Perception of the Environmental Impact of the Fast Fashion Industry Among Generation Z

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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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Abstract

Fast fashion has been spurred by technological advancements and the rise of social media. This has led to a complex, wide reaching network whereby advertisers can reach many young people through traditional advertisements and social media influencers. While social media has been influential in promoting consumerism, it has also been very important in educating young people about the negative environmental and social impacts of their consumption of fast fashion. As young people become aware of the effects of overconsumption, they will start to shift their habits to align with their values. Eight college-aged members of Generation Z were interviewed about their personal buying habits and perception of the environmental issues with the fast fashion industry. These interviews gave insight into how social media has impacted buying decisions and people's perception of how sustainable their consumption of fashion is. Every participant was able to list many negative environmental impacts of the fast fashion industry, but five of the eight people still believed they consumed fashion sustainably.

Key terms

fast fashion, green fashion, thrift, fashion habits, environmental sustainability, Generation Z, interview

Definitions

Fast fashion: cheap, mass-produced clothing that is often made to reflect quick trends. This clothing is not meant to be durable or long lasting

Slow fashion: deliberately sustainable clothing that is often made with fair labor and concern for the environment. These companies tend to publicize transparency reports

Thrift: buying clothing second hand at a reduced cost, either online through sellers such as Depop or eBay or at a thrift store.

Green fashion: combination of slow fashion and thrift

Introduction

For many people, Meryl Streep's delivery of Miranda Priestly's iconic cerulean monologue is the most memorable scene from the 2006 movie *The Devil Wears Prada.* In this scene, industry titan Priestly is lecturing her new assistant who thinks herself above the frivolity of fashion. She explains how design choices begin on designer runways and trickle down to department store clearance bins, such as the one that the assistant fished the "lumpy blue sweater" out of. The sneering monologue ends with "However, that blue represents millions of dollars of countless jobs, and it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry, when in fact, you're wearing a sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room… from a pile of 'stuff.'" [Frankel, 2006].

The fashion industry began with all custom pieces, whether by a seamstress or a family member. This was an exhaustive practice of patterning, sewing, and tailoring to clothe a family (Laver, 2020). In the mid-nineteenth century, the haute couture industry began when British designer Charles Frederick Worth had women model clothing in Paris and founded the first atelier to design and make gowns. Less than 100 years later, all French fashion houses followed a calendar to showcase their designs for women. Ten years after Worth opened his atelier, the Dewachter brothers opened a department store featuring a line of ready-to-wear (RTW) men's clothing in pre-made sizes (Maisey, 2019). RTW clothing was not available for women until the beginning of the twentieth century (Farrell-Beck 1992), and there was no designer RTW clothing for women until Yves Saint Laurent opened the Rive Gauche boutique in 1966. Fashion houses continued to debut 2 lines each year during fashion shows: a fall/winter line and a spring/summer

line. As the fictional Miranda Priestly explained, the choices made by designers on the runway would filter down into RTW fashion (Maisey, 2019).

Fast fashion is a new phenomenon that began at the end of the twentieth century. The fashion industry had previously released new clothing once a season, following the couture trends. New brands began to put out multiple releases in a season, often capitalizing on trends. This clothing was manufactured cheaply and not made to last a long time, as it only needed to last as long as the trend's lifetime. This paradigm shift occurred because of technological advancements in the fashion industry, allowing for the quick mass production of low-quality clothing. Enabled by technological advancements, fast fashion companies have flooded markets with persistent releases of RTW clothing (Diantari, 2021). Generation Z (Gen Z) grew up with fast fashion as the norm, as well as with the ever-present looming threat of climate change. As the older members of this generation reach adulthood, our purchasing power is projected to increase, which has attracted attention from advertisers (Raynor, 2021).

As Gen Z's purchasing power increases, we are attracting more attention from advertisers. Additionally, many members of Gen Z are active on social media websites, where targeted advertisements thrive (Knoll, 2015). While social media can promote unsustainable shopping habits in the never-ending drive to project a perfect persona online, social media has also been invaluable for many in informing them about the social, environmental, and economic issues that are rampant in this industry. While fast fashion has been available for as long as I can remember, the advent of social media has led to a pervasiveness in targeted advertisements. Even if one were to block brands, they could still see sponsored posts by paid influencers (Knoll, 2022). The rise of social media has correlated with a rise in clothing consumption and an increased view of clothing as disposable (Rudalevige, 2021).

The European Commission, the executive branch of the European Union (EU), plans to crack down on this mindset by imposing regulations to ensure that clothing made in or imported into the EU is more environmentally sustainable. In addition to imposing quality restrictions and banning the destruction of unsold merchandise, new clothing will need to have a label describing how sustainable and recyclable a garment is. Growing clothing manufacturing is linked to an increase in energy usage by the sector, and most energy is produced by fossil fuel combustion. The proposed regulations aim to reduce the amount of textiles discarded each year, currently estimated at about 24 pounds per person in the EU (Hernandez, 2022).

Fast fashion has increased sharply with the rise of online commerce, with one store, Shein, introducing between 700-1,000 new pieces of clothing every day. This model of clothing consumption has led to a world where the average consumer throws away over half of newly bought clothing in the same year that they were purchased. The negatives of the fast fashion industry do not end with the environmental impact of producing between 35,000-100,000 new garments each day, as the industry has been rocked by scandals surrounding sweatshop labor, poverty wages, and stolen designs. The social media app TikTok has become notorious for popularizing influencers doing "try-on hauls" of hundreds of dollars worth of Shein clothing (de Ferrer, 2021). While Shein has stood out for its massive drain on the environment, it has also led to a rallying countermovement against the fast fashion industry, as many are abhorred by the sheer overproduction of poor quality clothing. Social media has allowed advertisers to reach young, impressionable people, but has also connected consumers with educators that seek to warn buyers of the impact of their purchases. As young people, steeped in the climate crisis and battered by a barrage of "once in a lifetime" events become aware of the effects of overconsumption, they will start to shift their habits to align with their values.

This study was conducted to gauge the perception of the environmental impact of the fast fashion industry among older members of Generation Z (Gen Z). This study focused on this demographic group because Gen Z's purchasing power is growing and fast fashion has been the industry standard for as long as Gen Z can remember. This paper will be looking only at self-identifying members of Gen Z that are around the age of a typical college undergraduate student because this project was conducted on a college campus. Younger members of Gen Z will not be interviewed or considered in this paper. This paper will only look at the environmental impacts of the fast fashion industry, not the social or economic issues related to labor or distribution. This paper will not consider the perception of fast fashion among other age groups. The fast fashion industry has taken drastic steps to distract consumers from the environmental impact of consumption, and social media influencers and advertisements have shaped how young people interact with the industry.

This paper will start with background information of the environmental impact of the fast fashion industry. The second section is an overview of the interview methodology, including participant selection and interview questions. Following the interview methodology description will be a section describing how Gen Z interacts with the fast fashion industry, both in traditional brick-and-mortar stores and the expansion into online commerce. This section will include some positives that were identified, as well as barriers to moving past the fast fashion paradigm. Then, a section detailing green fashion and the barriers/advantages associated with it will follow. The next section will discuss the impact of social media on Gen Z's perception and interaction with the fashion industry. From this information, an actor-network theory approach will be employed to better understand how consumers act as actors in the network of the fashion industry (Latour, 1996).

Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion

The fast fashion industry has had widespread negative impacts on the environment that are hidden from consumers. Chief among these issues are the environmental hazards for those living near textile manufacturing facilities and the millions of tons of textile waste in landfills and open-air dumps. Most of these externalities are limited to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) where production is outsourced to (Bick, 2018). When clothing is unsold in primary American, European, or Asian markets, that clothing trickles into the secondary clothing trade in the developing world. One of the largest of these secondary markets is centered in Chile, where clothing is distributed throughout the rest of Latin America. However, more than half of the 59,000 tonnes (65,000 tons) of clothing that remain unsold end up in open air dumps in the desert. The unsold textiles are not accepted in municipal landfills because it is not biodegradable and was treated with chemicals. An open clothing dump in Chile's Atacama, the driest desert in the world, is shown in Figure 1 (Bernetti, 2021).

Figure 1: Open air clothing dump in the Chilean Atacama (Bernetti, 2021)

Close to 90% of all clothing sold in the United States is primarily composed of cotton or polyester. Polyester fabric is derived from oil and cotton fabric requires high volumes of water and pesticides to grow. Additionally, textile dying produces further environmental harm, as untreated wastewater from dyes is often discharged into local water systems, polluting the natural environment with heavy metals and other toxicants. However, the environmental impact of clothing does not stop at the production. The fast fashion industry has contributed to skyrocketing amounts of textile waste, with some estimates showing that the average American consumer throws away approximately 80 pounds of textiles annually, making up around 5% of landfill space. However, many spent textiles enter the second-hand clothing market. Roughly half a million tons of secondhand clothing are exported to the developing world annually.

Clothing that does not sell in second-hand markets overseas often becomes solid waste outside of landfills, which can have adverse environmental and health effects (Bick, 2018). Further, textiles have an incredibly high carbon footprint, rivaling aluminum for generating the most greenhouse gasses per unit of material. The fashion industry was responsible for 8% of global carbon dioxide emissions, and one fifth of that was from shoe production alone. These emissions numbers do not consider the emissions associated with transporting garments to retail environments and laundering (Diantari, 2021).

Fast fashion's environmental impact does not end once the clothing reaches its owner, as laundering synthetic fabrics can release microplastics, defined as fragments of plastic that are less than five millimeters in length. Washing machines and wastewater treatment facilities are not equipped to filter out these small plastic particles, and they enter the environment, where they can break down into smaller pieces and concentrate bacteria and pollutants. Microplastics have been found in many aquatic species, and can move up the food chain. Microplastic particles have been found in human food and in human bodies. This issue is so new that the long-term effects of microplastic consumption are not well known. The fast fashion industry encourages overconsumption and uses synthetic fibers heavily. The textile industry is responsible for over one-third of all microplastic ocean pollution. Microplastic pollution from laundry can be reduced by using special washing bags such as the GuppyFriend™ or the Cora Ball, which can remove up to 31% of microfibers from a wash cycle (Garcia, 2021).

Interview Methodology

A total of 8 interview participants were chosen using the popcorn method. Seven of the participants were female, and one was male. Seven of the participants are enrolled as undergraduates at the University of Virginia, and one graduated in May 2021. All participants

knew that the goal of the study was to gauge how older members of Gen Z perceived the environmental impact of the fast fashion industry. First, interviewees were asked to provide their age and gender and rate their passion for both fashion and environmental sustainability on a scale of 1-10. Participants were asked several questions about their personal clothing shopping habits, encompassing fast, slow, and thrifted fashion. Then, they were asked about the harms and merits that have come from fast fashion, as well as the environmental issues specifically. Following this, the interviewer asked participants what they did with wearable clothing that they no longer wear. Then, participants were asked how social media has influenced their relationship with fast fashion, if at all. Following this, they were asked about social pressures to avoid repeating outfits or to inform people that they are wearing thrifted clothing. Then, participants were shown the image in Figure 1 and told a brief description of the secondary market and the vast amounts of waste and asked how that made them feel. Finally, interviewees were asked if they felt that their consumption of clothing was sustainable and allowed to give any other thoughts on the matter.

The interview was written to be as open-ended as possible, following the methodology used by MacDonald et al. in the paper "An interview methodology for exploring the values that community leaders assign to multiple-use landscapes" published in *Ecology and Society* in 2013. The methodology was developed to gain insights on participants' values, so it took a semi-structured approach, allowing participants to feel comfortable talking about their values and beliefs (MacDonald, 2013). The present study was asking personal questions that were related to values. This study was gauging how young adults interact with the fashion industry, but questions were written carefully to avoid priming participants to give certain answers. The interview was performed conversationally, with participants answering each question fully and stopping before proceeding to the next question. Participants were asked about their personal

consumption habits before being asked about the merits and demerits of the fast fashion industry to avoid priming. The questions were structured to gain insights on young adults' values and consumption of fast fashion.

Fast Fashion Consumption and Perception

Fast fashion has supported the dying ecosystem that is the American shopping mall. Five of the eight people interviewed reported shopping at malls currently or in the recent past. Four people reported that they prefer to shop in person because it is easier to find the correct size. Fast fashion has expanded and done very well in the online market. Half of the interviewees reported shopping for clothing online. One interviewee cited that online shopping was more difficult to resist than in stores. This was compounded by the sharp rise in online shopping during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants were asked to identify positives of the fast fashion industry. Six of the interviewees stated that fast fashion was helpful to low-income individuals, as they can express themselves through clothing affordably. Three interviewees stated that a personal benefit of the affordability of fast fashion was the ability to try different styles to figure out personal aesthetics. Additionally, two participants cited fast fashion as helpful for finding costumes for themed college parties. One participant cited that they received no personal benefit from fast fashion, but that there could be a positive impact for others. Another participant cited the social capital that her younger sister was able to receive from fast fashion, as she purchases fast fashion pieces, posts a picture in them, and gives them to her older sister. The affordability of fast fashion has allowed this individual to gain social status despite being from a modest background.

Next, participants were asked to identify negatives of the fast fashion industry. Non-environmental issues identified included worker exploitation and abuse abroad,

homogenization of fashion, massive overconsumption by wealthier individuals, the rise of materialistic culture in America, trend cycle acceleration, decline in clothing quality, and a classist separation in who can afford to participate in trends. Environmental issues included water pollution, energy usage and emissions from each step of the supply chain, chemical usage, microplastics, a disposable mindset towards clothing, and waste. Many people reported learning about the harms of fast fashion on social media sites, and many stated that they had taken steps to reduce or eliminate their consumption of fast fashion.

Green Fashion Consumption and Perception

Every person interviewed was able to provide negative impacts of the fast fashion industry, but all but two participants still purchase fast fashion. All eight of the interviewees participated in thrifting, but few participants had purchased any slow fashion pieces, the other half of green fashion. All but one of the participants reported that they donate or sell wearable clothing that they no longer wear. The one person that did not report donating clothing does not have that problem and consistently wears all their clothing.

Donating or reselling clothing supports the thrift market, whether donated or sold to a store or sold by the individual on secondhand market sites like eBay or Depop. Every person interviewed reported having thrifted at some point, with six individuals reporting as frequent thrift shoppers. Benefits of thrifting included the lack of guilt, low prices, and ability to find unique pieces. Additionally, three participants cited that an older item in a thrift store has stood the test of time and proven itself to be durable. Drawbacks to thrifting included poor organization, difficulty finding size, and difficulty finding stylish pieces. A few participants described thrifting as a hobby or an activity to be done with friends that can lead to overconsumption. This shift occurs primarily because it is difficult to change habits. Shifting the

habit to purchasing secondhand clothing is better for the environment, but does not change the fact that it is still overconsuming. Breaking the overconsumption habit is difficult and requires dedication to change. This resolve can be tested, especially with friends. Additionally, the popularity of thrift reselling can be used to downplay the consumption, as people purchase affordable thrift clothing to sell on sites such as Depop. One participant described how thrifting became a trend a few years ago, which was a reversal from the strong cultural stigma associated with secondhand clothing that they were raised with in southwestern Virginia.

Five of the participants had some awareness of slow fashion, but only two of them have purchased from slow fashion brands. Many cited price, awareness, style, and sizing difficulties as barriers to purchasing slow fashion clothing. Slow fashion clothing is created to last a long time and is created using ethical labor, which increases the price. Slow fashion is marketed towards adults, as can be seen in the styles and price points. Most slow fashion clothing is sold online, so it can be difficult to find the right size. Additionally, it can be difficult to assure that a company's values line up with their stated intent. Reformation is one of the most popular slow fashion brands and has impressed many with their commitment to environmental and social sustainability, but they were rocked by scandal in June 2020 amid allegations of racism by former employees (Nesvig, 2020). One interviewee cited this scandal as a barrier to supporting slow fashion, telling me "I've been shopping at Reformation recently, but I know that there are questions about the ethicalness of Reformation." This interviewee cited knowledge of slow fashion brands as one of the biggest barriers, because these brands cannot advertise as heavily as fast fashion brands. It can seem pointless to research ethical brands, because a consumer cannot ever know if a company is aligned with their values. If one can never know whether a brand is

truly ethical or sustainable, it makes sense for many to continue to shop from fast fashion brands, because those brands emphasize style and affordability.

Social Media Impact

Social media has revolutionized the way that consumers interact with the fashion industry, but it has also had a large impact on how consumers interact with other consumers. The interviewees cited Instagram and TikTok as the platforms that most impacted their relationship with fashion. Social media has led to pressure around repeating outfits, as people want to avoid the stigma of posting pictures in the same outfit more than once. Three of the interviewees reported that they avoid wearing the exact same outfit in some fashion, with one stating their rule that they could not wear the same top and bottom combination more than once per semester.

Additionally, many of the people interviewed reported susceptibility to social media advertisements, both explicit advertisements from companies and partnerships with influencers. While social media has encouraged consumption of fast fashion for many, it has also been vital in educating young people about the harms of the fast fashion industry. Educational infographics have circulated on social media sites, especially Instagram, warning young people of the environmental and social harms associated with the fast fashion industry. Half of the people interviewed cited Instagram infographics or TikTok videos as educational about the harms of the industry. Social media has revolutionized the way that young people interact with the fashion industry, from advertising to educating to having to check to see if you've posted a photo wearing something before you leave for the day.

Social media has also been a large factor in trend cycle acceleration. The traditional trend cycle lasted twenty years and consists of five stages: introduction, rise, acceptance, decline, and obsolescence. Before social media, a microtrend lasted between three and five years. The current

trend cycle still has the same steps, but they occur faster. Five of the eight people interviewed cited trend cycle acceleration or the emergence of microtrends as a negative impact of the fast fashion industry. Social media has been hugely impactful in accelerating the trend cycle and promoting microtrends, with many consumers reporting that a piece will have gone out of style in the few weeks of shipping required to get a piece (Rudalevige, 2021). The accelerating trend cycle can lead to irrational purchases and the "have to have it" phenomenon, with two of the participants reporting that they had purchased trendy clothing items that they never wore.

Actor-Network Theory Approach

The Actor-Network Theory (ANT) approach is used to model societal interactions between actors that are connected by a network. Actors need not be single individuals, or even humans. To be considered an actor in this framework, an actor must perform an action. Networks describe how actors are interconnected (Latour, 1996). In the fashion industry, both fast and slow fashion brands are actors, as are consumers. The network of interconnection includes consumers purchasing fashion and companies advertising products. For young adults, the bulk of this advertisement occurs on the Internet or on social media sites. Advertising influencers become actors in this network as well, as do the people that speak out against the harms caused by the fast fashion industry. The network that connects consumers and brands has become increasingly digitized, connecting consumers with other consumers as well. The digitization of this network has led to a far more interconnected network than the previous model of paper advertising and in-store shopping. As the network becomes more interconnected, both consumption and awareness of the harms of consumption have risen. Many young adults are uneasy about supporting fast fashion, and many of those interviewed indicated that they would cease supporting fast fashion altogether when they had the time and money to shop for green fashion.

Conclusion

Every person interviewed is an actor in the fashion network as a consumer of textiles. The network connecting consumers to producers has become more invasive and interconnected with the rise of social media and targeted advertisement, but interconnectivity has also led to consumers learning of the harmful environmental and social impacts of the industry. This has led to a cognitive dissonance in consumers, as every person interviewed was able to identify multiple issues with the fast fashion industry, yet five of the eight young adults interviewed still rated their personal consumption as sustainable. Many of the people interviewed expressed intent to decrease consumption once they were able to, financially, but all of them voluntarily signed up to discuss fast fashion and the environmental impact, so it is likely that this study highlighted people that were already aware that the fast fashion industry has a harmful effect on the environment, as the lowest self-reported "passion for environmental sustainability" was a 6. I hope to see Gen Z change the status quo and reject the overconsumption that we have become conditioned to. Gen Z has the power to promote a new world that emphasizes a balance between the environment and society, and the fashion industry will need to change drastically to promote reasonable consumption of durable clothing.

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