

**The Overconsumption of Fast Fashion:  
An Analysis on the Social and Environmental Impacts of Stakeholders**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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# **An Analysis on the Social and Environmental Impacts of Stakeholders**

## **Introduction**

Under rising consumer demands for the latest fashion trends at ever-lower prices, the social and environmental impact of fast fashion industry giants grow increasingly apparent. Since the year 2000, clothing sales have doubled to 200 billion units a year (Mulhern, 2022). Yet, in the face of rampant consumerism, the knowledge of ethical shortcomings in the business practices of such brands is seemingly incapable of swaying the public towards more socially responsible options. Fast fashion, the business practice centered about reducing the time to get new fashion into the store front (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006, p. 259), stands in at the front of socially and environmentally reprehensible consumption. Consider the fast fashion giant Shein, which rose to fame off the social media trend “Shein Hauls” in which people buy copious amounts of clothing at once (de Ferrer, 2021). Borne of desire rather than need, these flimsy clothes serve their purpose looking nice in a single video and are then often sent to the landfill. Nevertheless, in the face of this wasteful consumerism, interest has risen for a more sustainable option, often via secondhand clothing consumption methods like thrifting or upcycling (4 Learning, 2009). Considering the success of the fast fashion industry despite the rise of consumer awareness of more socially and environmentally responsible options, it seems important to ask: how do trends in the consumer behavior regarding the consumption of fast fashion impact the producer-consumer dynamics, the environment, and the fashion industry as a whole?

## **Supportive Background Information:**

At the root of fast fashion exists two primary categories by which the relevant business practices might be ethically scrutinized: environmental implications and social implications.

While these categories are neither all-encompassing nor refined to exact points of contest, they provide a strong structure for providing the background on this material. As earlier mentioned, fast fashion can be thought of as a conglomeration of business practices used in expediting the time it takes clothes to both hit the storefront (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006, p. 259).

However, some business practices also exploit the time it takes for said garments to leave the consumer's closet. According to a recent paper by Liu and colleagues, the fast fashion industry prioritizes “cheap textiles and toxic textiles dyes” and promotes a culture of discarding garments after a single use, leading to increasingly large amounts of clothing discarded, (Liu etc. all, 2021). The article further went on to reference the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which noted that 11.3 million tons of textiles ended up in landfills and 3.2 million tons were incinerated, (Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

The incinerated clothing certainly contributes to greenhouse gasses. Landfills both contribute greenhouse gasses upon decomposition and generally involve the destruction of local natural habitats. The cheap textiles are made of either polyester, which sheds microfiber pollutants, or of cotton, which requires extensive amounts of water and pesticides (Liu etc. all, 2021). The consumption of clothing ultimately results in some form of waste and environmental harm; however, the business practices involved in fast fashion ultimately expedite and intensify the severity of these consequences.

As previously mentioned, the environmental consequences are not alone in the ethical consideration of the fast fashion industry. Most consumers of fast fashion escape the

environmental implications, highlighting one of the many social implications of industry. In a paper, “The Global Injustice of Fast Fashion”, Bick and colleagues highlight the exportation of clothing waste from the United States to low- and middle-income countries, (Bick, Halsey, & Ekenga, 2018). In order for the consumer country to not deal with the environmental repercussions of the generated waste, those impacts are levied onto the producer country, allowing the consumer to remain ignorant of the damaging effects. Moreover, in order to make these clothes as cost effective as possible, corners are cut when it comes to labor. Bick and colleagues further address the hazardous conditions in which laborers operate under, including respiratory and musculoskeletal hazards that might ultimately be linked to debilitating and life-threatening conditions, (Bick, Halsey, & Ekenga, 2018). The ethical conversation surrounding fast fashion is grim; the social and environmental consequences of such consumerism is unfair and appallingly dangerous. So, in the age of information, why is such a toxic industry so successful?

### **STS Framework:**

In order to better understand the motivations that drive the consumption of fast fashion, this paper looks to utilize the Actor Network Theory (ANT) framework. With aspirations to analyze the socio-technical system that is responsible for the success of the fast fashion industry, the ANT framework offers a structure by which to identify the key stakeholders or actors and evaluate their motives. Cressman in his, “A Brief Overview of Actor-Network Theory,” ascribes the fundamental aspect of Actor Network Theory to associations, stating, “ANT studies associations between heterogeneous actors - associations that are proposed and attempted, failures or successes. There is literally nothing else for ANT, except associations,” (Cressman, 2009). The consumer’s associations with the producers, the environment, and the fast fashion

industry, all consist of motives necessary to understand prior to grasping the sociotechnical system as a whole.

As a socio-technical framework, Actor Network Theory has not gone without scrutiny in its ability to contribute to the field. One particular critique argues that the ANT framework fails to “provide a critical account of the organization;” however, this point is made after conceding that ANT does provide utility in the “empirical analysis of the organization process,” (Whittle & Spicer, 2008, p. 611). However, in recognizing the ability for ANT to contribute to a better understanding of the organization process, it is foregone that ANT can aid in the reveal of certain organization aspects, which is integral to the critical account. An argument could be made that perhaps alone, ANT is insufficient as a social-technical framework. However, it goes without question that it is a tool vital to understanding complex organizations and associations.

A useful methodology in discussing a problem under the ANT framework is based around the sociological process of translation and the moments within: problematization, interessement, enrollment, and the mobilization of allies (Callon, 1984, pp. 203-218). In essence, translation allows for the identification of the roles ascribed to each actor within the system and provides clarification on the arrangement of said roles in regards to one another. Each of the four aforementioned moments contributes to the larger picture that describes the network as a whole.

### **Research Questions and Methods:**

This research looks to analyze how trends in consumer behaviors surrounding the consumption of fast fashion impact the producer-consumer dynamics, the environment, and the fashion industry as a whole. In order to best understand the socio-technical system at play within the fast fashion industry under the Actor Network Theory framework, the discussion is explored via a network analysis and complementary documentary analysis. The network analysis will

identify and contextualize actors and their motives, including the actor-network that encompasses the entirety of the fast fashion system. As such, this network analysis is broken down into two key parts: an initial analysis of the motives driving the key actors within the system and a subsequent evaluation of the translation process under which the network encompassing fast fashion system operates. The culmination of this research will result in the provision of guidelines and governing principles for each key actor in the fast fashion system. In the pursuit of establishing such responsibilities, a deontological approach to ethics is adopted, as the primary ethical consideration for each key actor is their duties and obligations to others within the network.

### **Results and Discussion:**

Prior to the investigation into the translation process of the greater fast fashion network, the first part of this section explores a couple key actors in the fast fashion system for their motivation and relationships with other key actors. The key actors investigated in this research consist of not only consumers, but fashion industry giants, the workforce in low to middle income countries, and the environment. However, the initial investigation into key actor motives is focused on the consumer and the fashion industry giants, who harbor the primary roles from which this network is built. It is only by evaluating each key actor as an individual, that the associations that construct the greater network containing the actors and intermediaries can be best understood. In recognizing that the fast fashion system network is one spawning from an socioeconomic arrangement, the buying and selling of clothing, it seems reasonable to begin the discussion with the actors who harbor the system's root motives.

### **Understanding the Consumer**

What better way to understand the socio-technical system encompassing the fast fashion

industry than to look at it through the lens of the consumer? The end consumer is a familiar key actor to most that might stumble across this paper, as most who reside in high income countries today rely on fast fashion. However, a reliance on fast fashion has not always been the case. Consider thrifting, which in the modern day is seen as the procurement of secondhand goods, most commonly clothing articles, (Batista, 2022). However, in 20th century America, thrifting was a cultural movement, based on principles of industry, frugality, and stewardship (Yarrow, 2014, p. 144). In the 1910s to 1930s, America established thrifting as a pervasive ideology that spanned not only the modern ideas of repurposing used goods, but one that encompassed all avenues of wise spending and conservative consumption. This belief in thrift led to the education of children on the impact of thrift on one's character (Yarrow, 2014, p. 65). Ultimately, the consumer of the thrifting era became exceedingly mindful of any purchase they made.

Looking upon the modern world of fast fashion, where clothing is purchased in environmentally unsustainable hauls (de Ferrer, 2022), it is obvious that at some point, consumer behavior shifted away from the mindful approach founded in thrift. Yarrow (2014, pp. 126-127) attributes this to ideologies following the Great Depression. The collapse of the stock market certainly shook the faith of those who saved or invested every penny, but it was new ideas formed surrounding a duty to purchase and consume that cemented the shift. Ideologies like consumptionism, in which people are encouraged to buy and use more, were backed by the likes of Thomas Edison, leading it to prevail over the thrift mentality by the 1930s (Yarrow, 2014, p. 127). The shift in consumer behavior ultimately led to the materialist consumption oriented modern American society, and the fashion industry is exceedingly aware of that. Bruce and Daly wrote in a paper on buyer behavior in the fashion industry that, "Fashion consumers expect and thrive on constant change and so new products have to be available on a frequent basis," (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006, p. 329). The existence of a market that finds success in the desire for

needless recurring novelty flies in the face of the thrift mentality and epitomizes the wasteful extravagance it denounces. Nevertheless, this form of consumerism finds success, as it plays to the hedonist tendencies of the modern materialist.

What motivates the modern consumer in the realm of clothing and fashion? While it is evident our society has leaned more towards fast fashion and high consumption options as opposed to secondhand and repurposed options, the consumer's decision is not necessarily devoid of morals. From the fashion industry's perspective, Joergens discusses the tendency for consumers to choose more ethical options when presented with similar choices (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006, p. 360). As such, modern consumers can be divided into two groups: the conscious consumer and the unconscious consumer. The latter is characterized by a lack of mindfulness in the consumption of clothing, and motivated by convenience, a domain dominated by fast fashion. The former is characterized by the thought and effort they put into their fashion consumption. Their engagement with fashion leads the conscious consumer to be torn between the materialistic and hedonistic appeal of trending fashion with the ethical considerations of their actions, as often, they are aware of more sustainable options (McNamara, 2022). After considering the motives underpinning either group of consumers, it becomes quite clear how the fast fashion industry could find success in the modern era.

### **Understanding the Fashion Industry Giants**

On the other end of the socioeconomic relationship that governs the clothing market sits the fashion industry giants. For the purposes of this paper, the leading clothing retailers under speculation are broken up into two groups: fast fashion retailers and secondhand or repurposed clothing retailers. In actuality, there exists plenty of clothing retailers that fall in neither of these groups, or perhaps somewhere in between them. However, as the main focus of this research is



on the fast fashion industry, the secondhand and repurposed clothing retailers are highlighted to contextualize the motivations behind their fast fashion industry counterparts.

Any company which hopes to last in the sudo-free market capitalist American society ultimately needs to turn a profit. It would be foolish to not recognize this primary motivator for any company. However, in the fast fashion industry, a profit-centric motivator is not so simply captured. Fast fashion itself was borne from an attempt to maximize profits, regardless of cost. As outsourcing manufacturing became a valid cost-cutting measure in the 1980s, not only did production move overseas, but an opportunity to expedite the fashion production cycle presented itself (Gupta & Gentry, 2018, p. 16). Outsourcing labor is an ethically questionable but highly utilized practice within the United States, primarily due to reduced labor cost (Gallimore, 2021). The low labor costs available via outsourcing allowed for greater variety and novelty, which allowed for quicker trends in fashion and more individualized marketing, further driving demand. The aforementioned cycle is made most evident today, as arguably the largest fast fashion retailer Shein utilizes social media influencers to spike short lived fashion trends to drive demand on the platform (de Ferrer, 2022). Yet, the goal of maximizing profits still does not fully encapsulate the severity of the fast fashion industry's profit-oriented motives.

In order to fully grasp the extent to which the fast fashion industry is willing to go to maximize profit, it is necessary to consider the reprehensible actions taken in pursuit. The 2013 Rana Plaza garment factory collapse, which led to the death of over a thousand people, stands as a testament to the unsafe working conditions suffered by the laborers who performed the outsourced labor, (Lohmeyer & Schüßler, 2018, p. 3). In the pursuit of maximizing profits, the fast fashion industry cut corners on safety, ultimately causing devastating and unjust harm.

As previously mentioned, any company that cannot turn a profit will not last. Such is not

only the case for fast fashion retailers, but also for secondhand and repurposed clothing retailers. Yet, as opposed to the *maximize profits at all cost* approach taken by the fast fashion industry, these more sustainable clothing retailers often have other motives beyond profit. The environmental hazards begotten by the immense waste generated by fast fashion have seemingly led many to pursue environmentally friendly methods of fashion consumption. A documentary by CBC Business describes a boom in the clothing resale market and shift away from secondhand clothing stigmas, attributed it to concern for the climate (CBC Business, 2019). Other clothing retailers look to break into the high fashion realm with upcycled clothing articles (4 Learning, 2009). There is an undeniable drive amongst these sustainable clothing retailers to make fashion and general clothing consumption a safer practice. This further contextualizes the difference in motives between the fast fashion industry and their sustainable counterparts. The following sections explore the greater network under the sociological process of translation, encompassing not only the consumer and the fashion industry giants, but the intermediaries and other key actors therewithin.

### **Translation Process**

In order to grasp how the translation process works in the realm of fashion, it is crucial to break it down into its four moments: problematization, interessement, enrolment, and the mobilization of allies. Problematization begins the process by understanding the nature of the problem and the establishment of dependencies between actors (Callon, 1984, pp. 203-206). The network encompassing the fast fashion system is rooted in a simple problem: people need clothing. Clothing addresses the physiological needs to provide shelter from the elements, so under Maslov's Hierarchy of Needs, it occupies a primary need to be met (McLeod, 2023). As society progressed with the specialization of labor, each individual became dependent on

someone else to create their clothing. Clothing artisans and eventually manufacturers assumed this role. However, this problem has shifted away from a psychological need to a materialist desire, as status and self-expression intertwined with clothing, cultivating fashion. The obligatory passage point, by which all actors are linked (Callon, 1984, p. 205), is then the decision of the consumer to purchase clothing. With modern consumerism in tow, the simple problem that entailed the need for clothing evolved, as did the companies that meet those needs.

The modern consumer is dependent on the fashion industry for their clothing needs to be met. Yet, the increased consumption of clothing has ultimately led to harm, both towards the environment as well as to manufacturers and producers in low to middle income countries. Families in these producer countries are dependent on the fast fashion industry specifically to provide them with a job just as the fast fashion industry is dependent on these producer countries to provide low-cost labor. The environment has little ability to protect itself, creating a dependency on all parties to ensure environmentally safe practices are adhered to. This then morphs the problem once again. All actors become intertwined in this transactionary relationship regarding the buying and selling of clothing.

The moment of interessement flows naturally from problematization, as after establishing the dependencies in problematization, this moment is focused on how the actors are locked into place (Callon, 1984, pp. 206-211). The aforementioned mutual dependency between the producer countries and the fast fashion industry is a prime example of these two actors locking themselves in their roles. The fast fashion industry locks itself into the consumer dependency relationship by creating a cheap option for clothing that simultaneously meets a variety of consumer desires through an expansive catalog of clothing articles, whereas more sustainable clothing resale retailers lock themselves in their consumer dependency relationship by providing

a more ethically sound option for clothing and fashion. The consumer is dependent primarily on the fashion industry to provide them with clothing options and locks themselves into the role by continuing to purchase these articles. It seems like a natural inclination to assert that the environment is more dependent on sustainable clothing retailers, as these parties are the most cognizant of one another. However, the environment is locked into the same dependency as all actors, one based in a need to uphold environmentally friendly practices. It is only through the successful establishment roles and dependencies in the intersement moment that the moment of enrolment, in which these roles are coordinated and defined, can find success (Callon, 1984, p. 211).

The moment of enrolment is not so clearly defined in the case of the fashion industry problems. These problems are directly a result of the interrelationship between the roles and dependencies, so as intersement locks these actors into their roles, the coordination of these roles is already self-evident. The moment dictating the mobilization of allies, which might be characterized as the representation of actors within the network by a given spokesperson, is then the final moment in the cyclical process of translation (Callon, 1984, p. 214-218). From this moment, a crucial question arises: are the actors with the fashion industry network represented? It is evident that the consumer is well represented within the network, as the desires and motivations of the consumer are constantly catered to, as the obligatory passage point within the translation process is dependent on consumer desires. While fast fashion giants certainly do not lack representation thanks to the capital spent on marketing, authenticity in this representation is often lacking. Ethically reprehensible actions are constantly swept under the rug, and comprehensive narratives surrounding these companies are often overshadowed by success on social media (de Ferrer, 2022). On the other hand, many secondhand clothing retailers lack the agency to ensure comparable representation with their fast fashion counterparts. The lives and

misfortunes of those working in harsh conditions in producer countries certainly lack representation through the network, and there is an astounding lack of representation for the environment considering the degree of environmental harm contributed by fashion. It begs the question, what can change the fashion industry for the better?

### **Establishing Responsibility Amongst Actors**

In establishing a set of guidelines and principles by which each actor might conduct themselves, it is under a deontological model that actions and motives are considered. Deontology is characterized by an adherence to one's duty and to a moral code which governs their actions (Cline, 2019). Rigidly defining the moral code by which each actor should operate is a contentious idea; however, it seems apparent that each actor carries an ethical duty to not inflict unnecessary or excessive harm on others within this symbiotic network.

The moral obligation of the consumer is based on conscientiousness and the minimization of harm. It is impossible to fully reduce the negative consequences of fashion consumption. Pollutants, for example, are unavoidable, both in the creation of fashion but also in its transport and cleaning. Yet, it is through conscientiousness that the consumer can reduce their negative impact. As mentioned, the consumer can be subdivided into two groups: the conscious and the unconscious. The unconscious consumer, who shops for clothing out of convenience and necessity, does not preoccupy themselves with concerns of the fashion industry network. Such ignorance is morally reprehensible, as in purchasing clothing, these consumers shirk their duty to others with the network they are now a part of. As for the conscious consumer, who is torn between the materialistic appeal of cheap yet expressive fashion and the more ethically sound option of sustainable fashion, they must further concern themselves with the harm they might create. The conscious consumer cannot shirk their duties to the environment or to the

manufacturers simply by claiming the joy they derive from an unethical purchase can balance the scales. They must be willing to suffer the failure to appeal to their material desires if those desires are sufficiently morally reprehensible.

Ascribing a set of moral guidelines to the fashion industry giants is perhaps more nuanced than that of their consumer counterparts. While the average individual consumer might be kept in check by their conscience, companies are harder to compel. As such, these guidelines are stated such that the company is not only expected to hold themselves accountable to these standards, but society must also hold them accountable. The most fundamental moral obligation historically shirked by the fast fashion industry is the assurance of the safety of their manufacturers. The deaths and other misfortunes that have befallen those who craft these articles of clothing for subpar wages are blood on the hands of the fast fashion giants, and the network as a whole. Actions need to be taken to ensure fair and safe working conditions for the laborers, regardless of the monetary cost. Furthermore, the environmental pollutants and excessive waste generated by the fashion industry need to be reined in, with efforts to reuse and upcycle wherever possible. Both the laborers of these low to middle income countries and the environment lack the platform and representation to advocate for themselves, so it is incumbent upon society to hold the fashion industry accountable, and that begins by holding the companies accountable.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite the expansive goals of ascribing responsibilities to key actors in the fast fashion system or suggesting the consideration of policy to govern the existing system, this research should be considered as a conversation starter for the use of actor network theory in understanding the fast fashion industry. In a system as broad as the fashion industry, it is almost

self-evident that there would exist other key actors beyond those mentioned in this paper. There exist entire sub industries to support the transportation of clothing articles alone. As such, future research might investigate other actors within the fashion industry, or perhaps further investigate aforementioned actors and their undiscussed relationships. This research is further limited by its singular ethical approach, an area for future research to consider. The value of future research into the relationships governing the fast fashion industry cannot be understated, and this research looks to play a small role in the greater discussion.

### **Conclusion:**

This research ultimately looks to provide insight into the network that encompasses the fashion industry and promote an ethically sound outlook on how the system should change. These guidelines and principles are constructed such that in recognizing one's responsibility within the greater system of fast fashion, both to themselves and to other key actors, further actions can be carried out conscientiously and responsibly. One's duty and obligation to others is the primary impetus by which their decisions should be made if this industry is to become a safe, moral place.

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