The Ethics of Getting Dressed

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**Recommended Citation**

Beniwal, Charvi () "The Ethics of Getting Dressed," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 15, Article 1. Available at: [https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol15/iss1/1](https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol15/iss1/1)

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The Ethics of Getting Dressed
Charvi Beniwal
This paper was originally developed for a Writing 101 course taught by Dr. Kelsi Morrison-Atkins.

Research Question
How do the historical transitions in fashion norms contribute to the emergence of sustainable fashion, and what are the implications for contemporary fashion consumers in terms of their choices and the broader societal and environmental consequences?

Introduction
The world of fashion undergoes profound evolution with time. They reflect societal changes, technological advancements, and shifting cultural values. In recent years, a new paradigm has emerged that challenges the traditional norms of clothing designs, sales, and usage. The focal point of this transformation has been the rapidly growing concept of sustainable fashion. Through this research paper, first I want to see the historical transition that gave birth to current norms of clothing designs, sales, and usage, and as I do so, I will highlight the challenges that emerged and analyze why they in turn called for sustainable fashion measures. Broadly speaking, during the course of this research I realized that every human is part of today’s fashion emergency in some capacity. However, this particular research paper aims to reach fashion ‘consumers’ and make them aware of the consequences of their choices to them and others. This research aims to trace the evolution of fashion paradigms, pinpoint crucial obstacles that have prompted the move toward sustainable fashion, and emphasize how important it is for consumers to be aware of and make conscious decisions when it comes to solving the urgent issue of modern fashion.

The History of the Apparel Industry and the Emergence of Fast Fashion
I believe that understanding the “ways and methods” of the past helps us understand the “ways and methods” of today. So, it is important to look at what happened in the past that has today led to the emergence of sustainable fashion (the latest in the fashion industry). The biggest evolutions in the fashion industry occurred during the 18th century. A revolution took place in
Britain and the Americas which broadly paved the way for mass production of ready-made clothing, a popular variant of this idea is called ‘fast fashion’ today.

In pre-Industrial-Revolution Britain, the rise of slop shops, akin to modern-day thrift stores, was a catalyst for the demand for ready-made clothing (*Linden*). These shops were mostly frequented by working-class individuals who lacked the time and resources to make their own clothes. This trend normalized the purchase of pre-made garments. Their popularity created a shift in consumer preferences, establishing a burgeoning market for ready-to-wear clothing. This transformation significantly predates common perceptions, laying the foundation for the eventual mass production of apparel and marking a crucial turning point in the history of the clothing industry.

Meanwhile, the garment industry also began to expand in the United States post-industrialization (*Linden*). The foundation for the same was laid by the American South's utilization of slavery to meet Britain's demand for raw cotton. This reliance on slave labor grew significantly in the early 1800s, following Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793. At this point, due to technological advancements, cotton was efficiently getting processed in European factories, particularly after the power loom's invention around 1801. Consequently, the supply of cotton in the States increased throughout the first half of the 19th century, which in turn caused the prices to dip. This affordability factor allowed individuals from the lower economic classes to access cheaper fabrics, thus, contributing to the growth of a thriving garment industry in the United States from the mid-1800s onwards (*Linden*).

However, as time progressed, the landscape of manufacturing changed back then, as rising operational costs prompted companies to seek cost-effective solutions, leading to the outsourcing of production to countries offering cheaper labor. This shift also marked a significant transition in the industry's trajectory, influencing not only the production process but also shaping global trade patterns.

It is interesting to note here that there were evident historical ties between the US and British apparel sectors and they attest to the industry's critical role in the advancement of national economies. They demonstrate how the sector developed into a significant economic force from its beginnings in the production and trade of cotton. Furthermore, its evolution reflected sociological shifts in addition to industrial and economic developments. Changes in socioeconomic status and demography were major factors in forming the consumer landscape.
As a result, the consumer base became more diverse, which profoundly changed the dynamics of the fashion industry.

Now, entering the era of fast fashion—an outcome of outsourced production and evolving consumer preferences. Fast fashion has revolutionized accessibility to trendy clothing by offering high-fashion styles at significantly lower prices. However, this affordability comes at a cost. The products of fast fashion are typically characterized by their low quality and disposability, lasting only a limited number of washes. But, all in all, that has marked a departure from the earlier fashion industry models that focused on limited but higher-quality product offerings.

**Modern Day Fast Fashion trends**

Modern-day fast fashion is spread across the globe, however, the major reflection of the fast fashion industry lies in prominent Western countries. The Western world benefits significantly from globalization, thus, offering a surplus of fashion trends through giant retailers, both in physical stores and online. For many in the West, shopping for clothes has evolved into a leisure pursuit, providing not just utility but also entertainment and pleasure. In 2007, a research team from MIT, Stanford, and Carnegie Mellon conducted a study that used fMRI technology to examine how the brain reacts when consumers from Western countries shopped for clothing. They discovered that the brain shows greatly increased activity when we shop (Knutson et al.). The researchers concluded that consumers gain direct pleasure from shopping but they gain an even greater pleasure from receiving a bargain. This aspect of seeking affordability and style is central to the appeal of fast fashion. At the core of it, fast fashion's core objective revolves around optimizing the supply chain and leveraging globalization to access low-cost labor and international markets.

To provide a preview of how MNCs work with intricate consumer input and the latest trends within seconds, here is a case study of Zara, one of the biggest fast fashion brands in the wor. They use various methods to keep up with the current trends. Zara's distinctive strategy revolves around agility and customer-centricity (Ledezma). With 300 in-house designers and feedback from global store managers tracked via information technology (IT), Zara swiftly collects and utilizes real-time sales data and customer demand insights. This data informs designers, enabling the rapid creation of new designs, swiftly outsourced to factories for production. Zara's seamless process ensures a constant stream of fresh fashion designs,
bypassing traditional cycles and meeting consumer demands promptly. This approach solidifies Zara's position as a fast fashion leader, consistently delivering the latest trends to an ever-changing market.

Understandably so, it is evident that this poses numerous implications for both the producers and the consumers in the fashion industry. Producers might face pressures related to supply chain efficiency, environmental responsibility, and ethical considerations in labor practices. On the other hand, as a consumer personally, I enjoy affordable and trendy clothing but face implications related to frequent consumption, environmental impact, and ethical awareness. As the industry evolves, balancing these implications becomes increasingly crucial for sustainability and ethical practices within the fashion ecosystem.

**Environmental and Consumer Responsibility**

Bin Shen (2014) found that famous fashion brands such as Benetton, H&M, Zara, Adidas, and C&A were blamed for the non-sustainability of the environment. Nonetheless, many companies are much more conscious of the conservation of the environment and green practices. As the fashion industry has a huge impact on the global environment, conscious consumers are growing social and environmental awareness which has a direct influence on co-fashion consumption. Consumers have begun to gain the understanding that if the supply chain is sustainable then more natural resources will be used with the least carbon dioxide emission in the environment.

With more than 3100 stores across 53 markets, the Swedish company H&M launched a campaign called "Conscious Action" that has increased employment opportunities in developing nations, increased the use of recycled resources in production, and taught consumers to be more ethical. All of these factors have combined to make the market more sustainable in terms of the economy, society, and environment. Nevertheless, the changing dynamics of the fashion industry have forced retailers to cut the cost of design, production, and even the profit margin which ultimately added speed to the market. Following the 1990s, there was a significant shift in the global fashion sector that coincided with environmental concerns about fair trade and the green market of the future.

Additionally, it showed that buyers were willing to pay a premium price for environmentally friendly products. The rise of eco-consciousness among consumers presents a
significant opportunity for the fashion industry. Multinational campaigns that successfully integrate environmental responsibility can benefit both fashion and the environment, while also paving the way for promising research and development (R&D) for companies like H&M.

Studies have shown that young consumers in Canada and Hong Kong, in particular, exhibit a strong awareness of environmental sustainability when it comes to fast fashion (Annamma Joy et al, 2012). This growing trend presents a valuable market segment for companies that can demonstrate a commitment to eco-friendly practices.

There's a clear corporate social responsibility (CSR) for fashion companies to embrace eco-friendly production methods. By implementing sustainable practices throughout the production process, companies can attract environmentally conscious consumers and further motivate them to make eco-conscious purchasing decisions. Research from the Korean Society for Clothing Industry supports this notion, indicating a positive correlation between a company's environmental values and consumer purchasing behavior (Byung-Sook Hong, 2010).

However, it's important to acknowledge that the impact of CSR efforts can vary geographically. Other studies suggest that corporate social responsibility initiatives may have a differing impact on a nation's socioeconomic culture depending on the specific context. Therefore, companies need to be mindful of tailoring their sustainability efforts to resonate with the specific values and priorities of their target markets.

**Conclusion**

Growing up, I reveled in the thrill of chasing fashion trends, my wardrobe a revolving door of fast fashion finds. But everything changed during college when a documentary exposed the darker side of the industry. Suddenly, my passion for fashion was overshadowed by guilt and a newfound sense of responsibility. Determined to make a change, I delved into the world of sustainable fashion, educating myself on eco-friendly materials and fair labor practices. It wasn't easy to break away from the allure of fast fashion, but with each conscious decision, I felt a sense of empowerment.

My journey mirrors the industry's shifting landscape. While fast fashion still dominates, there's a growing movement towards sustainability. Even giants like H&M are pivoting towards more responsible practices. In conclusion, consumer consciousness plays a pivotal role in
reshaping the fashion industry. By making informed choices and supporting ethical brands, we wield significant influence. Together, we can steer the industry towards a more sustainable and socially responsible future.

References


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