

Millennials and “Clean Fashion”: A Sustainable Approach to the Responsible Consumption of Fashion

We all wear clothes, and whether we buy them from major retail stores or thrift stores, we are consumers of the fashion industry. We are not always mindful of where our clothes are manufactured or where they go once we dispose of them. The US Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates that the spending on clothes has increased significantly in the 21st century than in any other time (Cline 22)¹. A significant part of this increase has been due to the rise of the “fast fashion” industry. “Fast fashion” is the term used by many retailers to describe the quick nature designs move from the production process to major retail stores. Fast fashion has a higher rate of return because its prices are significantly marked down, often unethically. Fashion consumers get excited about the lower prices and discount rates without considering the cost extracted from workers in garment factories and the pollution incurred by the environment. Garment factories in Southeast Asian countries and several African countries have caused the deaths of many workers.² Major retail groups have come under scrutiny about their labor, safety, and wage standards. Despite the outrage that has been voiced about the effects of fast fashion, very little is being done to change the trajectory of the industry. Major consumers of the fast fashion industry are millennials³, many of whom are still in college and working minimum wage jobs and to whom the remarkably low prices of the fast fashion industry appeals to. Nonetheless, research shows that millennials are also more willing to work for and support ethical organizations than

¹ Elizabeth Cline is an author who spent years in the fast fashion industry. Cline’s book *Overdressed* is used as an integral part of the research and discourse that is done in this paper. This paper specifically and intentionally applies her research to millennials.

² The unethical practices of garment factories and their effects will be discussed later.

³ Millennials are considered the generation from 1982 to 2002 by social researchers and analysts (Spain & McGlone, 195).

they are unethical companies (Spain & McGlone 199). Some would argue that if millennials were aware of fair trade or “clean” fashion the fast fashion industry would simply become a thing of the past. Judith W. Spain and Vernon McGlone, researchers at the University of Kentucky and University of the Cumberlands respectively, argue that it is not enough for millennials to care about the problem but they need to be motivated to act. They think that millennials are aware of the injustices that exist and want to cause corporate social change (Spain & McGlone 195). If this is the case then the clean fashion industry should be able to capitalize on the millennial desire for change. Though fast fashion prices are attractive to millennials, the ethos and ethics of fair trade fashion also appeal to this group. By incorporating some aspects of the “fast fashion” industry, fair trade fashion can be even more appealing to millennials and become a sustainable fashion alternative.

The fashion industry has not always used the fast fashion model for production or retail. The GAP played a big role in the shift to fast fashion during the 1980s. GAP was the first retail store to have an in-house designer, which meant costs were extremely low and consumers could buy “designer” clothes without spending extra or going into a designer shop (Cline 18). Everyone could now afford to look trendy and wear clothes that were inexpensive yet looked the same as high-end fashion, but were made with lower quality. Without intending to cause a shift in the fashion industry GAP had revolutionized the model other retailers were using. Target, which had its inception in 1902, had manufactured clothes on a two-season model. H&M since it was founded in 1947 had also never experimented with lowering costs to achieve higher sales. The new GAP model for production meant that stores like Target and H&M could have their own designers and

plummet costs. Retail stores had shifted from having two trend seasons, and instead switched out trends so fast they needed another method of production. Initially, most garment factories that produced clothes for the American fashion industry were housed in either New York or Los Angeles. Nevertheless, as major retailers needed to produce clothes in bulk quickly and in a manner that was least expensive, they started outsourcing labor and production. Mexico was the center of production earlier in the rise of the fast fashion industry. It was not too long until even Mexico could not achieve the low costs that most stores needed in order to break even and outsourcing labor and production went further into Southeast Asia and certain West African countries. This shift was detrimental for American garment factories and many of the American factories could not compete with the low prices and soon went out of business. Fast fashion by the early 90s had completely changed the way the fashion industry worked in every regard.

Fast fashion encouraged offshore outsourcing, which meant a significant decrease in the quality of clothes. In order for garment factories to meet their daily requirement, they had to simplify designs. Simplified designs meant that fabric was taken out or specific stitches were not used. The quality and care taken in clothes making of decades past declined as companies demanded higher volumes. For higher volumes of production to be met, workers could not spend a majority of their time trying to understand designs. They simply had to find a way that made all their work easier and increase production using the least difficult way possible. Many fast fashion garment factories still use this method of production where quality does not matter. The bottom line is clothes are produced in a speedy fashion to meet the daily requirement set by retail stores. Many garment factories overworked their employees without any added compensation because of this new method

of production. At garment factories overseas many workers are employed for 19-hour days with one break and at times no food (Balsinger 145). Concern for the bottom line leaves little room for thought about worker safety or job quality. The Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights states that 80% of the workers in garment factories are young women between the ages of 18 and 20 (globallabourrights.org). The institute also contends that many of these women are not fairly compensated for their work with workers working a 13 to 14.5 hour week being paid \$12.28 a week (globallabourrights.org). That number is lower than the minimum wage standards in almost all the countries in the Western Hemisphere. The speed at which clothes are in season then out of season comes at a very high cost for workers in garment factories.

In 2013 a factory collapsed in Bangladesh. The Rana Plaza disaster is still the most lethal disaster in the history of garment factories, killing 1,1137 people (globallabourrights.org). Five factories within the Rana Plaza were contract facilities for major retail companies in the US and Canada. H&M and Forever 21 were some of the retail giants receiving merchandise made from the Rana Plaza. Workers, often after long days were locked in to ensure nothing was stolen. After the Bangladesh disaster many organizations, such as the United Nations and the Fair Trade Foundation voiced their outrage. The collapse of the garment factory in Bangladesh is by no means an isolated incident. Consumers spoke up and asked that major retailers like H&M, Forever 21, and ZARA be kept accountable for their methods of production. Major retail store websites boast about their monitoring of garment factories and the fact that it is not their responsibility to do so (Cline 145). H&M's statement reads, "Legally we don't really have a responsibility for our suppliers, but of course morally and according to our values we feel

that we should take responsibility for how the garments are produced” (hm.com/us). The retail stores do not directly own most garment factories. Garment factories are merely subsidiaries; nevertheless, retail stores own the clothes that are produced. This is a legal loophole that makes companies less accountable to taking responsibility for their chosen method of production. In Bangladesh most of the buildings are old and would be condemned in the US for their cracked walls, broken water pipes that cause mold, and sketchy fire protocols (globallabourrights.org). The International Labor Organization (ILO) has sought to enhance cooperation between Asian governments and retail stores. This venture has proved unfruitful because many Asian countries are unwilling to set minimum wage standards (ethicalfashionforum.com). Their unwillingness to reduce the human rights violations in garment factories has given major retail stores an excuse. Many store managers state that it is out of their hands if the governments cannot comply. Men and women are suffering in order to supply clothes to an industry that needs it in a timely and inexpensive manner.

The fast fashion industry is set up in a way that does not support the rise of new designers in the fashion industry, making it unsustainable. This method of production impedes the rise of younger fashion designers. When fashion designers start out, they neither have the capital or the order size to outsource abroad (Cline 57). They could produce locally, but that is expensive to do since most of the commercialized garment factories that were once in country have closed down. Even if they successfully set up a production facility, which is expensive, they will need to mark up their final market cost in order to make up the difference. This also proves hard to do when they are competing with the Forever 21s of the world that have such low prices. Without places to grow and learn

designers are therefore, left to work for other design houses or join major retail stores and keep adding to the problem. In order for fast fashion stores to turn their inventory weekly or biweekly they need new designs. Often times these designs are stolen from other designers and altered to fit the overhead cost and profit margin that is needed. Forever 21 is a perfect example of this having been sued more than fifty times for copyright violations (Cline 105). Even so they have never been found liable. This is because U.S. copyright law does not protect fashion, only prints and jewelry design. The U.S. Copyright Board has held to the opinion that clothing is functional and therefore cannot be protected. Companies like Forever 21 are well within their right to use someone else's design and are not held accountable. This is just one of the many loopholes in legislation that makes the fast fashion industry thrive to the demise of young fashion designers and contributes to the destructive cycle. Even in France where copyright rules to protect fashion designs and designers, but even then they are not enforced.

Copying fashion runs rampant in the fast fashion industry with retail stores like H&M, Target, and Macy's at times using past designs in order to be able to switch out their trends. Many consumers who enjoy shopping fast fashion do so without knowing that they may at times wear exact copies. In 2007 Congress considered passing a bill named the Design Piracy Prohibition Act⁴ to protect fashion designs that often times designers have worked so hard for (Cline 109). Nevertheless, the bill has not been successful in doing so; it has been reduced to merely protecting designers from copies for 3 years, a push many designers are still not happy about (Cline 110). Designers are split on the issue of copying fashion almost 50-50. Raustiala and Springman are two lawyers that have argued against

⁴ The extent of this bill is described and explained: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/house-bill/2196?q=H.R.+2196>.

the bill stating that the entire fashion industry exists because of copying, which create trends that increase consumer demand (Cline, 112). A few designers believe that copying fashion is a healthy way of getting their creations out into the public domain, while a percentage think that it is stifling their creativity. The main difference is the length a designer has been in the industry. If they have a preset market and means of production then they might not suffer in the same way a new designer who is trying to build a brand might. Fast fashion does not encourage new designers or seasoned designers to keep producing clothes for the industry. The unsustainability of stifling new designers and designs is detrimental to the growth or possible change of the fashion industry.

Fast fashion's unsustainability extends to the environment as well. EcoWatch an organization that measures major contributors of pollution and additives to global warming, says that fashion is the world's second largest polluter right after oil (ecowatch.com). Fashion is often the last thing that comes to mind as a contributor to environmental pollution. Nevertheless, the carbon footprint created by the fashion industry is significant and rising everyday. It is difficult to locate a specific aspect of the industry that produces the most pollutants, since the industry is so wide and involves so many different channels. The major contributors are cotton, delivery channels, and the dumping of used clothes. Many manufactures and even consumers think that cotton is the best choice when it comes to cloth production. More than 5000 gallons of water are required to manufacture just one t- shirt (ecowatch.com). Globalization allows for great strides in business and commerce, but globalization also means that the delivery channels used to make designs available worldwide are now extensive. The gas it takes to drive trucks with raw materials across state lines or fly clothes adds to air pollution. Because fast fashion switches out trends

weekly or biweekly, these delivery channels are constantly in use. Even after purchase, clothes continue to affect the environment. The dyes often used to color and bleach different fabrics are harmful to the environment and leave a heavy ecological footprint when they are washed. The waste-water from dye is usually released into nearby rivers, eventually spreading through the entire globe (ecowatch.com). Air and water pollution are some of the ecological footprints that fashion leaves behind after production and retail. These factors cannot be maintained; there is need for change in order to save the environment.

Many consumers do not think about what happens to their clothes after they are disposed. The waste that results from dumping clothes adds to climate change and the pollution of the water table. Consumers often feel a sense of pride when they donate clothes they do not want to throw away to thrift stores. However, clothes that end up at Goodwill or Salvation Army are often kept in stock for less than three weeks, before they are shipped to the second hand clothing industry in Africa (goodwill.org). This method does not take care of the pollution that the fashion industry produces it simply pushes the problem to other countries. The trade organization, Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles (SMART), says that of the clothes processed by recyclers like Goodwill or Salvation Army, less than half will continue as clothing (smartasn.org). This is because the poor quality of the fast fashion industry means that clothes are often in a very poor state by the time they are disposed (Cline 130). Dumping clothes into the African market has recently proved problematic for African designers emerging. As more clothes are produced each week, air pollution and water table pollution are increasing at a similar pace. The true environmental cost of the fast fashion industry is simply unsustainable.

Millennials are the main consumers of all things fast fashion. Many millennials take pride in finding good deals and cheap clothes on clearance sales. There is also an increasing use of fashion blogs and YouTube channels that take pride in cheap finds. Millennials often fill malls ready to find deals from their favorite stores. Every major mall is crowded with fast fashion stores like Forever 21, H&M, Charlotte Ruse, and GAP. Millennials are described as the generation most aware of a variety of injustices and have a willingness to correct those wrongs (Spain & McGlone 199). Millennials were born amid financial crisis and after the great depression, meaning that they are willing to save more and spend less. Some researchers attribute the nature of millennials to care about corporate social responsibility to the fact that they were born during this period of financial difficulty. Because they are also living in the world's largest digital age, this generation is aware of the injustices that plague the world. An article in the International Journal of Business and Emerging Markets conducted a study on a group of millennials and found that they are concerned with organizations that promote healthy lifestyles, safe products, and socially responsible consumption (Karlait 251). This generation has been studied extensively because they could be the generation that causes significant economic and social changes (Bovino). Nevertheless, their sense of awareness never moves to market action. This might be due to the rise of social media. Because millennials are constantly aware of what is happening around them; they often times become numb to those realities. The technological age and globalization has made it easier to find out what is going on miles away. According to research carried out by Fortune Magazine, millennials already spend \$600 billion annually and will spend \$1.4 trillion by 2020 (Bovino). Fortune's research contends that the amount of money millennials are expected to spend in the next five years

is more than 3 times the amount they are spending annually. If this increase is captured to create social responsibility around fast fashion a significant part of the dialogue would shift. Millennials are key to the conversation about the fashion industry since they are the major consumers and largely aware of the problems of the fast fashion industry.

It is imperative that sustainable or fair-trade fashion market to millennials. Fashion that is produced in a healthy, sustainable manner for the planet and pays garment workers fair wages, is referred to as fair trade or “clean” fashion. Fair Trade International is the organization that certifies and coordinates fair trade companies across the globe. Since Fair Trade USA certified a fashion label in 2010, companies selling sustainable fashion have begun trending from online stores like Thred Up to retail shops like Spiritex. Despite the significant number of documentaries on the effects of fast fashion, there are still only a small number of shops that carry fair trade fashion. A major drawback for many stores has been the cost that comes with carrying fair trade products. Thus, millennials do not have many options when it comes to shopping fair trade, and though they are aware of the damaging results of fast fashion, they simply do not know how or where to shop. Nevertheless, if clean fashion specifically targets millennials, the fast fashion industry might change. If millennials turned their desire to clean fashion the fast fashion industry would lose more than 50% of their consumers (McNeil, Moore 214). This would be a huge blow to retail stores that carry fast fashion. In order for change to occur fair trade fashion has to be willing to intentionally target and market to millennials.

The resistance to shopping fair trade is that it is expensive and many clean fashion stores cannot compete with the prices of major retail stores that use the fast fashion model. The nature of fair trade fashion is complex and involves many channels. The fashion

industry is already multilayered, but attempts to produce clean clothes while the market is overwhelmed with fast fashion would be complicated. The reason for the significant mark ups in the clean fashion industry is due to the amount of work it takes to ensure that everyone in the supply chain and delivery channels is properly compensated. Most fair trade stores travel to production sites overseas to ensure that the method and labor used are just and comply with international labor standards. The fabric often used in clean fashion is dyed with organic colors and uses a minimal percentage of water in comparison to fast fashion. Instead of cotton or wool, fair trade fashion uses cellulosic fabrics like a tencel⁵ blend that are not oil dependent (Cline 212). Fair trade fashion goes further and ensures conditions for suppliers are supporting local growth (Hogg, Wilson, Shaw, & Hassan 427). Even though fair trade fashion stores⁶ are not turning in a rate of return like fast fashion stores, they are growing in number and have a steady consumer base.

Clean fashion has tackled the issue of mass-production by proving that it can do so without impeding on the rights of producers and suppliers. Alta Gracia for example, is a garment factory that is demonstrating how mass production of clothes in factories can be ethical and still hit production targets in a timely fashion. Alta Gracia is housed outside the United States and is owned by Knights Apparel, the leading company for many college and university logo clothing (Cline 140). The factory has been able to develop methods to aid workers in filing their complaints. They also support labor unions and send an outside party to ensure that the company's standards are met daily. Alta Gracia is not a typical garment

⁵ Tencel is a sustainable fabric; it is an eco friendly regenerated fabric. The chemicals used to produce this fabric are nontoxic and thus not detrimental to the environment (<http://www.ecomall.com/greenshopping/everydaychic.htm>).

⁶ ThredUp, Threads4Thoughts, Ten Thousand Villages, and Ecouturre just to name a few.

factory; the Workers Rights Consortium, an independent labor group, determines wages (altagraciaapparel.com). This ensures that workers are paid a “living wage” that is a pay standard that considers living factors as well as inflation (Cline 142). Living wage standards are just one way that retail stores can use to ensure that workers are paid a fair wage, this is regardless of minimum wage standards. Fair trade garment factories like Alta Gracia go the extra mile to guarantee that the income their employees earn are functional with present day, real time factors. These take into account inflation, economic instability, and governmental standards. Clean fashion organizations like Fair Trade International and Alta Gracia show retailers and consumers that fast fashion is not the only production model. The beauty of fair trade fashion is that it aims to clean up the mess that fast fashion is causing. By including aspects of the fast fashion model into clean fashion the cost and price of clean fashion can be reduced tremendously.

One of the major criticisms of clean fashion stores has been that their trends never change. Fair trade fashion does not have to change trends on a 52-week rotation, but they may be able to change trends to reflect seasons, which would take them from no trend changes to a quarterly rotation. That would incorporate a Fall/Winter and Summer/Spring trend rotation. This would encourage millennials who are always looking for the newest trends to shop frequently at fair trade stores. The other major criticism of the clean fashion industry has been price. The prices set by clean fashion stores are set to reflect the exhaustive work that goes into producing and then transporting clothes while still ensuring that everyone is paid fair wages. Marketing quality instead of quantity to millennials might be the key to overcoming this price hurdle. Since millennials have such a heavy technological presence, moving sales to online markets might also help fair trade fashion

reach them. Eliza Starbuck is a fashion guru who is creating awareness to fashion designers about the impact of clean clothes. She is the founder and owner of Ecouterre, an online shopping site that creates eco friendly fashion (Cline 204). Starbuck believes that good clean fashion means that consumers get more wear from their clothes (ecouterre.com). Slow or clean fashion produces clothing that lasts longer and will be in style years to come, inherently eco friendly. By creating an online presence Starbuck is appealing to millennials and making it convenient for them to shop fair trade. Elizabeth Cline puts it this way, “Clothing that isn’t produced at resource-draining quantities or by shortchanging the people making it is not cheap” (208). Quite honestly fair trade fashion might never have prices as low as fast fashion. Nevertheless, what might make prices slightly less than what they are today at clean fashion stores is if the stores start receiving a higher percentage of foot traffic. If more people start buying fair trade clothing and consuming fashion responsibly prices within fair trade stores will reflect this shift. Using certain aspects of fast fashion creates a base for millennials to start shopping fair trade. The key is to realize that these two methods are intentionally different because they each achieve a distinctive return in the market. Even though the fair trade fashion model and fast fashion seem so different, the combination of certain aspects of the fast fashion industry would prove beneficial to clean fashion and appeal to millennials’ desire to cause change.

Fair Trade Organization and Fair Trade International have done a great job at labeling food products, but a lot is left to consumer decision-making cues when it comes to fair trade clothing. Often times online shopping websites, which are where millennials are shopping, do not have the fair trade label readily available. The Clean Clothes Campaign is a platform that seeks to inform consumers on retail stores that are ethical and those that are

unethical (Geffner). Even with platforms like the Clean Clothes Campaign it is still hard for millennials and other consumers to discern which clothes are fair trade and which ones are not (Hogg, Wilson, Shaw, & Hassan, 428). In most cases trying to figure out if a store or website is fair trade requires a time commitment and even after this process there is no guarantee that any information will be obtained (Hogg, Wilson, Shaw, & Hassan 428).

Other Platforms like Six Items or Less have recently been set up to encourage millennials and other consumers to move past just being idly aware into a state of action. Six Items or Less encourages consumers to wear only six garments for one month (Cline 191). The aim is that after the month is over consumers will be aware of their overconsumption and the fact that they simply do not need to buy any more clothes if they invest in quality clothes. Fair trade fashion lasts longer, which means that consumers like millennials do not have to keep coming back for more in turn conserving the environment against wasteful dumping.

The International Trade Center is another voice that encourages fashion consumers to shop local and support the local production of clothes or design by supporting local businesses (intracen.org). Researchers also encourage millennials and other consumers to refashion, that is taking an article of clothing that is out of style and redesigning it. Consumers can also shop second hand, and in so doing, they alleviate the need for dumping and spend the same amount of money they would spend at a fast fashion retail store. There are platforms creating awareness about alternatives to fast fashion and the resistance to the expensive fair trade industry.

The real cost of a \$10 clearance item at a major retail store like Target, Forever 21, or H&M is human rights violations, air and water pollution, and detrimental lack of growth to developing economies. The need to reduce costs in order to meet higher production

schedules and receive a higher rate of return is destructive and unsustainable. It has become acceptable to be unethical because that is the norm in the fashion industry. Cheap fashion has robbed us of the beauty and craftsmanship that was once a part of the fashion industry. Nevertheless, millennials have a chance to change all this; if millennials turn their desire for change into market action major retail stores might follow. Sustainability in the industry can be achieved through incorporating aspects of the fast fashion industry into the fair trade fashion model. This would appeal to millennials and change the trajectory of the industry toward corporate social responsibility. We have to be willing to view clothes and see the long journey they take to end up in our closets; perhaps then and only then will we view clothes with respect. Taking responsibility of our consumption of clothes is taking responsibility of each other and our environment.

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