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Too Fast of Fashion: A Literature Review on the Destructive Social and Environmental Impacts of Fast Fashion

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Too Fast of Fashion: A Literature Review on the Destructive Social and Environmental Impacts of Fast Fashion

Grace Webster

INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion is a segment of the fashion industry where time and production are limited, which in turn allows for harmful conditions and behaviors to be heightened. The movement towards enabling fast fashion has grown rapidly in an alarmingly short period, especially in the last decade or so. It can be described as an industry that “combines quick response production capabilities with enhanced product design capabilities to both design ‘hot’ products that capture the latest consumer trends and exploit minimal production leadtimes to match supply with uncertain demand.” (Cachon and Swinney 2011:1). These factors are what have allowed this industry to gain popularity so quickly but are also the factors that contribute to the detrimental outcomes it produces. This review pertains to sociology as fast fashion is an industry that affects society in various ways on individual, environmental, and societal levels. This industry disrupts the environment, the economy, business models, the well-being of people, and the relationships and behaviors society has with current social trends. It disturbs the environment, the economy, and business models because it encourages unattainable high-speed production to produce popular and trendy clothing which results in unsustainable and wasteful practices. The more successful these participating companies become, the more likely other companies will be to follow suit, which then normalizes extremely high rates of clothing production and disposal at the expense of the environment and the workers. As well as normalizing unnatural and problematic behavior and attitudes between the consumer and their spending habits. This leads to why this review is being made. This review intends to highlight the damaging and long-lasting

effects that the fast fashion industry encourages and how we can relate this to sociological concepts and theories. Fast fashion is a plague-like manufacturing and shopping trend that has become extremely prevalent in today's society, especially in the lives of adolescents and college students, therefore creating intense social and environmental impacts.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FASHION

Fashion is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as “a popular trend, especially in styles of dress and ornament or manners of behavior.” (Oxford Languages 2022). This definition helps illustrate how the idea of fashion can be sociological. This is because fashion allows people to make a statement about the way they would like to be perceived by others, while also showing how trends are created, and the part they play in influencing different behaviors on both the individual and the societal levels. Fashion is something that can “function as armor, as a joyful creative outlet, or a political statement.” (Inkpen 2020:83). This article by Inkpen (2020) also exemplifies the idea that when an individual chooses to wear a certain outfit, it becomes a “cultural artifact” and essentially is sending a message to the rest of society, therefore becoming “a canvas for society’s projections, open for comment, consumptions, and catcalls.” (Inkpen 2020:83). Inkpen (2020) goes on to create a metaphor for fashion being a communicator between oneself and society, which then allows for “judgment, categorization, and, in the worst cases, harassment and violence based on our self-presentation” (Inkpen 2020:92). This case helps demonstrate that fashion can be seen as a means of communication between individuals and society.

FAST FASHION

Fast fashion serves as a mode of production in the fashion industry that relies heavily on quick conceptual designs and production, which becomes problematic for many reasons. Fast fashion can be defined as “a business strategy which aims to reduce the processes involved in the buying cycle and lead times for getting new fashion into stores, to satisfy consumer demand at its

peak.” (Barnes et al. 2006:259). While this review has a primary focus on UK fashion retailing, which is a limitation in terms of data directly relating to the United States, it can also be seen as a benefit. This is because the United Kingdom, comparatively to the United States, is significantly smaller in terms of size and population. Therefore, by determining that there are pronounced issues of fast fashion in the United Kingdom, we can assume that the consequences associated with fast fashion are even more momentous in the United States due to its bigger size. Due to high rates of consumer demand for new trendy products that were enacted by the fast fashion industry, the industry has had to act quickly to remain competitive and relevant. To do this they have implemented faster-changing and more quickly-produced products to appeal to the younger generation of people such as adolescents and college students primarily. Although this book by Barnes et al. (2006) was published seventeen years ago, the analysts were able to pick up on a shift in attitude and behavior towards clothing and trends even then. They did so by explaining how the pace of both the purchasing and disposal of clothes was increasing rapidly. This work also goes on to say that the expansion in mass communication has been a huge aid in spreading information about trends and styles at quicker rates than ever (Barnes et al. 2006:259-373). The early 2000s was also an extremely monumental time in terms of “Pop Culture” which played a massive role in being able to form new fashion trends that consumers were able to follow at high rates (Barnes et al. 2006:259-373). We can deduce that since the early 2000s mass communication has only increased to a much greater extent, which would mean that these fashion trends and the clothes that follow are coming and going at rates higher than ever. Since fast fashion is a consumer-driven process (Barnes et al. 2006:259-373), the behavior of individuals in a society is what keeps these industries so successful, it will not stop until these behaviors and attitudes are corrected. However, it is because of the companies partaking in this

industry that these behaviors have become so normalized. This is because the demand has been carefully crafted by these businesses so that they receive profit, therefore making it more difficult for change to take place.

This concept that fast fashion is an industry that influences all different aspects of society, is only further exemplified in an article written by Ahmad F. Oran. Fast fashion affects consumer behavior and attitudes, the environment, business models and concepts, the economy, and so much more. Therefore, being able to gain knowledge about the subject is one of the most essential parts of being able to form an opinion and determine how an individual can change the cycle going forward. Because fashion sales are only increasing in recent times, businesses have had to adapt to being able to create and produce products now more than ever (Oran 2019:1088-1102). It is to be said that current industries, especially the fashion industry, are relying on brief product life cycles, high volatility, low predictability, and a high degree of impulse buying (Almahamid, Awwad, and McAdams 2010:387–579). All these aspects discussed are contributing to what Oran (2019) suggests is the “new economy”, which is the idea that businesses and corporations are capitalizing on fast production and turnover rates by making low-quality and low-priced products that consumers are counting on (Oran 2019:1088-1102). Both studies support the stance that fast fashion is extremely harmful because it enables the continuous cycle of destructive consumer behavior and business tactics as they adapt their economic strategies for the current period.

This idea that consumerism has been rapidly increasing is supported by an article by *Nature News*. This article is not only claiming consumerism is increasing, but it also supports the previous idea that fast fashion has become widespread and popular because their demands for “trendy” clothing are being met immediately, and only for a fraction of the price that most

clothes are being sold at (Nature News 2018). This article draws on an estimate that “there are 20 new garments manufactured per person each year and we are buying 60% more than we were in 2000” (Drew and Yehounme 2017). The authors also suggest that the time being worn is very short and the rate of disposal is remarkably high (Drew and Yehounme 2017). Because of this, manufacturing emissions are elevated, and the environment suffers the repercussions, which will be discussed thoroughly in the following sections of this review.

CONSUMER ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS

As previously discussed, the attitudes and behaviors of consumers play a significant role in supporting this industry. They are crucial in being able to understand why the problems associated with fast fashion are occurring and how we can potentially limit or stop this behavior from continuing. A study by Peng Shao and Hermann Lassleben (2021) suggests looking at the fast fashion industry in two ways to understand why consumers gravitate towards it, as well as why they should stop due to the overarching drawbacks. Shao and Lassleben (2021) suggest that the appeal of fast fashion can be seen both as a blessing and as a curse. It can be seen as a blessing “since it allows ordinary people to purchase fashionable clothes in various designs at affordable prices” (Shao and Lassleben, 2021:3340). Essentially saying that people who may not have had the funds to keep up with trends initially are able to participate now due to the more affordable clothing being produced. However, it can simultaneously be referred to as a curse “since it fuels the consumption of clothes, which has disastrous side effects on the environment.” (Shao and Lassleben, 2021:3340). This inherently means that the quick production, consumption, and disposal rates are directly producing waste and pollution that comes at the expense of the environment. While there are benefits that come along with fast fashion, they are heavily outweighed by the drawbacks that come with it.

One massive drawback of fast fashion in terms of consumer behavior and attitude is the creation of circular consumers. The circular consumer is an individual that is stuck in a continuous cycle of purchasing clothing, disposing of the clothing, and then buying new clothes again, therefore consistently contributing to waste and pollution (de Aguiar Hugo, de Nadae, and da Silva Lima 2021:1-17). This article claims that consumers can practice consuming more sustainable fashion when they have associations with sustainable causes, exclusivity, and perceived product value (de Aguiar Hugo, de Nadae, and da Silva Lima 2021:1-17). Therefore, it would be beneficial for consumers to research more about the advantages of sustainable clothing, in general, to become more open to the idea of making a switch. It would also be of great value if some sustainable clothing brands could attempt to market their products as exclusive to differentiate themselves from other companies. By doing this, their products may become more appealing and sought after, while also being a driving factor in helping individuals make the switch to sustainable clothing. In doing this, it helps individuals recognize that sustainable products are of better value and consequently better perceived by others. These aspects are some of the qualities this study recognizes for being able to make a change, but the authors also do not see the behaviors of the businesses or consumers changing due to consumers thinking it is too expensive to buy sustainable clothing. While at the same time recognizing businesses will not want to change their ways, as they are already successful with their current models and mindsets, which is a limitation.

It is vital as individuals to recognize the wrongdoings of this industry and reflect on how they are contributing to them. From here it is key to be able to acknowledge that consumer attitudes and behaviors are a huge factor in being able to make change happen. One cannot expect businesses to suddenly change their practices because it is seen as unethical, as they have already gained success using these strategies. One case study by Joanie Willett, Clare Saunders,

Fiona Hackney, and Katie Hill (2022) wanted to measure what role fast fashion workshops played in the relationship individuals had with clothing. They conducted this study by utilizing participants over nine months. Here the participants were placed in workshops where they took part in experimental learning, where they were able to discuss their thoughts about clothing prices, learn about sustainability, and hopefully develop more pro-environmental attitudes. The authors found that group learning environments were useful, but to make substantial strides towards more sustainable clothing, group learning must do more than just teach about sustainable values and behaviors (Willett et al. 2022:219-237). This is because the relationships people have with clothing are very complex. There is no easy solution to fixing this industry, as it was specifically geared to manipulate production, quality, and consumer behaviors, but there are many ways we can start to limit the damage this industry creates.

It all begins on an individual level. People must learn to look past the affordable prices and realize more sustainable clothing is not only better for the environment and society in general, but also will be better individually in the long term. This is because sustainable clothing will be of better quality and have a longer shelf life. In addition, many individuals do not realize that buying and disposing of clothing at high rates will end up being just as costly in the long term. One quote that helped explain the current state of the industry is “coupled with contemporary concerns for environmental well-being, as well as recent economic trends leaving families and individuals at financial risk, presents a platform that supports the potential for consumer change. Consumers’ understanding of the conundrum between the cheap, fast fashion that is available to them and their altruistic interests in environmental sustainability is key to effecting change” (McNeill and Moore 2015:213). While consumer behavior and attitudes are

influenced and affected by fast fashion, there is also a lot to be said about the social impact this industry has and will continue to have.

SOCIAL IMPACT

Fast fashion is a concept that is heavily socially related, this is because it contributes to the social injustices occurring in the workplaces and communities of the workers involved in this industry, as well as referring to the social impact fashion has on our society. This element of the social impact is exceptionally sociological. This is because the research associated with social aspects of fast fashion allows for many questions to be answered having to do with its effect on communities and employees, the unethical and unsustainable practices taking place, and how fashion plays a social role on both an individual and societal level. In the case of fast fashion, we can say that there are more negative social impacts than positive for a multitude of reasons. On one hand, we can examine the perspective that consumers are worried about how their clothing portrays them in terms of wealth and social status (Inkpen 2020:83-100). While on the other hand, it allows us to conceptualize how, as a society, we fund businesses for our social well-being while tearing down the well-being of others and contributing to unethical practices.

One study that was able to exemplify the extreme consequences that the fast fashion industry has on workers of assembly lines, textiles, and factories was a study conducted by Sandaya Hewamanne. This study was conducted throughout the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which allows us to see exceptionally relevant and recent information that is also fascinating. This study has a focus on women workers during the pandemic and can draw the conclusion that the lockdown increased these workers' exposure to various forms of modern slavery due to halted production which in turn left many with no work or income, demonstrating that there is a major reliance the workers have on the fast fashion industry (Hewamanne 2021:54-69). Hewamanne

(2021) came to this conclusion by using the methods of observations of participants and in-depth interviews to draw information from her two focus groups: the first being “daily-hired workers in the Katunayake and Biyagama FTZs” and the second being settled “former global factory workers” who became successful (Hewamanne 2021:54-69). While many of these women were forced to be away from their jobs and incomes, it also left many female workers still in these work environments despite experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 (Hewamanne 2021:54-69). This is most likely because the pandemic left many without a job or income; those who managed to keep their job within this industry were left with limited options as they depended on these wages to support themselves and their families. Both outcomes however still supported the argument that these workers were not being treated with any sort of human decency. These Sri Lankan assembly line workers were facing unemployment, poor wages or no income at all, inhumane working conditions, and having to overcome working in the pandemic, while working with or around symptoms of COVID-19 yet were still able to provide finished goods to the consumers who were often more privileged and of higher levels of affluence. While there are limitations to this study due to the lack of acquiring permission to travel to the extent the author preferred and not being able to talk face-to-face with the participants; Hewamanne instead conducted interviews via WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype, or over the phone. The paper communicates the unjust practices and circumstances the workers of countries with lower economic levels must endure due to the economic recessions experienced throughout the lockdown (Hewamanne 2021: 54-69). While at the same time calling for a change in safety measures, gender insecurities, income disadvantages, decision-making, social status, and the physical safety of the workers (Hewamanne 2021:54-69).

To help solve the wrongdoings of this industry, there must be changes in policies and procedures implemented now. The fast fashion industry must start implementing safer practices, more attainable production rates, and producing more sustainable clothing and materials. To change the ways of this industry, it must start with the consumers. If consumers do not advocate for change, businesses will not change any behaviors or practices because they have already achieved success through manipulating this system and consumer behaviors. Due to the current climate of this industry, we can infer that fast fashion highlights society's habit of encouraging quick and easy production resulting in unsustainable and wasteful practices. Therefore exemplifying how society has a pattern of performing actions that support negligent operations for personal gain at the expense of an underprivileged, minority, or less able group.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The effect that the fast industry, as well as many other industries, have on the environment is one of the most relevant issues of our time. While it has been made known that there is a need for serious changes to be made on all levels to help prevent the downfall of our environment, many choose to look the other way and pretend it is not happening. But it is, and the fast fashion industry is one of the main contributors to manufacturing emissions as discussed previously in this review. According to the article discussed earlier in the review, "The Price of Fast Fashion", by *Nature News*, the textile industry is one of the biggest industries that contributes to pollution by creating 1.2 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent a year (Nature News 2018). This article estimates that "less than 1% of the material used to produce clothing is recycled within the clothing industry, with around 13% recycled for use in other areas" (Nature News 2018). This article suggests that a way to slow down this amount of environmental impact is to research more about how the clothes are being made and where they are coming from,

therefore attempting for individuals to avoid buying products from textile factories or any sort of fast fashion company. This article also encourages businesses to use more recyclable materials, and for consumers to become knowledgeable about how they can dispose of their clothing in more environmentally friendly ways (Nature News 2018).

There are also ways in which we, as a society, can begin to change our attitudes and behaviors, even if it happens in small measurements. It is said that there is evidence that people who have attained higher education levels are more likely to have more pro-environmental attitudes (McQueen, McNeil, Huang, and Potdar 2022:53). With this, we often see a correlation between people of higher education levels and levels of affluence due to the increased access to job opportunities that come with higher education and degrees. A higher willingness to participate in pro-environmental behavior comes with more environmentally cautious attitudes (McQueen, McNeil, Huang, and Potdar 2022:53). With this information, we can see that perhaps the more educated members of society can be, the more likely normalization of environmentally friendly practices can take place. However, there are limitations to this idea because the less affluent groups are often the people most involved in supporting fast fashion companies due to their limited price ranges. It is also nearly impossible and ignorant to assume people of all socioeconomic statuses can switch to more sustainable products without struggle.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we can conclude that the fast fashion industry has become a widespread issue that is only gaining more popularity with time. Fast fashion can offer quickly made, trendy clothes at an affordable price. This business tactic is targeting adolescents and college students especially due to their limited price range and their desire for new, trendy clothing very often.

Since consumers are so hungry to find affordable and trendy clothing, they go to websites where brands can sell their products for often as cheap as a few dollars. These actions have been normalized even though most are aware of the dangers they encourage by supporting these businesses. This is because these business strategies have been normalized quickly and have created a cycle of consistent consumer behavior and attitudes that encourage each other and continue this process to repeat.

It is both due to consumer behavior, and business manipulation that this industry has grown so quickly. Not only has this industry become inimical on a societal level, but the idea that it is just a normal behavior has spread quickly. In an attempt to change the practices that are taking place, there must be more in-depth future research regarding the rate at which this clothing is being produced, the main locations of production and consumption, surveys completed by the workers concerning well-being, more affordable sustainable clothing options, and especially precise statistics of how many products of this industry are being produced, sold, and disposed of. To make change happen, people of younger generations must see research that shows the increased rates in recent times, to gain more sympathy, empathy, and ultimately compassion. The sooner this future research can show how extreme this problem has become and what consequences society will face because of it; the more individuals will begin to hold themselves accountable and want to make a difference. Especially if more affordable sustainable options are abundant and readily available in the future.

Because adolescents and college students have grown so accustomed to being able to purchase these clothes at such a low price, they often prioritize their wants over the damage that is known to be happening because of this industry. For example, this industry has and will continue to have, a tremendous impact on the idea of overconsumption, enabling poor consumer

behavior and attitudes, forcing businesses to shift to unhealthy models and strategies, detrimental environmental and social impacts, and so much more. It is essential that as a society, we recognize the effects that this has brought about and try to limit our individual and societal behavior to slow down this industry so that one day it has a possibility to stop altogether.

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