

Save Your Wardrobe: Supporting Sustainable and Mindful Clothing Consumption

Interview with consumer researchers Deirdre Shaw and Kat Duffy from the University of Glasgow

Consumers love fashion but many also feel guilty about their consumption styles and their often exuberant and short-lived wardrobe. Reports about the social and environmental costs of our clothes concern some consumers and make them rethink their buying behavior. Aspiring to change one's clothing habits and actually doing it are two quite different things. Can digital services and AI help bridge the gap between stated desires and actions? The startup Save Your Wardrobe (SYW) took up the challenge and created an app which provides a digital eco-system to support more sustainable approaches to clothing consumption. They started a fruitful collaboration with consumer researchers Kat Duffy and Deirdre Shaw from Glasgow University to tailor their services to deliver what consumers need to act more sustainably. In this interview, Kat and Deirdre talk about their collaboration with SYW and the consumer insights they gained to improve the app and to support consumers in moving toward a more sustainable approach to fashion.



Daiane ✕ *As a start, could you please tell us a little bit about the Save Your Wardrobe (SYW) app?*

Kat ✕ Sure, it's a digital app which is premised on the idea that the most sustainable clothing is clothing that you already own. It aims to provide a complete view of someone's wardrobe. It helps you think about the items that you have, but also your behaviors and lifestyle around those items. It also has an ecosystem of services attached to it which is very much focused on unlocking clothing longevity through more sustainable behaviors; thinking about aftercare of garments, disposal routes, alterations, repair or donation. It helps you

care for a garment; if it no longer fits within the inventory in your wardrobe you can make more responsible conscious choices in terms of what to do with it.

How did you find Save Your Wardrobe and decide to team up?

Deirdre ✕ In 2018 Kat and I were working on a research project on sustainable clothing consumption. During that year I attended the Copenhagen Fashion Summit where I met Mehdi from Save your Wardrobe. Their mission is around sustainability and mindfulness and this aligned really well

**DEIRDRE SHAW** →← **KAT DUFFY**

ABOUT SAVE YOUR WARDROBE

Save Your Wardrobe is a digital platform and app that helps consumers to use their wardrobe more sustainably and supports extending the lifecycle of fashion products. The startup was cofounded by Hasna Kourda and Mehdi Doghri in 2017. Kourda, now CEO of Save your Wardrobe, was born and raised in Tunisia, where lots of used European clothes end up in landfills, causing serious environmental problems. After moving to the UK, she witnessed how many people handled and disposed of clothes and fashion and came up with the idea of Save Your Wardrobe.

The app offers AI-driven wardrobe recommendations based on a user's lifestyle. Furthermore, the platform offers a curated eco-system of sustainability-enhancing services for clothes like repairs, alteration, donations, and options for reselling pieces no longer needed.

www.saveyourwardrobe.com/

ABOUT OUR INTERVIEW PARTNERS

Deirdre Shaw is Professor of Marketing and Consumer Research and Kat Duffy is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing, both at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow in Scotland.

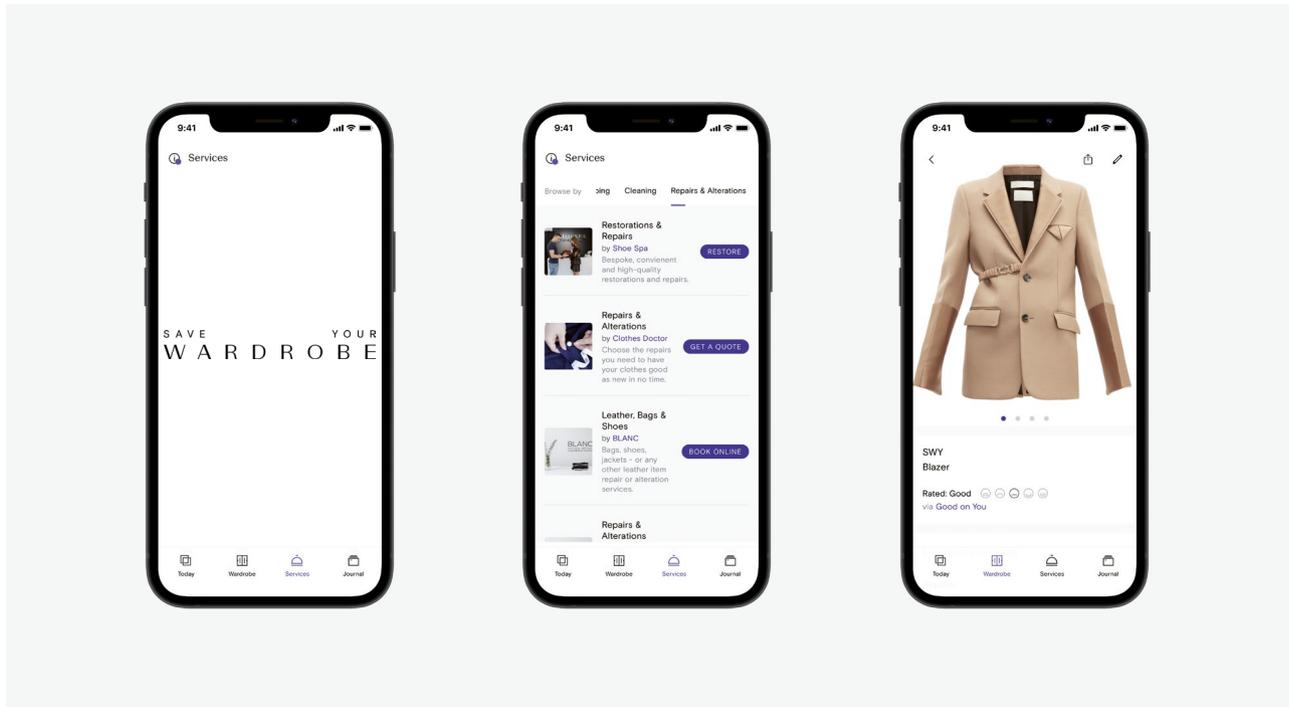
Deirdre has researched the area of consumption ethics throughout her career. Kat's research interests are in consumer culture and include clothing sustainability and circularity as well as the digitalization of consumption. Their research has been published in top tier international marketing journals. On the Save Your Wardrobe project, they have, to date, published two research reports.

Shaw, D. and Duffy, K. (2019): Save Your Wardrobe: Digitalising Sustainable Clothing Consumption. Project Report. University of Glasgow, Glasgow.

Shaw, D. and Duffy, K. (2020): Save Your Wardrobe: Digitalising Sustainable Consumption: Further Insights. Documentation. University of Glasgow, Glasgow.

THE INTERVIEWER

The interview was conducted by Professor Daiane Scaraboto in November 2021.



with the research we were doing. They had a lot of technical knowledge around the app but were less knowledgeable about the consumers and users. That's why our collaboration began, because we could come in to help them understand their users, how they would use the app, what their needs were and aspects like that.

You mentioned that mindfulness was in SYW's mission and that it aligned with your research interests. What is the role of mindfulness in your research and in sustainable fashion consumption?

Deirdre ✕ The concept of mindfulness was popping up in the industry and H&M, and other mainstream fashion brands were talking about being more mindful. Mindfulness became a hot topic in fashion magazines and blogs, too. Also, in the academic literature it was discussed as a conduit to sustainability. So, we decided to use mindfulness as an anchor when we asked people to engage in more sustainable practices. Becoming sustainable isn't easy and we were really interested in how mindfulness is working in daily routines. We framed mindfulness as going beyond awareness to setting a new intention and to reframing approaches to consumption at a broader level. We found that those people who questioned their consumption of clothing more generally and stepped away from the market to engage in restraint were the most successful in achieving mindful clothing consumption.

And when you learned about SYW, did you get interested in how the app might help consumers to act more mindfully?

Kat ✕ We know that digital tools can offer assistance to consumers in terms of advice on what to buy or where to buy or what to boycott, so we were interested in whether this would act as a pathway to action for consumers' intentions. People are used to using digital solutions in a mindfulness space to get more headspace and calm. The SYW app uses AI in terms of gaining a more holistic picture of how your clothing behaviors sit within your lifestyle. The premise is that if you can know more about what you're doing with your clothing, you can make more informed, more mindful choices.

So, the app is facilitating those decisions not by lowering the required cognitive effort but by adding information? How does it work?

Deirdre ✕ Starting with the app is quite labor intensive because you have to upload your wardrobe. We wondered whether this would be a barrier to people, but actually we found the opposite. Through uploading their wardrobes, people engaged further with their clothing. They realize what they don't wear anymore and start making decisions about a piece: Perhaps that's something to pass on, or is it

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an item that needs to be repaired? So, using the app was a burden in terms of engaging in this process but at the same time there were many benefits.

It's like transferring a mental load onto the app, right? The app keeps the knowledge for you and you don't have to constantly think about everything?

Kat ✕ Right. Participants talked about how the app enabled them to almost shop their existing wardrobe again because they were able to reframe what they already owned. They could see it digitally, whereas perhaps due to space constraints, they just didn't have their eyes on many pieces. Also, more information led to people feeling empowered to make better choices.

Did you come across other apps or websites that could help consumers become more conscious and mindful of their fashion consumption?

Kat ✕ The SYW app is linked with a whole ecosystem of digital services. One of those is "Good on You" which provides sustainability ratings for many of the familiar high street brands. Consumers found this useful to underpin their thinking around brands because many were aware of greenwashing and felt almost paralyzed about what information they should trust and embed in their choices. SYW is also really focused on education and supporting consumers through their blogs, through social media and webinars. Most important, they focus on raising awareness of repair and care and the skill sets that might have been lost across generations. They help their users to overcome skill gaps that become relevant again now that we're moving to more circular principles in terms of our clothing.

Does the app have any collective aspect or community angle to it? Or is it essentially individuals working on their own?

Deirdre ✕ The app is an individual inventory of what people own and it's reflective of individual behaviors, but there's a constant discussion about the role of community. It is not yet embedded in the app but there's potential for the future. Some of our participants said, for instance, that they would like to compare their behaviors with other people's behaviors. Also, in our last wave of research opportunities for more activism were discussed. There were others who wanted to open up their wardrobe for sharing, through some sort of sharing system. So, I think, community is something the app is constantly working toward.

Let's now talk about the pandemic. Did the COVID crisis change consumers' view on fashion consumption?

Deirdre ✕ The pandemic highlighted some of the worst aspects of clothing production and consumption behavior. We saw all kinds of non-payments of factories in Bangladesh by some brands. In the UK, we had the exposés of the Leicester factories in terms of how workers had been treated but also ignoring the virus in those factories. Despite all of that media coverage, we saw an increase in online shopping of fast fashion, and the associated impacts that come from transportation there, then transportation back of what did not fit. There were also reports that some retailers don't resell those returned items, with additional associated waste coming from that.

How have the lockdowns that we've all been through shaped how consumers relate to their wardrobes?

Deirdre ✕ The lockdowns were an opportunity to stop and consciously reflect on what they had been doing before. Through engaging with the app, people started to become more conscious of the clothes they were wearing. It was almost like a permission to reboot while all the other damaging things happened in the fashion industry. The lockdowns definitely gave people the opportunity to realize that they were part of the problem and this was quite uncomfortable.



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Do you think these positive intentions and habits will remain when people resume a faster pace of life in the post-pandemic world?

Kat ✕ I am not sure, but we are collecting additional data to explore whether and which new practices become embedded longer term. There was quite a bit of enthusiasm for the app to make recommendations about more sustainable brands. But that's not really sustainability in clothing. That's just another market on top of existing primary markets and that's not what the app is about. It is about connecting with what you already have, it's about clothing longevity, helping to maintain and care and repair that clothing and to pass it on afterwards. For fashion to become really sustainable, there has to be a seismic shift within the fashion industry. We need concerted effort in terms of reduction of consumption, not just a modification.

Who is responsible for this shift? Consumers?

Deirdre ✕ I don't think it's fair to responsabilize consumers but also we can't deresponsibilize them. It's important to think about the fashion industry as a multi-pronged environment with different actors, each of whom have roles and responsibilities, including the consumer. To rely on any one in isolation is not going to drive the whole agenda forward. Business and policy need to help the consumer in doing the right thing, and we're not going to see the dismantling of a linear model without policy intervention like extended producer responsibility or carbon taxing and other elements.

What do your respondents think about consumers being responsabilized? Are some of them pushing back?

Deirdre ✕ Interestingly, we did not find that consumers felt responsabilized. Their interest was how they could enjoy their clothing in a more meaningful and responsible way. The challenge here is the lack of clear paths to action. Those people who want to do the right thing are challenged by the lack of an infrastructure to support doing the right thing in an easy, convenient, and affordable way. If I want to recycle my clothing, it's really difficult to know if it is actually going to

be recycled. Where do I take it to? How am I supposed to bag it up and put it into the recycling? If I want to repair items, it's generally quite expensive. It's maybe not that accessible.

How does the SYW app make repairs, for instance, more accessible?

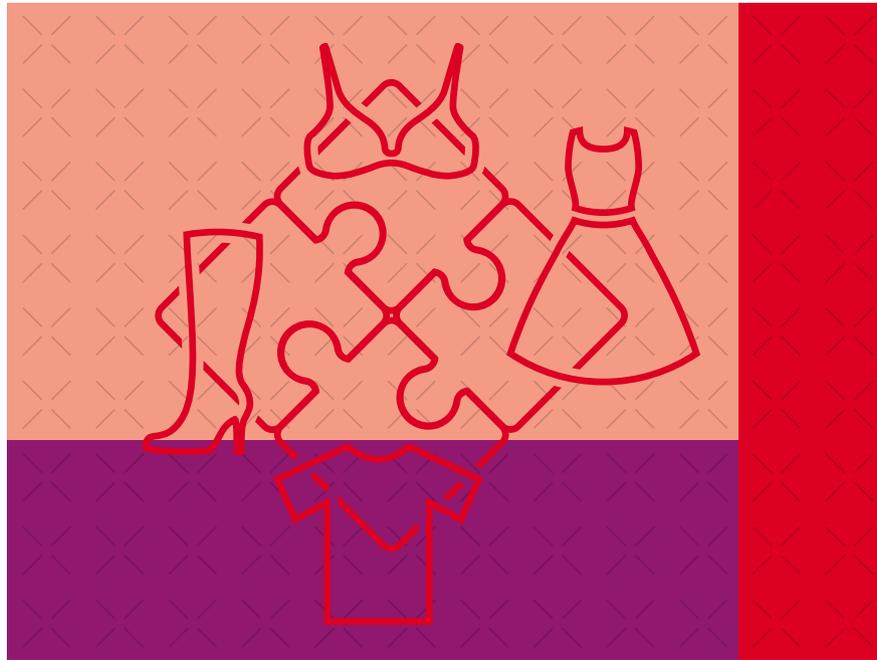
Kat ✕ They have built on the ecosystem that already exists in local economies with family-run businesses who offer repair and mending but as an industry have been quite slow to digitalize. So they act as a facilitator because you can gain an understanding of how much a repair is going to cost you, and what's the time frame for it to be returned to you. I think this is key: Circularity needs to be convenient, readily available, and simple to access. Being able to do all these things from your phone is a huge bonus.

And the app does that at a local level? If I input my location, can I get recommendations?

Kat ✕ At the moment the app is quite London-centric with the ambition to roll out. Also, they have teamed up with the German ecommerce platform Zalando and they are trialing how offering and embedding aftercare in the local infrastructure works in Berlin and in Dusseldorf.

Maybe even more than repairs, reselling has become a hot topic. Recent research suggests that some people perceive the value they get from their reselling of clothes as windfall money to buy more new clothes. Is this really helping a sustainability agenda?

Kat ✕ There are useful aspects of reselling because it empowers consumers to adopt more circular practices but it is problematic if they continue to consume at the same level. It's great to see a destigmatization of second hand and that it's no longer frowned upon but actually lauded. But how it works in terms of more sustainable values needs to be probed. If it just keeps the same speed going and you just resell the item if you've been photographed on Instagram and then use that money to buy something new again it keeps the cycle perpetuating.



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So, ultimately, is it a question of mindset, of slowing down? Have you seen approaches for sustained change that brands could support and encourage, not only in consumers but in the industry as a whole?

Deirdre ✕ We need to reduce, not modify consumption. We need to help consumers increase the longevity of clothing. The brands need to produce items that can have a longer life in the first place and then they need to offer the services that facilitate longer use. This is already happening with brands like Patagonia but it needs to become more mainstream. It must get easier for consumers to connect with services that they need and that's exactly what SYW is trying to do: to

provide a supportive infrastructure where people can connect within their local communities, where they can pop out to a repair or mending shop because you need to have that accessible and convenient to you. Change needs to come, it needs to come urgently and it has to be about reduction.

This is a great concluding statement. Thank you so much for the interview. Your cooperation with SYW is amazing. It's great to see you understanding what consumers actually do rather than what they say they do and how this helps to make the change we need in the fashion industry happen. ✕