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Fast Fashion, Sustainability, and the Ethical Appeal of Luxury Brands

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Abstract

The phrase “fast fashion” refers to low-cost clothing collections that mimic current luxury fashion trends. Fast fashion helps sate deeply held desires among young consumers in the industrialized world for luxury fashion, even as it embodies unsustainability. Trends run their course with lightning speed, with today’s latest styles swiftly trumping yesterday’s, which have already been consigned to the trash bin. This article addresses the inherent dissonance among fast fashion consumers, who often share a concern for environmental issues even as they indulge in consumer patterns antithetical to ecological best practices.

Seemingly adept at compartmentalism, and free of conflicted guilt, such consumers see no contradiction in their Janus-faced desires. Can luxury fashion, with ostensibly an emphasis on authenticity, and its concomitant respect for artisans and the environment, foster values of both quality and sustainability? Since individual identity continually evolves, and requires a materially referential re-imagining of self to do so, we hypothesize that actual rather than faux luxury brands can, ironically, unite the ideals of fashion with those of environmental sustainability.

KEYWORDS: luxury brands, fast fashion, sustainability, quality and consumer behavior

Introduction

Over the past decade, sustainability and ethical conduct have begun to matter in fashion (Emberley 1998; Moisander and Personen 2002); companies have realized that affordable and trend-sensitive fashion, while typically highly profitable, also raises ethical issues (Aspers and Skov 2006). How do today's young consumers, so conscious of green values, balance their continual need for ever-newer fashion with their presumed commitment to environmental sustainability? In our research, we ask how such consumers perceive fast fashion versus its luxury counterpart, what sustainability actually means to them, and, based on our findings, how the fashion industry can address sustainability.

Sustainability: The Social Contract

Sustainability—of necessity a primary issue of the twenty-first century—is often paired with corporate social responsibility (Aguilera *et al.* 2007), informed purchasing decisions, and an emerging green orientation at some companies (Bansal and Roth 2000). “Sustainability” has many definitions, with the three most common being an activity that can be continued indefinitely without causing harm; doing unto others as you would have them do unto you; and meeting a current generation's needs without compromising those of future generations (Fletcher 2008; Partridge 2011; Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Seidman (2007: 58) notes, “Sustainability is about much more than our relationship with the environment; it's about our relationship with ourselves, our communities, and our institutions.”

Sustainability involves complex and changing environmental dynamics that affect human livelihoods and well-being, with intersecting ecological, economic, and sociopolitical dimensions, both globally and locally. Langenwater (2009: 11) lists some essential principles of a

sustainable policy for companies: “Respect for people (at all levels of the organization), the community, and its supply chain; respect for the planet, recognizing that resources are finite; and generating profits that arise from adhering to these principles.” Organizations are embedded in society, and reflect the value they offer society, which raises profound issues. As Beard (2008: 448) states, “The difficulty (in the fashion industry) is to see how all the suppliers of the individual components can be ethically secured and accounted for, together with the labour used to manufacture the garment, its transport from factory to retail outlet, and ultimately the garment’s aftercare and disposal.” With a global reach, the fashion industry supply chain is highly fragmented and inherently complex; as a result, fashion manufacturing is even less transparent than agribusiness (Mihm 2010; Partridge 2011).

Why Is Fast Fashion Unsustainable?

Fast fashion—low-cost clothing collections based on current, high-cost luxury fashion trends—is, by its very nature, a fast-response system that encourages disposability (Fletcher 2008). A formerly standard turnaround time from catwalk to consumer of six months is now compressed to a matter of mere weeks by such companies as H&M and Zara, with heightened profits to match (Tokatli 2008). Fast fashion companies thrive on fast cycles: rapid prototyping, small batches combined with large variety, more efficient transportation and delivery, and merchandise that is presented “floor ready” on hangers with price tags already attached (Skov 2002).

To keep customers coming back, high street retailers routinely source new trends in the field, and purchase on a weekly basis to introduce new items and replenish stock (Tokatli and Kizilgun 2009). The side effect of such continual and rapid turnover: a new form of seemingly contradictory mass exclusivity (Schrank 2004). Moreover, lower manufacturing and labor costs mean lower costs overall, which result in lower prices, which, in turn, equal higher volume. Even companies such as Zara, which once manufactured all their goods in Europe, resulting in better quality control, now outsource at least 13 percent of their manufacturing to China and Turkey. Shipping time from China to Europe may take three weeks, but it only takes five days from Turkey (Tokatli 2008). Admittedly, fast fashion companies do employ stables of in-house designers: more eye-catching designs lead to trendier, must-have fashions, which lure consumers into paying full price now rather than deferring gratification until the year-end sales arrive. When faced with tight delivery demands, fast fashion companies will even use higher-cost local labor and expedited shipping methods. In due time, future financial returns will far outweigh current costs (Cachon and Swinney 2011).

Avid consumers are now primed to browse fast fashion stores every three weeks or so in search of new styles (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2006). According to a former Topshop brand director, “Girls see something and want it immediately.” The fast fashion industry—in common with the technology industry, which similarly produces a constant stream of ever-improved, ever more alluring, products—exists courtesy of such impulsive behavior, employing the planned obsolescence practices recently identified by Guiltinan (2009: 20): limited functional life design and options for repair, design aesthetics that eventually lead to reduced satisfaction, design for transient fashion, and design for functional enhancement that requires adding new product features. Fashion, more than any other industry in the world, embraces obsolescence as a primary goal; fast fashion simply raises the stakes (Abrahamson 2011).

Young consumers’ desire for fast fashion is coupled with significant disposable income (or, alternatively, the availability of credit). Fast fashion exploits this segment, offering of-the-moment design and the immediate gratification of continually evolving temporary identities—a postmodern phenomenon (Bauman 2005). Fast fashion has been referred to as “McFashion,” because of the speed with which gratification is provided. The framework is global, and the term “McFashion” is, to a degree, appropriate. According to Ritzer (2011: 1), “‘McDonaldization’ is a term that became fashionable in discussing changes in capitalist economies as they moved toward greater rationalization. Types of production matter: manufacturing reliant on artisanal craft is a distinct system, as are those of mass and more limited production.” “Craft” denotes highly skilled labor, using simple tools to make unique items, one item at a time, and accessible to only a select clientele. Hermes’ affluent customers, for example, might wait for several years to acquire a particular bag (Tungate 2009). With fast fashion, new styles swiftly supersede the old, defining and sustaining constantly emerging desires and notions of self. As Binkley (2008: 602) argues, the idea of “multiple selves in evolution” is central to fast fashion lovers. Fast fashion replaces exclusivity, glamour, originality, and luxury with “massclusivity” and planned spontaneity (Toktali 2008).

Unsurprisingly, fast fashion chains in Europe have grown faster than the retail fashion industry as a whole (Cachon and Swinney 2011; Mihm 2010): low cost, fresh design, and quick response times allow for greater efficiency in meeting consumer demand. Fast fashion chains typically earn higher profit margins—on average, a sizeable 16 percent—than their traditional fashion retail counterparts, who average only 7 percent (Sull and Turconi 2008). Their success is indisputably significant. Consider the case of Zara, an exemplar of fast fashion: the brand’s publicly held parent company, Inditex, operates 2,700 stores in more than sixty countries, and is valued at US\$24 billion, with annual sales of \$8 billion (Crofton and Dopico 2006: 41).

The Rise of Anti-Consumerism

Some consumers, however, are disenchanted with mindless consumption and its impact on society (Kozinets and Handleman 2004). Terms that are often used to represent this anti-market stance are: consumer resistance, rebellion, boycotting, countercultural movements, and non-consumption (Shaw and Riach 2011). Consumers are also aware that individual consumption fosters organizational production, creating an ongoing cycle of appetite, simultaneously voracious and insatiable. Bauman (2000) calls it “liquid consumption.” Fluidity of identity and uncertainty are the trademarks of such a system, often leading to an anti-consumerism position (Binkley 2008). According to Binkley (2008: 601), “While anti-consumerism defines a broad set of ethical and political positions and choices, it also operates on the every-day level of mundane consumer choice, through critical discourses about the market itself, where small decisions serve to anchor subjectivities in constructed and heavily mediated narratives of lifestyle, self-hood, community, and identity.” Anxiety and responsibility can weigh heavily on consumers. In the process of being catapulted to a postmodern lifestyle, “identity” as Bauman notes (2005: 116–28), in liquid modernity becomes “an endlessly cultivated and optimized polyvalency of mobility, a skilled adaptability to a permanent state of ambivalence and unsettledness.” Such ambivalence allows individuals to continually reinvent themselves. Multiple evolving selves, as we argued earlier, are built on constantly evolving fashion styles created by fast fashion. But herein lies the paradox: the very possibility of reinvention can now serve to disenchant the consumer, as a means of revealing consumption’s potential to harm others and the environment; such information can now realign consumers with ecologically sustainable fashion (Beard 2008; Elsie 2003).

Methodology: Searching for Subconscious Values

In our study, we interviewed both male and female fast fashion consumers aged between twenty and thirty-five in Hong Kong and Canada on their own ideas of style and fashion, to highlight the issues involved in their approach to consumption. Hong Kong is a long-time manufacturing powerhouse in the fashion industry, home to at least one centenary company: Li & Fung, a self-described “network orchestrator” (Mihm 2010: 59) founded in 1906, and now the largest outsourcing firm in the world, linking to 83,000 suppliers worldwide (Fung *et al.*, 2008). Canada, by contrast, falls at the opposite end of the fashion industry continuum, playing no major role. Unsurprisingly, given its potent lure, fast fashion has taken root within Hong Kong’s and Canada’s respective youth cultures with equal vitality.

We found that sustainability is not a term young consumers typically associate with fashion, although they are very open to environmentalism. Such contradictory sensibilities need to be understood in order to alter perceptions and attitudes.

Varying levels of interest in fashion and brands notwithstanding, fashion is key to many of the younger adults, (those under twenty-eight years old), in our study, which is why we chose that specific demographic; as well as a slightly older group (aged between twenty-eight and thirty-five), whose fashion choices were more closely linked to their professional lives. In both Canada and Hong Kong, students who were invited to join our study led us to other students, until we reached theoretical saturation and redundancy. Table 1 lists participants by name, country, age, and occupation.

To gather and analyze data, we combined phenomenological interviews with the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), a method of accessing subliminal thoughts by probing the metaphoric sub-context of images self-selected by research subjects. We initially met with each participant individually, instructing them to select ten images representing what fast fashion meant to them, at least three images representing sustainability, and five indicative of luxury. Participants were encouraged to source their images from online sites, print advertisements, photo albums, magazines, and the like, and to consider the implications of their respective choices. At follow-up meetings, each participant offered a personal narrative describing why they chose specific images, and what meaning they attached to each image. We also asked informants to sort their respective images into three relevant categories of their own devising (e.g. industry-related activities, advertising, and luxury-defining locations such as Parisian landmarks). Participants then described how any two of their categories were more similar to each other than to the third. We conducted this triad task to probe for deeper meanings and values associated with choices.

Table 2 provides a list of images that participants provided. Spiggle (1994), as well as Thompson (1996), provide a detailed analysis of this approach, including categorization, abstraction of categories, comparison of instances within data, and discernment of emergent themes. Various techniques have been proposed to tap into the subconscious, where most decisions are made. Heisley and Levy (1991) describe the importance of visual elicitation techniques, as does Zaltman (1997), the developer of ZMET. According to Zaltman (1997) 95 percent of what consumers think and feel is never expressed verbally; mechanisms that elicit responses are needed. Our participants' respective responses to images of their choosing revealed subtle assumptions, desires, and beliefs; their self-selected and self-interpreted images served their purpose well.

Table 1

List of participants.

Name	Country	Age	Employment
Roxanne	Canada	20	Student
Lynn	Hong Kong	31	Homemaker
Linda	Hong Kong	21	Student
Rita	Hong Kong	35	Homemaker
Dave	Canada	35	Merchandiser
Wendy	Hong Kong	20	Student
Nora	Canada	32	Shop assistant
Lara	Canada	21	Student
Brendan	Canada	30	Sales clerk
Eva	Hong Kong	35	Consultant
Leticia	Hong Kong	33	Office worker
Alexa	Hong Kong	35	Teacher
Catherine	Canada	32	Office worker
Rita	Canada	20	Student
Cynthia	Hong Kong	32	Lawyer
Cathy	Hong Kong	33	Office worker
Sheena	Canada	30	Shop assistant
Jenny	Hong Kong	20	Student
Henry	Canada	21	Student
David	Canada	20	Student
Alicia	Canada	25	Grocery store worker
Tania	Canada	20	Student
Andrew	Hong Kong	20	Student
Ellen	Hong Kong	31	Sales assistant
Joanne	Hong Kong	20	Student
Melissa	Canada	22	Student
Linda	Hong Kong	25	Student
Paula	Canada	30	Homemaker
Tom	Canada	30	Fashion store manager
John	Canada	30	Sales manager
Tim	Hong Kong	32	Financial officer
Eric	Hong Kong	30	Bank teller
Tanya	Hong Kong	30	Homemaker

Table 2

Images.

Fast Food
Flash Gordon (fast fashion)
Trends-Style (catwalk)
Pop Art (actress: Audrey Hepburn)
Kaleidoscope
A House on the Lake (water)
Plastic Vortex in the Ocean
Eco-fashion
Mona Lisa (face)
Exclusivity—Patek Philippe (wristwatches) Chaumet Jewelry

Our overarching finding is that consumers from both Hong Kong and Canada, while concerned about the environmental and social impact of their non-fashion purchasing decisions, did not apply such principles to their consumption of fashion. They talked in general terms of saving the environment, were committed to recycling, and expressed dedication to organic food. In the strict fashion context, ethical fashion refers to “the positive impact of a designer, a consumer choice, a method of production as experienced by workers, consumers, animals, society, and the environment” (Thomas 2008: 525). Yet, these very same consumers routinely availed themselves of trend-led fashionable clothing that was cheap: i.e. low cost to them, but high cost in environmental and societal terms. They also exhibited relatively little guilt about fast fashion’s disposability, seeing little discrepancy between their attitudes toward sustainability and their fashion choices.

Our finding is unsurprising; other studies have similarly documented irrational consumer choices that are poorly connected to, or completely disconnected from, consumer values (Moisander and Personen 1991). The moral-norm activation theory of altruism proposed by Schwartz (1973) states that environmental quality is a collective good, and therefore will motivate consumers to embrace environmentalism in all aspects of life. The rapid rise of fast fashion implies otherwise. Schwartz’ theory presumes that consumers will thoughtfully evaluate the life cycle of different products, and will then select whichever product has the least environmental load. However, in our study, participants had little overlap with the “ethical hard liners” (those living entirely in line with their commitment to sustainability, and thus purchasing only eco-fashion) discussed by Niinimäki (2010: 152) in her study of eco-fashion in Finland. Solomon and Rabolt (2004) argue that sustainability is simply not an attribute that most consumers consider when purchasing clothing.

Two themes predominate in our analysis: “speed and style at low cost” and “disposability and limited durability.” These options enable consumers to constantly alter their identity. The infographic in Figure 1 delineates these emergent themes. In addition, three themes that emerged from discussions of luxury in both locales are desire/dream, history/heritage, and elegance/art. We focus below on only those themes directly relevant to the issue of sustainability.

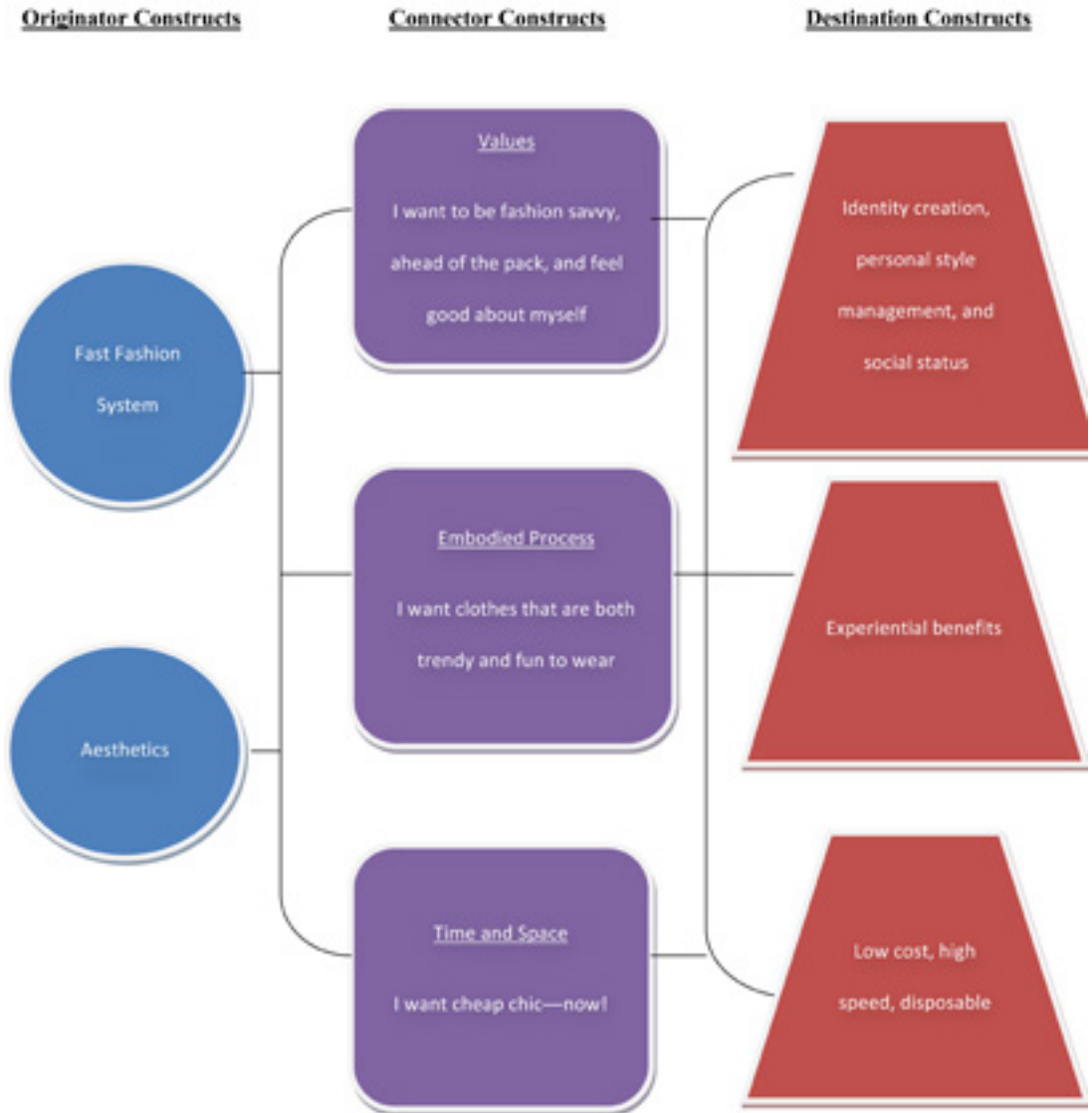


Figure 1
Identity play and fast fashion.

The Advent of Cheap Chic

Often participants combined several themes in their descriptions. Speed was described as part of the fast fashion industry mode. Updated looks, greater variety, and limited editions, along with the speed of their availability, make this industry very attractive to many consumers—initially a younger crowd, but now attracting older segments as well. Some participants even talked of speed that resembled that of the fast food industry, although they recognize the problems associated with creating goods for mass cultural consumption (Stillman 2003). Roxanne, a Canadian student, echoed the views of the Topshop brand director mentioned earlier: “I want to see new things and styles that can help me create and recreate my wardrobe and who I am. But I don’t want to look like someone else—so the limited edition satisfies this need to be unique. When I see it on the catwalks or in magazines, I want it immediately.” Roxanne’s desire is characteristic of how purchases are made in stores like Zara. As one participant, Rita, a Canadian student, mentioned, “If you do not buy the item that you like right away, you will not be able to get it later.” The supply side of fast fashion ensures scarcity, which in turn drives demand. Lynn, another participant from Hong Kong, referenced fast food, noting:

Since the speed with which...the display and collection [changes] is fast, it [fast fashion] is similar to the fast food store. In Hong Kong, most of us go to fast food restaurants at least once a week—the same is true of fast fashion. We like new things and we don’t have to wait too long before we own these items.

Linda, a Hong Kong student, noted: “Fast fashion (like Flash Gordon) is moving at the speed of light, speeding up deliveries, and reinventing... [itself] and...[its] designs as quickly as possible.” Clearly, time is of the essence. As Dave, a thirty-five-year-old Canadian merchandiser, pointed out, “Patience used to be a virtue. But nobody likes to be kept waiting. Once consumers have seen the latest fashion shows, they want to own the high-fashion item ASAP.”

The possibilities of endlessly defining the self are envisaged. Wendy, a Hong Kong student, said: “Just recently I purchased a cocktail dress for my friend’s wedding party. I saw a similar dress at Marc Jacobs—a velvet beaded dress—but I bought this one at Zara for a fraction of the price. It may not be premium quality, but it is a trendy piece and very affordable!” The choice of that item was more than satisfactory, so why spend more? Since the dress was available at Zara, it suggested style. Nora, a Canadian shop floor assistant, commented: “The trendy items allow me to update my wardrobe more regularly than before. If the style is going to be dead in a year, why should I buy a piece that

will last longer? In a nutshell, it is affordable pricing and acceptable quality.” Lara, a Canadian student, noted: “It is cheap chic—it is a trend worth buying into. I visit Zara and H&M twice a month and if I see something, I buy it.”

The fact that all our participants were students or recent, employed graduates, and that all were under thirty-five years of age, inevitably skewed the responses. However, it is this demographic that is conscious of the catwalks, slavishly follows trends, and is perennially in pursuit of specific pieces that are both unique and stylish. They are also pragmatic. Why spend money on something that will last, at most, several seasons? Instead, acquire a number of items that are cheaper and offer a wide variety.

The fashions themselves are seen as new and lively. Brendan, a thirty-year-old Canadian salesperson, reported:

In-house designers in these stores offer an eminently affordable take on the season’s trends from the catwalk. They bundle different values together in the goods. One is freshness, next novelty, and then trendiness. The pleasure from shopping for these goods it seems is endless. There is something new and cute each time they walk into a store like Zara.

Today’s Treasures, Tomorrow’s Trash

Disposability plays a key role, along with speed and style, in fast fashion. Edith, a thirty-five-year-old Hong Kong consultant, said:

These companies [referring to H&M] use designers like Stella McCartney and Karl Lagerfeld to create limited, one-time collections, which generally sell out within days. So they are very creative when it comes to strategy! Affordable prices mean that consumers are buying more clothes more frequently. But it also means they’re truly disposable. You may keep an item after ten washes, but the item may lose its lustre by then, or it may have gone out of fashion.

The reference to ten washes is derived from fast fashion companies themselves, who openly proffer the number as a benchmark, after which an item will no longer be expected to retain its original value, due to poor-quality materials and manufacturing. The companies pay no price for such revelations, nor do most customers experience regret in tossing out clothes based on this principle. Leticia, a Hong Kong office worker, did, however, have guilt pangs: “I fill up big garbage bags of things and then throw them away. It is a lot of wasted goods—some

of which I may not even have worn more than once. I do feel guilty, but I have a small apartment and I cannot keep them.” She rationalizes her actions on the basis of limited space, but shows no attempt to reducing her shopping sprees. Alexa, a Hong Kong teacher, took specific steps to assuage her guilt: “I give all my clothes to my maid...she is always in fashion after I’ve had my fill with these clothes. But at least I don’t feel guilty. It is recycling!” Hong Kong has a recent history of bringing in domestic workers from the Philippines, and, unsurprisingly, they have a reputation for dressing well (Constable 2007). Catherine, a Canadian office worker, noted, assessing an image she chose of escalators:

Toronto artist Michel Awad captures urban movement in his panoramic photographs. This picture captures images of escalators at one of Canada’s busiest shopping centers on one of the craziest shopping days—Boxing Day. Lots of people are conveyed in and out of the same place every hour, every minute, and even every second. This is exactly like the fashion industry; varieties of style are put on and off the shelves at the same time.

Cynthia, a Hong Kong lawyer who had selected an image of a kaleidoscope among her choices, pointed out:

Pop Art favoured figural imagery and the reproduction of existing and everyday objects. This movement eliminated distinctions between good and bad taste, and between fine and commercial art techniques. On the other hand, a kaleidoscope is a tube of mirrors. Once the tube is rotated, the tumbling of the coloured objects presents the viewer with varying colours and patterns. The main feature of both Pop Art and the kaleidoscope is the alteration of an existing object to a small extent—in the form of a silhouette, color, pattern, and so on. It is similar to the design process in the fast fashion business. That is why it is disposable.

Of the thirty participants in both locales, only six talked overtly about the societal downside of fast fashion. Cathy, an office worker in Hong Kong, suggested: “It makes producers violate guidelines on the treatment of workers, and break the laws on overtime. Even if the factory owner is a good man and willing to pay workers legally, he cannot control the working hours.” Jenny, a young Hong Kong fashion student who is appalled at the waste and unsustainable practices, described how she reuses her clothes: “I take bits and pieces from my old clothes [that do not fit anymore or are not in style] and sew them together. It will become a new piece of clothing that is in style and I can wear it for another year.”

Understanding Sustainability: Is Eco-fashion a Viable Option?

Responses to what sustainability meant to individuals were robust, with details of how personal acts of consumption led to sustainability. Henry, a Canadian student, said, “Sustainability means to live a life where you are not taking any more from the earth than what you are giving back. You are trying to minimize the environmental footprint that you leave behind.” It is important to him; he notes that he does not buy books anymore, but is involved in e-learning. He believes in not turning on the washing machine unless there is a full load, and even hang-dries his clothes. Yet, he experiences no guilt in buying clothes designed to have no long-term value. David, a young Canadian student, observed: “Sustainability is the level at which humans are able to live and co-exist indefinitely with the natural world without harming or causing damage to either side.” For him, partnership with nature is a mechanism by which he is reminded to act in sustainable ways. He recycles bottles for money, conserves electricity, and uses water very carefully. Yet, he too shops for fast fashion items regularly. Alicia, who works in a grocery store in Canada, talked about how important it was to be vegetarian, given large-scale agribusiness’ detrimental impact on the environment. But Alicia was oblivious of the links between environmental issues and her obsession with fast fashion.

Some of the images that participants used to illustrate sustainability suggest that they take it quite seriously. David provided a picture of a plastic vortex in the ocean that he noted “includes all kinds of plastic litter, including Crocs that we used last year. We are destroying our oceans.” Tania, a Canadian student, chose an image of a big, brand-new house to demonstrate how easy it is to fall victim “...to the false North American reality that possessing material things equals happiness. The purpose of life is not to buy, but to live and feel.” Melissa, a Canadian student, said, “By recycling, I am helping to save trees and allow more clean oxygen to be produced...I attempt to consider sustainable values in all area of my life, including at home, at school, and at work.” Joanne, a Hong Kong student, summarized it well: “I am happy to do my bit for the planet and recycle, etc. But fashion...this is another thing. Maybe if designers used eco-labelled materials and designs, the change will happen. But at this point the eco-fashion I have seen is not fashion—they are just plain dull and for older people perhaps.”

When participants were asked if they would buy eco-fashion, the quick response was only if the clothes were stylish. Usually the choices available to them were only T-shirts. Even when other items were available, as in offerings by companies, such as American Apparel, that use organic cotton, participants saw the clothing as frumpy. As Linda, a student from Hong Kong, said, “I would never buy these clothes, because

they are just as boring as [those from] Gap. It is so out of sync with what is happening now on the catwalks.” When we probed further, Paula, a Canadian participant, said, “You need to get the designers weighing in on this issue and using organic cotton and the proper dyes and so on. If Marc Jacobs did it, we would all be buying these clothes.” Change is possible, but it has to come from the fashion domain. Aesthetics is crucial to the appeal of eco-fashion.

As noted above, participants cared greatly about sustainability, but only as it related to food, recycling, and, in some cases, cosmetics (now available containing organic ingredients). If consumers recognize the demands that fast fashion makes on the environment, they seem to block it from their consciousness (Joergens 2006). Aesthetics trump ethics, at least for the time being. Niinimaki (2010) notes that, while ethical hard liners are increasing in number, that number is still low.

Moreover, Niinimake argues, cost is far from the sole barrier to embracing eco-fashion: style, quality, color, compatibility with one’s current wardrobe, and an ongoing desire for new clothes—which means valuing volume over ethical considerations—affect consumer purchase decisions as well.

Luxury Fashion: Dreams and Desires

When we asked participants about luxury fashion, the three main themes that emerged were dreams, exclusivity, and beauty/art. Fast fashion allows dreams of luxury to come true. Style is achievable even if quality is compromised; if an article of clothing is not really “beautiful” and “elegant” as is the genuine item, consumers can nonetheless afford the fast fashion option. For our participants, the idea of owning exclusive, unique items from a luxury brand is both an aspirational dream and a desire; yet, even as aspirations motivate them to pursue their dreams, pragmatism prevails. As Tom, a thirty-something Canadian fashion store manager, said: “Polo is not only a traditional game played by the upper classes (e.g. Prince Charles), it also refers to the social and emotional attitude of people towards exclusive and luxury products. This is a dream that I cherish...but it is not within my reach currently. I hope my dreams will come true one day.” The notion of exclusivity, accessible to only a select few, is also evident. John, a Canadian sales manager, noted: “I chose a picture of a woman taking a bath in Dom Perignon champagne...a symbol of the lifestyle of an extremely rich social class...I don’t care about the money so much as the freedom to do what you want and when you desire it.” Implicit in the conception of exclusivity is that of a signifier of status. Tim, a Hong Kong financial officer, chose a picture of a Patek Philippe watch. He stated: “People in Hong Kong want to own at least one watch like this in their lifetime. I also want to own one of these, which helps increase my status as a man,

and shows to my close male friends that I am also able to buy luxury products.” Patek Philippe, unlike Rolex, is not worn by a large number of people in Hong Kong. It is a dream product, while Rolex is seen as readily accessible. It takes knowledge to select a Patek Philippe watch; this participant aspires to a look that is very cultivated.

Heritage and Quality

While the dream quality is essential to a luxury product, in some instances, a long history and heritage further intensify a brand’s strength. Louis Vuitton, for instance, prides itself on having provided royalty with luggage. Quality is assured in all aspects of its business (or so is the claim), since Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy has designed exclusive objects for the nobility. While Patek Philippe may not have served the nobility, it does have a rich tradition of creating exclusive and extraordinarily well-crafted dream products. Creating such products takes time, which in turn limits availability; highly trained artisans work with carefully chosen, exclusive materials that are not produced en masse.

The dreamlike quality of luxury products has its origin in elaborate craft ateliers where generations of artisans have created one-of-a-kind products. Cathy, a student participant from Hong Kong who selected an image of Chaumet gold earrings among her choices, observed: “Chaumet has served royalty since the early eighteenth century. Each piece is placed in a frame like a piece of fine art, and can be seen through the shop window. It shows they [the earrings] are unique, special, and have a rich history. Only people who are in the know will use such fine and exclusive products.”

Heritage and quality appeal because they do not conjure up pollution, dwindling natural resources, and global warming—most of which are associated with the oil and transportation industries. There is little exploitation of labor, since most ateliers are attached to big fashion houses located in major fashion cities, such as Paris and Milan, although outsourcing to countries such as China and India is raising the specter of sweatshop operations.

Beauty and Art

The final theme of beauty, elegance, and art is important as well. Tanya, a Hong Kong participant, commented: “Pearls give us a sense of luxury because they are elegant, bright, luminous, expensive, and gloriously beautiful. High fashion brands...make us look elegant.” Catherine (the Canadian participant referenced earlier), linked luxury brands to art and said: “I chose the picture of the Mona Lisa to represent the artistic quality of haute couture. I associate it with the personalization of the

artist/designer. Some people refer to haute couture as moving art.” It is clear from the observations of the participants that they dream of exclusivity, beauty, art, design, and heritage—all of which are associated with luxury brands. Yet, this ideal seems distant. They love the glamour and style, but lament the expense. They see that the next best alternative is to buy fast fashion items. These items approximate the look, but at a fraction of the cost. Consumers compromise on quality, the factor central to undermining sustainability. If the items used featured high-quality material and stitching, they would not fall apart after ten washes. Yet fast fashion companies highlight a limited product life span as a special attribute. Consumers are trained to continuously purchase and consume fast fashion replacements. Durability in fast fashion apparel is the kiss of death.

Concluding Remarks and Implications

In this article, we have explored the perceptions that consumers in both Hong Kong and Canada have of sustainability, fast fashion, and luxury fashion, and have shown that sustainable fashion is not a priority for them. The bulk of the data suggest that young people separate fashion from sustainability. They definitely support the idea of sustainability, but do not apply such ethics when it comes to sustainable fashion. Their moral imagination (Werhane 1998) seems quite impoverished in this category. This state of moral stasis may gradually change. As Carrigan and Attala (2001: 577) note, “Perhaps in time new generations of consumers will not only think more ethically, but also act more ethically.”

Bonini and Oppenheim (2008: 56) argue that, around the world, there is a great deal of concern about environmental issues, but, “when it comes to actually buying green goods, words and deeds often part ways.” The apathy toward eco-fashion can be partly explained by the fact that, while clothing is central to the body and the definition of identity, it has not been related to health concerns (Petit 2007). Moreover, the term “eco-fashion” conjures up the hippie and environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s, during which ecologically sensitive fashion often meant shapeless recycled clothing (Welters 2008). Winge (2008: 520) goes one step further, distinguishing between eco-dress and eco-fashion. Eco-dress is what she associates with the hippie movement, whereas eco-fashion currently represents luxury and cultivated taste. In Europe, eco-fashion has become prominent; some of the producers are smaller companies making clothing and accessories from organic cotton sourced through fair trade practices. Our participants felt that these clothes were drab and boring. While organic cotton T-shirts may be cool to wear to class or when hanging out on weekends, only stylish clothes with panache would do for other social occasions. Eco-fashion did not meet these needs. Perhaps it may do so in the future, as

consumer attitudes evolve, much as, to a degree, they have done with food. Witness the ever-broadening acceptance accorded the artisanal slow food movement.

Tellingly, Fletcher (2008) prefers to use the term “slow fashion” rather than eco-fashion, arguing that “slow” in this context refers not to time (as opposed to the “fast” in fast fashion, which most assuredly does refer to time), but rather to a philosophy of attentiveness. As in the slow food movement, that philosophy is mindful of its various stakeholders’ respective needs (with “stakeholders” referring to designers, buyers, retailers, and consumers), and of the impact producing fashion has on workers, consumers, and eco-systems.

According to Bonini and Oppenheim (2008: 56) there are five barriers to being green: “Lack of awareness, negative perceptions, distrust, high prices, and low availability.” Trust was not an issue for our participants, but style was. Prices and availability did not emerge as major barriers in our discussions.

Although a shift in power from corporations to stakeholders has occurred, accelerated by e-commerce and online activism (Scaturro 2008), our participants in both Hong Kong and Canada seemed oblivious to this shift. While they do take their brands seriously (as in fast fashion and luxury), sustainable fashion brands are simply not on their radar—or, at least, not yet. Even though Nike made the news for running sweatshop operations, our participants in Hong Kong and Canada did not boycott the company’s products. In any event, Nike has since made dramatic changes to its operations, pushing its way to the forefront of sustainable fashion (Ramaswamy 2008).

The Power of Dissuasion: Promoting Sustainability via Artisanship Appreciation

Luxury brands are often tarred with the same brush as fast fashion and other types of disposable fashion (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). However, because of their long-standing concern for quality and craft, luxury brands could effectively counteract some of the problems endemic to fast fashion and provide leadership on issues relating to sustainability. Some consumer researchers may refer to this as “ethical mainstreaming”—a process whereby consumers are willing to pay a premium for such products (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007: 137). According to these authors, this is another guise for bourgeois consumerism—rather than question the system, such practices may well be supporting the very system it purports to critique. We, on the other hand, suggest that a luxury brand company can be both “green” and “gold.” Blendell and Kleanthous (2007) provide provocative insight into the meaning of “deeper luxury” to the consumer and producer. Increasingly, they argue, the pursuit of luxury is linked to the brand’s

stance on important social issues, such as saving the planet. Whether marketers can effectively reposition costly luxury brands to play authentically in a more holistic ecology of value (Adolphson 2004) is a pressing question. Clearly, presenting luxury brands as fulfilling an ecological need is controversial, in a world where luxury is accessible primarily to only the fortunate.

Sustainable fashion, in common with its luxury counterpart, embodies living harmoniously with nature, employing trained artisans in safe and humane working conditions (Partridge 2011). But if sustainable fashion items are neither meeting consumer desires, nor being offered at affordable prices, who will buy them? According to Van Nes and Cramer (2005), when asked what they wanted from future eco-fashion, consumers listed their primary requirements as durability, quality, and style.

Not coincidentally, durability, quality, and style are experiences that materially interpenetrate luxury brands, along with a sense of personal achievement. The sustainable consumption challenge for such brands is their need to embody artisanship, emphasizing authenticity, and both environmental and societal respect. Since luxury brands create desire through innovative design, and influence consumption processes, they can become leaders in sustainability. The methods by which products are manufactured, purchased, used, and disposed of affect the environment in many ways. The call to ecologically sustainable fashion is appropriate at a time when, clearly, people consume more natural resources and produce more pollution than the planet can sustain. Businesses must begin to operate within the ecological carrying capacity of the planet.

Many luxury brands are already making ecologically sustainable fashion clothing and accessories, such as Stella McCartney, Ferragamo, and Vivienne Westwood, among others. Westwood acknowledges that she is very concerned with climate change and that she tries to do something about it. She notes: "There is a real connection between culture and climate change. We all have a part to play and if you engage with life, you will get a new set of values. Get off the consumer treadmill and start to think and it is these great thinkers who will rescue the planet" (Ecouterre 2012). Similarly, Stella McCartney says:

Eco-friendly fashion is something I've always felt strongly about. You have to create demand so the customer base will grow. We've been doing organic for years in my own collection, in my lingerie and with the Adidas collaboration. We touch on it across the board. I think it's a bit more sincere to do that. It's part and parcel for us as a brand. (NBC New York 2011)

While fast fashion companies can emulate luxury products, they may be less able to match deeper elements of value, such as high ethical standards in sourcing, efficient use of material, low-impact manufacturing, assembly, and distribution; and the availability of repair and upgrade

services. All these values represent an opportunity for luxury brands to justify their share of purchases by affluent customers (Blendell and Kleanthous 2007), even as they address conventional criticisms, such as the role of precious stones in financing conflicts, the impact of mining operations on land (e.g. gold mining), workers' rights in companies and supply chains, responsible marketing, and the trade in wildlife-derived products (Tungate 2009). Luxury brands need to also seriously consider what Partridge (2011: S107) calls "supply chain democracy"—that is political, social and economic accountability.

In some areas of the economy, consumers have demanded more information about product sourcing and manufacturing, including, to a degree, in the fashion industry, with Nike drawing the wrath of protesters around the world (if not, as referenced above, from our participants). Fast fashion companies such as Topshop and Gap (McDougall 2007), have also come under relatively recent scrutiny concerning their compromised manufacturing ethics. Consumers are demanding more information about sourcing and manufacturing, which can be a point of differentiation by companies. Such changes in the marketplace suggest that there is a greater need to understand the relationship between ethical markets and mainstream consumer markets. As Shaw and Riach (2011: 1059) note, "it is through individual and collective struggle that continually sets the parameters and makes meaning over what is constituted as 'ethical' within the dominant market."

Clark (2009: 428) raises the issue of how the idea of "slow fashion" could be nurtured, by de-emphasizing what is seen and heard (i.e. fashion "buzz"), to one that values actual, tactile experience. How that approach can be transferred to fashion remains to be seen. However, the promise is evident, provided the focus is shifted from fashion as image, to the materiality of fashion.

While dreams and desires feed consumer behavior, they must be constrained if sustainability is to be viable. Young consumers will need to embrace a significant shift in consumerism: no longer routinely purchasing on impulse, and no longer routinely viewing their acquisitions through the lens of short-term thinking. In fact, sustainable fashion should become their dream, and all stakeholders in the fashion industry should strive toward this goal, with luxury fashion playing a major role in the transition.

Aesthetics plays a key role in this transition, calling upon the consumer's ability to discern and value artisanal quality. Heidegger argues that a work of art is never finished when the artist stops working on it; rather, it needs a viewer to make present the "being of a thing" (Atwood 2004: 48). The same can be said of luxury: only once a luxury item has become an element of a consumer's self-definition, with its innate appeal both reflecting and reinforcing the consumer's individual aesthetic, can it be said to be fully complete.

Luxury brands can become the leaders in sustainability because of their emphasis on artisanal quality; why toss an item designed to last, with

timeless—as opposed to deliberately time-limited—style? Dissuading consumers from fast fashion poses a significant challenge, however, given their acute addiction to its transient thrills. However, since identity is continually evolving, and requires a materially referential imagining of an individual's identity, an alignment of fashion with saving the environment could make dissuasion possible (Parkins 2008). Such a process cannot be tied to the conceit of a self that is fully transparent to itself and to whom we are able to assign agency (Butler 2005). As Binkley (2008: 602) notes, “Ambivalence itself is no longer the enemy of identity, but the basis for an on-going project of the self, tuned to the endless pre-production of fluidity, mobility, and indeterminacy as a permanent state through a variety of life choices, daily practices, and on-going projects of the self.” We tend to believe like Butler (2005) does, that the basis for morality is not so much self-identity but the exposure to others—the continued desire and attempt to not close down the task of narrative itself. Fashion, especially sustainable fashion, lends itself to such creative practice (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006). As Wilson (2004: 381) suggests, “Fashion, the epitome of consumerism, is also its stealthiest critic.”

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