

Unsustainability in the Current Fast-Fashion Industry: The Social Pillar

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Abstract: - There are countless clothing networks that articulate in the rhythm of the so-called fast-fashion, term that refers to the current movement in which fashion trends undergo rapid changes, producing clothes of low durability and quality. This dynamic of the market allows high profitability of such corporations since the work developed under precarious working conditions and fragile environmental legislations are not accounted into the cost of clothing, corroborating to the formation of social and environmental liabilities. Given that it is fundamental that product costs begin to incorporate the externalities of their production, it is interesting to discuss the facts that have led to current unsustainability in the social pillar of this industry, critically analyzing consumer behavior throughout the history of fashion and the current behavior of the consumer in the face of human rights violations occurring in the fast-fashion industry, in addition to verify the current working conditions scenario relating to the liabilities of labor exploitation and violation of human rights.

Key-Words: - Social pillar; sustainability; fast-fashion; clothing industry; textile industry.

1 Introduction

Numerous are the chains of stores that are articulated in the rhythm of the so-called fast-fashion. The term in English refers to the current ephemeral fashion movement, in which fashion trends undergo rapid changes and focus on mass consumption, producing clothes of low durability and quality.

This dynamic of the market allows high profitability of the corporations of this branch, since only the private costs of the manufacturing process carried out, mostly played in underdeveloped countries, under precarious working conditions, violation of human rights and fragile or non-existent environmental legislations, are considered.

Even if the fast-fashion industry products are manufactured under such conditions, the consumption of these clothes and footwear continues to grow. In the current context of globalization and consumer behavior linked to advertising, fashion industry has become a vehicle for mass clothing. The success of industries in the mass production of fashion manufactures is also a consequence of the consumer's attempt to match its purchasing power with someone who inspires the consumer and has a superior purchasing power [1].

Such non-conformities of this capitalist model of production, specifically of the fast-fashion industry, corroborate with social liabilities formation, making it necessary for the development of this industry to be rethought in order to promote social inclusion and build sustainability into processes, as proposed in the ninth goal from the plan of action proposed in Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, by the United Nations.

Therefore, it is interesting to discuss the facts that have led to current unsustainability in the social pillar of this industry, critically analyzing consumer behavior throughout the history of fashion and the current behavior of the consumer in face of human rights violations occurring in the fast-fashion industry, in addition to verify the actual working conditions scenario relating them to the liabilities of labor exploitation and violation of human rights.

This article begins with a brief theoretical contribution on the dynamics of the fast-fashion industry emphasizing the social impacts of producing low-quality and durability clothing.

Then, the paper presents a view of consumer ethics in the purchase of fast-fashion products and also brings to light the quick diffusion of trends in

social networks and clothing department stores originally produced by fashion professionals who end up suffering infringement of intellectual property.

Finally, the paper presents a discussion of the need for consumers to invest in the image at any cost and, knowing the existence of the human rights violation in clothing production and often superfluous needs of such pieces, to address ways in which the fast-fashion industry could have a mindset change in order to become more sustainable.

2 A Social and Behavioral Perspective on the Evolution of Fashion

Historically, the reason for wearing clothes has never been well defined. Some anthropologists claim that the suits were used as protection against cold since primitive man, however, this did not justify the fact that populations located in the fertile lands of the Nile and Euphrates rivers wear suits even in the light of day, for instance [2].

Others claim that the main reason for dressing was due to shame, as it had been reported in the book of Genesis, after Adam and Eve committed the first sin.

Despite the lack of a reason for using clothes, many are the paintings in artifacts of ancient Egypt that allow to associate the garments to the social class, as it is portrayed by Reference [3].

Egyptian slaves in the paintings appear semi or completely naked, while members of the royal family or upper classes were covered with fine fabrics and gold accessories (Fig.1).

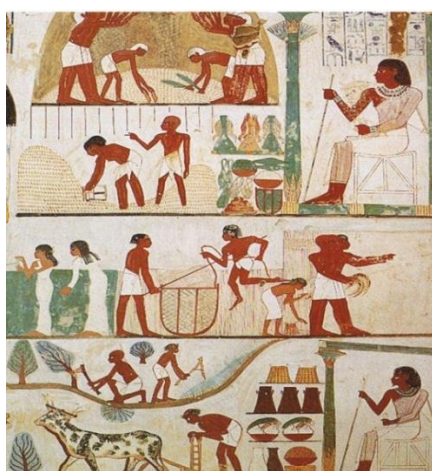


Fig.1. Painting showing the typical costumes of Ancient Egypt. Source: [4].

Likewise, in the empire of China, clothing was defined according to the function that each person prosecuted. Clothing followed the principle of hierarchy and not the principle of utility [5].

In the Renaissance period and in the sixteenth century, according to Reference [5], fashion in Italy and England revealed a distinction between the costumes of peasants, patricians, ambassadors and even academic's attire, such as Luther's attire which represents, until today, the clergy. Man's prosperity was once again associated with fashion.

Another aspect that the author points out in her work as interesting in the history of fashion is the rapid diffusion of using lace ribbons tied in women's hair in England and France, as soon as Louis XIV expresses admiration for such style. This fact says about the immediate impact of a famous person having the ability to dictate fashion, and to persuade all classes in matching what their idealization of life represents [6].

By 1840, a well-dressed man should have, according to Reference [5], six pants for the day, a pants for the night, four vests for the day and one for the night. The exigency of the decade revealed that the more pieces a man possessed, the greater the elegance and his purchasing power.

With the Great Depression and the period of the World Wars, the fashion process changes due to the scarcity of raw material to manufacture clothes. As is usual, humankind has sought to improve the fashion industry techniques over the years, replacing the use of animal skins for plant fibers that came to Europe from Asia and, after the Second World War, replacing it with natural fibers which were complemented by synthetic fibers such as polyester [5].

This shortage in supply was covered by the development of synthetic fabrics in the United States of America, a fact that contributed to the increase similarity of the clothes between classes. In 1941, the utility principle prevailed as there was a rationing of the resources available for such industry [5].

At the end of the war, England began mass production of clothing, spurring the emergence of many British sewing schools, expanding throughout Europe. In Paris, some students made a young revolution claiming a more liberal fashion, which included enhancement to the woman's body from the use of miniskirts and tighter jeans [7].

From this revolution onwards, the industries of *prêt-à-porter* clothing, a term in French that means

ready-to-wear, appeared that focused on serial production - conflicting to the exclusivity characteristic of *hauté* couture - and the intermediate cost of the pieces. It can be said that from such a fashionable revolution, there was an upwelling of consumption, concomitant with intense sales and rapid diffusion throughout the world [3].

3 The Current Social Scene of Fast-Fashion

When analyzing the fashion industry in the 21st century, there is a great tendency towards a disposable fashion style, in which consumers around the world have easy access to a range of clothing models due to rapid diffusion in social networks, lower prices and short-term until their disposal. According to Reference [8], often clothes are discarded before being even used.

The scenario outlined above is the view of the fast-fashion industry under the eyes of the consumer, in which low prices are associated with the supply and demand law. However, the fast-fashion industry goes far beyond a pattern of demand behavior.

The reason of the very low clothing costs sold on major global networks such as in *Topshop*, *Forever 21*, *Zara* and *Primark* has been widely discussed by researchers around the world who bring industry scenarios from the political, environmental, economic and social view [9].

Fig. 2 show some of the industries involved in the fast-fashion model relating the average price charged on clothes and the amount of style that the pieces carry under the dictatorship imposed by fashion at a given time.

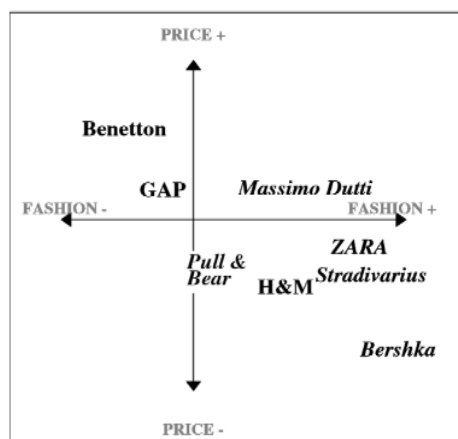


Fig.2. List of world brands, prices and style scale.
Source: [10]

It is well known that the textile industry is still characterized by labor intensive and under poor working conditions, used as a strategy of minimizing costs to ensure competitiveness in a market as large and rapidly changing as fashion.

During the 1980s and 1990s, according to Reference [11], wages in developed countries were adjusted, including higher wages and better working conditions. Since then, the outsourcing of services in the textile industry in the underdeveloped countries has grown rapidly.

Frequently, large brands from developed countries such as the United States and European Union countries outsource their production services to countries like China and India, as can be seen in the statistics cited earlier in this section. These nations become attractive because of their abundant labor and low wages.

In this same period, the retail sector became more intense, especially in countries such as the USA and Great Britain, which demanded even lower costs from suppliers. Price pressures due to the competitiveness of large networks, coupled with shorter life-cycle dimensions, increasingly resulted in shifting production outward [11].

The new clothing stock model has become, since that decade, a multi-season retail, in which the clothing collections that used to change during the two or four seasons of the year change every four or six weeks. This transition impacted the suppliers, since it imposed a higher production speed, minimizing deadlines and expenses with human and material resources [11].

With the advent of technological innovations such as computer-controlled cutting (CCC), network competitiveness has grown, and together, deregulation of labor markets in the USA and UK has increased. However, deregulation in these countries was not hidden. Disclosure of problems and abuses associated with unpaid overtime, below minimum wage and insecure workplaces were evident, especially in the USA, causing more networks to shift their production sector to Third World countries [11].

In 1994, amidst the gradual liberalization of trade, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was terminated, which, after 50 years of validity, led to the end of a period in which the textile and clothing industries were heavily regulated. With the subsequent emergence of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the trade regime for textiles changes dramatically at a time when

quotas for the export of textiles and clothing from underdeveloped to developed countries established since the Multifibre Arrangement (1974) have been totally eliminated.

In India, until the mid-1980s, a policy was in force whose regulatory mechanisms used for the textile and clothing industries included granting licenses to start a fusion, a permission for expansion, a renewal and diversification, and control over exports and imports [12].

Since 1991, when trade liberalization policies were launched, this policy was reformed and the delicensing of some sectors, i.e., the non-need to obtain an environmental license to operate, as well as the removal of export barriers and the cutting of import duties, especially for exporters [12].

Another characteristic pointed out by the author is that this type of industry in India is divided into a small organized sector, called the formal sector, and a large disorganized also called informal sector. The organized sector, which accounts for 10% of an industry's total workforce, consists of units covered by statutory labor laws, where employed workers are covered by the access to good working conditions, wages and social protection. In contrast, the informal sector is not covered by legal labor laws (or sporadically covered) and social protection. It is worth mentioning that, in the case of working women, 97.40% are working in the informal sector of the textile industry [12].

Under the liberal trade regime, China, in 1980, began investing in the textile industry and became the leading exporter of clothing to the USA, taking the place of Mexico. When it accedes to the WTO in 2001, and when quotas are totally eliminated in 2005, China becomes the largest exporter and textile producer in the world, achieving an annual growth rate of 21% in this sector [11]. Today, China has more than 100,000 manufacturers, employing more than 10 million people, mostly located in five provinces of the east coast [13].

With trade liberalization, clothing suppliers to the European Union (EU) feared competition with the Chinese. Pakistan was one of the largest suppliers of clothing to the EU, but with political instability within the country, its exports virtually stagnated in 2004. Bangladesh has continued to heavily export worldwide, as production capacity has slowed in China, justified by the increase in labor costs, partly due to the policy of a single child and the quick industrialization in the country [11].

Production in Bangladesh, according to a report drawn up by the Bangladesh National Committee for Labor, indicated that in 2001 there were 1.6 million garment workers, 85% of whom were young women between the ages of 16 and 25, who worked 12 to 14 hours a day, for seven days a week with occasional shifts of 20 hours. The salary paid was 13 to 18 cents per hour [11].

In 2013, the monthly salaries of this branch in Bangladesh were around US\$ 40, which corresponds to a quarter of the same sector work in China. Working conditions include absence of emergency exits, inadequate sanitary facilities and poor ventilation [11].

A fact that proved negligence with working conditions in the textile and clothing sector in Bangladesh occurred on April 24, 2013, in the city of Dhaka. The Rana Plaza, an eight-story building where six garment factories operated, collapsed and left 1,138 dead, most of whom were young women [13].

The previous year, *Tazreen Fashions Limited* located in the Ashulia district just outside Dhaka caught on fire while it was in operation, with 1,200 people working at the time of the fire, killing about 120 workers. The company produced clothing for American, British, German, Italian, Spanish and Swedish buyers, including *Carrefour*, *Delta Apparel*, *Disney* and *Walmart* [14]. However, such events were not only exclusive to Bangladesh.

In Cambodia, in 2013, three people died when a floor piled with material collapsed in a tennis factory in Cambodia [11]. With no change in working conditions, the clothing industry in Cambodia has boosted GDP growth, and currently accounts for about 80% of Cambodia's total exports.

The World Trade Organization has recognized the International Labor Organization (ILO) as the body competent to negotiate labor standards and prevent accidents such as Bangladesh and Cambodia from happening. The International Labor Organization identifies eight conventions as "fundamental", covering the identified themes in which there is (Y) or (N) ratification of selected countries to be associated with these conventions in Table 1.

Table 1. Ratification of some Asian countries in ILO conventions. Source: [13].

Convention	Ratification of selected countries							
	China	Bangla-desh	India	Pakistan	Vietnam	Indonesia	Sri Lanka	South Korea
Forced Labour	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Equal pay	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Under the abolition of forced labor	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N
Discrimination (employment and occupation)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Minimum age	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Worst Forms of Child Labor	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

From another perspective, the fast-fashion industry also affects a variety of people involved in the design of original clothing pieces that, after a person's influence on the media, are quickly imitated for mass production and sale. Design piracy threatens the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people employed by the United States fashion industry [15].

According to the author, on average, a single collection takes from six to twelve months to be created and costs about US\$ 6 million to produce; however, design piracy prevents designers from making a return on that investment. Because of modern technology, "a design can go from the track of a fashion show to retail stores within a matter of days, without protection from the US Copyright Act, for example" [15].

With today's corporate trend toward environmental sustainability and social responsibility, fast-fashion industries are experiencing pressures from the media and stakeholders to become more aware of the importance of sustainable development in the economic, environmental and in the social field. For instance, famous international companies such as *Zara*, *H&M* and *GAP* are using green marketing to affect consumer selections [16].

In a few cases, the corporations in this sector seek restructuring of the chain, that is, they try since

the raw material to adopt sustainable strategies of production and sale. However, most corporations still use corporate sustainability marketing, which is only present in the marketing corporation itself, not involving suppliers of raw materials, for example (see Fig. 3).

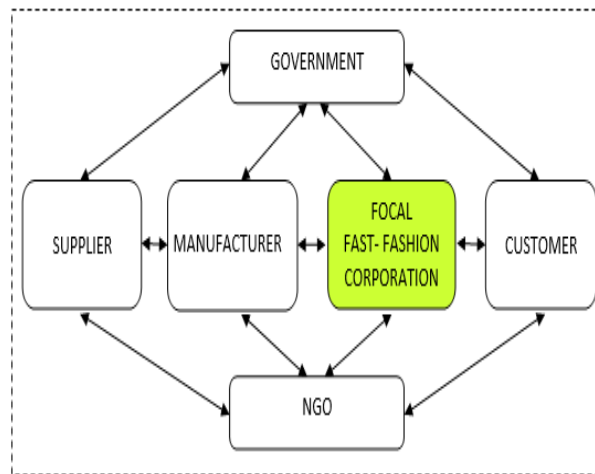


Fig. 3. Supply chain of the fast-fashion industry and its stakeholders involved in sustainability. Source: Adapted from Reference [16].

Some suppliers of famous fast-fashion brands ignore environmental protection policies and others treat their employees unfairly, as previously reported in this section. These problems show the separation between the pursuit of maximizing economic benefits and social responsibility. It is important to say that corporations, by providing honest information to the public, could change the perception of their social responsibility held by stakeholders and consumers [16].

The provision of accurate information to interested parties is called fair trade. This category of trade can be described, according to Reference [8] as a partnership based on transparency and respect that aims at greater equity in international trade. According to Reference [17], fair trade is the most prominent label used for ethical products. This label can be applied to both the making of the clothes and to the textiles of which the clothes are made and the most prominent example of social sustainability in the production of clothes, which can be applied to both the making of clothes and the textiles of which the clothes are made, thus offering access to information on the entire production chain to consumers of fast-fashion products.

4 Ethics of Consumption of Fast-Fashion Products

The act of some corporations in the fast-fashion industry discussed in the previous section may be characterized as unethical behavior. To mislead consumers, disguise or omit the reality of supply chain involvement in environmental pollution and the exploitation of workers are essentially caused by opportunistic behavior [16].

Driven by external motivations, many consumers are driven to the consumption of products, not knowing the social costs involved in producing the piece of clothing they are buying. On the other hand, many are also consumers who have access to information of this reality, but do not give up having less expense in the acquisition of their objects of desire.

According to the study by Reference [16], such motivations for external needs are best understood from the needs hierarchy theory, which includes the physiological need (D1), the need for security (D2), the need for love (D3), the need for esteem (D4) and the need for self-actualization (D5), shown in Fig.4 below.

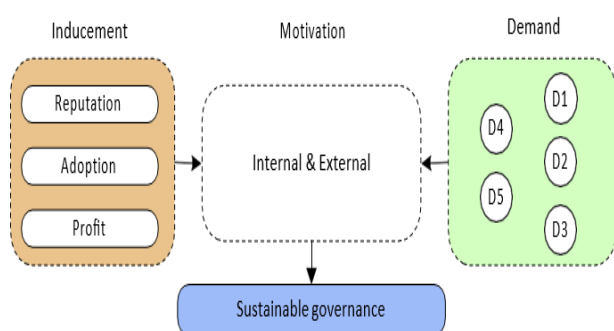


Fig. 4. Motivations for sustainable governance in the product supply chain. Source: [16].

It is understood by physiological necessity that consumers demand that the product serve a general function. The need for security is tied to the fact that the consumer is aware of the effects that the product can cause. Already the need for love is linked to the help that the product can offer to improve the social image of the consumer who uses it. When the consumer gives value to the symbolism of the products, it is called need of esteem. Finally, the need for self-actualization addresses individual preferences of a consumer for a brand or style [16].

Such needs refer to the characteristics of clothing consumption in the Middle Ages, as discussed earlier, when purchasing a product to match some

social class. Today, it is said that there was a cultural revolution with the push of marketing and advertising, actors that made consumers demand bigger and bigger varieties and acquire a great quantity of pieces that give a feeling of instant happiness of being dressed like an icon of the fashion, without major investments [11].

A relevant fact about such exacerbated consumption is the lack of questioning on the part of many consumers of the origin and the reason why their pieces are so cheap and yet they remain similar to a piece used by that rich idol. Despite well-documented abuses of what happens in fast-fashion producing countries, Western consumers remain relatively indifferent to the situation of these foreign workers and to changing their buying behavior [11].

Fair trade is not attractive to the capitalist consumer. After all, paying a much higher price for items just to ensure that they were not made in sweat factories (a term that came from the term "sweatshops" in English referring to industries of extreme exploitation of workers) would not allow the consumer of low or medium purchasing power could possess so many pieces of clothing that would meet their needs of love and self-realization.

In addition to fair trade, the term sustainable consumption has been widely disseminated to the branch of the fast-fashion industry. According to Reference [8], sustainable consumption of clothes can be divided into three stages: purchase, maintenance and divestment.

This category of consumption reveals behavior of ethical consumers who make selection of sustainable products, boycotts of unsustainable products and act with the philosophy of anti-consumption [18]. However, Reference [8] believes that the reason why consumers remain so tied to unsustainable consumption behavior is due to the lack of incentives for more sustainable consumption.

Studies reported by Reference [8] found that, in general, consumers prioritize style above ethical issues in the purchase of clothing. The major limitation of sustainable consumption may still be the difficulty encountered for consumers to know whether or not they are buying products that are sustainable due to the lack of transparent information at the point of sale.

5 Final Considerations

The attempt to insert sustainability in the various industrial sectors, especially in the case of the textile sector, still seems very intangible. The generic sustainability that has been built up in the image of some fast-fashion companies does not often reflect whether environmental issues and social issues have been accounted for in the price of products, leaving liabilities along the chain of processes, that is, from the planting of cotton, for example, through weavers until reaching the consumer.

What was interesting in the brief historical analysis of fashion in this article was that the flaw in the social pillar of this market does not depend only on the owners of such big brands in the fast-fashion world. Fashion, historically shows a system based on propagating an image, following not the principles of utility but the principles of hierarchy, where who has such "clothes of the season" or those who possess a huge collection of clothes transmit the image for society.

The major limitation of sustainable consumption may still be the difficulty encountered for consumers to know whether or not they are buying products that are sustainable due to the lack of transparent information at the point of sale.

Based on the concept of society, from Latin *societas*, which consists of the friendly association of a group, this paper proposes that efforts be undertaken for part of the regulatory bodies and agencies who care for ensuring respect for human rights, to equalize the wage bases of workers involved in the fast-fashion industry, to incorporate the social costs of liabilities into a precarious working environment, to apply laws that promote benefits to every society, promote human dignity and are maintained efficiency of production processes.

Concomitantly, the consumption pattern of society must be changed, promoting less demands for clothes and more acceptance of minimalism, that is, the concept of living with what is, in fact, necessary and sufficient to fulfill the function of dressing. In addition, it is essential to promote less waste of parts, prioritizing quality under quantity, and prioritizing parts manufactured in environments that do not use slave labor and, above all, that do not violate any human right, and consumers even receive tax incentives if they purchase such sustainable products.

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