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Is Fast fashion a feminist issue?

Fast fashion and feminism are two seemingly unrelated topics that weave intrinsically into one another. In this Independent Project I want to venture into unknitting both topics to see where they collide and how they can help each other, both unlock their problems and hopefully discover solutions. Although “Feminism is going to ruin your life but in the best way” (Given, 2020), you understand that what you uncover is going to shock you however, the feminist principles always end up with you gaining something, whether that’s an enhanced perspective or a motivation to make change happen. Whereas with fast fashion, much is promised, but in the end, there is very little to commend it. In fact, its attributes are harmful to mankind both from an ecological and humanitarian perspective. Both feminism and fast fashion are topics that have a symbiotic relationship that is often hidden from view, we know about them, but we often feel as female consumers that we have very little influence into changing consumer habits. In actuality female consumers have a majority influence within the economy. When you uncover the hidden secrets and delve deeper into practices, we are led to ignore, this knowledge may change the way you think about products, the way in which they are produced and how you want to consume them.

The focus of this Independent Project (In the form of an extended essay) is to look at how feminist models, consumers and designers can change fast fashions current unsustainable and often unethical practices For a more sustainable and ethical model.

For the purposes of this independent enquiry’s term, I have defined Fast fashion as a fast rate of production with items of clothing getting little to no wear, an industry that neglects the people who work for them as well as the planet and a model that is entirely unsustainable (Ethical Consumer, 2019).

Women consume more clothing and accessories than men according to Stuart (2019) women are more likely to purchase, within 2019 pre pandemic 80% of women purchased more nightwear than men with only 53%. The stereotypical view may be to assume that the reason women tend to consume more is due to their addiction to handbags and shoes or that they need more retail therapy than men to feel satisfied. However, the reason that shopping habits are on the rise, according to Brenman, (2013) is that women do not just buy for themselves they buy on behalf of many others, their husbands or partners, family, friends and relatives.

Some women have to help elderly family members to get presents for the rest of the family, this combined with their own shopping leads to a higher consumption for most women. This may be linked to women's role of care givers within the family dynamic, according to both the Care collective, (2020) and; De la BellaCassa (2017) care is a moral obligation women feel they need to oblige to in many aspects helping with shopping being just one of the.



Note: n=22,686. Respondents were asked to indicate what types of garments they had purchased in the last 12 months.
Source: 2019 Winter Simmons Profile Report. Copyright 2019 Simmons Research LLC. All rights reserved.

Table.1: *Pre-Pandemic statistics for consumerism*

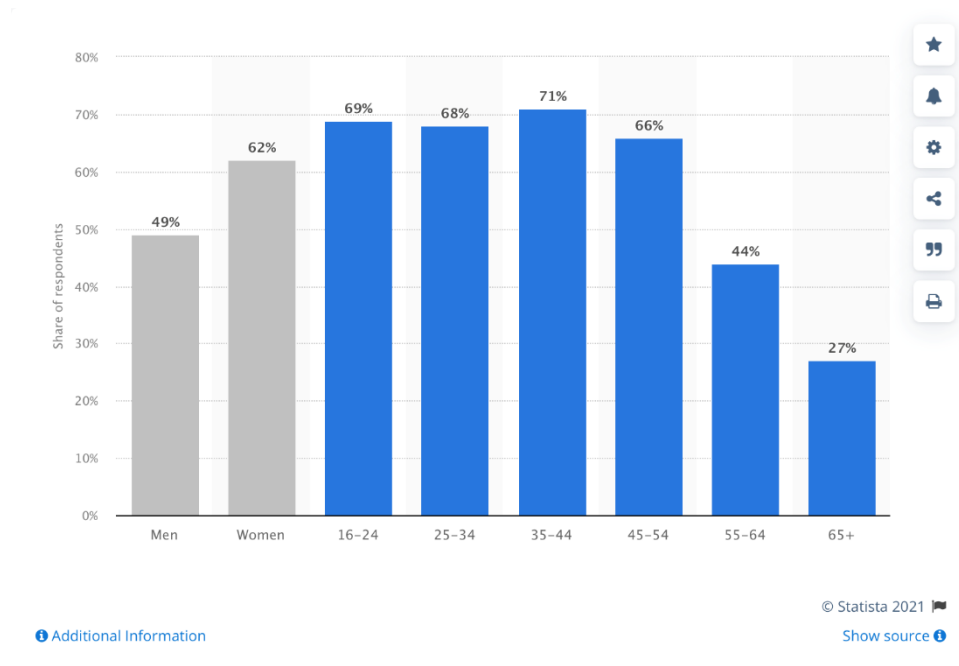


Table.2: *Post-pandemic statistics for consumerism*

However, this graph from 2020 shows an up-to-date visualisation of female consumerism in Great Britain in 2021, this demonstrates that post pandemic women are still consuming more than men. As women in society, we must acknowledge and address these issues in order to change our consumer habits and help stop practices that are unsustainable.

Recent trends and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a desire for an increased consumption in fast fashion. With many companies having to deal with a massive decline in sales due to the closing of all retail establishments during the multiple lockdowns, “In 2020, total retail sales volumes fell by 1.9% compared with 2019, the largest annual fall on record” (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This was due to the closing of in person shopping after the number of lockdowns. With demands from high street shops almost vanishing, many fast fashion brands withheld payment from their suppliers for goods, according to McNamara (2020). Many companies refused to pay invoices amounting to more than £12.3bn of goods. These brands refused to pay the factories for goods between April and June of 2020. Refusing to pay for orders that had been placed well before the COVID

outbreak. With lockdowns and high street shoppers unable to visit fast fashion faced a decline in sales of almost 70% giving the workers and the environment time to recover. However according to Bootle (2020) this was short lived as online sales began to rise as there were further lockdowns, with many people becoming impulse buyers using online shopping as retail therapy. This increase in consumption gave mass media outlets a new current conversation it seemed like fast fashion was a new concept whereas, Bravo (2020) teaches us that it is quite the opposite. It can be hard to work out exactly where fast fashion began, from tailors trying to make affordable suits for the working man, to utility clothing during the war. This ever-expanding multimillion dollar industry has continued to grow, and as it has increasingly exploited its workers in favour of profit, the majority of which are female. "An estimated 60 million workers power the global garment industry, generating its billions of profit. 80% of these workers are female" (Clean Clothes Campaign, Nd). This puts women at the forefront, heart and the receiving end of this issue, making fast fashion a direct feminist concern.



Fig.1. *Paco Rabanne paper dresses*

One of the first cases of throw away fashion according to Hoskins, was Paco Rabanne who in 1966 decided to create garments made from paper, the clothing was a stunt for Scotts Paper (See fig.1) and was only meant to be worn once or twice. This was a new outlook for many and was shocking, but Rabanne was convinced this was the way forward with fashion. The garments were affordable, cheap to make and buy, and these savings were passed on to the consumer. This idea from 1966 does not seem too far from the way we are currently living in 2021. Today fast fashion is a multibillion-dollar industry, at Christmas Oxford Street alone makes £1.5 million a minute (Hoskins, 2014). Although this industry is booming, we must remember that these are businesses designed for commercial profit. They make clothing for profit. If we only brought the clothes we needed, these businesses would not exist, the companies have been created to suit the market and consumer's needs.

There are many ways that these companies propel desires that fuel our (The consumers) perceived needs. Both Hoskins and Miney, explore the way we shop, even though we could have spent a whole day shopping to

fulfil a need inside ourselves, we get home and still feel empty, we need more. It is a momentary high, serotonin leaves our body as soon as we see new flashy adverts or the latest upcoming collections (Hoskins, 2014; Miney, 2016) (see earlier research on retail therapy). As lockdowns became the new normal many companies made a shift in what and how they advertised. To address current trends and situations such as comfier loungewear in the place of more formal evening attire. Taking full advantage of this captive audience. Exploiting the fact that people could not go out to shop giving them a greater desire to buy online.



Fig.2: Fast Fashion clothing heaps

Currently most of our clothing is made in other countries that are less developed such as parts of Asia. Bravo confirms this when she talks about the shift in manufacturing. Before the 1990s most of our clothing was made and manufactured in the UK but since around the 90s most of our clothing is now made in developing countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, China and less regulated countries, where labour costs are cheaper (Bravo, 2020). It has taken a long time for the worlds general population to start realising that these new and cheaper ways of making and manufacturing clothing comes at some unseen considerable costs. There is such pressure on factories and companies to keep slashing costs, that something has to give. The companies' ways of creating cheaper items, costs of making garments and pressure to make more of them at a higher speed, has led to considerable changes including the standards of the clothing dropping and worse. In fact, it has led to horrific accidents like Rana Plaza (Fletcher and Tham, 2019).

Rana Plaza was a wakeup call for many people in and outside of the fashion industry. It exposed just how bad the working conditions were in fast fashion factories, there were 1,133 deaths and many life changing injuries

from this one incident alone. According to Jacoby (2018) most of the people who died were young women, their deaths caused by structural damage to the building that the garment workers were working in. it has been reported that the day before the eight-story commercial building collapsed the workers had been arguing with their managers, trying to explain that the structure of the factory was unsafe due to the large cracks in the concrete, the building was becoming unsafe they had started to fear for their lives. Yet nothing was done, and the workers were threatened with cuts in their monthly pay if they did not go into the building and continue working. The day after this argument the building collapsed, killing over a thousand people and injuring many more (Hoskins, 2014). Once the news of the Bangladeshi tragedy hit the media people were shocked at the effects of buying cheap clothing.



Fig.3 : Rana Plaza building collapse

These included the effects on the workforce making the garments and the conditions in which they were working. When the news broke to the media outlets the shock and sadness was evident in the content of the articles. Both *The Guardian* and *BSR* spoke out stating it was a dark reminder of the cost behind the cheap garments. (BSR, 2013) and ;(The Guardian,2013). The brands who had clothing being made in this factory spoke out and said that they would help with money for the victims' families. They pledged to ensure that the factories were safer and working conditions were improved.

Following, the Rana Plaza incident many companies came together to discuss and create a policy, that would prevent such a disaster happening again. According to Jacoby (2018) Rana Plaza led to over 200 global

companies signing a legal binding contract. The policy named, *Accord on fire and building safety in Bangladesh*. A Caveat of this policy means the brands can only source from factories which provide the basic safety criteria. This includes the building and health and safety of their workers. Clean clothes campaign (Nd) also talks about the Rana Plaza Arrangement that was also made only a few months after the building collapse, creating a compensation scheme for the families affected by the tragedy. This summer (2021) the policy for garment workers in Bangladesh came to an end, leaving the workers in danger and activists fighting to ensure the safety of the workforce. On the 25th of August 2021 a new contract was agreed binding brands for two years. This new contract continued with the earlier policy and expanded upon it. So far, many brands have signed up to the new arrangement, yet there are many yet to commit to checking on the safety of their workers. In the image below from Re/make is an updated list from October 2021.

Brands that HAVE Committed to the 2021 Accord Renewal & Expansion	Brands that HAVE NOT Committed to the 2021 Accord Renewal & Expansion
- adidas - American Eagle - ASOS - Bestseller - Boohoo - C&A - Esprit - H&M - Inditex (Zara) - Mango - Marks & Spencer - Next - Primark - Puma - PVH (Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger) - UNIQLO	- Abercrombie & Fitch - Amazon - Disney - Gap - IKEA - JC Penney - Kohl's - Levi's - Lululemon - Macy's - Missguided - Mothercare - Nordstrom - Ross - Sears - Target - The Children's Place - VF Corporation (Northface, Timberland) - Walmart

Fig.4 : 2021 Accord

According to Minney (2016) many companies have not kept up with these promises on safety. H&M is one of the main companies who has yet to address safety hazards in their Bangladeshi factories. The wakeup calls for people was unfortunately short lived, since the main Rana Plaza incident there have been many more tragedies of this nature. According to Bravo (2020) this is not the only case where fast fashion has caused tragedy and deaths. In the year before the Rana Plaza incident 250 people died in Pakistan when an Ali Express

factory caught fire. Clean clothes (Nd) compared Rana Plaza to the Ali Express fire, they found that the Ali Express fire took a lot longer to get settlement money. The court case dragged on and gained momentum following the Rana Plaza incident. Corner (2014) believes we should care and ensure that we consider the happiness of the people who are making our clothes.

The majority of garment workers are women and children, this is not a coincidence according to (clean clothes, 2021). The garment business has grown and taken full advantage of both the social constraints that society places on women, and the willingness that women feel to abide by these social constraints. This highlights a variety of issues that are in general specific to women and their health. These issues not widely addressed in the media presumably because they only effect women. They are being exposed to harsh working environments including chemicals and other health and safety concerns. According to Hesperian Health Guides (Nd) sexual and reproductive health are things that can be affected by chemicals that these women are exposed to. Prolonged exposure to chemicals can affect a women's menstrual cycle, they can become infertile or if they do manage to become pregnant, they often have issues with miscarrying or complications with the baby. Women and children tend to be chosen for this type of work in the garment industry because of their small hands and dexterity. As most of these workers are women we must understand and address a variety of factors including, unsafe working conditions, low wages, forced over time, deprivation of maternity/ childcare. These issues are further exasperated by gender-based violence and other abuse from male colleagues. Hoskins (2014) gives a walk-through view of the places garment workers are slaving away in. They illustrate the conditions that workers face, crowded places with families working on top of each other, children that are losing their eyesight because of conducting up-close beading, their smaller hands are better for all the intricate stitch work and beading.



Fig.5 : Factory worker

Consumers forget that people are making this clothing, they don't consider the human cost of these cheap garments. This topic is covered by Bravo (2020) when she comments on the idea that fast fashion clothing is a 'blank canvas' they just appear in the shops fully made and happens to be cheaper. "Modern industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchy master into the great factory of the capitalist." (Marx and Varoufakis, (2018). From this we understand that modern factories have come to resemble capitalist models in society. We as consumers forget to think about the conditions these clothes are being made in, the people who are dying making them, to us the clothing is soulless, we don't consider what has happened to make the item, it just appears to be consumed. The consumer over time has become totally removed from the process of making these garments and those involved in the process. This model of working is outdated, and we need to find a new model that works, in a more humane way, less harsh, more caring way. This would be beneficial not only for the women in the industry but also for our planet.

Jobs synonymous with care giving are more frequently conducted by women the OECD's report shows this. Current economic trends de-value this type of work and thus ultimately the value of care givers. This means that these roles are often unknowingly gendered. The jobs more specifically feminine are generally involved in health and social care sectors, because of this. According to OECD's (2019) 'Gender Equality' data ¾ of women make up the health and social care industry. This further perpetuates the idea of care being women's work, as it becomes our everyday unconscious bias, we see only women in caring roles and so believe that only women can perform these tasks. The world and its infrastructures are driven by financial capital, and this has been the way for at least the last 40 years according to (The Care Collective, (n.d.)). They believe that this new crisis, a lack of care has come about due to the governments positioning of profit making over care, meaning they have been ruthlessly dismantling all areas of care, including the welfare states. Care is a system forgotten about in modern day logic, but for a feminist it is a vital part of life, De La Bellacasa (2017) also shows that care is part of feminist ethics and so both are vital to each other; this does not mean just because care is a vital part of feminism that care is work only for women. The care structure is about maintenance with human and ethical implications.

Safety for women workers traveling in and out of the factory is also not considered, many women experience sexual assault, exploitation and abuse from both inside the factory and beyond.

Gender discrimination runs deep throughout all of the countries in which garments are currently produced. Women are frequently subjected to verbal and physical abuse and sexual harassment. They also work under the fear of perhaps being assaulted or raped on their way home from work late at night. (Clean clothes campaign , n.d.)

These are all things that women must face in the industry, there is aggression from male superiors as well as men on the street, this means that women have no safe place to hide.

Solnit (2014) further enhances this when she talks about the struggles of feminism, women face rape, domestic violence, marital rape and workplace harassment. Their counterparts in more westernised countries understand that they can stand up and speak against these issues. In less developed countries that prey on people being exploited for monetary gain these issues are not raised. Siddiqi (2009) had never before come across such extreme working conditions, comparing garment workers to prostitution and yet prostitution comes out on top. In both jobs you have neither job security nor protection from sexual exploitation, in both jobs you are left vulnerable. This helps re-affirm the gendered roles comparing sex workers and garment workers.

Given (2020) talks about how there is also a bias in the way that the industry's work, women must prove themselves before being acknowledged whereas men are automatically respected, before even getting into the room, women are at a disadvantage. If some women do manage to break this glass ceiling many of them experience something called 'Imposter Syndrome' Perez (2021) talks about this, how a woman's achievements can never fully feel their own and deserved. Wolf (1991) strengthens this point by saying that no matter what type of work women do they always have to work harder than men, no matter if they are stay at home mums or holding down a job, they feel they must work harder than men. This is not the only example of gender discrimination. Both boys and girls growing up are told that it is not ok for boys to cry, that crying is something women and girls do. Perez (2021) talks about how interesting it is that we have come to a point where even emotion is gendered, if crying is feminine why is showing femininity a bad thing? On the other end of the spectrum it's ok for boys and men to get angry and set firm boundaries, but for women the same actions are seen as bossy and rude. Given (2020) explains that women setting boundaries should not be seen as a threat, they simply know what they want and have had to work hard to get to a place where they feel comfortable saying that. It is interesting how both women and men have their own structures to their gender. Perez (2021) implies that people believe that because women possess a womb, they will automatically know everything that goes along with being a mother and caring for your child, that there is a hardwired ability for nappy changing.

Many women struggle to find jobs as companies turn women away due to their age, marital status or if they suspect they will want children in the near future as they fear maternity leave. This is also present in the fast fashion workplace as according to Hesperian Health Guides (date) many women are made to decide whether they want children or if they want a career. The factories often only offer jobs to women who are not married, thinking this holds off planning a family. If women do become pregnant the factory managers will most likely not offer them a safer job or help with the extra costs of health care or paid leave. There is maternity provision provided and this leaves women having to consider what is more important, the safety of their unborn child or the money they need to live. This is not a decision any mother should have to experience and not a topic this industry and companies should be able to decide on. Although we can acknowledge that it is not only women who are exploited in these ways, they do make up the largest percentage of the workforce, thus making women particularly vulnerable to this issue. There are women of the world who are lucky enough to have resources, information and education to fully understand this situation and as such we must decide for the benefit of the world and humanity to consume both more ethically and environmentally consciously.

Unfortunately, most of the time the only way to educate the world's population about these topics is by highlighting and talking about these issues. Helping people understand that mass manufacturing of fast fashion garments is having a huge impact on the environment and in turn affecting them. In affect the individuals will be more willing to co-operate as they have a vested interest. Minney (2016) talks about how in her own experience, her friends find the wrong things to focus on, they talk about traveling to find the best most organic food but struggle to see that their handbag addiction and extensive shoe collection are also part of the problem. The fast fashion industry is one of the top 5 most polluting industries in the world (Academic English,2020). Guinut (2020) a French women known for her style and fashion also says she struggled to give up fast fashion but for her, the growing ecological concerns pushed her to commit to the more sustainable lifestyle. The growing model of fast fashion has increased exponentially "The global fast fashion market is expected to grow from \$25.09 billion in 2020 to \$30.58 billion in 2021 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 21.9%" (Global Newswire, 2021) this statistic alongside what Bick, Halsey & Ekenga (2018) shows that globally 80 billion pieces of clothing are purchased each year, with most of these products being assembled in third world countries like China and Bangladesh. To manufacture these garments comes at a great cost causing strain on the environment to produce. According to Niinimäki, Peters, Dahlbo, Perry, Rissanen, Gwilt (2020) some of these impacts include 92 million tonnes of waste per year and 79 trillion litres of water consumed. This waste is being created for garments that consumers are throwing away after just a few uses, this way of producing and consuming is unsustainable both from an environmental and ethical perspective, it is a dead end anyway you look at it.

Brands and designers have one of the most important responsibilities and critical roles for remodelling how we consume in the future. If consumers are given sustainable and ethical alternatives to the fast fashion industry, then they have a better chance to consume in a more responsible way. Currently brand designers have 52 collections a year whereas in the past there were only two seasons, Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter.

When you consider that retailers like Zara can get a garment from the drawing board to the shop floor in as little as 10 days, it's hardly surprising some of the clothes are not worthy of a longer lifespan.
(Bravo,2020)

The issue with brands having such a high turnover of stock means consumers have more to purchase, always trying to keep up with current trends and disregarding older collections for the new. Perpetuating a model which is an unsustainable cycle.

Consumers are the other major role in tackling this issue, we need to reconnect with the garments we are buying. We need to stop the disassociation we have between the garments we buy and the people who make them, this needs to be addressed so we can learn to reconnect with the processes and people involved. (Mansvelt, 2011). Consumers have a variety of alternatives which they can use instead of fast fashion. They have the option to take garments to tailors to mend or learn to develop the skill of sewing and mending themselves. The need to shop using companies who use methods of upcycling existing materials including old garments or alternatively they can rent clothing e.g., *HURR* instead of buying. The world needs to learn from incidents like Rana Plaza and make sure when we are buying clothing to look at the way these companies operate and how transparent they are about these issues. There are apps and websites available at our fingertips such as *Good On You*, they do the hard investigation into brands to see how these companies take care of their workforce, the Planet and also animals. Giving the consumers an insight into the ethics of each brand, enabling them to make a fully informed choice into the brand/ designer they want to support. Hopeful this information also serves as a reminder to companies that they the need to do better because people and in particular their consumers care. Although the worst cases of garment workers' wages and working conditions are in 3rd world countries, they are also evident closer to home. There is a growing fast fashion industry in LA, a geographic location not previously associated with the fast fashion industry. According to Morse, (2020) although there is more regulation and better conditions in the US sometimes there are still workplaces that slip through the net. The article names big fast fashion brands like Fashion Nova for being amongst their top violators for wage theft. These companies are paying their employees according to workers output instead of hourly wages, this means they are being paid 2 or 3 cents for sewing each garment. By highlighting these companies on *Good On you* we have the power to implement change in our everyday life.

Zara

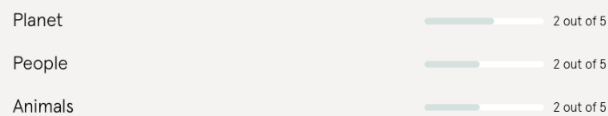


Rated: Not good enough
Price : \$\$

Location: Spain

How we rate ↗

Zara is not taking adequate steps to ensure payment of a living wage for its workers.



Zara is owned by Inditex.

Its environment rating is 'not good enough'. It uses few eco-friendly materials. There is no evidence it minimises textile waste when manufacturing its products. It uses recycled packaging. It has set an absolute target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions generated from its own operations and supply chain but there is no evidence it is on track to meet its target.

Its labour rating is 'not good enough'. Half of its final stage of production is undertaken in Spain, a medium risk country for labour abuse. It received a score of 51-60% in the Fashion Transparency Index. It likely publishes detailed information about its supplier policies, audits and remediation processes. It publishes a detailed list of suppliers in the final stage of production and some information about the findings of supplier audits. It publishes some information about forced labour, gender equality or freedom of association. There is no evidence it ensures payment of a living wage in its supply chain. It discloses some policies to protect suppliers and workers in its supply chain from the impacts of COVID-19.

Its animal rating is 'not good enough'. It has a formal animal welfare policy aligned with Five Freedoms. It uses leather, down and exotic animal hair. It states that it sources wool from non-mulesed sheep. It does not use fur, angora or exotic animal skin. There is no evidence it traces any animal products to the first stage of production.

Zara is rated 'Not good enough' overall.

Last Updated: July 2020

Fig.6 : Good On You Zara Review

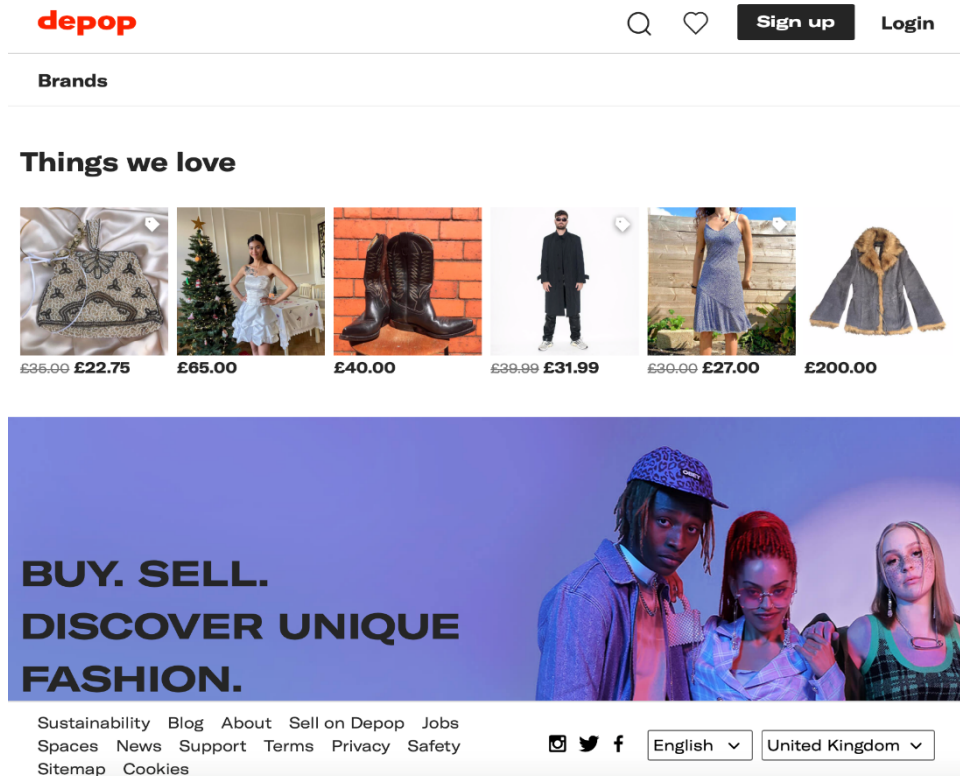


Fig.7 : Depop

Other alternatives that have become more prevalent recently with younger generations is the second-hand revival market including apps such as *Depop*, *eBay* and *Vinted*. With *Depop* having a new hold on the vintage market. Our current model goes by “buy > use > dispose > the end” (Bravo, 2020) we need to stop this unsustainable model and embrace modern ideology's.

This second hand market allows the repurposing and resale of clothing and accessories. Embracing the care mentality in clothing. The beloved coat that belonged to your grandmother and was handed down as an heirloom, making quality garments that last and can be a classic staple vintage piece such as the little black dress. This garment is a classic timeless piece which keeps evolving and therefore is always current. Meaning that clothing has a longer life cycle and so in its essence is more environmentally friendly.

During the process of writing this extended essay, I have begun to understand the structure of fast fashion and why it needs to change. I have demonstrated the need to employ conscious caring methods in the production of quality ethically made garments. These beliefs and methodologies are common to and are associated with feminism. We need to redress the balance between monetary gains and care in the fashion industry. Placing profit ahead of human lives and our planet demonstrates a profound lack of basic care and shows the current model is failing. Hoskins (2014) writes about the way nature works and how humans should start mimicking animals, who do not over-consume. We, on the other hand, produce a surplus of clothing, shelter, food and other commodities. This way of living means we are never satisfied and have to continue the current cycle of consumerism. To break the chain of consumption we need to start voting with our feet, forcing fast fashion brands to change their practises, threatening to boycott those who refuse to change, creating a consumer revolution. This particular power is in the hands of women as I have pointed out previously, we are the main purchasers in the household. Woman can also influence those around us to change the habits and educate them to make better decisions. Using alternative methods from fast fashion like second hand purchasing, upcycling, recycling, ethically sourcing clothing and understanding the true cost of the clothes you wear. As a consequence of my research, I have made personal changes to the way I purchase and view my clothing. I no longer purchase items from fast fashion brands preferring to purchase vintage quality items from local charity shops, second hand websites and getting to know my local tailor better. I also care more for my clothing now; I've learnt to darn, mend my clothing, upcycle parts of my wardrobe and have also started educating those around me on the consequences of fast fashion.



Fig.8 : *My own hand darning of jumper*

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