



Evaluating sustainability through an historical lens: clothing conservation efforts during WWII

Sunhyung Cho and Jean L. Parsons
University of Missouri, USA

Keywords: WWII, sustainability, advice on dress, clothing conservation

Sustainability has emerged as an important dimension in the fashion industry, and has been attempted through 3R (reduce, reuse, recycle) strategy for textile waste management (Fletcher, 2013). Minimizing resource use entails searching for a solution to extend the lifespan of the products that we already have. The current dialogue on sustainability is not the first time strategies were developed to both conserve and extend the life of apparel. A study of conservation efforts in the United States during World War II (1942-45) can provide useful insights into how consumers strived to conserve and prolong limited resources. During WWII, the War Production Board, established in 1942 to oversee wartime production, introduced Regulation L-85 to impose style restrictions and specify measurements to restrict textiles used in clothing to conserve yardage (Ewing & Mackrell). This measure applied to the apparel industry, not to individual consumers. However, shortages of goods and the rationing of some, meant women searched for ways to conserve.

This paper seeks to provide a historical perspective on sustainable fashion by examining approaches to waste management during World War II. To explore this topic, we looked into advice literature and educational materials aimed at consumers to adapt to style and textile restrictions. The results of this study will provide insights into conservation gained from this historical perspective. Content analysis served as the primary method for data collection and interpretation. The data gathered on wartime fashion included a wide range of primary sources, such as women's magazines, including *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *The American Home*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*, and newspapers, including *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. In addition, contributors to *The Journal of Home Economics* studied and wrote about the problem. The analysis revealed four ways that these sources encouraged women to adapt their wardrobe to wartime shortages: through purchase decisions and shopping advice, wardrobe maintenance, reconditioning and repair, and repurposing.

Purchase and shopping advice centered on how to select items for extended use. High school and college students were encouraged to develop good buying habits, while teachers also raised their awareness of wartime scarcity as an incentive to learn to sew. Women's magazines and newspapers frequently gave shopping advice that focused on housewives' limited budget and on

making a successful purchase. Guidelines on careful purchasing included suggestions to look for classic styles. Emphasis was also on buying both the correct size and durable fabrics.

Wardrobe maintenance was a focus of some advice, as multiple strategies were offered to prolong clothing life. This required careful cleaning, and proper storing, plus regular brushing and proper pressing. Many publications encouraged readers to check clothing labels and understand the nature of various fabrics. Some also informed them of safe methods to address the difficulties of laundering with hard water. Storing properly also helped them to preserve their items.

Clothing reconditioning and repair for damaged items formed another avenue of advice. Damage that might occur and need maintenance included stains, holes, raveling, fit changes, or faded colors. All these demanded action to ensure better and longer use. Reinforcing items with adding patches or darning extended the durability and life. Also, dyeing whole garments, color of which had faded, was seen as an easy way to renew their clothing – something easier to do with clothing of the day that was natural fibers.

Repurposing described finding additional use for consumers' garments after they had reached the end of their lifespan, or were clearly no longer wearable for fit issues. There was extensive guidance on reconfiguring and remodeling clothes for new use. Further, most of the written materials was in line with what today might be called "upcycling" by suggesting to 1) partially transform small attachments such as pockets, collars, or cuffs or 2) make a new outfit which utilized all of the pieces deconstructed from existing garments or combining an outfit from several outfits using scraps of unusable clothes.

Through historical study on resource conservation efforts during World War II, it may be possible to identify past strategies through educational and advice endeavors intended to ensure it. The ideology of this period encompassed ideas beyond that of individual thrift, but of national interest. National demand to conserve and consumers' desire to extend the life of clothing coincided in wartime. Questions remain as to how to continue this ideology for contemporary consumers.

References

Fletcher, K. (2013). *Sustainable fashion and textiles: design journeys*. New York: Routledge.
Ewing, E., & Mackrell, A. (2005). *History of twentieth century fashion* (1st ed.). London: Batsford.