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Fast Fashion is Past Fashion: An Analysis of Countercultural Movements, Environmental Impact, and Consumer Shifts in the Fast Fashion Industry and a Call for Sustainable and Ethical Practices in the Wake of These Impacts.

Abstract

Fast Fashion is Past Fashion examines the emergence of subcultural anti-materialist views within the fashion industry, driven by countercultural movements advocating for sustainability, individualism, and ethical decision-making. The consequences of fast fashion highlight the exigency for the industry to prioritise sustainable and ethical practices. Solving the issues caused by fast fashion could give a £152billion boost to the global economy (Global Fashion Agenda, 2018), create 18 million additional jobs by 2030 (Pacini, 2021) and reduce the industry's carbon footprint by 63 per cent (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

The industry's contributions to global pollution, rapid turnover and overconsumption are accentuated through the utilitarian critique of prioritising short-term pleasure over long-term well-being. The utilitarian perspective dissects the psychological impacts of fast fashion, Herbert Marcuse's "one-dimensional man" and the Scarcity Principle evaluate how fast fashion exploits consumers' insecurities, leading to buying behaviours that have negative effects on mental health. The Rana Plaza tragedy illustrates fast fashion's violation of human rights, emphasising the industry's responsibility to ensure suitable conditions for workers. Changing values in consumer perspectives, driven by increased environmental awareness, reveal that social media has a significant positive influence on sustainable living and consumer buying habits, while greenwashing has a significant negative effect on consumer loyalty. Brands such as Human Touch Clothing, Tentree, Ecoalf and Amschela outline how successful approaches to sustainable and ethical practice are possible through innovative material selection and creative strategies.

Fast Fashion is Past Fashion contends that sustainability is the future for the fashion industry, highlighting the need for collective efforts from the industry, consumers, and businesses. A transition away from fast fashion to a more sustainable and ethical industry would not only benefit the planet but would also reap benefits for brands, consumers and everyone in between.

Introduction

This analysis examines the countercultural movements that support sustainability, individualism, and moral decision-making as the driving forces behind the emergence of subcultural anti-materialist perspectives on fashion design. Discussing the impact of fast fashion and analysing the work of designers and brands that embraced these changes highlights how important it is for modern fashion to prioritise sustainability and ethical practices. With a significant portion of consumers expressing concern for sustainability, this work explores how such efforts align with consumer values and contribute to social and environmental progression, while considering potential obstacles brands may face on their journey to becoming sustainable. Sustainable fashion is the future and brands must align themselves with this to stay relevant and successful.

Fast Fashion

Fashion is erratic by nature and inherently unpredictable. Fast fashion businesses use these factors to their advantage over non-fast fashion brands. While other fashion retailers struggle to make as much of an income due to excess stock and supply networks that are unable to adapt quickly to changing trends, successful flexible supply chain management techniques mean unsustainable fast fashion businesses can quickly acknowledge and act in favour of emerging fashion trends, addressing key customer behaviour more quickly. Some fast fashion companies now create roughly fifty-two "micro-seasons" annually, or one new "collection" every week, while companies like Zara, Topshop, and H&M have been the target of criticism for overproduction, luxury brands also measure their growth by increasing production (Stanton, 2023).

The apparel industry creates 10 per cent of the world's total carbon footprint, to put this in perspective, the whole aviation industry creates 2 per cent, moreover, worldwide, apparel is the second-largest polluter of fresh water (McFall-Johnsen, 2020). To add to the growing number of fashion garments being thrown away each year, compared to fifteen years ago, consumers now hold onto clothing for about half as long as they would have previously (Ahmed et al., 2019), while the amount of clothing pieces produced each year has increased by one-hundred per cent since the year 2000 (Remy, Speelman & Swartz, 2016).

Utilitarian Perspectives Regarding the Environment

Utilitarianism, which focuses on maximising overall happiness or well-being, states that “moral theorists should focus on topics that are most important to the future promotion of well-being” (Mulgan, 2019). This concept highlights the negative consequences of fast fashion practices on the planet, which, in the long run, can lead to a decrease in overall well-being. Fast fashion designers frequently give precedence to trends that result in the usage of materials and production techniques that have adverse effects on the environment. Due to the magnitude of fast fashion pieces being produced, each year, around 300,000 tonnes of textile waste are sent to landfills or incinerators and end up in household black bins (Environmental Audit Committee, 2019). The overuse of resources and the development of enormous volumes of textile waste may be caused by the drive for rapid turnover and cheap manufacturing costs. The utilitarian critique points out that this pursuit of immediate pleasure and economic gains comes at the expense of long-term harm to the environment, natural resources, and overall well-being. On the other hand, the advantages of the availability of these low-cost on-trend garments mean that lower-income families and individuals can acquire pieces similar to those of higher-income individuals, eliminating classism through fashion (Williams, 2022). However, these low-quality garments will inevitably wear out faster than higher-quality pieces, meaning more clothing will need to be bought over time compared to buying quality pieces, hence the saying “buy nice or buy twice” (Silverstein, 2023). Utilitarianism critiques these cheaper low-quality items, that will inevitably go to landfill, for their short-term advantages, compared to higher quality long-lasting garments, because there is “No Fashion on a Dead Planet” (Extinction Rebellion, 2023).

The purchasing of these low-cost, low-quality pieces is not only detrimental to the planet but can also have negative effects on consumers’ mental health. Due to the quickly changing clothing options and the limited supply of current designs, customers feel pressured to immediately buy garments from fast fashion brands, rather than waiting to take advantage of sale pricing or attempting to find a more sustainable alternative. Because new designs are introduced often, the items are not only hard to find for brief periods of time, but they are also produced in limited quantities, making them rare (Sasikarn, p.1 2012).

The Scarcity Principle

The Scarcity Principle fuels these buying habits. This belief stems from evolutionary psychology; because our predecessors had to fight for scarce resources, our behaviour was shaped by the

need to acquire these objects (Chen, 2020). Marketers capitalise on this instinctive need by producing limited-edition goods that evoke a feeling of urgency and exclusivity, fast fashion triggers this emotion within consumers, due to its constantly changing collections and trends (Aryaman, 2023). This immediate interest overrides long-term interests, the fast fashion industry takes advantage of our primal urges, ignoring the long-term consequences these choices may have.

One negative factor for sustainable brands is the fact that consumers often delay purchasing an item from the brand when it first becomes available, to instead obtain it at a later date, for cheaper during an end-of-season clearance (Cachon & Swinney, 2011). Due to the fact that sustainable and ethical brands usually have higher product costs, this strategic behaviour may be more common within their audience. However, Cachon and Swinney (2011) also state that by offering consumers a more valuable product, they may be less willing to risk losing out on said product while waiting for a sale or looking for a cheaper alternative, mitigating this strategic behaviour. Sustainable fashion brands could take advantage of the scarcity principle, whilst also offering more valuable pieces, to avoid this strategic behaviour from consumers. This could potentially decrease the volume of post-purchase emotional responses and product returns because the customer receives a better quality product that they value more, while also benefitting the environment through the sale of sustainable and ethical products, which can also have a positive effect on consumers' mental health. Recent research by Zaki (2020) shows that prosocial behaviour can increase happiness and decrease stress, while also increasing beneficial communal results such as interpersonal bonding and collective resilience.

Utilitarian Perspectives Regarding Consumers' Mental Health

Utilitarianism would critique fast fashion for prioritising short-term pleasure at the expense of long-term harm (Mulgan, 2019). From a totalitarian perspective, Herbert Marcuse introduces the fundamental idea of the "one-dimensional man" as an individual who is subjected to a new kind of totalitarianism in the form of consumerism and technological capitalism. The one-dimensional man critiques fast fashion, due to the part it plays in fuelling this form of new social control. Marcuse (1964, p.16) argues that consumerism has created a new type of social pattern where we have exchanged our need for freedom and progression within ourselves and the human race, for material comfort, "capitalism is "enslaving us softly", not by mean of violent oppression but rather through comfortable temptation" (California State University San Marcos, 2021).

Research by Microsoft reveals that the nine-second attention span of a goldfish now “exceeds that of a human” (Auletta, 2018, p. 152). Fast fashion takes advantage of this shortened attention span and prioritises short-term pleasure by providing consumers with inexpensive, trendy clothing that aligns with current fashion trends. The idea behind retail therapy is that actual issues may be solved via shopping. Upon closer examination, however, it is evident that retail therapy is the antithesis of therapy; it is only an avoidance tactic and a diversion from problem-solving and confrontation, again prioritising short-term pleasure, in the long run, this can lead to consumer stress and anxiety (Pratt, 2004, p.1), especially if the scarcity principle is causing people to spend money they do not have, inevitably negatively affecting individuals mental health. A study conducted by Sasikarn (2012, p. 2), examining how female consumers with a keen interest in fashion respond to impulse purchases, scarcity and product returns within fast fashion, revealed a positive correlation between views of fast fashion brands and perceptions of scarcity, and impulse buying behaviour within fast fashion. A notable connection between impulse buying and negative post-purchase emotional responses was revealed. The study also found that behaviour regarding increasing product returns in the fast fashion industry was conclusively influenced by some negative emotional responses post-purchase (Sasikarn, 2012, p.2). This research outlines why these practices could be unsustainable for fast fashion brands in the future. Over time, these negative emotions evoked and an increasing amount of product return behaviour due to these negative emotions may override the “comfortable temptation” and impulse buying habits fuelled by these scarcity tactics, meaning the brands may begin to lose more than they gain from being unsustainable. Sasikarn (2012, p.2) also uncovered that a heightened awareness of fashion had a positive influence on the attitudes of consumers toward fashion retailers. The Green Fashion Report 2023 reveals that “four in five UK consumers (81%) will boycott apparel brands that do not prioritise sustainable fashion within the next two years”, posing a threat to brands that do not sustain their environmental and social obligations (Climbing Trees, 2023).

Human Rights Violations

As well as the effects fast fashion has on consumers’ mental health and the environment, it is also a violation of the human rights of its workers. The United States General Accounting Office states that sweatshop factories violate “more than one federal or state labour law governing minimum wage and overtime, child labour, industrial homework, occupational safety and health,

workers compensation, or industry regulation” (Giljum et al., 2014). Factory workers are unable to openly express their disapproval of the unfair treatment they endure, for fear of endangering their jobs and lives. In certain regions, trade union activity is largely supported by virtually no government policies. Furthermore, insufficient environmental protection policies are frequently found and authorities rarely enforce such policies, even in those cases where they exist.

One event that brought attention to the plight of garment workers in these nations was the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh, in 2013, which claimed over 1,100 lives and injured 2,500 people, mainly garment factory workers (International Labour Organisation, 2023). The event was caused by the building’s structural defects, due to illegal expansions of added floors and subpar construction. Employees of the building had previously made numerous complaints about cracks within the building, but the need to meet production deadlines caused these complaints to be disregarded by management (International Federation For Human Rights, 2013). The event exposed unsafe working conditions throughout the textile industry in Bangladesh, sparking global outrage and prompting initiatives that aim to address labour conditions and emphasise the need for corporate accountability and ethical standards in the fashion supply chain (Institute for Human Rights and Business, 2023). Since this incident, an increasing number of brands have taken the initiative to protect the welfare of the workers involved in creating their products, ensuring safe and ethical working conditions. In addition to ensuring all factory workers are paid fairly and have favourable working conditions, brands like Boden, Sézane, PACT, People Tree, and many others are making efforts to help reduce the industry's carbon footprint, reduce waste, and use sustainable materials (Okafor, 2023).

Changing Consumer Perspectives

Due to the fact that the negative effects fast fashion has on the mental health of consumers, as well as on the environment, and the lives of fast fashion workers, is becoming increasingly clear, consumer perspectives towards buying more sustainably are changing. According to Nielsen Consumer LLC (2018), three-quarters of consumers within Generation Z express that sustainability means more to them than brand names, while within the Millennial generation, 75 per cent are so concerned about the environment that they are willing to shift their purchasing patterns to favour environmentally friendly products. A study from Unilever (2023) reveals that content on social media has the capability to promote more sustainable behaviour, revealing that 78 per cent of

customers admit social media influencers had the most impact on their sustainable purchasing decisions and 83 per cent of respondents believe that Instagram and TikTok are excellent resources for sustainable living guidance. This leads us to wonder why more brands and their ambassadors aren't making changes to align their practices and values with these new consumer perspectives.

Greenwashing

Unilever (2023) reveals one reason why brands may be hesitant to become more sustainable; the study found that 76 per cent of content creators want to talk about climate issues but 38 per cent are afraid of greenwashing. There may be a good reason for this fear. A report by Changing Markets Foundation (2023) revealed that 59 per cent of sustainability claims made by UK and European fashion brands are misleading and potentially greenwashing. One example of misleading claims is the situation that took place during Earth Day 2020 when H&M announced actress Maisie Williams as the brand's new Sustainability Ambassador, releasing "Looop Island", within the console game *Animal Crossing*, to advertise its new in-store recycling machine (H&M, 2021). In recent years, H&M has made progress towards circularity but this essentially comes across as greenwashing due to the fact that encouraging consumers to recycle or buy recycled garments will not compensate for the three billion garments produced annually by H&M. The price of some of H&M's clothing also leads us to question whether fair living wages have been paid to the factory workers making these items. In the case of H&M, the brand must implement more foundational alterations to its business model and accept responsibility for its unethical and unsustainable practices, to avoid greenwashing claims in the future.

In the case of brands trying to communicate their sustainable and ethical practices to their audience, there are a few things that can be done to avoid greenwashing. Brands, content creators and influencers have the power to make change, so must ensure they are fully informed about their operations before preaching sustainability to their audience. The first step to avoid accusations of greenwashing would be for brands to be as knowledgeable as possible about their supply chain, operations, partners, and any laws or regulations that may have an impact on their business. Another possible way brands can avoid greenwashing is through the language they use. Phrases like "natural," "green," and "environmentally friendly" do not convey how a product or service will affect the environment, they are buzzwords consumers have heard for years and may have

possibly become desensitised to, due to their overuse. As a result, brands need to be sure their claims are clear. The European Commission recently established uniform standards to eliminate ambiguous, deceptive, or unsupported environmental claims, making it easier for brands and creators to understand and avoid claims of greenwashing (Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union, 2023).

Transparency plays a crucial role in building trust, particularly in a landscape of greenwashing and unsupported assertions, collaborations with reputable stakeholders such as farmers, or engaging with accreditation bodies such as PETA or Oeko Tex, provide transparency for sustainable supply chain practices. These accreditation bodies work as sustainability passports and are ways that consumers can ensure the sustainability claims made by brands are supported (Oeko Tex, 2023).

Although brands and designers face obstacles to becoming sustainable, an increasing number of designers and brands are implementing creative approaches that involve material selection, production methods, and customer involvement to promote sustainable consumption and lessen the negative effects of fast fashion. Packaging that can be recycled or composted along with refill alternatives serve as prevalent entry strategies for brands aiming to be more sustainable (Nielsen Consumer LLC, 2023), but there are many things brands can do to make changes to their practices.

Ecolaf

One brand that has made efforts to combat problems within material selection is Ecoalf. Ecolaf specialises in producing eco-friendly clothing and has gained attention for its innovative use of materials and manufacturing techniques. The brand's focus on employing recycled plastic and algae in the shoe-making process is in line with larger initiatives within the fashion sector to address environmental issues (Ecoalf, 2023). Due to the fact that consumers who share concerns about the environment are more likely to trust and reward brands that are transparent about their sourcing, production methods, and materials (He, 2023), Ecoalf adds to their credibility by being open and honest about these things. However, achieving scalability is a challenge for brands using innovative materials. It is imperative to evaluate the scalability of Ecoalf's strategy for using algae and recycled plastic without sacrificing the benefits to the environment and product quality. These

innovative materials may not be largely available to obtain or create, meaning the scalability of the product is limited.

One factor to consider when using innovative materials is the durability and quality of the products, this should not be compromised by the use of sustainable materials. Customers frequently want durable, well-made products, especially if they are willing to pay more for a sustainable product. The success of the brand depends on assessing how long-lasting shoes produced from algae and recycled plastic are, or how accepting consumers are that the products may not be as durable as products made from common materials. However, if these pieces are not as durable and long-lasting, then this may contradict the fact that consumers may expect sustainable products to be longer-lasting than fast fashion pieces.

Ecoalf's emphasis on employing algae and recycled plastic in shoe production represents a positive stride in an appropriate direction for the fashion industry. Critical examination should take into account not just the environmental impact but also durability, scalability, social responsibility, consumer education, and regulatory compliance, just like with any fashion brand. Ecoalf has the potential to establish itself as a frontrunner in the sustainable fashion industry if these factors are properly addressed.

Amschela

One brand that has faced questions of durability regarding their products, is the UK-based, affordable luxury handbag brand *Amschela*. In 2021, Amschela moved over from using leather in their designs to being a completely vegan and PETA-approved handbag brand. The brand now creates handbags from materials including recycled bicycle inner tubes, recycled wheat straw and natural bamboo (Amschela, 2023). Vegan leather is usually more lightweight, making it more beneficial for fashion, however, this does also make it less durable (Shep, 2023). Questions have risen regarding the durability of these innovative materials compared to traditional materials such as leather. In order to avoid this problem, there are a few things that can be done, protective coatings can be bonded onto the vegan leather to increase durability, however, the materials used to create these coatings vary and can affect whether the piece remains eco-friendly and sustainable (Meyer et al., 2021). Vegan leather has not yet been perfected, if made from PVC-based synthetics, the manufacturing process and disposal of the product can "let our hazardous toxins, which can cause developmental and reproductive issues and even cause cancer" (Shep,

2023). More research into these innovative materials is needed to find the perfect mix of sustainability and durability, the increased use of these innovative materials by fashion brands will allow more experimentation and development.

Amschela is also an example of a brand that has partnered with accreditation bodies to ensure their customers that the sustainability claims they make are completely supported. Amschela is a Peta Approved brand and “all Amschela products are threaded with Scanfil organic cotton which is 100 per cent biodegradable and satisfies the GOTS (Global Organic Textile) standards” (Amschela, 2023). Amschela also collaborates with GreenSpark to embed environmental action into their sales by planting one tree and removing one piece of plastic from the ocean, for every sale they make (Amschela, 2023). Greenspark allows customers to track the brand's impact online as proof of this. In collaboration with a range of brands within their community, Greenspark has managed to plant 1.7 million trees and remove 3.2 million plastic bottles from the oceans so far (Greenspark, 2023). Since aligning their practices with changing consumer perspectives Amschela have grown in popularity, reaching American shores, stocking their handbags in Urbnique, in the Beverly Centre, Los Angeles, and have been called “a brand to watch” by British Vogue (London Fashion Week, 2023).

Human Touch Clothing

One brand that has created a unique way to communicate the importance of sustainable and ethical practices to consumers is Human Touch Clothing. The brand state that “to support the development towards a socially sustainable fashion industry and to expand its positive features, we suggest a creative approach to enhancing informed consumerism” (Human Touch Clothing, 2023). The brand uses the creative approach and technique of *paint-sewing*, which involves sewing garments with paint on their hands in order to “move the human component into focus by directly visualising the human touch of sewing technology in its immediate medium: the garment of quotidian use” (Human Touch Clothing, 2023). Instead of using advertisements to remind consumers of their values, Human Touch Clothing has created a way to keep reminding consumers of the importance of socially sustainable fashion by embedding this into the garments they create.

A recent study by Bridge (2022) found that it takes up to five views to read an advertisement, up to ten views for an advertisement to become memorable, and up to twenty views to become a

conversion. The same research reveals that the capacity of short-term memory is limited to approximately four elements at any given time (Bridge, 2022), so, this form of micro-learning used by Human Touch Clothing also drives engagement. Rather than providing their audience with a range of facts and data about the importance of sustainability within fashion, they instead communicate their message directly through visuals and clothing design. Their customers are reminded about the human labour essential to clothing manufacturing each time they wear the garment, it is also an innovative way to encourage word-of-mouth marketing which can have a significant impact on consumer behaviour. According to a Nielsen study, ninety-two per cent of consumers place greater trust in recommendations from friends and family than in any other form of marketing (Nielsen Consumer LLC, 2012). A study by McKinsey found that word-of-mouth constitutes the predominant factor influencing twenty to fifty per cent of all purchase decisions and this number has surely risen since this research, due to the rise in popularity of social media influencers (Bughin et al, 2010).

The design decisions made by Human Touch Clothing do not only inform and educate consumers about the human skill that goes into creating garments, reminding them of the importance of ethical working conditions for garment workers, but the design also encourages consumers to discuss and share the brand. This benefits both factory workers and the business owners, while also being sustainable and benefitting the planet.

Tentree

Another brand doing things differently to make consumers consider their impact on the environment when buying fashion pieces is Tentree. Tentree (2023) plants ten trees each time they make a sale, they have a goal of planting one billion trees by 2030 and enable customers to track the growth of these trees within their website. Tentree is completely transparent about its practices, the brand's clothing is made in ethical factories from ethically sourced and sustainable materials such as coconut, cork and recycled polyester (Tentree, 2023). As well as producing clothing, Tentree also offer monthly subscription packages that allow customers to offset their footprint by planting trees each month, so consumers can do something good for the environment without feeling pressured to buy a garment. Consumers are then able to post about this "good deed" on social media, again, encouraging word-of-mouth marketing for the brand. Advancements in technology mean brands can now communicate this importance to their customers much more

easily, and use tactics that provide consumers with more than just the garments they purchase, meaning customers keep the brand in their minds even after making a sale (Deskera Content Team, 2023).

Conclusion

Different consumer groups at different levels of sustainable consumption may not respond well to one general message or idea, therefore, companies need to modify their marketing communications and brand voice, to cater to the distinct buying motives of different groups if they aim to establish a genuine connection with consumers across the green gap. Beyond the label, brands also need to communicate with their audience, social media, retailer websites, and brand websites are important channels by which brands communicate with customers about their sustainable journeys (Nielsen Consumer LLC, 2023). Cost is still a major obstacle, but legislative change is anticipated to level the playing field and reward businesses that can clearly articulate their value offers (Nielsen Consumer LLC, 2023). If brands do not have the funds to do things such as adopting more innovative and sustainable materials, there are opportunities available to attempt to counteract their carbon footprint or educate their audience through platforms like Greenspark. In an environment where greenwashing is common, transparency, achieved through partnerships and accrediting bodies, is essential. As sustainable packaging becomes the standard, it is crucial to define sustainability and inform consumers about recycling procedures, even though recycled and compostable packaging act as a gateway to sustainability, behavioural change can also be sparked by cooperative initiatives like sustainable logistics and in-store recycling stations.

While there are isolated instances of individual brands attempting to stem the tide of consumerism and indications that consumer behaviours are shifting, more needs to be done, much more quickly. Thus, everyone has a responsibility to perform their share, including the businesses, consumers, and the industry, these changes would then benefit each of these groups simultaneously, due to the fact that fast fashion is past fashion and sustainability is the future.

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