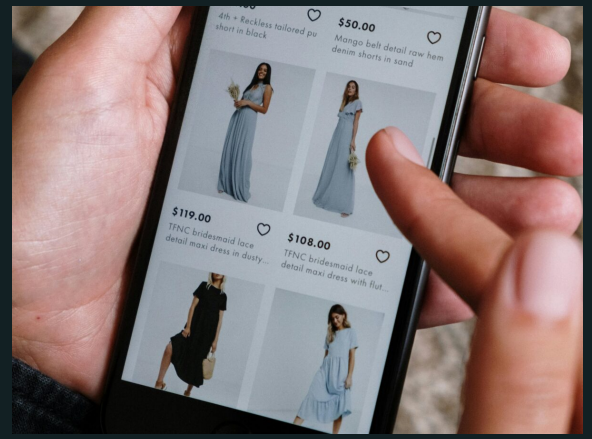


Breaking the fashion habit: efficacy of education as a behavioural intervention

Edel Moore, Dr Rafiq Elmansy, Dr Marjan Vazirian, Dr Qianqian Pan (University of Leeds); Prof Carmen Santos (University of Leon, Spain)



Executive Summary

The average UK person owns 100-150 items of clothing and disposes of 3.1kilos (UK), 12 kilos (EU) of textiles per year. Eighty-one percent of 18-24 year olds (UK) purchase clothing at least once a month. (WRAP, 2022). This project prototypes the Habit Awareness and Behavioural Intervention Training (HABIT) framework as an educational awareness intervention to disrupt online fashion overconsumption. It integrates a Habit Loop workshop to identify triggers, routine and rewards, Journaling to systematic record behaviour and Future-self-letter writing to promote goal alignment. Purchase metrics, psychometric assessment and Large Language Model (LLM) model analysis evidence changes and identify underlying motivations for modification.

Purchase metrics revealed substantial modifications:

- participants decreased financial expenditure by £17.49 (28.3%), from £61.85 to £44.36
- extreme purchasing categories (6–10 and 10+ items) were eliminated.
- online time increased marginally (3.31%), however, modal engagement decreased significantly from two hours to 0.75 hours.

Psychometric data demonstrated:

- decreased Pleasure and Arousal metrics.
- statistically significant reductions in combined Self-Report Habit Index scores (frequency, automaticity, self-Image).
- discipline-specific decreases emerged: Design students showed reduced frequency; Management students exhibited decreased frequency and automaticity.

Thematic and Large Language Model analyses identified consistent key themes within Triggers, Routines and Reward across both groups. However, critically, statistically significant discipline-differences emerged indicating the salience of educational/career associations to change outcomes.

The research highlights the efficacy of habit loop awareness through educational training in disrupting problematic purchasing behaviours. However, the scope is limited to a single intervention and a short data collection period. To develop HABIT from a disruptor of unhealthy buying patterns to a sustained habit-change tool requires further testing through longitudinal, multi-phase training to support lasting behaviour change and broader intervention efforts.

Introduction

Breaking the fashion habit project investigates fashion overconsumption as habitual behaviour and measures the impact of a habit-theory educational intervention in altering online fashion overconsumption among young adults in the UK and Europe. Consumers now purchase 60% more clothing than they did 15 years ago yet wear each item for half as long. (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2023). Overconsumption has become normalised and routine. Current industry responses focus on sustainable manufacturing and circularity. However, this overlooks that many fashion purchases are emotionally motivated, where the buying cycle is a habit reward as much as the physical product. Fashion shopping has become a form of entertainment, social-media status, a mood enhancer and a rewarding behaviour. Online fast-fashion business models can involve high levels of repetition and automaticity of activities which are performed without deliberation or control. This research investigates the habitual and addictive nature of the online buying loop as an overlooked contributor to fashion overconsumption and underuse.

The project prototypes the Habit Awareness and Behavioural Intervention Training (HABIT) framework as an educational awareness intervention to disrupt online fashion overconsumption. The research comprises three elements: Habit Loop workshop to identify triggers, routine and rewards; Journaling to systematic record behaviour and Future-self-letter writing to promote goal alignment. The studies aim is to develop and empirically test the value of HABIT to enable participants understand and consciously manage their buying habits. The project also explores cultural and sociocultural factors of habitual fashion overconsumption among young adults in UK and Europe.

Methodology

The HABIT protocol required participant to understand, monitor and proactively become aware of their online fashion buying patterns. A pilot study with three UK-based participants validated the training and analysis procedures. Three workshops with 36 UK-based participants in the School of Design, University of Leeds and 20 EU-participants from the Masters in Business Administration, University of Leon, Spain, were conducted. 36 participants (18 UK and 18 EU) successfully completed both pre- and post-intervention



questionnaires and psychoanalysis assessments specifically related to online fashion buying behaviour. Four questionnaire responses were unusable due to incomplete data. Additionally, 16 participants trialled the intervention but did not focus on online fashion. 44 participants provided useable qualitative data for Thematic and Large Language Model (LLM) analysis.

Quantitative statistical analysis was employed to evaluate pre- and post-workshop survey data. Purchase metrics measure changes in buying expenditure – financial, time online and number of items. Three validated psychometric scales, Self Habit Report Index, Pleasure, Dominance, Arousal Scale and The Bergen Shopping Addiction Scale were used to identify behavioural and motivational differences in automaticity, frequency, impulsivity, emotional engagement and problematic shopping tendencies. Thematic reflective analysis and LLM analysis were undertaken on qualitative data generated through the workshop and Future-Self writing activities.

Main findings

The Habit framework demonstrates efficacy in disrupting unhealthy “extreme” purchasing patterns through empirically validated behavioural modifications. Participants on average reduced financial expenditure by 28.3%, whilst eliminating extreme purchasing categories of 6 or 10+ items. Modal online engagement decreased from two hours to 0.75 hours. Psychometric results for Emotional Traits (Pleasure, Arousal and Dominance) and Habit Intensity (SRHI across Frequency, Automaticity and Self-Image) reinforced this change in online behaviour through either statistically significant or directional change across the group. These quantifiable variations represent meaningful departures from normative patterns of behaviour. It also highlights the importance of understanding the hedonic and social value of the overconsumption-buying-loop, where the physical product is not always the primary motivation for overconsumption

Purchase metrics:

- Decrease in financial spend by £17.49 (28.3%) from £61.85 to £44.36.
- Small increase of 3.31% in time spent online. However, modal engagement of most frequent time spent moves from 2 hours to 0.75 hours.
- Decrease in bulk number of items bought. Shift from varied purchasing patterns to clustering on lower counts. Elimination of 6-10 and 10+ item purchase categories.

Psychometric data evidenced an average:

- Decrease in directional impact in Pleasure and Arousal metric for all groups.
- Statistically significant decrease in:
 - combined SHRI (Frequency, Automation, Self-Image) for all groups.
 - Frequency for Design students based in the UK.
 - Frequency and Automaticity for Management students based in Europe.

Thematic Reflection and LLM analysis identified consistent key themes within Triggers, Routines and Reward across both groups. However, critically, statistically significant discipline-specific differences. Design students communicated emotional and social motivators, whilst Management students prioritise utilitarian factors indicating the

salience of educational/career associations to change outcomes were found.

Conclusions and recommendations

In response to the Back to Baselines TA5 call for greater evidence-based understanding of current behaviours and cultural factors surrounding fashion consumption, this research investigates the habitual and addictive nature of online fashion buying as an overlooked contributor to fashion overconsumption and underuse. Project outcomes and industry relevance include:

New Focus on Habitual Overconsumption: Awareness of emotional versus utilitarian motivations within an extended buying cycle provides strategic and communication opportunities for the UK fashion sector and brands to prioritise their authentic sustainability as a competitive advantage.

Strategic Innovation Opportunities: Exploring the links between current ‘push models’ of fast/supersonic online fashion and habitual buying behaviour provides opportunities to differentiate by aligning with customer emotive purchase process, emphasising self-identity, self-care and social responsibility. Ethical positioning of UK brands and the textile sector as sustainability leaders and conscious consumption champions through evidence-based consumer educational programmes.

Collaborative Intervention Design: Collaboration between design, psychology and sustainability within an international context (UK-EU study design) demonstrates a replicable framework, applicability across diverse contexts. It also proves the validity in combining psychometric assessment tools and LLM analysis techniques to understand complex buying motivations and outcomes.

Although prototyped with young adults in online fashion purchasing, the HABIT framework demonstrates potential for adaptations to diverse demographic groups and overconsumption contexts. The research highlights the efficacy of habit loop awareness through educational training in disrupting problematic purchasing behaviours. However, the scope is limited to a single intervention and a short data collection period. To develop HABIT from a disruptor of unhealthy buying patterns to a sustained habit-change tool requires further testing through longitudinal, multi-phase training to support lasting behaviour change and broader intervention efforts.

Completion date: 31/07/2025

For further information: please visit [Breaking the fashion habit: efficacy of education as a behavioural intervention](#).

Acknowledgements: IMPACT+, Back to Baselines in Circular Fashion and Textiles, and Future Fibres Network Plus are all part of the Network Plus Circular Fashion and Textile programme, supported by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) under grant no. NE/Y004043/1; Network Plus is part of a £15M UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) programme supported by a trilateral funding consortium which also includes the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Innovate UK. The kind support of all other members of the delivery teams is gratefully acknowledged.