive body image may be uneven, intermixed with negatively charged experiences (Ogle *et al.*, 2023; Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015) and may be shaped by social, cultural and psychological factors beyond body size (e.g. Grogan, 2022; Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

Lessons learned from participation in the Challenge

During the second and third interviews, participants shared their experiences with the wool& Challenge and whether and how their participation in the Challenge prompted them to transform their wardrobes and their broader consumption practices and values. Based upon these conversations, we identified four key lessons that participants took away from their engagement in the Challenge.

First, for many participants, engaging in the Challenge prompted a shift toward more intentional decision-making regarding clothing purchases. Ava explained that she had learned to be more “thoughtful and intentional about things” (Interview 3), whereas Sally emphasized

the importance of “spend[ing] more time on the research phase” (Interview 3). By being more thoughtful about the clothing choices, Eleanor further reported that participating in the Challenge heightened her awareness about the versatility and quality of clothing:

[Being thoughtful about my wardrobe] . . . means I just want to be thoughtful about buying items that are higher quality that will last longer that are more like versatile like you can wear different ways and different situations. (Eleanor, Interview 3)

Thus, participating in this Challenge allowed the participants to develop a more conscious mindset toward clothing purchases, moving away from fast fashion’s disposable culture (Sadashige and Gleeson, 2025; Vladimirova, 2021) and toward a slower and more sustainable approach. This aligns with previous research on VS, which emphasizes mindful purchasing and sustainability (Demirel, 2022; Kang *et al.*, 2021).

Second, some participants also started to embrace a minimalist mindset to clothing consumption, choosing to own only items that brought value and meaning to their lives, valuing “simplicity” (Dorothy, Interview 3) and “wanting to have kind of a minimalist capsule wardrobe” (Jennifer, Interview 2). In many cases, participants tried to buy fewer items that were of higher quality and/or to whittle down their closet, tracking what they actually wore so as to create a “very curated, small wardrobe where everything mixes and matches, and you just wear that” (Dorothy, Interview 3). Thus, consistent with previous research (Armstrong *et al.*, 2016; Ruppert-Stroescu *et al.*, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2013), participants’ experiences demonstrate how minimalist wardrobes can contribute to greater emotional clarity and creativity.

Third, through the wool& Challenge, many participants reconsidered their approach to dressing. This was manifested in various ways, such as “try[ing] to figure out new and different combinations” (Susan, Interview 3). Further, as noted, participants came to the realization that others paid less attention to their clothing choices than they had previously thought. Dorothy elaborated on this shift in perception:

The reality is nobody cares . . . Nobody’s paying that much attention to you, like you’re paying that attention to you, but nobody else is. It’s just that perception. (Dorothy, Interview 3)

Findings align with psychological literature on clothing and the self. Clothing serves as an embodied practice of self-expression (Entwistle, 2015), yet perceptions of scrutiny often exaggerate social attention toward appearance (Gilovich *et al.*, 2000). The wool& Challenge encouraged participants to shift toward more self-directed choices, listening to their own voices, in making clothing choices.

Finally, at the end of the Challenge, participants expressed a desire for greater internal coherence between their values and their clothing consumption behaviors, particularly in relation to “sustainability” (Ava, Interview 2) and “comfort” (Kathy, Interview 2), feeling that the wool& Challenge and its products facilitated or supported that goal. For instance, Eleanor explicitly described broader social impacts of participating in the Challenge:

[Participating in this Challenge has] . . . opened up conversations with people that have been meaningful about, like how we value clothes, . . . interact with our wardrobe, . . . be more mindful . . . and conversations about sustainability in that way, which has been meaningful. (Eleanor, Interview 2)

This outcome is consistent with previous findings (Armstrong *et al.*, 2016; Ritch *et al.*, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2013), which have shown that participating in apparel consumption reduction challenges fosters critical reflection about consumption patterns, promotes dialogue about sustainability and strengthens the alignment between consumer behavior and personal values. Eleanor’s connection between her personal experience and broader dialogues around sustainability further suggests that challenges such as wool& might transform individual behaviors and ripple into participants’ social networks. Also, participation in wool&’s

SMBBC (Habibi *et al.*, 2014; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) may have played a role. Specifically, it is plausible that connections with others undergoing similar experiences might reinforce commitment to new consumption practices and validate the emergent value systems centered on mindfulness and sustainability.

Conclusions

This study built upon previous research examining apparel challenges grounded in the principles of VS (e.g. Armstrong *et al.*, 2016; Ritch *et al.*, 2020; Ruppert-Stroescu *et al.*, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2013) to explore consumers' experiences of participating in a brand-initiated apparel consumption reduction challenge – the wool& 100 Day Dress Challenge – incorporating self-image appeals and a brand-based financial incentive. The work adopted a longitudinal component, examining participants' experiences across and beyond the Challenge. Findings revealed that some aspects of participants' Challenge journeys varied across three data collection points spanning approximately three months, with some attitudes and behaviors adopted during the Challenge enduring beyond its conclusion.

Overall, the study's findings suggested that participants were motivated to engage in the Challenge by their desires to reduce decision-making fatigue, practice sustainable clothing consumption, receive a financial incentive and experience a sense of accomplishment, suggesting that wool& consumers were prompted to participate in the Challenge not only by the promise of financial gain, but also by a desire to relieve mental and emotional stress and to experience the intrinsic pleasure of taking on a challenge. Findings also revealed that wool&'s SMBBC is a key consumer engagement tool that provided an opportunity for Challenge participants to connect with other consumers engaged in the Challenge and to exchange information and share experiences related to wool& products and the brand (e.g. laundry and sizing tips) as well as to consume and sell used wool& products. Over time, participants shifted their engagement activities from seeking practical tips to offering encouragement and sharing knowledge.

Furthermore, for many participants, engaging in the Challenge also supported enhanced self- and body image, which lasted beyond the end of the Challenge, with participants' experiences aligning with characteristics of body acceptance and love and body appreciation. Realizing that others were not paying much attention to their appearances – and de-emphasizing the importance of appearance in defining the self – also may have contributed to participants' positively-charged self- and body image experiences. Finally, engagement in the Challenge moved participants to adopt new attitudes and behaviors that often persisted after the Challenge, including becoming more open to the value of minimalism, rethinking their approaches to dressing and engaging in sustainable consumption practices.

Academic implications

This study contributes to academic literature in several important ways. It extends the application of the VS framework, traditionally examined in controlled, non-commercial settings such as among university students (e.g. Armstrong *et al.*, 2016) or within nonprofit initiatives (e.g. Ritch *et al.*, 2020), into a brand-sponsored consumption challenge. This shift not only broadens the contextual boundaries of VS research but also underscores its relevance and application within the marketing field. By situating the framework in a brand context, this study bridges sustainable consumer behavior with brand strategy, offering a novel intersection for future marketing scholarship. Participants' willingness to reduce their wardrobe options, coupled with the persistence of these behaviors post-Challenge, signals the potential for long-term shifts in consumption patterns. Thus, findings provide initial evidence that brand-led initiatives have the potential to catalyze enduring changes in sustainable consumption and the internalization of minimalist values.

It is important to note, however, that findings also suggest a more complex and potentially contradictory form of VS emerging through brand-sponsored initiatives. On one hand, the challenge encourages mindful consumption, extended product use and greater awareness of one's clothing habits, positioning the brand as a facilitator of simplicity-oriented behavior. On the other hand, participation requires product purchase and includes financial incentives, creating a dissonance between promoting reduced consumption while simultaneously operating within a system dependent on consumption. The findings suggest that contemporary VS may be shifting toward a form of "brand-facilitated" simplicity, where consumers are encouraged not necessarily to consume less altogether, but to consume more intentionally through durability, longevity, intentionality and product attachment. These findings expand VS theory by illustrating how brands may simultaneously support and complicate simplicity-oriented lifestyles within current overconsumption systems.

This study also expands scholarly understanding of social norms and apparel consumer behavior. Contrary to commonly held assumptions that wearing the same garment repeatedly might lead to negative social judgment or stigma, participants rarely reported such adverse reactions. Instead, they found that others hardly noticed they repeatedly wore the same wool& dress, supporting the "spotlight effect" (Gilovich *et al.*, 2000). This allowed participants to disengage from the social pressure of constantly focusing on their appearance and to experience positive self- and body image effects, providing understanding about the empowering role of recognizing that others are less invested in our appearances than we imagine. Finally, this study adds to the understanding of the potential role of the SMBBC in supporting positive self- and body-image among its members.

Industry implications

Based on the findings, this study offers several key managerial implications. It confirms the vital role of SMBBCs in cultivating brand identity and fostering consumer loyalty. The brand-sponsored wool& Challenge, for instance, successfully engaged its consumer not only because of financial incentives but also because of shared motivations related to sustainability and minimalism. Within the Facebook community, participants connected with one another, developing strong bonds grounded in their mutual interest in wool& products and similar lifestyles. This community fostered a new collective identity as the "woolie" community, which, in turn, strengthened emotional connections with the brand, fostered trust through shared experiences and enhanced brand differentiation from competitors. While this specific challenge-based promotional strategy may be most effective for certain product categories (e.g. apparel), the findings strongly encourage brands to develop innovative strategies that facilitate and deepen consumer interactions. One such strategy might be to invoke a storytelling approach; in the present study, consumers shared their own experiences to construct authentic product narratives. Brands can encourage their customers to post product usage-related messages (e.g. tips, questions) on social media and invite feedback and comments.

The findings from this Challenge also offer significant implications for promoting sustainability at a societal level. Findings demonstrate the cultivation of a sustainability mindset and interest in a minimalist lifestyle among Challenge participants. This shift was evidenced by growing awareness and desire in building capsule wardrobes and developing limited consumption behaviors, which appear to be a direct result of creative styling and freedom from social scrutiny (i.e. spotlight effects). Although financial incentives motivated Challenge participation for many, it is noteworthy that the use of gift cards was criticized by some for potentially encouraging further clothing consumption, which ultimately undermines sustainability goals. To address this, it is recommended that brands provide consumers with options such as allowing participants to make a charitable donation instead of receiving a gift card.

Limitations and future research

Limitations of this study can inform future research in several important ways. First, because the sample was composed predominantly of Caucasian/white consumers, subsequent investigations would benefit from incorporating more racially/ethnically diverse participants to capture variations across cultural backgrounds and consumption practices. Second, because the data for this study were obtained across a relatively short duration (i.e. three months), the implementation of longer-term longitudinal designs could be beneficial for evaluating attitudinal and behavioral changes over extended periods. Third, there is a possibility of response bias among participants, as their engagement with the wool& social media community before initiating the dress challenge may have influenced their perceptions and responses. Although the study focused on participants' experiences with the Challenge rather than their specific perceptions or attitudes toward the brand, this potential bias could still limit the generalizability of the findings to broader consumer groups who have not interacted with the brand in similar contexts. To address this limitation, future research could investigate how social support within SMBBCs shapes brand loyalty and repurchase intentions, as these factors may offer valuable insights into the relationship between prior social media engagement and sustainable consumption behavior. Fourth, the study is qualitative in nature with a limited sample size; however, the findings provide a foundation for quantitative examination of relationships among factors such as decision fatigue, creativity and environmental consciousness and their influence on consumers' willingness to engage in brand-initiated consumption challenges and their apparel sustainable consumption behaviors.

Moreover, this study raises important questions about the design of incentive structures in brand-led sustainability and consumption campaigns. The dissonance between motivations related to financial rewards and ethos of an apparel consumption reduction challenge highlights a critical area for further academic inquiry – how to ethically and effectively incentivize sustainable consumption behaviors without undermining the intended message. Further research should examine how brand-sponsored sustainability initiatives/challenges reshape traditional understandings of the VS framework. Future work could examine how consumers negotiate the tension between sustainability-oriented simplicity and financial incentives, including whether rewards and challenges encourage VS practices or weaken the ideological foundations of simplicity by embedding them within the consumer culture. Findings related to self- and body image suggest new directions for exploring how changing perceptions of social norms, particularly around fashion, appearance and consumption, can empower individuals to adopt more sustainable lifestyles.

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