

Fashion's psychological and ethical effects on consumers from poor environmental practices
Victoria R. Cobb
Sacred Heart University

Introduction:

There is no doubt that the fashion industry in some form or another has affected our lives. However, the extent to which the industry has affected our lives is much more than what the general public would assume. This research paper analyzes the psychological effects and the ethical implications the fashion industry has imposed on us as consumers through their poor environmental results.

Environmentally, the fashion industry has produced an unforgivable amount of damage. Due to the nature of the excess production, manufacturing processes, disposal, and lack of appropriate recycling systems the industry is considered as the second biggest contributor out of all other industrial polluters (Presley, 2018). When analyzing all aspects of the fashion industry the easiest solution to implement greener practices is to look at production. However, it's what happens after the garment leaves the store or the warehouse that we really need to worry about. According to the life cycle assessment (LCA) the consumer use portion of a garment's life is the most forgotten segment of life that creates the highest impact environmentally (Kozlowski, 2012).

Along with the sustainability aspect of trying to reverse the environmental effects caused by the fashion industry comes ethics. In this particular business ethics do not just come down to the employees but animals and other stakeholders as well (Dimitrova, 2020). Worker exploitation is one of the largest and most known ethical issues that the fashion industry faces today. The rise of personal media platforms has granted society the ability to advocate for issues with importance to them. An issue relating to the fashion industry in particular is for the betterment of working conditions and methods of conducting business (Radclyffe, 2018).

According to recent surveys, society is invested in the ethical effects their clothing has in a way that has never been seen before (Radclyffe, 2018).

The psychological effects and ways consumers behave towards fashion brands prioritizing sustainability and moving in a greener direction is vital to a company and brand's success. As consumers move towards a more ethical mindset companies are utilizing their name recognition to keep consumers interested as they make the move towards greener practices and sustainability (Heekang, 2018). Keeping the general aspects of the brand the same such as prices and styles so the consumer remains on board and does not question the transition is an integral part of the brand's new extension (Heekang, 2018). However, the problem with consumers wanting to maintain the essence of the brand during this transition is that the essence of some brands is the antithesis of what made the consumer fall in love with some of the brands in the first place. For example, fast fashion brands will have the hardest transition to sustainable practices because they are founded on low prices as a result of outsourcing to lower-cost workers which have poor environmental consequences.

The fashion industry touches almost every sector of a consumer's life, their mind, morals, and home. While the industry is necessary alterations need to be made. Being the second biggest contributor out of all other industrial polluters is unnecessary considering there are businesses who have found success within sustainability (Presley, 2018). With the grip apparel has on societies psychological wellbeing sustainability can play a role in increasing consumer purchasing.

What is Fast Fashion?:

Fast Fashion generally speaking is the production of trendy clothing hitting the store floors at double, often faster, the rate of traditional collections at astronomically low prices

(Presley, 2018). The fashion industry unintentionally developed this sector of the business in response to consumer demands. A preference for new, different, or fresh looks applied force to companies giving them no choice but to identify trends promptly so they can respond quickly and please their customers which in turn ramped up production time creating faster life cycles (Presley, 2018). Life cycles have increased to periods of less than a month's time which is due to companies outsourcing globally and the rise of technology allowing for a condensed amount of time between the time it gets off the conveyor belt and hits the consumer's hands (Hyun-Mee Joung, 2014). Fast fashion has taken the world by storm and because of this has been recognized by other sectors of the fashion industry like department stores. Department stores, for example, JCPenney have adopted some fast fashion brands to appeal to consumers new wants and needs (Hyun-Mee Joung, 2014). Fast fashion although contributes to a huge portion of the industries effects is not solely to blame. Mid-priced fashion as well as luxury fashion contribute more so towards animal ethical and sustainability issues.

Ethical Issues in the Fashion Industry:

Outsourcing

Within the fashion industry, many ethical dilemmas are wrestled with every day from how the workers are cared for to effects on animals and the environmental impacts the industry creates from performing daily tasks. While one reason for the rise in ethical problems has been greed within business, a culprit not many identify is the media. The growth of media platforms in any capacity whether it be news or personal social platforms has allowed for an almost instantaneous report on anything and everything but especially fashion. Trends are now being reported within seconds whereas years ago it took weeks. This has caused a high demand resulting in companies outsourcing to other countries that can make their garments faster and

cheaper. Which ultimately gives the companies less time to produce so they cut back on safe working conditions and sustainable practices (Radclyffe, 2018). A sector of the industry that epitomizes this problem is fast fashion. By using a quick response model suppliers are forced to cut corners causing disasters like floors collapsing due to an overload of materials landing on and killing workers or even worse a multi-story garment factory collapsing and taking the lives of hundreds because of safety violations in Bangladesh (Taplin, 2014).

A major part of the fashion industry is manufacturing after all you cannot have a whole industry dedicated to apparel without the garments. Due to the nature of the business being heavily product driven and now partly because of the media, driven by the consumer's need for immediate satisfaction, manufacturing is extremely labor intensive. This means it can get expensive if not outsourced which is why many companies have chosen to do so, therefore neglecting working conditions and workers rights (Taplin, 2014). While the companies are partially to blame, so are the lack of labor laws and regulations. Without even basic regulations workers are taken advantage of and Bangladesh is a quality example of these effects. In 2001 the National Labor Committee reported that eighty five percent of apparel workers were women ranging from ages 16 to 25 and worked 12 to 14 hour days (Taplin, 2014). Additionally, the seamstresses had a labor wage of 13-18 cents per hour which can vary however, still represents that these problems are now a systemic issue because they have been ingrained in the fiber of the country (Taplin, 2014). While the workers themselves are not to blame for the poor working conditions and treatment many especially women believe the benefits outweigh the cons. For women in countries like Indonesia or Bangladesh working provided status and respect more so than staying home, for them, this is a multi-faceted issue because while their treatment in the factories may be poor their quality of life outside of work dramatically improved (Taplin, 2014).

There is a clear right and wrong within the ethical area of apparel production however, because of the lack of instituted laws and the worker's ties to their jobs for social benefits there must be an external force that creates change. If left up to the countries themselves and the workers experiencing these hardships change would remain an unanswered question.

Animal Cruelty

When diving into the ethical implications of fashion animals must be considered to the same level that workers are. Animals tend to be affected more so by the luxury goods sector of the industry as opposed to the fast fashion sector because the materials that come from animals are much more costly. Although, it is important to note that fast fashion retailers making strides in this area have included policies within their companies that address animal welfare as it is a rising concern for consumers (Stringer, 2020). Zara's parent company Inditex has established animal policies for all of their companies claiming that their goods with an animal origin will come from a farm that first uses the animal for meat, slaughtering animals solely for their characteristics such as skin is prohibited, and that all animals used for goods will be treated ethically and humanely (Mohamed, 2020).

Animal characteristics used in fashion are associated with a higher quality product to the consumer. Therefore, some consumers especially those purchasing luxury fashion goods look at incorporating sustainability as a compromise of quality (Mohamed, 2020). There is an interesting battle that consumers seem to face when buying luxury fashion, they want to do the right thing ethically and sustainably however, it has been so deeply ingrained in them that animal characteristics such as leather and furs equal higher quality and they do not want to compromise when they are paying a higher price tag. Consumers negative perceptions of materials overrule animal welfare in the luxury fashion sector of the industry (Mohamed, 2020). Psychologically it

appears when purchasing luxury consumers are not willing to compromise even if there is an ethical issue at hand. Spending large sums on luxury products can be due to the consumer's tastes but is also a signal of status and represents that when it comes to status or ethics consumers tend to bend on their values (Mohamed, 2020). This is why many advocate for luxury companies to continue to use animal materials just in a way that is more digestible to them so they do not have to give up the comfort of their status symbols.

Psychological Effects on Consumers:

Consumers are easily affected by the decisions companies and brands make which can be seen by their purchasing patterns. One of the largest issues affecting consumers buying habits tends to be from environmental issues especially in light of the media's growth. Social media has given the average person a platform to now be seen and heard (Radclyffe, 2018). The luxury industry is divided in that a large group of people feel not using animal products is a cut to quality and subconsciously their status (Mohamed, 2020) however, as veganism and vegetarianism expand to lifestyles and not just diets having an eco-label posted on luxury goods is shown to prove consumers are more likely to buy products that will spoil them or be self-indulgent (Grazzini, 2021). Furthering the up and coming idea that green is reason enough to buy. The largest ethical issue that gets in the way of consumers buying luxury fashion goods is mainly their use of animal products such as fur, wool, down, and exotic leathers (Stringer, 2020). Having a firm grasp on how animals and their wellbeing is affected in reference to purchasing patterns and behaviors is critical in wake of vegetarian and vegan lifestyles (Stringer, 2020). This lifestyle is not just one in the food industry anymore, oftentimes those who adhere to a vegan, vegetarian, or a more specialized diet will have it overlapped into other parts of their life. For example, in a vegan lifestyle consumption of animal products in any capacity is avoided

(Stringer, 2020). Stella McCartney who is largely known for vegan apparel products helps fill this hole in the luxury marketplace.

However, it has been increasingly questioned if fast fashion and sustainability can have any connection at all (Grazzini, 2021). This idea has gained traction amongst critics and consumers of fast fashion due to their unspoken motto of the more for less idea however, consumers have utilized their new voice in the media to express change so if fast fashion brands want to survive they need to find a way that proves to the consumer less is more (Rachel Bick, 2018). Fast fashion companies such as Zara and H&M have seemingly already adapted to the new demands of their consumers. Zara's goal was to have one hundred percent eco-friendly stores in 2020 which they accomplished by eliminating plastic bags, collecting used clothing to be recycled, and using what is known as forest friendly fibers (Jha, 2021). However, while Zara appears as if they are on the right track its business model alone is enough to see it will take a significant amount of time for them to make any headway in long term sustainability. With new clothing collections dropping as quickly as every two weeks and approximately twenty thousand designs being produced and sold per year their promotion of excess consumption inevitably leads to excess waste making it nearly impossible for the company to become fully sustainable unless their business model does a complete one-eighty (Jha, 2021).

On the opposite side of the spectrum is H&M who launched the "Conscious Action" program which provides an increase in job opportunities in underdeveloped countries, recyclable resources are prioritized in manufacturing, and allows for more information to be made easily available to customers so they can keep that information in the back of their minds when purchasing in the future (Bin Shen, 2014). The company has moved towards a more environmentally conscious method of prepping material, greener distribution, manufacturing,

and retailing as well as marketing towards a more ethical consumer base (Bin Shen, 2014). Their improved sustainable supply chain has aided in strengthening the brand's image and in return has shown businesses that being sustainable is not only morally good but helps gain them a competitive advantage in the industry (Bin Shen, 2014).

Role of Consumers Habits:

We are always thinking about how companies can improve and need to change their selfish ways by placing all of the blame on them. While they are the ones feeding us with overproduction, we as a society are also a part of the problem. Constantly consuming and demanding for someone else to change. Consumers previous environmental habits play a large role in how their garments are treated. The fashion world of today is so fast paced that it emphasises whats new and next moving on so quickly that it promotes that all items are expendable (Grazzini, 2021). Creating a cycle for more. On that same note due to clothing being produced at such a faster rate the garment takes a hit in quality and price. Oftentimes when consumers are done with their use of the clothing if the item falls into the category of cheap and poor quality it is thrown away in the garbage as opposed to being donated (Hyun-Mee, 2014). This directly correlates with consumers view on recycling. If the habit of recycling items like glass, plastic, and paper goods is already ingrained in them they are more willing and likely to recycle in other areas of their life as well (Hyun-Mee, 2014).

Environmental attitudes are extremely important to how consumers treat their clothing. If they have a good environmental attitude they are more likely to partake in the recycling, donation, resale, or reuse of any kind (Hyun-Mee, 2014). Fashion leaders, the first group of people to embrace a new trend or style, were suspected to have some level of affect on how consumers respond to their clothing when its at the end of its lifecycle however, it was found that

the way fashion leaders dispose of their clothing has no direct impact on how everyday people do (Hyun-Mee, 2014). It ultimately comes down to what habits they adopted first in regards to the reduce, reuse, and recycle movement. Additionally, the consumers view on the pieces monetary value and sentimental value have massive affects on how and why consumers think about and discard of their clothing in the ways that they do. Of course, not all clothing is discarded approximately twenty one percent of annual fashion purchases stay with the buyer (Hyun-Mee, 2014). The main reasons consumers give for keeping unwanted clothing is due to how expensive it was, the hope that someday it will be their correct size, sentimental value, and its aesthetics (Hyun-Mee, 2014). However, it seems to mainly come down to money because consumers who have expensive clothing items that they may not love or wear anymore tend to keep these pieces out of guilt (Hyun-Mee, 2014). A similar thought process can be applied to inexpensive clothing items and their disposal in which many tend to throw them out or not bother to find a useful solution for them due to the item's low price. Inexpensive equals trash.

Sustainability Issues:

It is no secret that the fashion industry has moved towards a place of overindulgence which in turn has caused over production. Due to this shift the industry has climbed its way up to the leader board as the second highest environmentally damaging business (Moorhouse, 2018). This reputation has shed a negative light on many fast fashion companies however, it has presented an opportunity as well to revamp their brand and win back the love of consumers. This all starts from one of the beginning stages, the design stage. According to the LCA, life cycle assessment, the consumer use portion of a garment's life is the most forgotten segment of life that creates the highest impact environmentally (Kozlowski, 2012). However, it is important to note that many of the effects resulting from the consumer use phase can be altered or ended in the

design phase. While there are negative environmental impacts and sustainability issues at almost all stages one of the main ones is how the textile or fiber itself affects the environment. Effects include large sums of textile waste from the production phase, utilizing toxic dyes, water pollution, obvious overproduction, and depletion of natural resources (Stringer, 2020). A solution to all of these issues would be the switch to a more environmentally friendly fabric. Many of the fabrics causing the pollution are microplastics that originate from synthetic or manufactured fabrics during the washing and drying process (Stringer, 2020). Miniscule plastic particles that are undetectable to the naked eye happen to be transported through water treatment plants, ultimately finding their way into oceans, rivers, lakes, ponds, etc. (Stringer, 2020). Artificial fabrics not naturally occurring such as polyester, fleece, rayon, and acrylic have been deemed the largest type of polluters (Stringer, 2020).

Seeking an alternative many designers have incorporated technology into their design process or just a deeper message to their consumers. Vivienne Westwood for example has paired down her collections to represent to her customers that they should be buying with the quality over quantity mindset, therefore, counteracting the problem of overindulgence. Vivienne Westwood has created a cult following by developing an emotional connection with her consumers by detailing what goes into making their Vivienne Westwood garment (Moorhouse, 2018). Stella McCartney, another luxury designer, expresses in their mission statement that they design their products in a way that is supposed to fit our current world and benefit it not only today but in the future as well (Moorhouse, 2018). Categorized as a vegetarian, vegan, anti-fur, and anti-cruelty brand due to its unsustainability the brand prides itself on its established ethos, guiding beliefs (Moorhouse, 2018). There is no world where sustainability and ethics are not connected and Stella McCartney as a brand has identified that and taken it upon itself to adhere

to sustainable policies during the vacancy of government established policies and legislation on sustainability issues facing the world today (Moorhouse, 2018). Brands like Stella McCartney and Vivienne Westwood who hold themselves to a high standard regarding environmental impact not only increase their corporate social responsibility but also are paving the way and making it easier for other companies to follow in their footsteps by being pioneers in the industry.

The epitome of a sustainable brand is Patagonia. They are known for being one of the most sustainable brands across the industry and gear their products towards anyone and everyone but their true target market is altruistic people with a love for the natural world (Moorhouse, 2018). The main point in developing trust between the company and the consumer is transparency. There is a multitude of ways to progress this but a way that has proven successful for Patagonia is involving reliable third parties to verify their claims and actions. For example, a majority of their goods are fair trade and this is verified by actively involving an organization like Fair-Trade USA, a third party, to instill trust within their consumers (Moorhouse, 2018). Similarly, to Vivienne Westwood promoting buying quality over quantity Patagonia created a campaign called “Don’t buy this jacket” that was essentially telling consumers not to buy their products on Black Friday, one of the largest shopping days of the year, just because the garment happens to be on sale (Moorhouse, 2018). While it had the opposite effect Patagonia was expecting raking in record sales, it was largely due to the message behind the product that customers connected with (Moorhouse, 2018).

Conclusion:

The fashion industry has affected society’s life in massive ways often times it is through the poor environmental effects that design, manufacturing, as well as the consumer use and

disposal stages have. Ethical implications of fashion are with consumers with every item they purchase whether they realize it or not. However, the ethical problems differ within each sector of the industry for example, in the luxury fashion sector animals tend to feel the impact more so due to the use of their furs, feathers, exotic skins, and many more characteristics. While in the fast fashion sector humans tend to feel the impact. These impacts range from being overworked and underpaid or even as drastic as death from poor working conditions like the ones mentioned in Bangladesh.

The psychological effects that consumers feel from the fashion industry are immense. It started with the rise in media putting life on fast forward. With trends being reported quicker timelines sped up which ultimately led to an overindulgence of constant purchasing and continuous collections hitting the storeroom floors every few weeks. Due to this constant consumption and overproduction, indirectly poor disposal habits were encouraged. This can be seen specifically in the fast fashion sector because garments tend to be of lower quality to minimize price and maximize profit. Consumers have created a category in their minds that this type of fashion is disposable and that it has no real value. Hence when the consumer feels their time with a particular garment has come to the end they throw it out in the garbage where it will eventually end up in a landfill. It has been shown that a large reason for this is the consumer's previous habits regarding sustainability. For example, if consumers are in a routine of recycling glass, plastic, paper, etc. they will be more likely to carry that over into other parts of their lives.

Another factor that is on the rise and being carried over into other areas of consumer's lives is veganism and vegetarianism. Both are commonly known diets where veganism does not consume any animal products and vegetarianism only avoids meat. This is commonly done for ethical reasons and until the past decade, there has been a hole in all areas of the market for these

types of consumers. Stella McCartney is one of the most notable brands that has catered to this group's needs. Creating designs that cater toward what we need today but will also benefit our future world.

Fashion while exciting can also have a dark side and with brands like H&M, Stella McCartney, and Patagonia being ethically and sustainably responsible consumers one by one are being educated about effects. It is also a guide for other luxury or fast fashion brands to follow due to the previous brand's success.

Recommendations:

For future research we need to see how current sustainability plans and revised ethical plans pan out and move from there. This will allow for a reevaluation of consumers wants and needs. There is no one right answer for each brand or sector of the industry so trial and error is inevitable.

References

- Bin Shen. (2014). Sustainable Fashion Supply Chain: Lessons from H&M. *Sustainability*, 6(9), 6236–6249. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su6096236>
- Dimitrova, S. (2020). Ethical Fashion. *Izesstia, Journal of the Union of Scientists - Varna, Economic Sciences Series*, 9(3), 27–39.
- Grazzini, L., Acuti, D., & Aiello, G. (2021). Solving the puzzle of sustainable fashion consumption: The role of consumers' implicit attitudes and perceived warmth. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 287. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.125579>
- Heekang Moon, & Hyun-Hwa Lee. (2018). Environmentally Friendly Apparel Products: The Effects of Value Perceptions. *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal*, 46(8), 1373–1384. <https://doi-org.sacredheart.idm.oclc.org/10.2224/sbp.6392>
- Hyun-Mee Joung. (2014). Fast-fashion consumers' post-purchase behaviours. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 42(8), 688-697.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-03-2013-0055>
- Jha, S. K., & Veeramani, S. (2021). Sorting Responsible Business Practices in Fast Fashion: A Case Study of Zara. *Journal of Management & Public Policy*, 12(2), 54–58.
<https://doi.org/10.47914/jmpp.2021.v12i2.004>
- Kozlowski Anika, Bardecki Michal, & Searcy Cory. (2012). Environmental Impacts in the Fashion Industry: A Life-cycle and Stakeholder Framework. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, 45, 17–36.
- Mohamed, A. A., Dekhili, S., & Codini, A. P. (2020). Consumer preferences towards animal-friendly fashion products: An application to the italian market. *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 37(6), 661-673. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JCM-10-2018-2908>

- Moorhouse, D., & Moorhouse, D. (2018). Designing a sustainable brand strategy for the fashion industry. *Clothing Cultures*, 5(1), 7.
- Presley, A., & Meade, L. M. (2018). The Business Case for Sustainability: An Application to Slow Fashion Supply Chains. *IEEE Engineering Management Review, Engineering Management Review, IEEE, IEEE Eng. Manag. Rev*, 46(2), 138–150.
<https://doi.org/10.1109/EMR.2018.2835458>
- Rachel Bick, Erika Halsey, & Christine C. Ekenga. (2018). The global environmental injustice of fast fashion. *Environmental Health*, 17(1), 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7>
- Radclyffe-Thomas, N. (2018). Designing a sustainable future through fashion education. *Clothing Cultures*, 5(1), 183.
- Stringer, T., Mortimer, G., & Payne, A. R. (2020). Do ethical concerns and personal values influence the purchase intention of fast-fashion clothing? *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 24(1), 99-120. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-01-2019-0011>
- Taplin, I. M. (2014). Who is to blame?: A re-examination of fast fashion after the 2013 factory disaster in bangladesh. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 10(1), 72-83.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/cpoib-09-2013-0035>