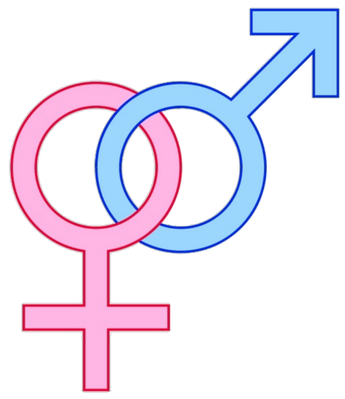
22nd European Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production (ERSCP 2025)

Gender Roles in Clothing Consumption as Sustainability Barriers in a Gendered Industry



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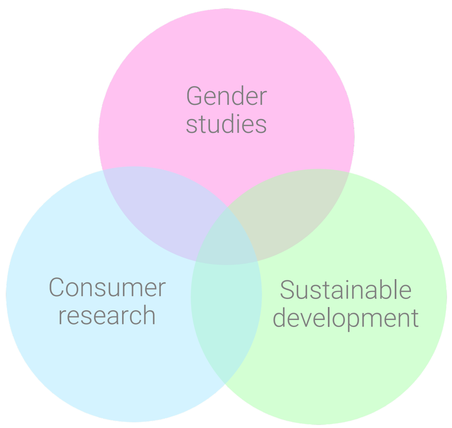
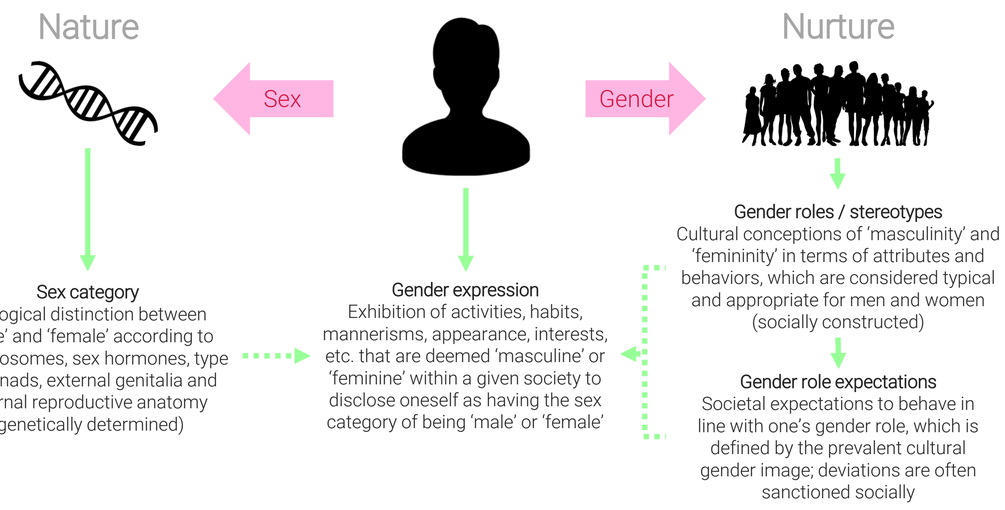
Field & Framework



Research gap and practical consequences
- Causes and mechanisms behind gender differences in sustainable consumption still poorly researched
- Measures to promote sustainable consumption currently not gender-sensitive (enough)

Why focus on clothes?
- Global textile industry causes grave socio-ecological issues
- Extensive gender differences in clothing consumption

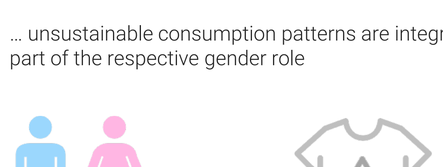
Theoretical background: "Doing gender" [1]



⇨ Gender stereotypes as strong personal and social norms for people's actions

Gender stereotypes as barriers against adoption of sustainable consumption patterns, if…

a) … those are considered unsuitable for a gender expression in accordance with one's sex category



b) … unsustainable consumption patterns are integral part of the respective gender role

Aim & Method

Research objectives

1. Identify common socio-cultural perceptions of 'feminine' and 'masculine' ways of acquiring, using and disposing of clothes
2. Examine, if and in which aspects these gender stereotypes counteract adoption of sustainable consumption patterns in clothing
3. Derive implications for gender-sensitive policies and measures to facilitate sustainable clothing consumption

Data

- 15 focus group discussions [2]
- Conducted in Germany
- Semi-structured discussion guide
- 116 participants
- 65 women, 51 men
- Age between 19 und 65
- Various socio-demographic backgrounds

Thematic Analysis [3]

(1) Data familiarization
(2) Data coding
(3) Searching for themes
(4) Reviewing themes
(5) Defining final themes
(6) Thick description of themes

Implementation using MAXQDA

Results

Self-interest promotes eco-friendliness and social compatibility – regardless of gender

⇨ No integration of eco-friendliness and/or social compatibility into gender images of typically 'masculine' or 'feminine' ways of consuming clothes

⇨ Barely any gender differences in considering ecological and social aspects in self-reported consumption behavior

⇨ No reference to gender roles in the corresponding justifications for (un-)sustainable behaviors

Acquisition
- Neither men nor women pay much attention to ecological production or social working conditions when buying clothes (reasons: perceived costs, image as scratchy and unfashionable)
- It's important to both that their clothing hasn't been chemically treated (main reason: health concerns)

Laundering
- Both, men and women, usually load the washer full, select the energy-saving mode, and set a low temperature (main reason: primarily saving money – occasionally supplemented by sustainability arguments)

Prevalent gender stereotypes: 'female fashionista' vs. 'male fashion grouch'

Social construction of 'femininity' in clothing consumption as …
- Strong focus on one's own appearance
- Great interest in fashionable clothing
- Desire for variety and alternation
- Impulsive and pleasure-driven shopping
- High rate of new acquisitions
- Rather short period of use

guiding principle for → Women (and 'feminine' men)

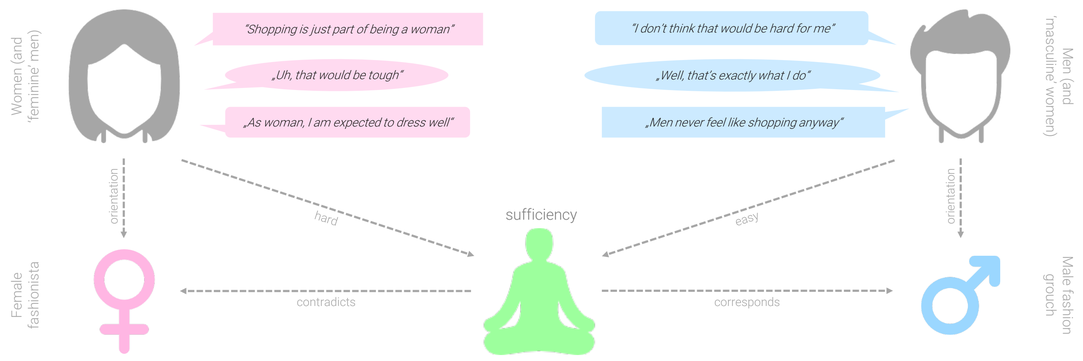
Social construction of 'masculinity' in clothing consumption as …
- Own appearance not so important
- Little interest in fashionable clothing
- Pragmatic approach to usage
- Targeted and efficient shopping
- New acquisitions only when necessary
- Clothing is usually worn until it's worn out

guiding principle for → Men (and 'masculine' women)

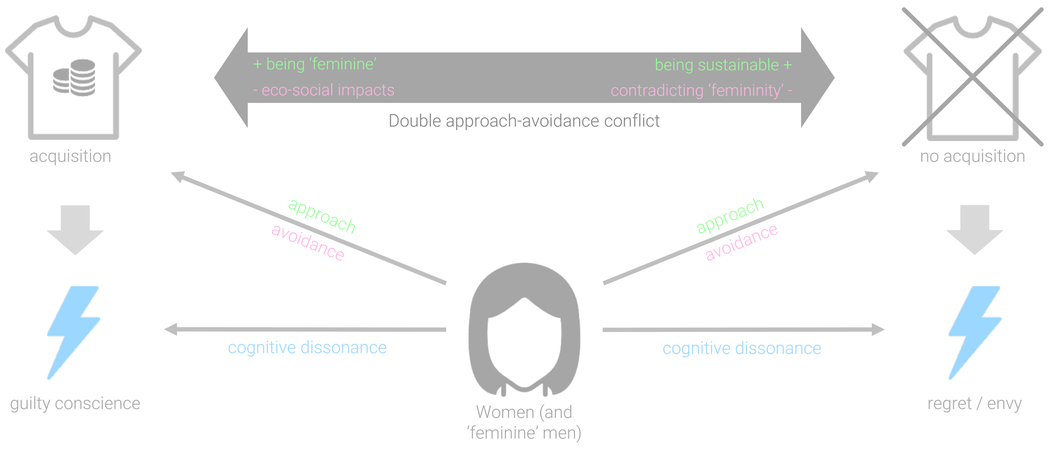
The 'feminine' sufficiency challenge

⇨ Strong differences in reactions to recommendations on sufficient clothing consumption

- Don't' follow every trend - Only buy if you really need something new - Wear items for as long as possible



Sufficiency vs. 'femininity': ´conflicting norms for consumption



Implications

Recommendations for gender-sensitive promotion of sustainable clothing consumption

Aim to invalidate gender role expectation that women must be intent on their appearance to be considered 'feminine'
- Stress the social acceptance of women who have found their own style and do not join every trend
- Emphasize that the social standing of women does not depend only on how they look

Expose the stereotype of the 'female fashionista' as a social construction
- Make it a subject of a deliberate discussion
- Question the underlying role model

Do not accentuate the 'masculinity' of consuming clothes sufficiently as this could imply consumption inducing effects in women

Represent sufficient clothing consumption as accepted and desirable behavior in men and women alike

Further research

- Dependence of content and reflexivity of gender stereotypes on socio-demographic background
- Factors influencing the impact of gender stereotypes on individual consumption patterns in clothing
- Potential measures to overcome prevalent gender stereotypes in clothing consumption
- Effectivity of measures to support women in sufficient clothing consumption despite the opposing stereotype of the 'female fashionista'

References
1) West, C. & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987): Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, Vol. 1 (2), p. 125-151.
2) Kruger, R. A. & Casey, M. A. (2015): *Focus groups – A practical guide for applied research*, Vol. 5. London: SAGE.
3) Braun, V. & Clark, V. (2006): Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3 (2), p.77-101.

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