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FROM FAST FASHION TO SUSTAINABLE SLOW FASHION

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FROM FAST FASHION TO SUSTAINABLE SLOW FASHION

A Thesis

Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English and Writing Studies:
Public and Professional Writing

by

Isabel Agatha Millward-Peña

May 2022

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis is to express a need for sustainability within the fast fashion industry, in the form of cultural movement that acts as alternative to the current means of production, consumption, and philosophies. Sustainability within current popular discourses is often human-centered and lacking authenticity, thus I aim to highlight an alternative that is opposite of that. In doing such, I bring to light the negative effects of the industry through a case study on the fast fashion company SHEIN, who claim to be making sustainable efforts. I analyzed SHEIN's 2021 Sustainability and Social Impact Report (SSIR), focusing on the disparities between SHEIN's rhetoric and the actual sustainable efforts being made, to determine their level of authenticity to sustainability. I uncover negative environmental impacts such as high levels of water consumption, ecosystem disruptions, and disposability that result from the materials used, which lead me to believe SHEIN lacks authenticity to their claims at sustainability. To counter these rapidly increasing effects, I highlight a new philosophy of fashion, one that carries sustainable values and practices. Invented by Kate Fletcher, slow fashion, is the cultural movement needed because it distances itself from the need to feed rising consumer consumption rates, moves away from quickly fading fashion trends, and reduces the speed of production. I highlight slow fashion as a cultural movement because the required sustainable change needed must occur on a cultural level, if it is to create impactful changes.

I finalize with possible steps that consumers and companies can take, in order to adopt slow fashion as a new mode of fashion.

Key Words: *Sustainability, fast fashion, slow fashion, consumer consumption, psychology of consumption, water consumption, ecosystem disruption, philosophy of fashion, rhetoric, and disposability.*

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CHAPTER ONE: FAST FASHION, FAST PROBLEMS

Introduction

Within the last couple of years, the term *sustainability* has become relevant in popular and mainstream discourses. Often human-centered, these sustainability discourses include marketing campaigns for companies seeking to appeal to the culturally approved understanding of sustainability. In particular, the fast fashion industry is a sector of the fashion industry that contributes to negative environmental effects, yet many claim to be making sustainable efforts. This is what prompted me to question fast fashion companies and their level of authenticity to sustainability.

Fast fashion company, SHEIN, is well known for contributing negative environmental effects, yet their website claims they are making sustainable efforts. For this reason, I conducted a case study to determine their authenticity to sustainability. I analyzed SHEIN's 2021 Sustainability and Social Impact Report (SSIR), in search of disparities between their rhetoric and the actual sustainable efforts being made. This is one example of how companies attempt to appeal to the culturally approved understanding of sustainability. This culturally formulated form of sustainability is modified to mean something entirely human-centered, meaning its primary focus is to protect humans and not the earth. This is problematic and is the catalyst behind my desire to search for new ways of consumer consumption.

My analyzes explores SHEIN's lack of authenticity to sustainability as a means of demonstrating the need for an alternative to fast fashion, one that values and reflects a less human-centered form of sustainability. Coined by Kate Fletcher, slow fashion, is the alternative I highlight and will discuss further in the second part of the literary review. One of my aims with this alternative, is to urge companies to consider shifting away from fast fashion and towards a more sustainable slow fashion. For consumers, my aim is to urge them to adopt slow fashion as a new philosophy of fashion. Companies who convert to this alternative form of sustainability could communicate more authentic efforts of sustainability, attract new customers, and change the conversation around their company, to perhaps something more ethically appropriate.

Before fully enter the conversations of sustainability and fast fashion, I would like to start by mentioning that my intended audience are mainly companies but also consumers. This is because the issues I mention are systemic and companies are the ones with the power to change their current modes of operation. It is companies that utilize consumer culture and influencer partnerships to influence what consumers want and desire, thus they are the ones who need to reconstruct their systems to reflect, value, and maintain authenticity to sustainability.

My project begins with a literary review of sustainability, the issues of fast fashion, and the introduction slow fashion. Next is my analysis, which is in the form of a case study on SHEIN. The focus of the case study is to compare the

rhetoric used in their 2021 SSIR, in relation to the negative environmental effects found from the materials used to make their clothing. Subsequent my analysis, I highlight slow fashion as an alternative to fast fashion. I conclude by discussing the benefits of converting to this alternative, possible ways for adapting slow fashion, and questions to consider for future conversations and research.

CHAPTER TWO: SUSTAINABILITY, FAST FASHION, & SLOW FASHION

Literary Review

Fast fashion functions as trendy clothing that are made from cheap materials and designs that are often ripped off versions of other high-end designers. I became aware of the idea of fast fashion in 2020 and the negative effects in 2021. Until that moment, I had mindlessly shopped on almost every fast fashion website there is. Growing up my family was considered lower middle class. That status coupled with the influence of having parents who did not value clothing, made purchasing a clothing item over \$20 unrealistic. Purchasing cheap fast fashion items unconsciously gave me the permission I needed to make a clothing purchase. This connection to fast fashion is one that many others in my generations also gravitate towards. In an article written by Annamma Joy, John F. Sherry, Jr, Alladi Venkatesh, Jeff Wang and Ricky Chan called, "Fast Fashion, Sustainability, and the Ethical Appeal of Luxury Brands," they discuss some of the issues that Fast Fashion creates with a specific focus on younger adults, under twenty-eight years old. They found that with this age group, "fashion is key" (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang and Chan, 278). This is important for understanding how the benefits of fast fashion, that being mass inclusivity, coupled with the idealization of fashion, creates a high level of desire and appreciation for fast fashion. In other words, fast fashion satisfies the current

fashion needs of young adults, and some would even say provides *benefits*. I say this sarcastically for reasons I will explain.

Fast fashion companies *benefit* from cheap production and low labor cost because it leads to high profit value. Great for CEOs but unethical for factory and warehouse workers, especially if minimum wage and labor laws are not present or followed strictly in the country the manufactures are located. The *benefits* fast fashion provides for consumers is the instant gratification of meeting current fashion trends at a low cost. The actuality of these *benefits* is that they negatively contribute to larger issues at hand. They come at a high cost to environmental and psychological impacts.

One of the psychological effects that consumers are faced with are the negative effects of instant gratification. In an article written by the Alexandra Samuel, she argues while instant gratification “may be convenient, we are warned that it’s ruining a long-standing human virtue: the ability to wait” but more from what comes with waiting, that being the “virtue of self-control” (10 Unique Reasons Why Mulberry Silk Is Eco-Friendly). I find this resonating with the lens of the psychology of consumption, which studies the influence of consumption rates on the human psyche. If companies are aware that consumers lack self-control with their fast fashion purchases and they aim to provide instant clothing trends, then they are capitalizing on the psychology of consumption.

To look at this issue from another angle, companies utilize the knowledge that comes from consumerism and the psychology of consumption to produce

marketing strategies. In many cases, these marketing strategies include campaigns that aim to achieve the highest profit. I worked in corporate for two years under communication and marketing. One of the things I learned was how a fundamental component of marketing, is to understand the psychology of the consumer. Understanding consumers in this way made me question the ethical position of marketing. Given the knowledge I learned about marketing strategies and the knowledge I gain about fast fashion production, I began to question the ethics of companies who seek to ensure profits remain high.

Something incredibly important that Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang and Chan mention and is the issue I seek to explore with my case study, is the difficulty that lies with the ethics of fashion industry (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang and Chan, 275). These ethics have found to be connected to issues resulting from lower manufacturing and labor costs, which essentially means higher profit value (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang and Chan, 275). The question that this raises, is how does one reach low manufacturing and labor cost? To answer that question, it is through third party manufacturing companies in countries with lenient or relaxed labor and manufacturing laws. These ethical concerns align with the negative effects that fast fashion companies create with such high-speed productions.

One way that production speeds are able to continue is through the influence of disposability. Disposability is a philosophy that promotes the acceptance of clothing containing a short life cycle. The cheap material used to

make these clothing items are a direct component as to why the life cycle is shorten. The negative effects this causes is with the social acceptance of cheap materials. Lower manufacturing and labor cost are made possible with cheap materials. This cycle of rapid production speeds and disposability add to the negative effects of the fast fashion industry.

Disposability contributes negative effects to the planet. Some clothing materials are not biodegradable, other materials take years to even begin biodegrading. On top of that, large levels of pollution from production are also detrimental to the planet's current and future state. With these issues in mind, sustainable efforts within the fast fashion industry are needed for the planet's longevity. Influenced by Stacy Alaimo's "Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialism, Posthumanism, and Unknown Futures," she considers sustainability through the "a perspective that deviates from anthropocentric ways of being to a more complex, epistemological, ontological, ethical, and political one" (Alaimo, 563). This definition moves away from the socially accepted, human-centered form of sustainability that considers humanity as the thing that needs saving, instead towards a more authentic form of the term. In terms of sustainability's relationship with fast fashion, it is often inexistent. Sustainability is tied to more obvious environmental impacts such as the utilization of electric cars, recycling, and reduced wasted. Fast fashion's lack of connection to sustainability is part of the reason why it has grown substantially, despite the planet's deterioration.

Greg Peter, Mengyu Li, and Manfred Lenzen explore the qualitative data on fast fashion's impact in their article, "The Need to Decelerate Fast Fashion in a Hot Climate - A Global Sustainability Perspective on the Garment Industry" by tracking and recording various increasing levels of energy consumption, greenhouse emissions, carbon intensity, and water consumption. They describe those environmental effects from the fast fashion industry as the following:

"It is notable that the total energy consumption of the sector has increased by 29% over the study period while greenhouse emissions have increased by only 23%, suggesting an improvement in the carbon intensity of the energy supplies it obtains has been a factor constraining the sector's climate impact. The water data suggests total water consumption has increased more than the proportion of it which is drawn from overutilized fresh-water environments. This may be a consequence of the expansion of polyester production and a relative reduction in the role played by cotton irrigation in dry landscapes." (Peter Li Lenzen, 4)

The main issues that stand out to me are the high levels of water consumptions and disruptions of ecosystems from the expansion of polyester production. These issues from fast fashion and the impacts of clothing life cycles occur as they mention, "pre-consumer" (Peter Li Lenzen, 8). Lowering the impacts of clothing life cycles is a "multifaceted problem but as quantified in this article, most of the impacts arise pre-consumer, in the producing countries, so strategies to reduce impacts will most efficiently intervene somewhere in the garment life cycle in way that influences pre-consumer activities" (Peter, Li, Lenzen, 8). One of the ways they pose a solution to fast fashion is by "requir[ing]

engagement from industry, governments and the non-government sector to try and influence consumers to buy fewer but better clothes” (Peter, Li, Lenzen, 8). This is important to mention and connects to arguments made in Sojin Jung and Byoungho Jin’s article “A Theoretical Investigation of Slow Fashion: Sustainable Future of the Apparel Industry.”

Peter, Li, and Lenzen discuss many of the scientifically proven impacts of the Fast fashion industry, while Jung and Jin take that scientific knowledge to create a conversation around solutions to these issues. Something that was brought to my attention through the work of Jung and Jin was the question of *do recycled materials actually help the planet?* This was a question I considered throughout my research but according to Jung and Jin, “consuming apparel items made of environmentally friendly material, creates much greater impact on the environment as it increases solid waste and depletes resources (Niinimäki, 2010; Hiller Connell, 2011).” Apparently, Patagonia came out with a campaign that read “while the jacket is made from recycled polyester, it still generates 24 times its weight in carbon emission and uses enough water to meet the daily needs of 45 people’ (Sweeney, 2012)” (Jung and Jin, 511). This knowledge in turn leads them to call “for more sustainable ways of apparel consumption” (Jung and Jin, 510).

This need for a sustainable solution brings me back to Valentí Rull’s article “Sustainability, Capitalism and Evolution,” where she reimagines sustainability through considering the possibilities of nature preservation. Rull focuses on answering the question of “how would sustainability guarantee nature

conservation?” (Rull, 105), which is an important question and something I found myself asking throughout my research. Rull points out that “[r]eplacing capitalism with a new economic system is necessary for sustainability, but real nature conservation also requires a less anthropocentric attitude and the adoption of an evolutionary perspective” (Rull, 105). The same sarcastic tone that Rull has about those who claim to be sustainable but are not, is the same way that I found myself thinking throughout my case study. “The terms ‘sustainable’ and ‘sustainability’ are in danger of losing their original meaning to become merely rhetorical elements or advertising slogans.” (Rull, 103) This is the inauthentic tone that I seek to uncover through my case study.

Another important argument made by Rull is how she believes that it is “naive to pretend that representatives of the dominant economic and political systems will renounce capitalism” (Rull, 104), which again goes back to the need for a new perspective that considers environmental effects. I understand it is naive to believe that companies are going to read my critique and not be offended. Asking big CEOs to change their mode of production and accept a loss in profit, seems foolish but that is exactly one of the reasons why I am asking. As the dominate culture, they hold the power to create the most sustainable form of change. Giuseppe Fiela writes in her article, “Capitalism in Sustainability Transitions Research: Time for a Critical Turn?” about the how sustainable transitions cannot solely rely on the rigorous analysis and critiques of capitalism (Giuseppe, 242). This is important to mention as it relates to Rull’s argument.

Focusing on a reconstruction of capitalistic consumerism is critical for my argument and the change in perspective is where Fletcher's work comes into play, through her notion of slow fashion.

High Level Alternative: Slow Fashion

Kate Fletcher stands as the foundation of my work, seeing as she is the one who pioneered a change in the fashion industry. Her notion of slow fashion counters fast fashion in many ways. She argues fast fashion's roots lay with greed and not "really about speed," it is about "selling more, making more money" (Fletcher, 2007). In words, capitalism. We see this with the exploitation of the psychology of consumption, which in many ways contributes to the construction of the hegemonic divide between consumer and companies. Raymond Williams argues that hegemony is presented not only through "distributions of power and influence" but also through "complex experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits" (Williams, 112). If consumers continue to consume at accelerating levels, companies will continue to grow in power and influence. If, as Fletcher explains it, "[t]ime is just one factor of production, along with labour, capital and natural resources that get juggled and squeezed in the pursuit of maximum profits" then "fast is not free. Short lead times and cheap clothes are only made possible by exploitation of labour and natural resources" (Fletcher, 2007). In other words, maximum profits are made possible through exploitation.

As I mentioned earlier, my intended audience are companies because I believe they have the most power to enact this change. I believe Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang and Chan would agree with my argument being as they argue “[y]ou 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.” (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang and Chan, 286) This kind of change must come from the fashion domain, given many of the issues result post-consumer. In an article called “The Price of Fast Fashion,” they do a great job at pointing to the negative effects of fast fashion but where it fails is by placing the need for change on the individual. While it is important to inform the consumer of issues, companies need to reinvent themselves to eliminate these issues. One of the ways, being through the adaptation of slow fashion.

In an attempt to provide an alternative to fast fashion, slow fashion emerges as a sustainable movement in the apparel industry (Jung and Jin, 510). Jung and Jin describe slow fashion as a sustainable and fashionable practice that values buying less but high quality (Jung and Jin, 511). Fletcher writes in her article “Slow fashion,” about the functionality of fast fashion. She offers a new system for still being able to make money but also respect “the rights of workers and the environment, and produces beautiful and conscientious garments” (Ecologist, 2007). That new system being slow fashion, which concerns itself with “designing, producing, consuming and living better.” (Ecologist, 2007) It is a shift from quantity to quality. This approach is her way of urging “designers, buyers,

retailers and consumers” to become “more aware of the impacts of products on workers, communities and ecosystems” (Ecologist, 2007). In another article written by Fletcher (2010) “Slow fashion: an invitation for systems change,” she discusses the idea of “fast” within the context of not only fashion but food and growth. This idea that within the business sector, “the logic of growth is well established as the basis of power and prosperity. The system that grows fastest is considered best and is sustained because people believe in it” (Fletcher, 260). This system of speed and power is inherently visible in the fast fashion industry, which again emphasizes the need for a more sustainable slow system. Slow fashion deviates from this current system of speed and power to reconnect itself to principles of nature.

Fletcher’s work values nature’s principles when considering the cultural and creative forces of fashion and design (Kate Fletcher, 2022). Her values along with her system thinking to fashion, has pioneered a shift in the way fashion, textiles and sustainability is understood (Kate Fletcher, 2022). It is through her notion of slow fashion that many have expanded the conversations of sustainability and fashion. While slow fashion does slow the pace of the fast fashion industry, its main concern is “rather a socially conscious movement that shifts consumers’ mindsets from quantity to quality, encouraging people to buy high-quality items less often (Fletcher, 2007). As this denotes, the concept of slow fashion can be approached from production and consumption aspects” (Jung and Jin, 512). Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, and Chan refer to Fletcher’s

new system as a philosophy of attentiveness (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, and Chan, 289).

Describing Fletcher's new system as a philosophy of attentiveness is critical for my argument. Understand how *slow* functions within fashion is through the separation of "values and goals of fast (growth-based) fashion," instead to standing as a "vision of the fashion sector built from a different starting point" (Fletcher, 262). In other words, it is a reimagining of fashion. When a consumer gains access to current fashion trends, there is a societal acceptance or achievement that is connected with doing such. Slow fashion disconnects with this line of thought, to produce a value that praises quality over quantity. Slow fashion combines slow production and consumption, does not exploit natural and human resources, and creates a shift in perspective on fast fashion (Fletcher, 2007). "This movement is against increasing fashion waste from the fast fashion system that involves rapid catching-up trends with minimum quality." (Jung and Jin, 510-511). Not only is slow fashion a new form of thought for the fast fashion industry, but it is also a new form of production.

Something that was also mentioned in Jung and Jin's article was how consumer's attitude on fast fashion's negative environmental effects, had little to zero effect on their purchasing decisions and "[i]n fact, apparel consumers consider style and fit more than environmental concerns when they make purchasing decisions (Butler and Francis, 1997)" (Jung and Jin, 511). Today I would argue that price and style are two considerations consumers make

regarding fashion purchase, and still trump any concerns for environmental effects. This is important to mention because, as we learned from Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang and Chan, fashion is essential to many of the younger adults and if their purchasing decisions pay little to zero mind of the negative environment effects, then there is no doubt that the rate of consumption will only increase. Adapting the philosophy of slow fashion promotes higher levels of awareness of consumption, which can be approached prior to production.

Slow Production brings balance to the environment and humanity by reducing exploitation of natural resources, unnatural material growth, consumption, and waste. (Jung and Jin, 512). Jung and Jin also claim that workers also benefit from slow production because it “improves the quality of life of all workers, guaranteeing their fundamental human rights by taking the time pressure off” (Jung and Jin, 512). I would hope that is true, but I feel as though that would need additional research. They describe slow fashion as holistic by considering its production and consumption connections (Jung and Jin, 512). This is due to sustainable production becoming “unsustainable when garments made of eco-friendly materials are worn only a few times and discarded quickly (LeBlanc, 2012)” (Jung and Jin, 512). Longevity is promoted within the values of slow fashion and thus connects it to sustainability. Slow fashions values are built on a sustainable foundation with its promotion of longevity within clothing items and made of eco-friendly material.

Slow fashion consists of clothing that is made of higher qualities, made for multiple uses, and longer life spans. It is a sustainable model that is needed as an alternative to fast fashion. Where I see slow fashion existing is as a means of regaining value and ownership. Purchasing items based off quality create a level of interest, desire, and longevity. It might be argued, fast fashion allows for mass exclusivity and an abundance of clothing. The reality is this is true, but it is not a sustainable means of consumption. If anything, it is a destructive means of consumption. One that causes destruction, not only to the human psyche but to the planet. In the following section, I analyze the fast fashion company SHEIN for the purpose of providing evidence of the previously mentioned claims.

CHAPTER THREE:

RHETORIC

Case Study

I choose SHEIN as the company to conduct a case study on because they have been continuously linked to numerous environmental issues and a whole, not a well admired company from multiple perspectives. They were founded in October 2008 and have since skyrocketed in popularity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, fast fashion companies like SHEIN found their sales increasing because of their e-commerce presence. The purpose of this case study is to compare the rhetoric used in SHEIN's 2021 SSIR in relation to the negative environmental effects found from the materials used. I only focus on information from SHEIN's SSIR as it relates to sustainability, specifically negative environmental effects such as large levels of water consumption, ecosystem disruption, and disposability. This is not to ignore or limit the conversations of other issues, but to narrow my focus and argument. To uncover any disparities and determine their level of authenticity to sustainability, I highlight the claims made in their SSIR and compare it to quantitative data on the clothing materials used. By focusing on SHEIN's rhetoric and materials, I found three negative environmental issues that demonstrate low levels of authenticity to their sustainability claims, those relating to large levels of water consumption, ecosystem disruption, and disposability.

In the Approach and Governance section of the SSIR, SHEIN identifies three pillars for their sustainability and social impact strategy, those being to protect our planet, support communities and empower entrepreneurs (SHEIN, 2021). In the “Protecting Our Planet” section, SHEIN acknowledges the impact that the fashion industry has on the health of the environment. In this same section, they claim several things. First claim, that they have introduced innovative ways to reducing the environmental impacts, through their “thermal digital transfer and digital direct printing technologies,” which are aimed at reducing water use at the production process (SHEIN, 2021). Second claim, they are shifting towards more sustainable materials such as recycled polyester (SHEIN, 2021). Final claim, that they are working to create solutions for “garment recycling programs and other initiatives to reduce post-consumer waste” and avoiding overproduction (SHEIN, 2021).

Materials Used

Chart 1: SHEIN Clothing Materials

SHEIN Materials								
Section 1			Section 2			Section 3		
Name	# Of Items	Bio-degradable or not	Name	# Of Items	Bio-degradable or not	Name	# Of Items	Bio-degradable or not
Polyester	122784	No	Mohair	24	No	Tencel	10	Yes
Organza	113	No	Quantity of Non-biodegradable items		136,026	Ramie	7	Yes
Spandex	97	No	Lycra	50	Yes	Cuprammonium	4	Yes
Elastane	97	No	Viscose	9048	Yes	Shearling	782	Yes
Recycled Polyester	80	No	Nylon	7522	Yes	Mulberry Silk	4	Yes
Recycled Polyester Blends	51	No	Satin	5429	Yes	TENCEL Lyocell	3	Yes
Coral Fleece	9	No	Recycled Cotton Blends	24	Yes	Recycle Cotton	3	Yes
Velvet	3682	No	LENZING Viscose	19	Yes	Tweed	1074	Yes
PU Leather	3410	No	Organic Cotton Blends	16	Yes	Wool-like Fabric	937	Yes
Embroidery Mesh	10	No	Organic Cotton	13	Yes	Cotton Blends	889	Yes
Sequins	2379	No	Cupro	13	Yes	Wool	2	Yes
Chiffon	1985	No	Bamboo Fiber	12	Yes	Quantity of Biodegradable materials		49,404
Fleece	195	No	Acetate	114	Yes	Corduroy	1547	N/A
Recycled Polyester	588	No	Lyocell	69	Yes	Lace	1492	N/A
Glitter	245	No	Polyamide	217	Yes	Metallic	1361	N/A
Faux Fur	219	No	Cotton	20166	Yes	Acrylic	7974	N/A
Recycled Polyamide	32	No	Silk	130	Yes	Schiffy	640	N/A
Cashmere	26	No	Linen	117	Yes	Mesh	4098	N/A
						Quantity of items that biodegradable status is N/A		17,233
Total # of items:			202663					

*The following are materials pulled from their website as of 2022**

In January 2021, SHEIN had a total of 202,663 clothing items and 55 clothing materials. Chart One shows all 55 of the materials uses by SHEIN, the quantity of items per material, and whether it is biodegradable or not. The red highlighted materials are not biodegradable, the blue highlighted are biodegradable, and the materials highlighted in tan were hard to determine.

Figure 1: Quantity of Clothing Items

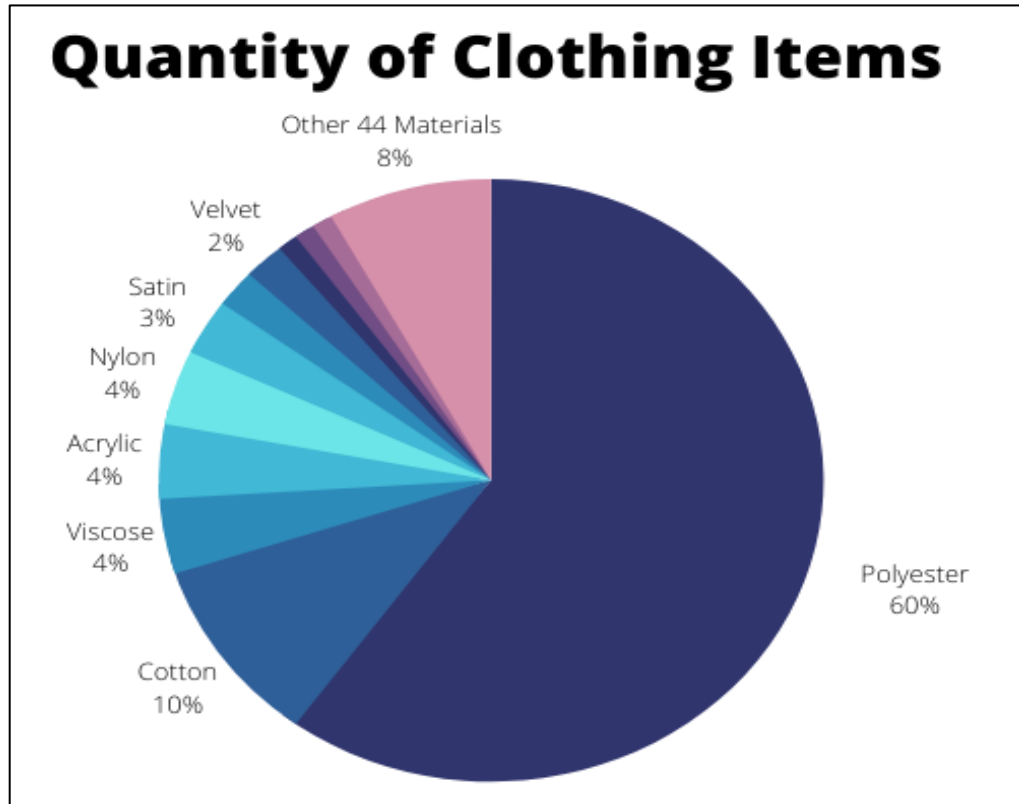


Chart Two provides the percentage of each material used to make the 202,663 clothing items being sold on the website. The top 10 percent of the 55 materials sold on the SHEIN website are polyester at 61%, cotton at 10%,

viscose at 4%, acrylic at 4%, nylon at 4%, satin at 3%, mesh at 2%, velvet at 2%, PU leather at 1%, rayon at 1%, and sequins at 1%. Of the 55 materials, polyester is the number one material used by SHEIN and takes up about 60% of the materials used, that is not including recycled polyester. Coming in second is cotton, which makes up almost 10% of the materials used.

Issue #1: Water Consumption

Figure 2: SHEIN's Water Usage

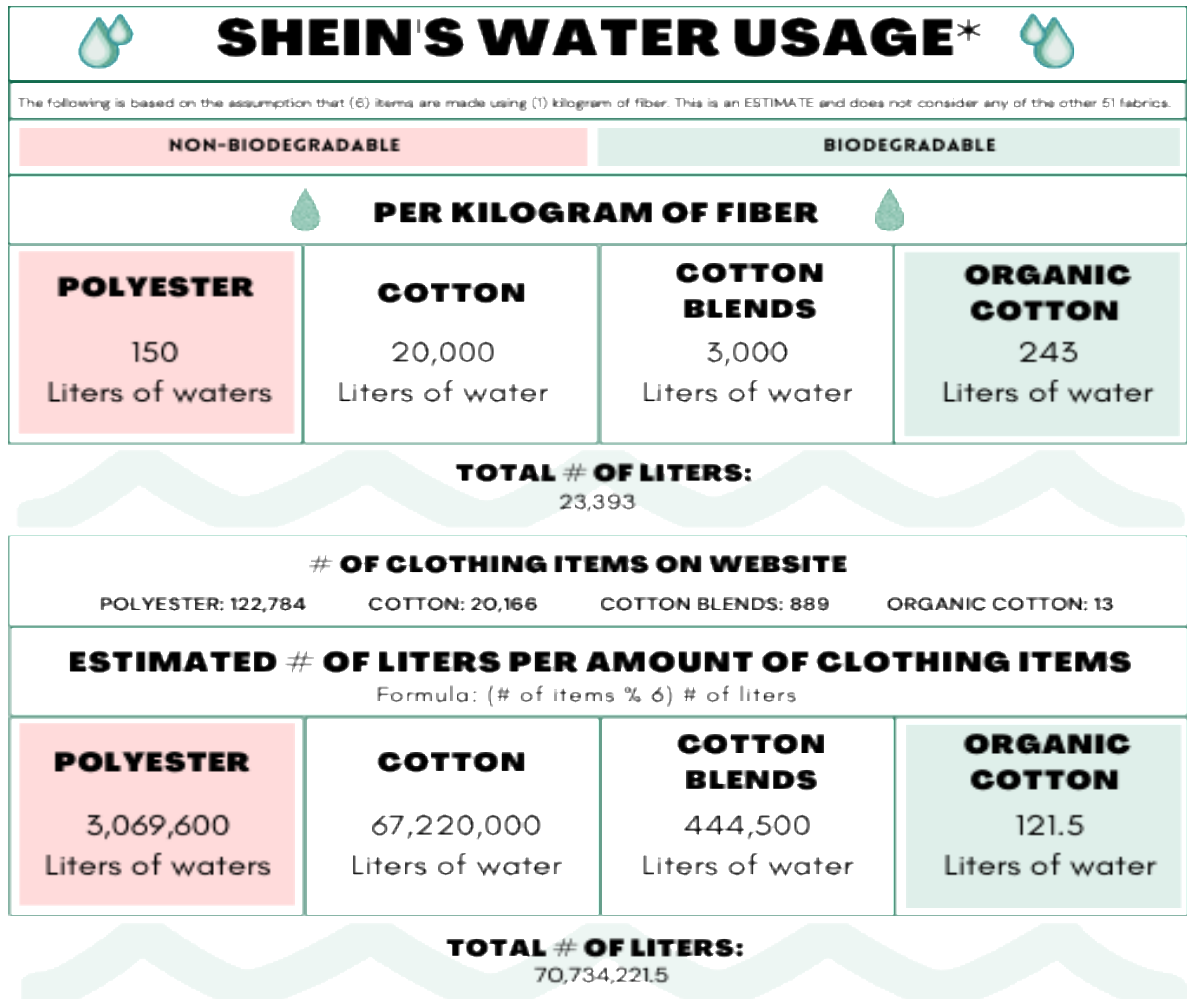


Figure 2 breaks down 4 materials and their water consumption. Polyester alone takes up almost 75% of the clothing materials used by SHEIN. Considering the way Polyester is produced is critical for understanding how it could contribute to SHEIN's lack of or low level of authenticity to sustainability. Another material that is worth considering is cotton's production. While it only takes up 10% of the

materials being sold by SHEIN, it is the second most used material on the website and known for carrying much controversy.

While organic cotton does consume more water per kilogram of clothing than polyester, it is biodegradable. When cotton is produced inorganically it uses over 80 times more water than organic cotton. Since cotton is grown by irrigation of arid land the distribution of water scarcity impacts are even more extreme (Peter Li Lenzen, 2). Of all the water used to run factories and clean products, the fashion industry is responsible for one tenth of water consumption (Le, Int J Consumer studies). In addition, it has been found that “current cotton production methods are environmentally unsustainable” and pose threats to the environment (Cotton | Industries | WWF). This will be discussed in depth in the next section.

In the first claim, SHEIN claims they have introduced innovative ways to reducing their environmental impacts, through “thermal digital transfer and digital direct printing technologies,” which are aimed at reducing water use at the production process (SHEIN, 2021). This claim not only ignores water waste from specific materials but water waste from anything outside of printing. These claims at protecting the environment are not enough. They are multifaceted and while a reduction of 50% water waste from polyester is great, it ignores all the other issues that the production of polyester creates. For example, it lacks the ability to biodegrade and given that it is made from “from petroleum, chemicals, water, and air. It is an energy-intensive process and results in high levels of pollution and chemical by-products.” (The Dangers Of Polyester And Why Bearaby Went

Natural). These production processes are very detrimental to the environment and create a variety of negative impacts, which leads to the next issue, that being the disruptions of ecosystems.

Issue #2: Ecosystem Disruptions

The second claim that SHEIN makes is that they are shifting towards more sustainable materials such as recycled polyester (SHEIN, 2021). As we learned earlier, polyester is not actually environmentally friendly, thus making the material not actually sustainable. Whether that is lack of knowledge or ignorance, that already demonstrates lack of authenticity to sustainability. We must also remember that of the four materials highlighted in Chart Four, polyester is the only non-biodegradable material and equates to more total clothing items than all the other materials combined. Recycled or not, polyester remains nonbiodegradable and accounts for 61% of the total number of clothing items.

If we consider the actual number of *sustainable* materials being used, only 8 out of the 55 materials are recycled or organic, and in total account for less than .0039% of the total number of clothing items sold. The way that these materials are being produced can lead to disruptions in ecosystems. Several major ecosystems have been affected by the diversion of water and its pollution as seen from cotton growing (World Wildlife). According to the World Wildlife, some of the most prominent environmental impacts from cotton come from the use of “agrochemicals (especially pesticides), the consumption of water, and the

conversion of habitat to agricultural use.” According to SHEIN, they have a strict code of conduct which outlines proper chemical regulations (SHEIN, 2021) but without any actual data this is hard to determine.

At first glance, Chart One appears to have more clothing items made from materials that are biodegradable but that is incorrect. The number of materials that are biodegradable is higher than those materials labeled as not biodegradable, but the actual number of clothing items made from non-biodegradable materials is higher. The marked N/A are hard to distinguish whether they are biodegradable or not because often they are made using a variety of materials. Of the almost quarter of a million clothing items, about 67% are not biodegradable and only about 24% are biodegradable.

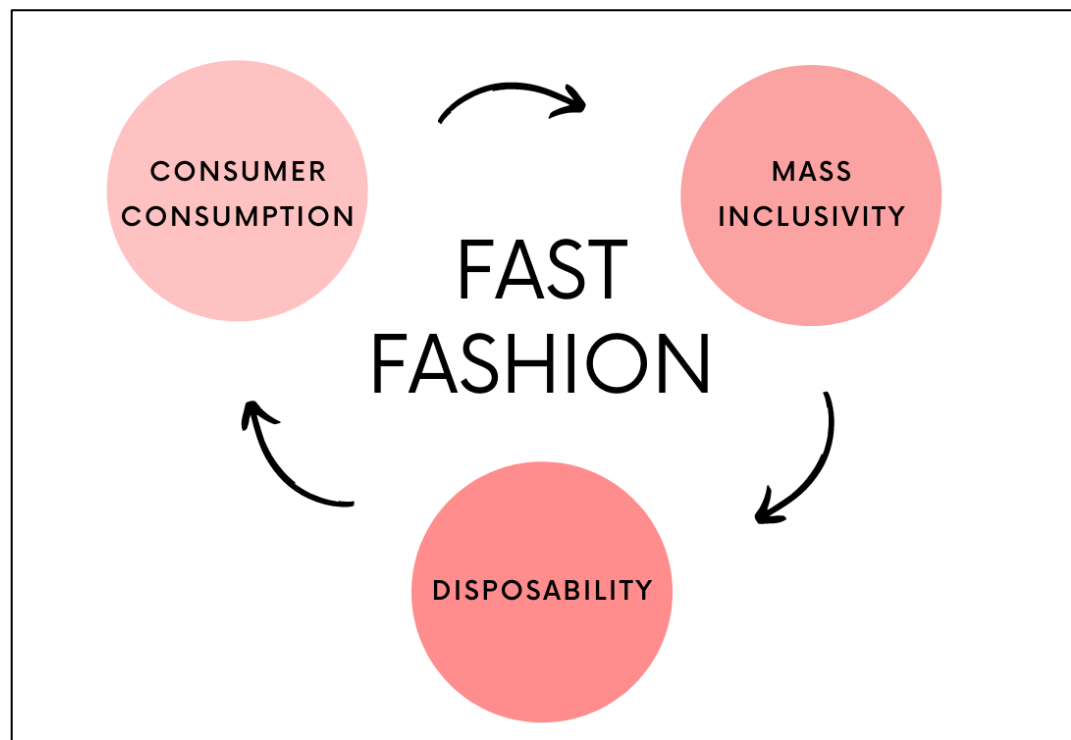
This second claim at introducing more sustainable materials fails at following in line with authentic measures of sustainability. The expansion of manufacturing warehouses and farming for materials, places great damage to neighboring ecosystems and destruction of previous ecosystems. With consumption rates only increasing, the need for expansions of manufacturing warehouses and farming will only follow. Given the fact that consumers are unaware of these negative environmental effects because of fast fashions lack of connections to sustainability, it only makes sense that they are unaware of what fast fashion promotes, that being disposability.

Issue #3: Disposability

As I mentioned, disposability is the philosophy that promotes the acceptance of cheap clothing containing a short life cycle. In the final claim, SHEIN states that they are working to create solutions for “garment recycling programs and other initiatives to reduce post-consumer waste” and avoiding overproduction (SHEIN, 2021). From this claim three aspects stand out to me, those being the creation of recycling programs, the desire to reduce of post-consumer waste, and avoid overproduction. These three issues address the issue of disposability in an indirect and counterproductive way.

It is well understood that luxury, high-end fashion is expensive and limited, completely contrasting fast fashion. While there have been claims that luxury fashion utilizes the same materials as fast fashion, the quantity of clothing items differs drastically. Fast fashion produces large amounts of clothing to reach a greater number of individuals, otherwise known as mass inclusivity. The result of mass inclusivity manifests through the lessening of originality and desire. Being that fast fashion is cheap and endless, its expansion through mass inclusivity results in this idea of disposability (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang and Chan, 275). Disposability acts as the foundation for the lifespan and value for fast fashion clothing. In other words, fast fashion clothing is valued extremely low and considered easily and quickly disposable.

Figure 2: Cycle of Fast Fashion



Consumer consumption, mass inclusivity, and disposability go hand in hand as they represent the cycle of fast fashion. The fast fashion industry appeals to consumer consumption through mass inclusivity, while profiting from the influence of disposability that occurs post-consumer. This results in a continuous cycle of increasing consumer consumption, mass inclusivity, and disposability. The way that disposability is created is through the acceptance of cheap materials. Instead of creating solutions that favor disposability, such as recycling programs that also benefit from it, SHEIN should produce clothing that values longevity and holds a higher value.

This claim fails to acknowledge the fact that high levels of consumer consumption and mass inclusivity leads to disposability and is the main issue leading to various environmental effects. This claim also fails at claiming responsibility, instead demonstrating how to continue benefiting from disposability. While creating recycling programs to reduce post-consumer waste might be a solution, it is more of a way to place the responsibility on the consumer to recycle. Placing the responsibility on the consumer ensures that production rates either stay the same or increase, and in turn continue to provide high profit values. Again, SHEIN fails at being authentic to sustainability. It should be well understood now, that the fast fashion industry is harmful to the environment. The large levels of consumer consumption, mass inclusivity, water consumption, and disposability create negative environmental impacts, and disrupt ecosystems. Thus, converting to slow fashion is the most authentic form of a sustainable movement.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE TRANSITION TO SLOW FASHION

Alternative

Before completely focusing on slow fashion I would like to reiterate some of the main claims SHEIN makes in their “Protecting Our Planet” section; first they have introduced innovative ways to reducing their environmental impacts, through “thermal digital transfer and digital direct printing technologies,” which are aimed at reducing water use at the production process, they are shifting towards more sustainable materials such as recycled polyester, and that they are working to create solutions for “garment recycling programs and other initiatives to reduce post-consumer waste” and avoiding overproduction (SHEIN, 2021). As we have seen, SHEIN’s materials contribute to large levels of water consumption, despite their claims at the implementation of new technologies. The *sustainable materials* that they claim to be moving towards only make up for 0.0039% of their clothing materials. The *sustainable programs* that they are working towards are not actually sustainable and contribute to the promotion of disposability. As a whole, SHEIN lacks authenticity to sustainability and has proven lack of knowledge to the foundation of sustainability, outside of its human-centered form.

Unfortunately, SHEIN’s claims at sustainability are human-centered. This is apparent with the use of *our* when referring to the planet. This rhetorical choice used in the SSIR should be revised, if one desires to adopt the values of slow

fashion. This is the anthropocentric attitude that Rull argues we need to pull away from. When we use *our* to refer to something, that implies ownership. That of which, we do not have over the planet. Do we have a relationship with the planet? Yes, one that can be seen as transactional. Transactional in a way that communicates how our actions impact the planet's state of being. The need for sustainability goes far beyond just recycling materials. Adopting the evolutionary perspective of slow fashion is the step needed to pull away from an anthropocentric attitude and into a more sustainably valuing attitude. A perspective that is carried through slow fashion as a cultural movement.

Considering slow fashion as an evolutionary perspective that creates a cultural movement is the form of sustainability need. Slow fashion "claims to slow down the fashion cycle via a combination of slow production and consumption" and by not exploiting "natural and human resources to expedite manufacturing speed" (Fletcher, 2007). Consumer demand heavily influences the need for rapid production speed, therefore cultivating a socially conscious movement is required to balance reduced production speeds. In other words, reducing production speeds requires a social acceptance of reduced consumer demands. This socially conscious movement creates a shift in mindset for consumers from quantity to quality and motivates consumers to buy high-quality items less often (Fletcher, 2007). It does such by opposing fads and rapid changing trends with minimum quality, that result in fashion waste (Jung and Jin, 510-511), and presupposing a longer product lifespan. Culturally we must resist consumer

demands that invoke speed, disposability, and quantity. Instead, replace these consumer demands with consumer interests that value with quality, individuality, and ownership. I say this with emphasize on quality, individuality, and ownership, these values that come with a reduction of speed and consumption.

Some of the ways slow fashion manifests are through eliminating *fashion rules* that value disposability. By *fashion rules*, I am referring to the societal influenced set of rules that determine what is acceptable and unacceptable. For example, the rule that you can only wear clothing items once. When it comes to fast fashion, the idea of wearing something once does not bare another thought because of the incredibly low price of the clothing item. Another reasoning that fast fashion deems this level of acceptance of disposability is through the low-quality material. Consumers understand they are *paying the price* for fashion when they purchase items that can only be washed 2-3 times before the quality of the material is compromised. In my experience purchasing clothing items from SHEIN, after one wash the quality of the item is completely compromised, making it almost impossible to wear more than once. Eliminating these *fashion rules* thus becomes a vital component of slow fashion. One of the ways that companies can do such, is through their marketing.

This type of cultural movement must come from the domain themselves because of their dominate placement within society. Given companies are the ones who create consumer demands, then they hold the responsibility for navigating consumers to value slow fashion. Effective and modern marketing is

critical for companies to voice their sustainability efforts properly and authentically. Understanding how various social media platforms function is the first step. I will only discuss Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube because that is where I have professional and personal experience. Instagram is shifting to a more e-commerce platform, and TikTok and YouTube value content creation. Each platform should serve separate functions for communicating slow fashion. Instagram can serve as the visual appeal to slow fashion. TikTok can function as informal and community building. YouTube can hold longer more story telling forms of video creation. The first step for companies, after they have made the necessary sustainable changes to their products, is to create a campaign with slogans that reiterate the values and ideology of slow fashion. Included in that campaign, should be several different forms of content. One way that companies can eliminate these *fashion rules* is through content creation. Specifically looking at TikTok, there have been many trends with the focus on “outdated fashion trends.” Companies can utilize these trends to market their clothing items and build their reputation as a slow fashion company.

Another way that companies can cultivate this new philosophy is through their influencer partnerships. Partnering with influencers can benefit the conversations about slow fashion and the need for this transition. It has been proven that influencers are a strong benefit for marketing strategies, which is why implementing influencer partnership within the initial marketing campaigns is impactful. Connecting and cultivating relationships with individuals who

understand, and value slow fashion can help to positively benefit the direction of the discourses surrounding the company and slow fashion. Influencers should be utilized on each platform and chosen carefully, to insure the values of slow fashion are understood and equally valued by the individual. That would communicate the purest form of authenticity to this sustainable, cultural movement.

I would like to conclude this section by emphasizing authenticity. This form of marketing should be used to vocalize the sustainable and authentic forms of slow fashion, that are already standing as the foundation of the company's production, values, and products. Unless, the marketing campaign is being used in an educational way, to educate consumers on slow fashion.

CHAPTER FIVE: A NEW CULTURAL MOVEMENT

Conclusion

My goal with this paper is to encourage companies and consumers to enact cultural change with slow fashion. The benefits of converting to slow fashion would include stronger ethics, stronger authenticity to sustainability, and a change in consumer culture, one that is less toxic, wasteful, and capitalistic. Reduced production speeds would benefit the environment through limiting the quantity of wasteful and toxic materials being used. Stronger authenticity to sustainability would consist of a nonhuman-centered form of the term, one that considers the planet as the one in need of saving. A slow fashion form of consumer culture would be less demanding and instant. Converting to this alternative form of sustainability could communicate more authentic efforts of sustainability, which is beneficial for the ethics of companies. In addition, those who are against fast fashion might reconsider purchasing items if the company is now a slow fashion company. That would be due to the change in philosophy of fashion that slow fashion curates. This transition to a more sustainable slow fashion company could also eliminate or decrease the stigmas surrounding the company, had they continued as a fast fashion company. While I understand converting to this new philosophy might be difficult, I suggest companies start with a marketing plan that introduces slow fashion and create a strategic plan to begin the reconstruction.

For companies, I would suggest producing a marketing campaign that educates consumers about the values of slow fashion. They can demonstrate the positive impact converting to slow fashion could have on the planet and our mental health, prior to blindsiding consumers with what might seem like only higher prices and better-quality clothing. For example, Levi's created a campaign called *Buy Better Wear Longer*. The campaign addresses the issues of over-consumption, which is one of the main issues slow fashion aims at reducing. Their campaign also speaks the importance of valuing clothing with longevity. Both factors contribute heavily to the influence and consciousness that they are aiming to cultivate for their consumers. Levi's partners with two of popular culture's iconic and influenceable influencers, Jaden Smith, and Emma Chamberlain. Understanding the impact that these influencers have on their audience is important for companies seeking to create change through slow fashion. These influencers are able to navigate the current discourse surrounding a company. Therefore, if companies emulate this formula they could help navigate and cultivate healthy slow fashion discourses.

In a prediction made by TikTok user @cozyakili, he talks about a predicted cultural shift that would influence the way we as individuals socially identify. He talks about how culturally we have been conditioned to identify with *things* but this new "vibe shift" will, as he states, be a "shift in the way that we use things to define culture." "Taking us back to an indie sleaze era," which will move us away from our current state of consumerism to a more nuanced, hesh, culture with

clothing being more thrifted, second hand, domestic cozy. I believe this new era is similar to slow fashion as a cultural movement. Both reimagine consumer culture, and question changes in culturally identification. This is information that companies should consider if they are interested in progressing with the times.

For consumers, I suggest starting with implementing small lifestyle choices. The small changes that I suggest consumers take, would be by making a conscious effort to limit or end purchases on fast fashion items. Purchasing clothing items that are *timeless*, is one of the ways they can start adopting slow fashion. Before making a clothing purchase, consider the quality, longevity, and reasoning for purchasing items. One of the ways that I have adopted slow fashion is by limiting my fast fashion purchases, not giving into current fashion trends, thrifting, and cultivating a style that is unique to me. In other words, my style is reflective of items that are timeless and interchangeable despite seasons, trends, or culturally accepted fashion rules. I value longevity in my clothing and try my best to not feed into the trap of consumerism.

Questions to consider for future conversations and research: *“Why should companies consider sustainability and what is it? Why should companies have a better consciousness of their consumer consumption? Can companies profit without capitalizing on consumerism?”*

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