



The Cost of Fast Fashion

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Abstract: Fast fashion is defined as the fast-paced production of cut-rate clothing. Fast fashion has taken over the clothing industry as a result of its affordability and accessibility. With its high demand, it encourages excessive consumerism which in turn leads to uncontrolled environmental waste. Through an ecofeminist framework, this study aims to examine fast fashion in various angles by bringing to light the current social issues in relation to economic injustice, environmental impact and over consumption. This study is divided into three parts: 1) a dissection of the fast fashion phenomenon, its development, its advantages and disadvantages, why people support such industry, 2) the ecofeminist concerns brought about by such phenomenon in connection to the producers, consumers, and the environment, and 3) possible alternatives that may address the issues posed by fast fashion. Consequently, this study concludes that although fast fashion is convenient and affordable, it causes long term effects that are beyond repair. Through the ecofeminist framework, feminine values are linked to their traditional social role (such as nurturing and compassion) being the key towards eradicating oppression and domination of subordinate groups and nature. The ecofeminist analysis on fast fashion will serve as a guide as to what can be done to ameliorate the cost of fast fashion and to create recommendations for sustainable fashion alternatives.

Key Words: fast fashion; ecofeminism; sustainability; alternative clothing

1. INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion is convenient and efficient for consumers. However, it is a continuous blow to the sustainability of nature and human ethical conduct. 21st century conditions demand for a more sustainable environment (Fletcher in Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Chan, 2012); primarily it is concerned with social responsibility. Human actions should be performed infinitely without damaging consequences, and most importantly, attain the needs of the modern world without compromising future generations (Patridge in Joy et al., 2012). As such, ecofeminism could remedy the constant issues of fast fashion through its appeal to social awareness of the environment. Ecofeminism claims that all layers of oppression must be acknowledged in true totality; the oppression of women and nature are unquestionably linked and one must consider both to address or neither will be solved (Oster, 2002).



Based on the foregoing it is argued that ecofeminism can provide an alternative principle to the current unsustainable fast fashion clothing. Hence, this study attempted to answer the question: How can an ecofeminist framework address the issue of the unsustainable fast fashion industry? In particular, this research aimed to answer the following:

1. What is fast fashion in clothing and why is it considered to be unsustainable?
2. How does fast fashion affect buyer's attitude?
3. How does fast fashion affect the fashion industry and its companies?
4. What is ecofeminism and what alternative framework can it provide vis-à-vis sustainable fashion?

A literature review was conducted to answer the aforementioned research questions. Data and results coming from various sources were gathered, summarized and used as evidence to support the stated claims in the paper.

2. FAST FASHION AND ITS UNSUSTAINABILITY

Fast fashion satisfies people's constant need for new things due to its mass production and cheap prices, thus making it affordable and convenient to purchase (Rosen, 2017). It continues to be widely produced and purchased in today's society despite unsustainability (Annamma, J., Sherry, J. Jr., Venkatesh, A., Wang, J. & Chan, R., 2012). The notion of 'development' is usually related to environmental annihilation and valued social attributes, therefore, as an alternative, people use the term sustainability rather than sustainable development. (Suton, 2004). With consumers being more demanding and fashion savvy, fashion retailers are then forced to provide quick (fast) fashion (The Economist 2005 cited in Jang, Ko, Chun & Lee, 2012). Since consumer market works in terms of consumption patterns, fast fashion continues to be of more significant among consumers. Although, from the viewpoint of conservative consumers', it is perceived as a 'waste' for the reason that instead of purchasing one high quality item to satisfy one's need, consumers opt to buy more that are of lower quality and then throw old clothes away (Sydney 2008 cited in Jang, et al, 2012).

In order to persist in the competition of the fashion industry, other apparel retailers converted from product-driven to buyer-driven chains, advanced in making alliances with suppliers in different markets, and endorsed their brands (Tyler, Heeley & Bhamra 2006 cited in Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Subsequently, increase in profits allowed them and the manufacturers to deliberately act by associating with overseas factories (Gereffi 1999 cited in Bhardwaj, et al., 2010). This certain infrastructure of fashion apparel industry stressed on promoting quick response through reduced lead times along with maintaining low costs (Bhardwaj et al., 2010). Fast fashion is largely supported by the belief that consumers buy in large quantities and dispose the clothing after some time (Jin & Jung, 2016). Hereafter, the phenomena of sourcing manufacturing and processes in fashion apparel industry to offshore places with low labor costs became a trend, thereby resulting in a substantial cost advantage. In actuality, the impression of cost savings by subcontracting manufacturing to low wage nations turned out to be misleading as the savings sometimes were low in comparison to the cost of uselessness, compulsory mark-downs, and inventory carrying costs (Christopher, Lowson & Peck 2004 cited in Bhardwaj et al, 2010).

In the context of fashion industry, a socially responsible apparel and textile business has 3 conceptual scopes: an orientation encompassing the environment, its people, the apparel/textile products made and consumed, and the systematic impact that production, marketing, and consumption of these products and their



component parts has on multiple stakeholders and the environment. A philosophy that balances ethics/morality with profitability, which is achieved through accountability-based business decisions and strategies... and a desire for outcomes that positively affect, or do very little harm to, the world and its people” (Dickson & Eckman cited in Johnson, Lee, Choi, Mun & Yoo, 2013, p. 188).

In the view of consumers, since most of them may not have substantive knowledge on slow fashion, they ought to still end up purchasing from fast fashion brands. The relationship of the consumers’ environmental values and shopping values highly impacts their judgment when it comes to purchasing clothing. In general, fast fashion has grown 9.7% per year over the last five years, defeating the 6.8% increase of traditional apparel companies (Yun Tan, 2016). Researchers are attributing the unexpected rise of fast fashion to the millennial whom they described as “a generation raised to shop” (Bain, 2015). Many of the current generation see shopping as a form of entertainment, or perhaps, a show of luxury. Furthermore, people who shop for fast fashion have the tendency to buy clothes, even when they are not in any need of them, if only for the purpose of staying in “trend”. Rapid production of clothing is equivalent to constantly changing styles of fashion which makes it difficult for many teenagers to resist shopping, due to their desire to fit into current trends (Cline in Yun Tan, 2016).

With old clothes being rapidly replaced by new ones, this opens the issue of how problematic the fast fashion industry is. People considered ethics in connection to fashion (Busch & Haug, 2016). Furthermore, consumers who have firm environmental beliefs are more likely to perceive slow fashion and sustainable apparel on a positive note. Moreover, individuals who showed strong environmental values are the ones who are perceived as environmentalists (Preuit, 2016). This illustrates that most consumers lack environmental values and knowledge when it comes to slow fashion and its alternatives. The problem is that most people do not have a deeper understanding of slow fashion and sustainable apparel (Preuit, 2016).

3. SUSTAINABLE FASHION AND ECOFEMINISM

According to Kazakevic (2017), sustainable fashion refers to avoiding harmful materials that could damage the environment thereby using natural, sustainable fabrics instead. Ethical fashion refers to the concern for human rights wherein it is assured that workers get to be treated well and paid generously (Kazakevic, 2017). It is also the maximum sourcing and manufacturing of clothing in order to give benefits to the people while avoiding detrimental effects on the environment (Busch & Haug, 2016). Slow fashion concerns the quality and the process of making the clothing. It means that these purchased clothing, although more expensive, can withstand the test of time (Kazakevic, 2017). With the bigger amount of effort and time spent on manufacturing the clothing, the producers enhance the quality of the product, making it more durable. The consumers are expected to buy less but at a higher quality. In fast fashion, it is largely dependent on the volume and budget; while in slow fashion, the manufacturing and consumption is dependent on the value of the clothing produced (Jin & Jung, 2016). A fast fashion ecofeminist theory attends to the improvement of cost and aligns sustainable fashion alternatives (Mukherjee, 2013). Through its advocacy of pursuing social justice in all forms, issues surrounding fast fashion are addressed.

Ecofeminism creates a link between women and environmental destruction as they are both affected by patriarchy and capitalism (Dobscha, 1993). Since it promotes social justice in all forms, ecofeminism examines the issues which involves the environment, consumerism and social structures by regarding the positions of producers, consumers and nature in respect to fast fashion. The fashion industry highly echoes the prevailing



patriarchal and capitalist disposition of society. Subsequently, ecofeminism promotes women's empowerment, environmental preservation, and social justice. It serves as an avenue towards revolutionizing sustainability and improving working conditions through recommending environment-friendly alternatives.

In order to understand how ecofeminism is utilized, a multifaceted approach is done as various modes of oppression are taken into account. These include unethical working conditions and prevalent capitalism that manifest into economic injustice; environmental impact due to the use of chemical dyes and non durable textile therefore worsening the condition of garments being thrown into landfills; and over consumption brought about by the industry's seasonal mass production. Furthermore, women's concern for the well-being of the environment is deemed essential as traditional feminine values dictate that they are regarded as natural caretakers in social structures (Mukherjee, 2013; Warren, 2000). The key to the ill cost of fast fashion is through fostering the value of sustainability in the industry and building up people's interest in protecting the environment and awareness of the possible consequences of their consumption methods. According to Busch and Haug (2016), social consciousness regarding ethical fashion has been growing, leading to consumers and ethical consumption, which is the avoidance of practices and products that can cause detrimental effects to the environment and the people (Busch & Haug, 2016).

Various brands have proven that combining sustainability and addressing consumers' desires (in terms of cost and designs) is possible. A Peace Treaty (APT) is a slow fashion brand based in New York City that sells items whose manufacturing process involves traditional crafting techniques from all over the world. APT works with artisans from cooperative indigenous communities and provide assistance to them through the business in return. Among these are widowed women from Kabul, Afghanistan who practice age-old hand-embroidery, block printers and textile weavers from Pakistan, and jamdani weavers from Bangladesh. Cooperation with APT has helped these communities in terms of sustainable income, livelihood, recognition, and preservation also through encouraging younger generations to learn the ancient techniques (A Peace Treaty, n.d.). Affordable high quality apparel is provided by Siizu and Alternative Apparel - American brands that utilize sustainable manufacturing practices and organic fabric. Workers' rights and ethical working conditions are recognized by Alternative Apparel's certification from the Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production (WRAP) and having factories that follow the Fair Labor Association (FLA) Workplace Code of Conduct, while Siizu provides transparency of the whole manufacturing process from source to finish (Alternative Apparel, 2018; Siizu, n.d.). Fast fashion designer John Patrick launched Organic in 2004 in attempt to merge the concepts of "Beauty and ethics. Green and global.", and his brand continues to strive in the industry until present (Patrick, J., 2018).

Sustainable fashion that espouse the ideas of ecofeminism also thrive at the local industry. Vivien Ramsay's eco-friendly line named "Earth" that uses dyes extracted from native flora such as coffee husks and almond leaves. Anthill Fabric Gallery, on the other hand, provides indigenous textiles that are sourced and produced ethically as sustainable fabric alternatives (Lacanilao, 2016). These actions and decisions, though small steps or full transformations, contribute an impact on the fashion industry. Changes towards the benefit of the environment and social structures without sacrificing the industry's value and aesthetics is proven achievable.

4. ARGUMENTS VS. ECOFEMINISM

One of the main claims of ecofeminism is the direct correlation between ecology and feminism. It states that ecology and feminism must cooperate to achieve their goals. In objection, it is an exaggeration to say that the two aspects are more interdependent than they are related. Despite the connection, the goals of ecology can be



met while those of feminism are not, and again vice versa (Biehl, 1991). However, instead of completely disregarding the claims of ecofeminism (that the two aspects must cooperate and happen together), the argument can be improved by clarifying that the progress of ecology or feminism only makes it easier for the other to improve as well. Critics also note the rigid biological traits associated with women in the framework. At the heart of the ecofeminism framework is the belief that women and nature are connected due to similarities in traits. Women are defined as biologically caring and nurturing (traits said to be possessed by nature as well). This automatically confines women to such feminine attributes expected of them, and fails to acknowledge the evolution of gender roles (Archambault, 1993). Thus, the idea that ecofeminism can solve ecological problems by addressing the portrayal of women is outdated and not as applicable as it may have been before.

5. CONCLUSION

There are ethical concerns that need to be emphasized to ascertain the actual cost of fast fashion, contrary to average consumer perceptions. The same can be applied to further find sustainable alternatives for it. Through ecofeminism, the issues of fast fashion can be addressed by promoting values such as environmental preservation and social justice. Fast fashion induces social economic injustices through labor and harm to the environment, wasting resources and emitting toxic substances. This study concludes that despite fast fashion's affordability and convenience, its true cost is the irreversible effects to the environment and its workers. By applying ecofeminism, the possibility of sustainable alternatives to fast fashion is doable as methods such as the use of indigenous and sustainable materials in the manufacturing of clothing and conversion of clothing brands to promote sustainable, ethical and slow fashion (wherein the process of creating clothes does not harm the environment and the workers) gives ethical and fair treatment to all.

As long as no action is done, fast fashion will only continue to be popular and alongside it, come problems - its detrimental impacts to the environment, oppression, and economic injustices. The mentioned issues are ones that require strong and immediate solutions - in this case, ecofeminism. With an ecofeminist perspective, women empowerment, environmental preservation, and social justice are promoted. Moreover, it is a multi-faceted approach that takes into account the consumers, producers, and nature. Traditional feminine values of being natural caretakers are also given importance as concern for the wellbeing of social structures is given action vis-à-vis dealing with the cost of fast fashion. In such a way, the closer to a globally ecofeminist view the people are, the more likely can fast fashion be made into something ultimately more sustainable.

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