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Greenwashing and the sustainability deceptions of the fashion industry

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Abstract

The objective of this dissertation is to examine the consequences of fast fashion on the three pillars of sustainability and to analyze how this has contributed to the phenomenon of greenwashing.

The phenomenon will be analyzed through a literature review and scholarly articles to gain a comprehensive understanding of its extent. The analysis will also examine how it has influenced consumer perceptions of brands that engage in misleading practices, including false claims and actions. The history of fashion provides a wealth of information regarding the emergence of fast fashion and its subsequent impact on the fashion industry. By examining the actions of two prominent fast fashion brands, it will be possible to gain insight into the ways in which they have attempted to present themselves as environmentally conscious entities, despite their actual practices.

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Introduction

"Our fashion choices do have social outcomes and meanings."
Cline, 2013

Fashion has been a pervasive force in our lives for decades, influencing the way we live and perceive the world around us. It has shaped our external appearance and our interactions with others, who can easily observe and judge our fashion choices. However, fashion's impact extends beyond mere vanity. It can create deeper problems that affect our personas and our relationships with others. In her 2013 work, Cline posits that fashion is obsolescence and change. Consequently, it has evolved into a business that exploits this phenomenon by creating trends and necessities that the average consumer may not necessarily require but could be compelled to purchase due to the social pressure of belonging. Fashion is a means of establishing connections and initiating conversations, and it serves as a unifying force among individuals.

The relentless evolution of this sector has precipitated a multitude of environmental, social, and economic challenges. In order to remain competitive, numerous fast fashion stores have emerged to meet the ever-changing demands of consumers and the rapid changes that occur in the fashion industry. These stores are able to imitate and deliver clothing items that have been seen on runways and fashion shows at a quarter of the price and with questionable materials to produce them in record times.

The capacity of these brands to deliver these products in a relatively brief period has prompted inquiries into the manner in which they were manufactured, which has in turn

contributed to their low cost. As concerns regarding climate change, water pollution, deforestation, inhumane working conditions, the lack of protection for garment workers, and questionable supply chains emerged, businesses began to enunciate loudly and proudly about their commitments to environmentally sustainable practices and the well-being of their workers. However, a catastrophic incident in a garment factory in Bangladesh revealed the true nature of these companies' activities and brought to light the realities of the fashion industry, particularly for fast fashion brands. The claims and statements they had made were found to be false, and it was revealed that they had been deceiving their consumers with greenwashing tactics.

This dissertation examines the phenomenon of greenwashing, which involves companies disseminating information to the public about their sustainability practices while not actually implementing these practices, this as grown as a problem more and more as the years go by and consumers are catching up on the actions of this businesses and get more and more skeptical about what they preach.

In the initial chapter of this thesis, we will analyze the evolution of consumer perception and the primary actors involved in this transformation, The younger generation is taking a more active role in addressing sustainability issues and their potential impact on future generations. The depletion of resources and the deterioration of the environment are becoming increasingly evident. Concurrently, we will examine greenwashing through a comprehensive literature review. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, it is necessary to examine the opinions of various authors of literature on the subject. At the same time, it is important to consider the implications of new

legislation that has been introduced in order to address the challenges currently facing this sector. Examples of how some major brands have misled their consumers will be presented as a basis for providing factual representation of the problem and how some of their practices were brought to light.

The second chapter is devoted to an examination of the three principal pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. The three pillars of sustainability are being examined from a sustainable point of view, with the question being asked whether everything possible is being done to avoid compromising the possibility of an easy life for future generations. This is in accordance with the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Commission, which was the first to explore the concept of sustainable development. The occurrence of natural and human-induced disasters has become a significant concern for the environment. The world is approaching a critical point due to the lack of concern for the rising temperatures. The United Nations[1] has acknowledged the fact that the Earth's temperature has risen by 1.2°C compared to the late 1800s before the Industrial Revolution.

The third chapter will be devoted to an analysis of the historical development of the fashion industry, with a particular focus on the emergence of the concept of fast fashion in the context of the Industrial Revolution. The chapter commences with an examination of the historical development of cotton, which emerged as a crucial commodity in the global trade network, and its role in the Industrial Revolution, which laid the foundation

[1] United Nations (n.n.). What is Climate Change?

for the advent of mass production and the subsequent emergence of the concept of fast fashion. We then proceeded to define fast fashion and examine the positive and negative aspects that have emerged from it. We concluded the chapter with an introduction to slow fashion, which represents an alternative to the aforementioned problem.

We then proceeded to the fourth and final chapter, which examined the challenges facing the fast fashion sector. To this end, we analyzed two major fast fashion brands, examining their sustainability practices and the extent to which these align with the concept of legitimacy theory. This theory posits that organizations tend to make false claims about their actions, aiming to appear desirable to society without there being concrete evidence to support these claims.

Chapter 1 - Ruling out Fashion. Literature Review

Deception, deception, and more deception. This is the word we use to describe modern day fashion. According to author Cline many fashion books make the argument that people should be taking fashion seriously but that's not what she thinks, instead she's of the idea that the bad reputation that the fashion industry gets is more than deserved. She also states: "It behaves with embarrassingly little regard for the environment or human rights. It changes the rules of what we're supposed to wear constantly, and we seem to have lost our sense of self along with changing trends" (Cline, 2013).

The industry is affected by an imbalance of power that extends beyond the outsourcing of parts to manufacturers in developing countries (La Diega, 2019)[2]. On the article "*Can the law fix the problems of fashion? An empirical study on social norms and power imbalance in the fashion industry*" the author states that the industry isn't regulated the traditional way hence the power imbalance that subsists in this sector, but it is dictated by social norms given that fashion is in a sense a closed community where contracts don't actually reflect the relationship between parties (La Diega, 2019).

The observation of the manner in which regulatory bodies around the world enforce their regulations provides insight into the extent to which they are complied with. It raises the question of whether compliance is achieved in its entirety or whether businesses choose to comply with only those regulations that are beneficial to their operations, while

[2] Noto La Diega, G. (2019). Can the law fix the problems of fashion? An empirical study on social norms and power imbalance in the fashion industry. Journal of Intellectual Property Law & Practice, 14(1), 18-24.

neglecting to consider the effects that their actions may have on the wider community and the surrounding environment.

Additionally, it is important to consider how this attitude is perceived by consumers. Is it something that is of interest to them, or do they simply ignore it if it does not directly affect them? This is an important question because it affects how consumers react to advertisements about sustainability disseminated by these companies. Are they aware of this deception, or do they simply ignore it?

1.1. - Consumers Fashion

Do consumers prioritize environmental and social issues, or is it assumed that what is currently popular is the optimal course of action?

"Good clothes" are now outrageously priced shopping cheap is more of a nonchoice than we recognize is what the author Cline stated on her book[3], she also states that the fashion industry has been largely split into two players: the ultra-high-end and the low – end, and there's no in between. Affordability and accessibility are the driving forces that allow fast fashion brands to gain notoriety and out shadowed the other "middle class" clothing brands that are not too expensive to be considered luxury but at the same time aren't taken into consideration because of their "high prices", but this distortion has been caused by this fast fashion retailers because as Cline said "to make cheap clothes you really need cheap labour" and "clothing that is well made is not cheap" (Cline, 2013). In a similar

[3] Cline, E. L. (2013). *Overdressed: The shockingly high cost of cheap fashion*. Penguin.

manner, we are currently providing support to restaurants that utilize locally sourced and grown food. In a parallel fashion, we are now examining companies that claim to be sustainable. We have begun to inquire as to the basis for such assertions.

As reported by Karine Trinquetel[4] in her article, 52% of individuals globally have observed or been made aware of misleading information regarding the sustainability actions of brands. Brands have come to recognize the necessity of shifting towards more environmentally conscious practices. This has been evidenced by the establishment of eco-label lines by various brands (Vu, N. T., & Anh, M. H., 2019)[5].

It is important to consider whether these conscious practices are always true or whether they are employed as a means of appeasing consumer demands regarding changes that are to be made in the fashion industry.

In the European Union, the commitment to sustainability has intensified in the context of the emergence of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Consumers are demanding that brands take tangible actions in response to these requests (McKinsey & Company, 2020)[6]. It is during periods of stress that one can discern the true nature of another's thoughts. In the face of a crisis, individuals tend to prioritize immediate needs over other considerations. This can result in the exclusion of long-term goals and broader perspectives.

[4] Karine Trinquetel. (November 9th, 2023). Mistrust and rejection: The impact of greenwashing and social washing on brands. Kantar

[5] Vu, N. T., & Anh, M. H. (2019). Consumer Perception and Behavior in the Context of Sustainable Fashion: A Comprehensive Analysis of Emerging Trends and Impacts. Journal of Human Behavior and Social Science, 3(1), 1–14

[6] Anna Granskog, Libbi Lee, Karl-Hendrik Magnus, and Corinne Sawers. (2020). Survey: Consumer sentiment on sustainability in fashion. McKinsey & Company

A survey conducted by McKinsey & Company in April 2020 revealed that 57% of respondents had implemented significant lifestyle changes with the objective of reducing their environmental impact. Furthermore, over 60% of respondents reported taking additional measures such as recycling and purchasing products in environmentally friendly packaging (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Furthermore, the surveyed consumers indicated that they anticipate that the brands will prioritize the well-being of the workers in Asia, which was the region most adversely affected by the pandemic, and that they will continue to uphold their ethical commitments despite the ongoing crisis (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

The exhibit (Figure 1) below gives a visual representation of the results of the survey in terms of change in behavior of consumer following the Covid – 19 breaks. It is evident that the majority of respondents are in some way in agreement with the necessity for a change in consumer behavior that will eventually result in a tangible shift in organizational practices. It is evident that this topic resonates more with the younger generation, as evidenced by second the exhibit (Figure 2). According to Nasdaq[7], a survey

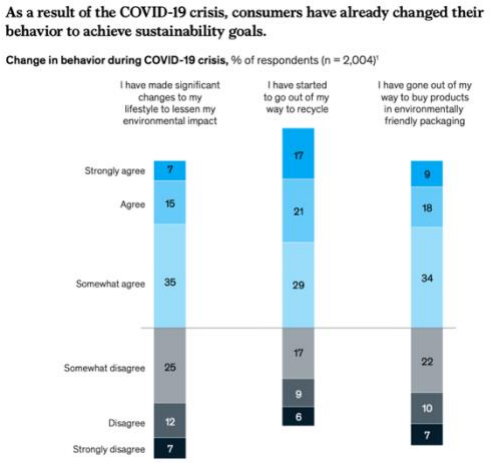

Figure 1: Variation in consumer behavior

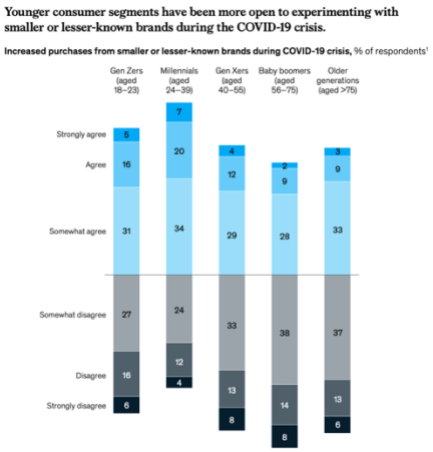

Figure 2: Younger consumer behavior

[7] Chris Versace, Mark Abssy., (September 22nd, 2022). How Millennials and Gen Z Are Driving Growth Behind ESG. Nasdaq

conducted by the asset management firm Amundi and the Business Times revealed that 82% of Gen Z and nearly two-thirds of young millennial investors have exposed to (ESG)[8] investments.

1.1.1 - Deceptive perception

As the discourse around sustainable practices has gained traction in recent years, fast fashion brands have felt the pressure to be perceived as environmentally and socially conscious in order to maintain their growth (Neha et al., 2024)[9]. In today's society consumers seem to be more driven by a bigger force than just the mere idea of shopping (Neha et al., 2024). The implementation of sustainable marketing practices is of paramount importance in the modern business society. The ultimate objective is to foster consumer loyalty and trust, which are essential for long-term operational success. (Neha et al., 2024).

Two of the biggest fast fashion retailers Zara and H&M felt this pressure, as a matter of fact they launched respectively Join life and the Conscious Collection created with sustainable material (Zhang et al., 2021)[10]. Although both give rather detailed information about their products and how they reach their consumer (Zhang et al., 2021), they have both been accused of greenwashing practices and as an example a "green" long sleeved shirt from the man's section in the H&M sustainability collection is categorized

[8] Environmental, Social, Governance
[9] Joshi, P., & Kumar, N. (2024). Fast Fashion Brands: Sustainable Marketing Practices and Consumer Purchase Behavior. *Tekstilec*, 1-15.
[10] Zhang, B., Zhang, Y., & Zhou, P. (2021). Consumer attitude towards sustainability of fast fashion products in the UK. *Sustainability*, *13*(4), 1646.

as sustainable, but how can that be if there were utilized 20,000L of water to produce it? (Gupta, Seema, 2023)[11]. It is imperative that consumers be educated on the tactics that this organization might employ. Furthermore, it is of the utmost importance that the industry adopts standards that are universal and ensure transparency (Neha et al., 2024).

How are consumers always deceived into buying from this fast fashion retailers? According to Bennetta & Oeppen (2022)[12], there are several factors that influence consumers into their purchasing decision, factors such as cultural, social, personal and phycological.

Clothing retailers and fashion brands are increasingly asking shoppers to dump their cast-off in store (Gould, 2017)[13], as an example H&M introduced a recycling initiative Garment collective program launched in 2013 with the message "let's close the loop hole" (H&M, n.d.)[14], the initiative is done by having a box in almost all stores across the globe where shoppers can bring in their clothes and receive a 5€ voucher to utilize at the next purchase. After that a designed commercial partner will then divided the items collected into three categories: the first one Rewear where all the items that are still in good condition are marketed as second-hand clothing, another category is Reuse where the items that aren't suitable for rewear are then reproposed for the conscious collection or used as cleaning cloth, and the last one is to Recycle where everything that has been left

11 Gupta, Seema. (2023). GREENWASHING: NEW AREA OF CORPORATE CONCERN. International Journal of Innovations & Research Analysis

12 Bennetta, K., & Oeppen Hill, J. (2022). Educating for change?: An investigation into consumers' perception of sustainability and the educational drivers needed to support sustainable consumption. International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education, 15(3), 418–429.

13 Hannah Gould. (2017). Zara and H&M back in-store recycling to tackle throwaway culture. The Guardian

14 H&M Group. (n.d.). Sustainability, Close the loop.

of will be thorn up into textile fibbers used for insulation materials (H&M, n.d.). From this perspective, it is possible to make some observations. Firstly, it can be argued that consumers are primarily motivated by the following factors: The rationale behind this behaviour is that consumers perceive it as a virtuous act, motivated by a desire to contribute to a positive cause. In this context, the act of recycling clothes is perceived as a way to benefit society, and the voucher serves as a reward for this altruistic behaviour. The voucher, in turn, acts as an incentive to return to the store and make new purchases (Tan, 2016)[15]. It is important to note that the practice of recycling is not inherently problematic. The key question here is whether the in-store recycling initiatives are making meaningful progress towards achieving their objectives (Gould, 2017), because the technological progress in the recycling department isn't as developed as it might seam and the majority of the natural fibers aren't suitable to produce new clothing because of their lower quality, which are then used for items such as rags that will end up eventually incinerated or in landfill (Gould, 2017).

The perception of customers plays a pivotal role in influencing consumer behavior and decision-making processes, we could define perception as: "the process by which we select, organize and interpret information inputs to create a meaningful picture of the world" (Kotler, et.al., 2022 p. 88)[16]. From this, it can be inferred that the greater the customer's trust and perception of the organization as a meaningful entity, the more inclined they are to engage in the desired behavior, therefore increasing sales and value

[15] Tan, Z. Y. (10th April 2016). What Happens When Fashion Becomes Fast, Disposable And Cheap? NPR
[16] Philip Kotler, Kevin Lane Keller, Alexander Chernev (2022). Marketing Management. Pearson

of the business and creating a long-term success for it. But this outcome isn't always the reality of fact and more often than not the fast fashion retailers are only deceiving their customers into thinking that their intentions and acts are pure and with no ulterior motives, an investigation from a Swedish newspaper reported that the claims that H&M makes in regard to their recycling program are false (Stokes, 2023)[17]. The author of the investigation decided to place some Apple air tags on H&M garments that were purchased from a second-hand shop to then deliver them to H&M to be recycled. To he's greatest surprise rather than the clothes being sorted by a facility outside the outskirts of Berlin, they were sold to a German company that sorted and sold second-hand clothes. The clothes were compressed into large bales to be sent in West Africa to be resold, destroyed, or discarded into landfills (Stokes, 2023). This is a clear case of greenwashing and misleading customers with their overly optimistic claims about how they are attempting to eliminate fast fashion. However, this case only serves to illustrate the ongoing challenges they face in dealing with end-of-life garments (Stokes, 2023).

1.1.2. - The grass is greener on the other side

The H&M case demonstrates the consequences of green marketing, a strategy frequently employed by companies in response to pressing environmental issues. This strategy is employed to demonstrate concern and to gain customer trust. It involves the deployment of specific attitudes and/or strategies that will showcase the company's eagerness and willingness to make changes that are to display their dedication to environmental and

[17] Jamie Stokes. (15th June 2023). Investigation Exposes H&M's Ineffective Recycling Solution. PC AW. NEWS

social causes. It will also enhance brand reputation because consumers are more willing to shop from environmentally conscious brands rather than those that are irresponsible (Kong, Witmaier, Ko, 2021)[18]. An example as we have said before can be the "green" collection that some companies create like Zara Join Life, H&M Conscious, Asos Green Room[19] (Stringer, et.al., 2020) or even Shein with their evoluShein[20] collection. As per the study conducted by McKinsey & Company that we saw before consumers are more incline towards brands that are known for their sustainability and CSR[21].

The term "greenwashing" a byproduct of a misuse of green marketing that was coined in the 1980 to describe outrageous corporate environmental claims, this is how Bruce Watson (The Guardian, 2016)[22] describes this phenomenon, there have been many ways in literature used to describe it, here are some. According to Delmas and Burbano (2009 p.66)[23] they describe it as the "act of companies capitalizing on the market demand for sustainable products and services by making false claims about their environmental practices", Baum (2012)[24] defines it as the "act of disseminating disinformation to consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service, greenwashing occurs around the world", another

[18] Kong, H. M., Witmaier, A., & Ko, E. (2021). Sustainability and social media communication: How consumers respond to marketing efforts of luxury and non-luxury fashion brands. Journal of Business Research, 131, 640-651.
[19] Stringer, Tara, Mortimer, Gary, & Payne, Alice (2020) Do ethical concerns and personal values influence the purchase intention of fast-fashion clothing? Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 24(1), pp. 99-120.
[20] Shein Group (n.d.). Sourcing Responsible Products and Materials
[21] Corporate Social Responsibility
[22] Bruce Watson. (20th August 2016). The troubling evolution of corporate greenwashing
[23] Delmas, M. A., & Burbano, V. C. (2011). The Drivers of Greenwashing. California Management Review, 54(1), 64-87..
[24] Baum, L. M. (2012). It's Not Easy Being Green … Or Is It? A Content Analysis of Environmental Claims in Magazine Advertisements from the United States and United Kingdom. Environmental Communication, 6(4), 423–440.

definition from Tateishi (2017)[25] defines it as "the selective disclosure of positive information about a company's environmental or social performance, without full disclosure of negative information on these dimensions, so as to create an overly positive corporate image". The scholars Delmas and Bruno (2009 p.65) also state that "greenwashing firm engages in two behaviors simultaneously: poor environmental performance and positive communication about its environmental performance". On the scheme below (Figure 3) we can have a visual representation of how they divided the various types of communication that a brand can put in action while communicating about its environmental performance. They divided the firms into "green" firm and "brown" firms, the first ones are those that can either actively be vocal about their environmental performances or stay silent about their actions on the other hand we have those that although their poor performance they are categorized as greenwashing firms because of their active communication, and finally we have silent brown firms that don't communicate their performance in any degree.

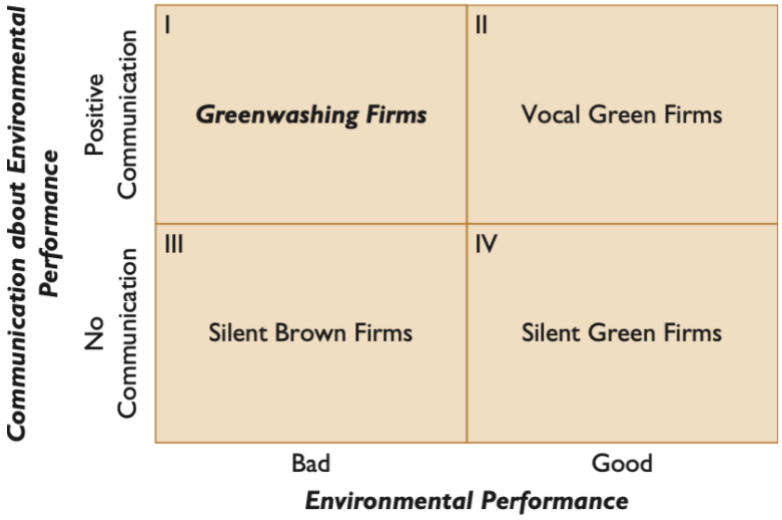

Figure 3: A Typology of Firms based on Environmental Performance and Communication

[25] Tateishi, E. (2017). Craving gains and claiming "green" by cutting greens? An exploratory analysis of greenfield housing developments in Iskandar Malaysia. Journal of Urban Affairs, 40(3), 370–393.

The authors (Delmas & Burbano, 2011) also came up with a model that would define the actions that go behind the intensions or actions of some businesses in terms of greenwashing, the model that's been used is a comprehensive framework or understanding the drivers of this phenomena.

The framework they utilize (Figure 4) shows how companies most frequently engage with these practices due to internal organizational and external markets issues that can be consumer demand, investor demand and competitive pressure.

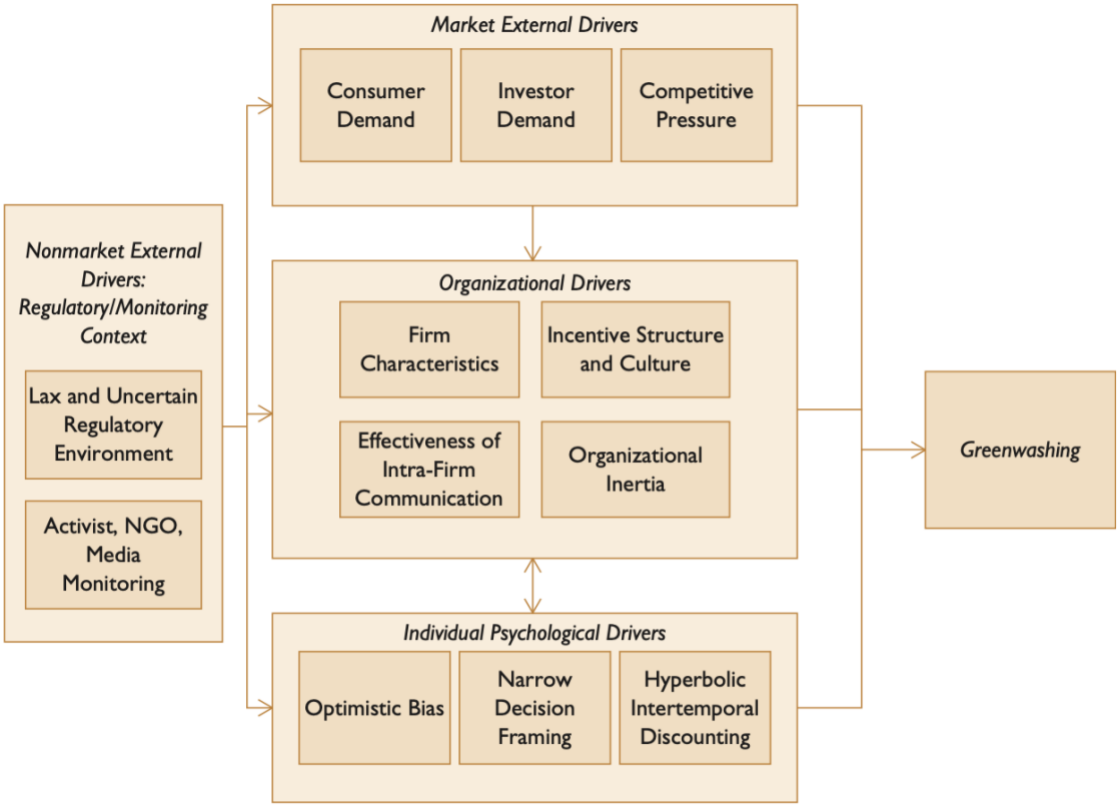

Figure 4: Drivers of Greenwashing

In the current era, where customers and investors alike are placing greater emphasis on corporate sustainability, companies are under considerable pressure to appear

environmentally friendly in their communications. In addition to customer and investor demand, companies are frequently compelled to embrace green initiatives in order to avoid falling behind their rivals. Furthermore, the company's internal environment, particularly its ethical climate and organizational structure, exerts a significant impact on the effectiveness of greenwashing tactics.

The concept of an ethical climate in an organization refers to the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations held by the company's employees with regard to ethical decision-making within the organization. Organizations with more rigorous ethical codes are less likely to engage in greenwashing, particularly with regard to environmental actions. The organizational structure, particularly in terms of size and industry, is another internal factor that should be considered. In particular, larger companies operating in industries with significant environmental effects, such as the textile industry, are more likely to engage in greenwashing than smaller companies in other industries.

The model constructed by Delmas & Burbano (2011) grouped the drivers into four categories: non-market external, market external, organizational, and individual psychological drivers Additionally, the authors posit that a lack of regulatory oversight would result in a heightened influence of organizational drivers. It is noteworthy that when there is a risk of public backlash for greenwashing, companies with a low probability of achieving environmental success tend to increase their level of disclosure and become more transparent. This is in contrast to companies with a high green reputation, which

do not exhibit this behavior (Lyon and Maxwell, 2011)[26]. The two authors also reported that organizations that own environmental management systems (EMS)[27] will be more unlikely be "able to hide behind veil of ignorance" therefore pressured to fully disclose.

One might posit that the primary challenge facing the fast fashion industry is the lack of transparency. This, according to scholars, impedes progress in the sustainability domain and compromises the information available to consumers, who are thus unable to make informed decisions. According to good on you[28] transparency in fashion stands for the "practice of openly sharing information about how, where, and by whom a product was made". It's also defined as the practice of publishing all information about every actor involved in the production process, from start to finish, from the fields to the store shelves. Such transparency allows customers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the product they are purchasing, including details from every stage of the production process (Rauturier, 2021).

The issue of greenwashing, which refers to the practice of businesses making unsubstantiated claims about their sustainability initiatives, can also be exacerbated by the lack of transparency in the fast fashion industry. In the absence of transparent reporting and validation, consumers may find it challenging to distinguish between genuinely sustainable practices and promotional strategies designed to project a favorable image without taking concrete steps. The achievement of sustainability

[26] Lyon, T.P. and Maxwell, J.W. (2011), Greenwash: Corporate Environmental Disclosure under Threat of Audit. Journal of Economics & Management Strategy, 20: 3-41.
[27] EMS is a set of management processes and procedures that allows an organization to integrate environmental issues into day-to-day decisions.
[28] Solene Rauturier. (2021). The Importance of Transparency in the Fashion Industry. Retrieved from Good on You.

necessitates the fostering of trust and the maintenance of transparency in reporting, labeling, and marketing procedures.

1.2. – Accountable Transparency

In order to address the issues that have been identified especially within the fashion industry, regulatory bodies around the world have begun to implement policies and regulations.

First is has been released the Green Claims Directive of European Commission. The European Commission has acknowledged the concerns of consumers regarding the environmental impact of corporate practices over the past several decades. The veracity of certain claims made by a number of organizations is increasingly being called into question by consumers. Figure 5 presents the percentages of green claims and sustainability labels that have been made by various corporations, along with a translation of these claims into actual facts.

Figure 5: visual representation of sustainability claims by corporations

On 22 March 2023, the Commission adopted a proposal for a Directive on Green Claims, in accordance with the aforementioned reasons. The objective of this directive is to guarantee the reliability, comparability, and verifiability of green claims across the EU, and to do so the proposed directive states that Member States have to ensure that companies carry out an assessment to prove the environmental claims they are presenting and this will be done by basing the claims to scientifically backed evidence and also using international standards, the claims shouldn't be because imposed by the law, reporting greenhouse gas offsets in a transparent way differentiating greenhouse gas emissions offsets from the greenhouse emissions. They also advice against the creation of national or regional labeling schemes that are meant to be used to certify that a product, process, or a company complies with the requirements for environmental labels. All this is done in prospect of, the creation of a circular and green EU economy and protecting consumers from greenwashing claims. This is intended to facilitate informed purchasing decisions by consumers and to establish a level playing field with regard to the environmental performance of products (EU Commission, 2023)[29].

Second, similar to the one of the EU, the Competition and Market Authority (CMA) has recently released a guidance document with the objective of addressing misleading sustainability claims. The initiative involves consulting with businesses and consumers to gain a better understanding of the processes by which such claims are created and perceived. The draft guidance delineates six fundamental principles that are: claims must be truthful and accurate, claims must be clear and unambiguous, claims must not omit or

[29] European Commission (22nd March 2023). Directive on Green Claims.

hide important relevant information, comparisons must be fair and meaningful, claims must consider the full life cycle of the product or service, claims must be substantiated to guarantee the veracity and transparency of sustainability claims made by businesses (UK Competition & Market Authority, 2021)[30].

Regularization of fashion is a topic that's of interest also countries outside of the Europe, as a matter-of-fact Dharna Noor covered an article related to approval by US regulators climate disclosure policy (The Guardian, 2024)[31]. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) finalized a scaled-back climate disclosure rule requiring large publicly traded companies to report climate-related information in an effort to provide investors with transparency about climate risks and corporate contributions to global warming. While some experts say the rule promotes transparency, others criticize it for potentially enabling greenwashing and caving to industry pressure, as it omits key provisions such as mandatory disclosure of Scope 3 emissions, which are the pollution generated by a company's supply chain and the consumption of its products, and which account for a huge percentage of a company's pollution and can reach 70% of a company's total carbon footprint, according to consulting firm Deloitte. While we still have a long way to go, and a rollback of this level of regulation can only lead to greenwashing, we hope for a future where disclosure of information that facilitates consumer decisions is much more rigorous.

[30] UK Competition & Market Authority (20th September 2021) Making environmental claims on goods and services.
[31] Dharna Noor (6th March 2024). US regulators approve significantly scaled back climate disclosure rule. The Guardian.

Continuing with the same topic, the State of California passed the Voluntary Carbon Market Disclosures Act (AB 1305) (VCMDA)[32] in December of 2023. This legislation is one of the new "anti-greenwashing" laws in the United States. The Act provides regulation of the carbon market and requires both private and public entities to provide publicly available disclosures. The aim of this is to increase transparency and accountability around climate-related claims and the use of VSOs. The disclosures must be made at least annually. In the event of noncompliance with the VCMDA, the civil penalty may be as high as $2,500 per day and may accrue up to $500,000 per violation.

Sustainability reporting represents one of the primary avenues through which corporations are able to disseminate and convey their progress in relation to environmental and social matters. As of December 14, 2022, the European Commission published the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)[33], which represents a key regulatory development in this domain. The objective of this directive is to modernize and strengthen the social and environmental information that companies are required to report. The legislation expands the scope of reporting requirements to encompass a more extensive range of large companies and listed small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), encompassing approximately 50,000 companies in total. It will ensure that investors and other stakeholders have sufficient and accurate information to assess the impact of companies on society and the environment. The companies that are required to adopt these new rules are to follow the guidelines set out by the European Sustainability

[32] Paul C. De Bernier, Stephanie M. Hurst, David A. Carpenter, Glenn K. Vanzura, Christine T. Carter. (7th December 2023). New California anti-greenwashing law goes live on January 1, 2024 – what you need to know if you make certain “green” claims.
[33] European Commission (n.d.). Corporate sustainability reporting.

Reporting Standards (ESRS), which are drafted by an independent body (EFRAG). By standardizing the information that needs to be disclosed reporting costs will reduce for companies in the medium to long term.

1.2.1 – Certified Fashion

In addition to the policies and regulations issued by regulatory bodies, the introduction of sustainability certification may be an effective means of addressing environmental and social issues in the fashion industry. It may also serve to bridge the gap between brands and consumers. (Baker and McNeill, 2023)[34]. The most prevalent third-party certifications worldwide are those associated with the Global Organic Textile Standards (GOTS), the SA8000 Social Accountability International (SAI) standards, the Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production (WRAP) standards, the Fairtrade standards, and those associated with the B Corp by B Lab certification program (Baker K., McNeill L.S., 2023). Additionally, the authors posit that in recent years, numerous brands have created pseudo-certifications, such as H&M's "Conscious Collection," which prompt consumers to differentiate between sustainable and non-sustainable products when shopping. Nevertheless, the certifications must adhere to rigorous standards, which are validated by reputable third-party organizations that possess expertise in sustainability and ethical knowledge.

[34] Baker, K., & McNeill, L. S. (2023). A five-stage framework for sustainability certification for fashion brands: Can a standardized approach work in the fashion industry? *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 1–15.?

The advent of fashion certification may facilitate a genuine challenge to greenwashing in the fast fashion industry. Companies are striving to attain the sustainability standards that could enable them to attract a more discerning consumer base, one that is better equipped to make informed choices and to support business commitments. This is because consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the practices of the organizations in question and of their position with regard to sustainability and ethics.

As evidenced by information published on Inditex's website, Zara implements the Eco-Efficient Store concept into its global flagship stores, which are LEED-certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and Breeam®-certified (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Methodology). It is encouraging to note that a number of fast fashion brands have begun to substantiate their claims by attaining well-known certifications in the apparel industry. These include Bluesign, the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Fair Trade Certified, and the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), among others.

Chapter 2 - Sustainability and the fashion industry

What combines the three pillars of sustainability: environment, society, and the economy with the fashion industry?

Sustainability is a topic that has for the past decade sparked a lot of interest in many people, especially the younger generation; they are the ones who are always fighting for a better future through manifestations, strikes, or even boycotting brands, specifically when they do not align with the values that they strongly believe in.

Fashion has always been in people's lives, however with the globalization of the world and the ever-changing trends that interest this sector we have seen a worsening situation when it comes to the life cycle of clothing. Trends are getting shorter and shorter as the years go by, if trends would last for a year, now it's a surprise if they make it to a season.

This led to the emergence of what is now called: "*fast fashion brands*", which are clothing brands that are mainly catered towards the younger generation because they are the ones that have a lower income and can shop in stores that can reach their pocket; at the same time with the wild spread of social media and the eagerness, the desire to belong, of the so-called Gen Z, makes it so easy for this brands to be changing their stock so frequently because they are only listening to the cues of what the market wants.

What do we mean with sustainability? According to the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Commission, sustainability is *"meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs",* this goes against the global phenomenon of fast fashion: *"an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers"* (Merriam – Webster 2022) which its main characteristic is: *"the main satisfaction of consumers' demand for fashion product at affordable prices"* (Chouprina, 2014, p. 31). So why have these two opposing terminologies been going hand in hand in the last decade?

Let's start by analyzing the environmental aspect.

2.1. - Environmental issues surrounding the fashion industry

As we have said, the fashion and apparel industry has been around for a long time and has shaped so much of our daily lives; it has so much influence on how we are perceived or how we perceive others. However, the notion of belonging to a certain status has influenced the way we look at clothing consumption and trends around the world. We've made it a trend to all look the same and this has led us into a cycle of overconsumption, and this is detrimental to the ecosystem we live in, the environment, and the world as a whole.

We still haven't realized that the more overconsumption occurs, the more damage we create on this planet; some of the major problems we are currently facing are the level of carbon emissions, the drying up of water sources, and the pollution of rivers and other water streams.

2.1.1– Carbon footprint and the fashion sector

When it comes to carbon emission according to the United Nations, we have been producing so much clothing in the last decade that the emission of only the fashion industry is more than that of all international flights and shipping combined using 93 million metric cubes of water yearly.

To put this into a numerical perspective we can take into account what the UNCE said in the press release on the 12th of July 2018 where it said that despite the enormous growth that the fashion industry had had in the past decades regarding the job market and the amount of individual it had employed this came with a price and the price was that: "*The fashion industry is highly greenhouse gas intensive, with estimated emissions ranging between 2 and 8 percent of the global total"*[35].
Not only that it also contributed to the phenomenon of plastic entering the oceans and inevitability harming the flora and fauna.

[35] United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. "*UN Alliance aims to put fashion on path to sustainability"*. 12 July 2018

2.1.2 – Water pollution in the fashion industry

The textile industry is one of the world's largest contributors to water pollution, with fast fashion exacerbating this environmental challenge. The dyeing and finishing of textiles use vast quantities of water, often laden with toxic chemicals. These chemicals include heavy metals, azo dyes, and various hazardous substances that pose significant risks to both aquatic ecosystems and human health.

Numerous scientific articles have recognized the impact of textile dyeing and finishing on water quality and not just that, for example, the research conducted by Quin Wang and Zhiming Yang examined the consequences of water pollution and environmental degradation in China as a byproduct of economic development and industrialization since 1970[36].

It also caused the discharge of pollutants to have a wide-ranging impact on the environment, resulting in the contamination of water bodies with a multitude of organic and toxic substances, as well as the accelerated growth of algae, collectively known as eutrophication. These phenomena, in turn, have a detrimental effect on ecological systems, often leading to their severe degradation[37].

[36] Wang Quing, and Zhiming Yang. "Industrial Water Pollution; water environment Treatment and health risk in China". *Environmental pollution (1987), 2016 - 11, Vol. 218, p. 358-365.*
[37] Ibid.

The aforementioned effects are not limited to the environmental sphere but also extend to the health of those residing in these regions. Indeed, according to the findings of Quin Wang and Zhiming Yang, *"approximately 190 million people fall ill and 60,000 people die from a range of other diseases and injuries associated with water pollution each year"* (2016, p. 358)[38].

The discharge of inadequately treated wastewater from factories into bodies of water has become a significant concern about water pollution. In developing countries, textile manufacturers have been known to avoid the treatment of wastewater to reduce costs, which has resulted in environmental damage.

The consequences of pollution from the textile industry extend beyond the contamination of water bodies. The contamination of groundwater sources by wastewater has the potential to impact both drinking water and agricultural irrigation systems. Furthermore, the release of pollutants into rivers and oceans can result in the disruption of ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity.

In consideration of the previously discussed environmental concerns, regulatory measures, technological innovation, and industry initiatives must be pursued to mitigate the aforementioned issues.

To have a visual representation of what happens when there isn't a proper discharge of textile products, we can take a look at the image displayed below (Getty Images 2024)

[38] Ibid.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Fig. 1: Garment Factory Waste Dump Contributes to Environmental Issues in Bangladesh

Fig. 2: Wastewater from a large sewage treatment plant flowing directly into a river.

2.1.3 – Waste generation in the apparel industry

Another environmental issue that must be addressed is the generation of waste. The rise of fast fashion and its disposable nature has led to an increase in consumer demand, which in turn has led to an increase in production. However, this has resulted in a greater disposal of clothing items, which has led to the generation of mountains of textile waste. This waste is overwhelming landfills and incinerators around the world.

When it comes to the problem mentioned above, we are looking at a phase that can be divided into three moments: pre-consumer, post-consumer, and industrial waste[39].

In the initial phase, as clarified by the article authored by Wojnowska-Baryła et al., *"The Growing Problem of Textile Waste Generation—The Current State of Textile Waste Management,"* we have the byproduct of fibrous material production which is typically regarded as a form of clean waste, may also include unsold inventory and returns from sales[40].

The second phase also called post-consumer is when the textile waste encompasses clothing that has been discarded and home textiles, such as pillowcases, sheets, and towels, that have lost their value due to deterioration[41].

[39] Wojnowska-Baryła, I., Bernat, K., Zaborowska, M., & Kulikowska, D. (2024). The growing problem of textile waste Generation—The current state of textile waste management. *Energies, 17*(7), 1528.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

Lastly, we have the industrial waste, which can originate from commercial and industrial sources, is considered to be a form of waste that is of a lower quality. This waste is generated during the production of fibers, yarns, fabrics, and clothing. The composition of the fibers utilized in the manufacturing process, in addition to the dyes, chemicals, and finishes employed during the production cycle, is typically well-documented[42].

It is also worth noting that this is the step that is typically presented to the general public as the amount of waste generated by a specific company. However, this does not take into account the other steps that are equally important and, in some cases, could be more damaging than the process that has been heavily documented.

[42] Ibid.

2.2 - The Impact of Prestige. How Fashion Influences Society and Culture

Fashion has consistently been an integral aspect of society. It serves as a means of self-expression, yet it also serves to differentiate between various social classes. As an illustration, haute couture, as defined by the Beverly Hills Design Institute, is "the creation of exclusive fashions." However, these fashions can now be easily replicated by fast fashion companies and made accessible to the general public, thereby reducing their exclusivity. Furthermore, contemporary society has reached a point where fashion trends only last for a season. This is because individuals collectively attempt to identify the newest, trendiest, and most popular topics, which they believe will make them stand out from others. Ultimately, these trends are adopted by others because they are influenced by social media, which is perceived as having the power to influence the opinions of others.

2.2.1 – Labour exploitation and the fashion industry

One of the most challenging aspects of the fashion industry is the exploitation of labor. This exploitation is not only a problem within the industry itself, but also a societal issue that has a profound impact on the lives of those employed in it.

The issue of low-cost clothing has been a concern for decades. The rise of the fast fashion sector has further highlighted the problem. The core of this sector is a large quantity of clothing items sold throughout the year. These items are not consistent; they change as

trends change. It is therefore not surprising that we ask ourselves how it is possible that large corporations are able to afford all of this clothing at such a low price without making a loss. The only possible explanation for this phenomenon is that these corporations are cutting corners in certain aspects of their business in order to maximize profits. Unfortunately, this often results in suboptimal treatment of employees.

The collapse eight-story commercial building of the Rana Plaza in Savar, Bangladesh in April 2013 represents the most catastrophic event in the apparel industry in recent years. It brought to light the mistreatment of workers in the industry. According to the New York Times the where more than 1100 workers killed and around 2500 injured (Fitch, 2014)[43]. The eight – story commercial building was poorly constructed and was located on a drained swap; the original construction was of 6 story buildings this means that the additional two floors were built illegally later on (Foxvog et al., 2013, p.19)[44]

On April 23, 2013, significant structural damage was identified in the Rana Plaza building. Consequently, the shops and bank on the lower floors were promptly closed. However, despite the issuance of warnings not to utilize the building following the emergence of the aforementioned damage, the owners of the garment factories on the upper floors proceeded to do so (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2022)[45]. In the face of mounting pressure, the workers were compelled to return to work the following day. Just hours after their shift commenced, the entire building collapsed, resulting in the tragic loss of 1,134 lives

[43] Nathan Fitch, (2014, April 14). The Deadly cost of Fashion. New York Times
[44] Foxvog et al., Still waiting. Six months after history's deadliest apparel industry disaster, workers continue to fight for reparations. Clean Clothing Campaign
[45] Clan Clothes Campaign, 2022

and severe injuries to approximately 2,600 workers, some of whom sustained permanent disabilities (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2022).

One positive consequence of this tragedy was that the brands that were sourcing from this factory could be held accountable for the conditions under which their products were manufactured. Furthermore, the fashion industry gained significant political leverage, which enabled it to pressure institutions to address the issues and implement accountability policies.

Another clear outcome of this tragedy is that the buildings in question were constructed illegally. Furthermore, the relevant parties failed to incorporate the necessary inspections as part of their standard audits. They also neglected to request certificates to determine the legal aspects of the buildings (Foxvog et al., 2013, p.1).

Subsequently, the paper will present a further analysis of this specific situation through the use of a case study.

Figure 3: Rescue operation on workers from Bangladesh

Figure 4: Women comprise 80% of Bangladesh's garment workforce.

2.2.2 – Supply chain management

Crisis events such as the Rana Plaza tragedy occur when businesses prioritize profit maximization by offering a vast array of clothing items while compromising production standards. Natural disasters and the pervasive mistreatment and unethical labor conditions endured by workers in the countries where these garments are manufactured contribute to the occurrence of such crises.

In the context of the supply chain in this sector, it is typical for operations to be dispersed globally. This is because it is often more cost-effective in the long term for companies to relocate their production processes to countries where labor is inexpensive, and workers' rights are not well protected. This lack of transparency precludes a comprehensive understanding of the sourcing of specific items and fails to hold those involved in the process accountable for any missteps.

It can be observed that there is a notable distinction between fast fashion brands and traditional fashion brands. In order to enhance their responsiveness to ever-changing market trends, fast fashion brands adopt a more malleable supply chain structure, which is in direct contrast to the supply chain structures typically utilized by traditional fashion brands, which are often characterized by greater stability and longer supply chain cycles[46]. The supply chains of these more responsive fast fashion brands tend to be shorter and demand-driven in nature[47].

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

The following image (Figure 5) illustrates the differences between the conventional and fast fashion approaches to sourcing clothing items. (Mihm 2010)[48].

Figure 5

The first approach is when the firm has control over all the parts of the process, beginning with design and concluding with distribution. The other extreme is where a firm has no direct contact with the manufacturing firm but only with the outsourcer that will be handling all of the processes required to produce the items. (Mihm 2010).

Where a retailer ends up falling in this spectrum depends on various factors: labor costs, price point of goods sold, use of technology, market alertness, and involvement in the supply chain (Mihm 2010). This is where we observe fast fashion brands engaging in practices that compromise quality in order to maximize profits. These practices often result in the sacrifice of previous steps, such as the exploitation of workers in low-wage jobs that do not provide them with a living wage. In some cases, these conditions are so poor that they are incompatible with the basic human rights of workers.

[48] Mihm, B. (2010). Fast Fashion In A Flat World: Global Sourcing Strategies. International Business & Economics Research Journal (IBER), 9(6).

2.2.3 – Culture and fashion

Fashion is an innate part of an individual and it's a cultural reflection in a point in time that what Cataldi, Dickson, Grover wrote on their paper Slow Fashion: Tailoring a Strategic Approach towards Sustainability, they also state that through cultural artefacts we are able to tell a story that can offer a snapshot of a society at a given point in time (Cataldi et.al., 2010)[49].

The fashion industry is a rapidly evolving sector that plays a significant role in the global economy (Chumo, 2023)[50]. In light of this, it is evident that diversity and inclusivity have become the central focus of this sector, to a greater extent than ever before. This is evidenced by the proliferation of campaigns advocating for the representation and celebration of diverse body types, races, and gender identities that can be seen as representative of a culture (Chumo, 2023).

Trends have a huge impact on society as a whole and at the same time they have some implications if care is not taken; the resurface of specific trends like the kimono inspired designs, or the popularization of indigenous inspired prints that have become mainstream in Brazilian fashion trends that on the one hand has contributed to the

[49] Cataldi, C., Dickson, M.E., & Grover, C. (2010). Slow Fashion : Tailoring a Strategic Approach towards Sustainability.

[50] Chumo, Lewis. (2023). Cultural Appropriation in the Fashion Industry: A Critical Examination of Trends and Implications

increase in GDP to 3.8% and an increase in annual production of 3.5% between 2010 and 2015 on the other hand however, the misappropriation of the cultural identity of another ethnicity still stands (Chumo, 2023). Another illustrative example is the one that interests the Nigerian fashion industry, which has undergone a significant transformation and that ultimately has benefited the nation's economy. There has been a surge in popularity of traditional African prints and designs, which have been participating in recent fashion trends. This has led to concerns about cultural appropriation and the stealing of intellectual property, such as the unauthorized use of traditional Nigerian designs by foreign designers (Chumo, 2023).

Cultural appropriation can be defined as the act of borrowing and adopting elements from one culture by members of another culture, with the consequence that the culture in question is not shown respect or understanding of the significance behind the elements in question. In response to the mounting concerns surrounding cultural appropriation and its implications, numerous designers have been actively seeking to collaborate with artists and artisans from diverse backgrounds. This initiative aims to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of specific items, symbols, and fabrics, as well as to demonstrate respect for the diverse cultural elements. (Chumo, 2023)

The progress made in this department although positive it still has a long way to go, given that culture appropriation is deeply intertwined within the concept of fashion and the implication of misusing some attire, fabrics or even specific symbols my lead to some negative consequences that see the population of the culture that has been appropriated disrespected and further marginalized than how they were already.

2.3 – The economical balance of the Fashion industry. An oxymoron

A thorough discussion has been held on the matter of the primary objective of any apparel company, which is to generate profit. However, the manner in which they have achieved this is often overlooked.

It is widely acknowledged that in order to achieve success in this world, certain compromises must be made. However, when these compromises result in the loss of other lives, they become problematic. One aspect that we need to take into consideration when looking at the economic feasibility of the fashion industry are the production practices.

2.3.1 – Unsustainable production practices

The production practices currently in use are those that are predominantly employed by fast fashion businesses, which require speed and efficiency. Consequently, these practices are likely to be deficient in specific departments. The model in question encourages the consumption of goods in large quantities, yet the quality of the product is ultimately lacking. This leads consumers to purchase new products in short spans of time, perpetuating the cycle and exacerbating the problem of rapid disposal and overconsumption.

The aforementioned production model allows high profitability of the corporations of these branches: “since only the private costs of the manufacturing process carried out, mostly played in underdeveloped countries, under precarious working conditions, violation of human rights and fragile or non-existent environmental legislations, are

considered" (Faria De Araujo, et al., 2020)[51]. It is a common practice among larger brands in developed countries to outsource their production services to countries such as China and India, where there is a plentiful supply of labour and low wages (Faria De Araujo, et al., 2020). A report by the Bangladesh National Committee indicates that in 2001, there were 1.6 million garment workers. Of this total, 85% were young women between the ages of 16 and 25.

They worked an average of 12 to 14 hours per day, seven days per week, with an average wage of 13 to 18 cents per hour (Faria De Araujo, et al., 2020). It can be objectively demonstrated that the advent of fast fashion has had a detrimental impact on manufacturing workers and designers alike. The mass production and imitation of clothing items has resulted in a depreciation of the value of these pieces, placing the livelihood of designers at risk hour (Faria De Araujo, et al., 2020).

The issue previously described may be identified as design piracy. Unlike the illegal practice of counterfeiting, design piracy is not a punishable offense, yet it has been a pervasive problem in the fashion industry for some time now (Tan, 2010)[52].

[51] Marina Jardim Faria de Araujo, Marcus Vinicius Faria de Araujo, Maria Amalia Sarmento Rocha de Carvalho. (2020). Unsustainability in the Current Fast-Fashion Industry: The Social Pillar. International Journal of Environmental Science

[52] Irene Tan, Knock it Off, Forever 21! The Fashion Industry's Battle Against Design Piracy, 18 J. L. & Pol'y (2010).

2.3.2 – The price of fashion

Fast fashion relays on impulse purchases states Nikolay Anguelov[53] on his books and the same sentiment has been shared by Cline on her book where she states that we tend to buy garments that we don't necessarily need but given the price at which is marketed it justifies the purchase.

The price aspect is detrimental to personal finances and also affects small enterprises that are unable to compete with larger companies on price. These enterprises must offer low prices and a rapid turnover to remain competitive, which puts pressure on them to lower prices as much as possible (Cline, 2013). The ability of large corporations to offer low prices is enabled by a variety of factors. Firstly, they are able to generate profits from the sale of garments at prices that do not reflect the actual cost of production. Secondly, consumers of these garments tend to purchase more than the average amount, often paying full price (Cline, 2013).

2.3.3. – Fashionably economic

According to the state of fashion 2024 by McKinsey and Company in the year 2022 the fashion industry received more than double the level of economic profit than between the years 2010 and 2020, with the exception of 2023 when the world was faced with challenges that were out of its spectrum.

[53] Anguelov, N. (2015). The Dirty Side of the Garment Industry: Fast Fashion and Its Negative Impact on Environment and Society (1st ed.). CRC Press.

A slow growth is what characterized Europe and the US different story instead for China that experienced significant growth during the first semester of the year that quickly came to halt during the second half.

Some of the predictions for this sector in the year 2024 are contingent upon the impact that fluctuations in demand have had in recent years. It is also posited that the supply chain will experience a "bullwhip effect," whereby minor sales variations will result in high levels of volatility, which will in turn give rise to a series of problems.

There's also the expectation that as travel renews following the Covid-19 pandemic fashion companies are eager to revamp their engagement with consumers through abroad shopping something that has been lacking for some year due to the pandemic.

The fashion industry as well as the majority of the industry that characterizes our economy are going to be facing periods of uncertainty and the causes are many that can range from geopolitical events, weakened economies due to the inflation and consequentially the impact of high interest rates. From Figure 6 we ca observe how prices are going to increase to combat the continued inflation that has been plaguing our economies since 2022.

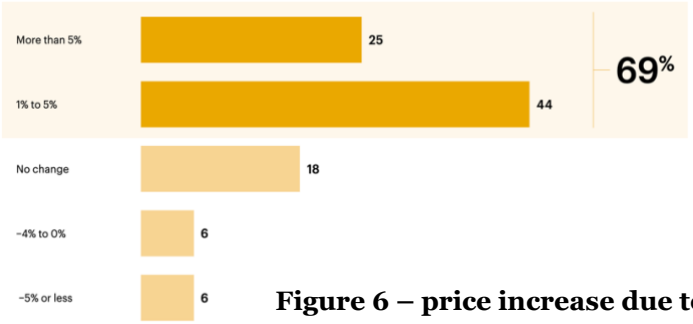

Figure 6 – price increase due to inflation.

Global GDP is projected to decelerate in 2024, with a projected decline of approximately 2.9 percent relative to the 3 percent growth observed in 2023 and 3.5 percent in 2025. A more detailed examination of regional economic data reveals that the projected growth rates for Europe are more pessimistic than those for the United States amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The eurozone is expected to experience a modest expansion in 2024, with a projected growth rate of 1.2 percent, compared to 0.7 percent in 2023. In the United States, despite the Federal Reserve's ability to implement policies that averted an outright recession and achieve lower inflation, the positive outcomes are not reflected in the GDP growth projections, which indicate a slowing from 2.1 percent to 1.5 percent.

Chapter 3 – Harmonizing Fashion. The Evolution of Slow Fast Fashion

To understand how fast fashion came to be we need to first understand how the garment industry came to be and how it began.

3.1 – Fashion and its history

The origins of the apparel industry can be traced back to ancient civilization, some, back to half a millennium ago in a Pacific coast that's today called Mexico, the population there grew maize, beans, squash and chiles; and among all of this subsistence agriculture and modest craft that they produced by hand they also grew a plant that sprouted small tufted white bolls, an inedible plant but also the most valuable thing they grew and was called *ichcatal: cotton*[54] (Beckert, 2014). *(The precise origin of the plant known as cotton remains uncertain. Some experts hypothesize that the earliest evidence of its use may be found in India, where excavations at Mohenjo-Daro, situated in the Indus Valley in northwest India, have yielded traces of cotton)*[55]. This ancient populations also used natural fibers such as wool, flax and silk. However, given the fact that most items were labour intensive because man made the capacity of production was limited and were mainly used by those that could afford them clearly highlighting those who ruled and those who were ruled (Beckert, 2014).

[54] Sven Beckert. The Empire of Cotton. (2014)
[55] Amer, Wafaa & Momtaz, Osama. (1999). Historic background of Egyptian cotton (2600 BC-AD 1910). Archives of natural history.

The industrial revolution that spanned between the late 18th and the 19th, as we all know, is a period of profound economical, technological, and social change; it brought so many changes in aspects of day-to-day life even to the apparel industry (Hobsbawm, 1968)[56]. The technological expansion marked a period by which we went from handcrafting to mechanized production that enabled the mass production in the textile industry and the possibility for fashion to be more accessible and affordable.

Some of the technological improvements we had were The Spinning Jenny invented by James Hargreaves in 1764 that allowed a single worker to spin multiple threads simultaneously that increased productivity in a way that wasn't possible with the manual spinning methods (Chapman, 1972)[57]. During those same years we had other improvements in regard to the spinning machines, with the spinning frame by Richard Arkwright and the spinning mule by Samuel Crompton (Nigro, 2022)[58].

However, the innovative breakthrough that other sectors were experiencing was not the same as that of the apparel industry in fact it only came after the 1870s and one of the major innovations was that of the sewing machine invented by Elias Howe in 1846 and later on perfected by Isaac Singer and that came as a solution to the motion human hand stitching process (Mokyr, 1998)[59].

The advent of new technologies ushered in a remarkable transformation, initiated in a modest valley in Manchester in 1784 by Samuel Greg. There, he assembled a small factory

[56] Hobsbawm, E. (1968). Industry and Empire: The Birth of the Industrial Revolution. Penguin Books.
[57] Chapman, S. D. (1972). *The Cotton Industry in the Industrial Revolution*. Macmillan.
[58] Nigro, G. (2022). *Moda Come Motore Economico: Innovazione Di Processo e Prodotto, Nuove Strategie Commerciali, Comportamento Dei Consumatori /* Fashion as an economic engine: process and product Innovation, commercial strategies, consumer behavior. Firenze University press
[59] Moykyr, J. (1998). The Second Industrial Revolution, 1870-1914.

equipped with a few innovative spinning machines, known as water frames, which utilized the weight of falling water, orphaned children (the individuals were employed in the labor force), and a supply of cotton from the Caribbean to power the operation. This pioneering effort laid the foundation for one of the most significant industries in the modern world. (Beckert, 2014).

During the Industrial Revolution, clothing became a commodity in addition to a mere want. This was due to the fact that the wage-earning workers who were employed in factories were now able to afford to purchase new clothing given the ability of raw cotton to be efficiently manufactured a consequentially lower its price.

The introduction of this machineries revolutionized the textile industry thus increasing production capacity and efficiency.

With the rise of factories concentrated labour in urban areas, we had a significant shift in demography (Beckert, 2014). We had people moving from rural areas to cities and this led to a rapid urbanization and created a new working class which faced long working hours, low wages, and often poor working conditions (Beckert, 2014).

The institution of slavery also played a significant role in the advent of mass production. As European colonists in the United States came to recognize the potential for cotton cultivation on American soil, they relied heavily on enslaved labor to meet the demand for cotton. The British west indies initially a major supplier, could not keep up with the lower prices demanded by the British lower class due to the increased cost of the Atlantic trade (Beckert, 2014).

Consequentially, American plantation ramped up cotton production, necessity a vast number of enslaved laborers to work the fields and support the burgeoning textile industry (Beckert, 2014).

The introduction of the new textile revolution enabled the greater importation of cotton, which resulted in unprecedented scales of production. This laid the foundation for the modern manufacturing process. Nevertheless, these advancements, as previously mentioned, perpetuated exploitative labor practices, not only in the American soil but also in the British country. Children, women, and men were exploited for several hours per week on a minimal wage (Beckert, 2014).

A subsequent examination of the late 20th and early 21st centuries reveal the evolution of the legacy of rapid and large-scale textile production into the phenomenon of fast fashion. The contest in question employs a different methodology, yet the underlying principle remains the same: to maximize profit while minimizing costs to the greatest extent possible.

3.2 – The rise of fast fashion

The clothing industry has historically been a labor-intensive sector, with the objective of producing a significant proportion of its products at minimal cost (Taplin, 2014)[60].

[60] Taplin, I. M. (2014). Global Commodity Chains and Fast Fashion: How the Apparel Industry Continues to Re-Invent Itself. Competition & Change, 18(3), 246-264.

And we can acknowledge the fact that fast fashion emerged as a consequence of mass production during the industrial revolution, it made fashion more accessible to a wider audience but at the same time it also brought a lot of problems environmentally, socially, economically, and much more.

This chapter will examine the positive aspects of fast fashion, exploring how it has influenced our perception of garments and fashion as a whole. However, it is important to acknowledge that this movement has also brought about negative consequences, which will be analyzed in this chapter. These consequences extend beyond the environmental, social, and economic problems that are visible on a daily basis. We will conclude with the emergence of a new movement that has gained increasing prominence in our daily lives and in the products, we consume: the slow fashion movement.

3.2.1 – The positivity in fast fashion

According to the paper by Liz Barnes and Gaynor Lea-Greenwood fast fashion is: "a business strategy which aims to reduce the processes involved in the buying cycle and lead times for getting new fashion product into stores, in order to satisfy consumer demand at its peak"[61].

In recent years, the concept of fast fashion has been portrayed in a negative light. However, before it reached its current state, it introduced numerous positive attributes that can be observed in the present era.

[61] Barnes, L. and Lea-Greenwood, G. (2006), "Fast fashioning the supply chain: shaping the research agenda", Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, Vol. 10 No. 3, pp. 259-271.

3.2.1.1 – The affordable accessibility of fashion

International fashion retailers are seen as the key drivers of globalization of the clothing industry (Tokatli, 2007)[62], The advent of fast fashion has led to a shift in the way consumers engage with fashion. Previously, haute couture and ready-to-wear were the dominant forms of fashion, but the advent of fast fashion has led to an increase in the variety and fashionability associated with fast fashion (Tokatli, 2007). The retailers of this sector do not engage in direct investment in design. Instead, they draw inspiration from the most promising and attractive pieces of high-end brands and shows and subsequently sell the more affordable versions (Tokatli, 2007).

The low prices make it easier to keep up with the latest trends, and this has become more accessible to those with limited financial resources (Cline, 2013).

One advantage that some fast fashion retailers enjoy is the ability to collect a larger percentage of the full price of the items they sell. This is due to the fact that they offer fewer pieces of items in a variety of styles (Nebahat Tokatli, 2007). This results in the replacement of values such as glamour, exclusivity, and luxury, which some individuals are willing to sacrifice in order to align themselves with the prevailing trends (Nebahat Tokatli, 2007).

[62] Tokatli, N. (2008). Global sourcing: insights from the global clothing industry—the case of Zara, a fast fashion retailer. Journal of Economic Geography, 8(1), 21–38.

Given the fact that the primary paradigm by which fast fashion brands operate is that of making everything as accessible as possible and responding to consumer demand as quickly as possible, it is unsurprising that the factories where these garments are produced are characterized by speediness, synchronicity, and responsiveness (Tokatli, 2007). In order to achieve this, they require a significant number of workers, thus creating new jobs. However, this could be viewed in a positive light if we did not consider the damage and destruction it has caused.

3.3 – The Negative Dressing

The advent of fast fashion has resulted in a homogenization of dress styles across the globe. In many instances, individuals are now so similar in their attire that they may be mistaken for one another if they were to dine out (Cline, 2013).

A critical examination of the phenomenon of fast fashion reveals that it is not inherently harmful. However, the underlying motivation driving this phenomenon is detrimental (Ertekin, et.al., 2015)[63].

A criticism that has been raised is that this sector has been exploiting workers and the ecosystem, contributing to the deployment of natural resources and the increase in textile waste (Ertekin, et.al., 2015).

[63] Ozdamar Ertekin, Z., & Atik, D. (2015). Sustainable Markets: Motivating Factors, Barriers, and Remedies for Mobilization of Slow Fashion. Journal of Macromarketing, 35(1), 53-69

The ideology of progress has been identified as a significant factor in initiating a desire for change in Western society (Ertekin, et.al., 2015). It is generally in the consumer's best interest to avoid the latest and greatest products and services. Nevertheless, even the least ambitious and least progressive woman is susceptible to the desire to follow a certain trend in order to be part of something that is beyond her. (Cline, 2013; Ertekin, et.al., 2015). It can be argued that the way in which we dress has social outcomes (Cline, 2013). This is because, regardless of our personal preferences, the way in which we dress is an extension of our persona, and it is this which ultimately determines how we are judged by others (Cline, 2013).

As previously stated, these brands were capable of creating employment opportunities for workers in the country in which they chose to offshore their businesses. However, the conditions under which this occurred were often suboptimal, and in most cases, the workers were subjected to mistreatment and underpayment. Furthermore, the majority of those subjected to mistreatment were women and children. (Ertekin, et.al., 2015). Low wages aren’t a problem that affect only the workers in the underdeveloped countries but also on the developed countries.

Those companies that did not utilize the advantages of lower labor costs at some point felt threatened by their competitors who did employ them and were consequently driven to adopt similar cost-cutting strategies (Cline, 2013).

The period saw a significant decline in employment levels, which was further exacerbated by the removal of quotas (MFA)[64] and the implementation of trade liberalization policies (Cline, 2013). These policies, which were in place between the United States and the European Union between 1974 and 2005, involved a bilateral system of quantitative restraint on textile and apparel imports (Fugazza et.al., 2010)[65]. The MFA imposed restrictions on the export of clothing from developing countries to industrialized ones, but only when it perceived a threat (Cline, 2013).

To illustrate, Los Angeles was the first city to experience a decline in exports following the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. This agreement eliminated import duties on exports to Mexico (Cline, 2013). It led to American companies to move every operation of cut and sew over the Mexican boarders to *maquiladoras*, it cost tens of thousands of jobs and it pushed down wages for labor workers in Los Angeles (Cline, 2013).

Following the cessation of the MFA (Multi Fibre Arrangement) in 2005, imports from Chinese manufacturers increased significantly. For example, the import of cotton trousers increased by over 1,500 percent, while the import of knit shirts increased by 1,350 percent. This occurred while thousands of textile jobs were lost in the United States and at least 18 factories closed (Cline, 2013)

[64] Multi Fibre Arrangement followed previous international arrangements that came into force 1974, that stated that developed countries can place quantitative restrictions on imports of textile and clothing for developing countries which were substantial exporters of textile and clothing. The methods utilized was allocating quotas for their exports.
[65] Fugazza, M., & Conway, P. (2010). The impact of removal of ATC quotas on international trade in textiles and apparel. ISSN 1607-8291. UN.

3.4 – Fashionably Slow

It is evident that the actions of this sector of the industry have resulted in significant environmental damage and have also had a detrimental impact on the lives of individuals (Cline,2013). It is therefore crucial for those engaged in this industry to consider other alternatives that aren't going to be as detrimental as the ones we've been used to in the past years, and it also might help enlighten some of the habits that we've lost when industrialization and later on globalization took away some of the practices like sewing, and mending our clothes in other to give them more meaning and longevity without having to think about owning the latest and cheapest thing (Cline, 2013)

It has come more to the attention of the average shopper how it is possible to have clothing that has been designed in an ethical and responsible way without having to sacrifice style (Cline, 2013).

Cline states that: "there are ethical designers that without the pressures of having to satisfy corporate shareholders or constantly dazzle with high – profile runway shows, are not only working with the most interesting and amazing – feeling fabrics on the market, but they are also some of the most innovative designers in the industry right now".

The slow fashion movement is driven by a distinct worldview that champions diversity and multiplicity in fashion production and consumption. This approach celebrates the

cultural pleasures inherent in fashion (Fletcher, K., 2010)[66]. Obviously, time has a crucial role in all of this because it plays a role into creating long-term relationships and recognize value in the experiences that comes with it (Fletcher, K., 2010). We can't *business as usual* or *production as usual* because it represents a blunt discontinuity of the practices of the sector in this present day, the concept of slow fashion represents a vision of sustainability based on the values and goals of the contemporary modern society (Fletcher, K., 2010)[67].

The Slow Food Movement that began in 1986 by Carlo Petrini in Italy was a movement that it main aim was to promote regional produce and organically grown food (Fletcher, K., 2007) furthermore, this movement has inspired the fashion community to link the pursuit of fashion with a sense of awareness and responsibility.

The term "slow" encompasses not only temporal considerations but also the various methodologies that can be employed in the production of garments. It implies a shift in the attitudes and practices of designers, retailers, buyers, and consumers with regard to fashion, emphasizing the environmental, social, and occupational issues that come as a consequence of the speed with which it the garments are produced (Ertekin, et.al., 2015). It also aims at reducing the number of trends and seasons encouraging in this way quality production and ultimately the value of the garments (Ertekin, et.al., 2015).

[66] Fletcher, K. (2010). Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Systems Change. Fashion Practice, 2(2), 259–265.
[67] Fletcher, Kate (2007), "Slow fashion". Ecologist,v. 37, n. 5, p. 61

“Clothing that is well made is not cheap”. This is the conclusion author Cline reached in her research, and when we start thinking like that maybe will be more conscious of the items we buy, because what we pay for, I clothing item is a direct reflection of how much the garment worker got for the work (Cline, 2013).

Slow fashion in about balance (Ertekin, et.al., 2015), because we also can’t be paying overpriced t-shirts for clothing that are going to be outgrown in a couple of months (Cline, 2013), but we can locally source those garments that are seen as statement pieces that aren’t going to be chosen because of a trend but as time goes on you won’t even be able to tell the time period it was produced (Cline, 2013)

This movement can be defined using a three-pillar approach that was first introduced by the “Slow Design” symposium in Milan in 2006 that was later on developed further by Clark in 2008[68] (Ertekin, et.al., 2015). According to Clark the three pillars can be grouped in the concepts of: taking a local approach, having a transparent production system, and making sustainable and sensorial products.

The initial approach places a premium on local design and production, emphasizing the utilization and valuation of local materials, as well as the retention of designers and skilled workers who can offer an alternative to the standardization that has emerged as a dominant trend in the fashion industry in recent years (Ertekin, et.al., 2015; Cline 2013).

[68] Clark, H. (2008). SLOW + FASHION—an Oxymoron—or a Promise for the Future …? Fashion Theory, 12(4), 427–446.

The second approach aims to reduce the number of intermediaries in the production system, thereby making the system more transparent. This approach also involves reviving some of the traditional crafts that have been marginalized in recent decades, such as knitting and sewing (Ertekin, et.al., 2015; Cline 2013).

Finally, we consider the creation of garments that are more sustainable and sensorially pleasing. These products provide significant experiences and have a longer and more durable life cycle (Ertekin, et.al., 2015). Furthermore, we are able to articulate the reasoning behind our purchases, rather than simply citing trends (Cline, 2013).

Significant advancements have been made in the realm of slow fashion, which has profoundly influenced the manner in which we consume and perceive fashion. The growing number of companies that are repatriating their production processes to their countries of origin is a testament to the positive outcomes of this movement. While the transition to onshore production is not without its challenges, given the prevalence of factories that have been sold to offshore countries, the direction towards which this sector is going is promising (Cline, 2013).

A review of economic data reveals a consistent and growing demand for sustainability over the past few years. This is evidenced by the findings of the 2020 McKinsey & Company survey, which indicated that 67% of respondents were more likely to purchase sustainable products. The current market value of the sustainable sector is estimated to be $6.5 billion, with an anticipated growth to $15 billion by 2030. By 2030, the sustainable textile industry is projected to create 18 million additional jobs, representing

a significant contribution to global employment. Furthermore, the transition to a sustainable textile industry could potentially boost the global economy by $192 billion, if the associated challenges associated with the fast fashion industry are effectively addressed (Ruiz, 2024)[69]

[69] Arabella Ruiz. (2024). 47 Official Sustainable Fashion Statistics. TheRoundup.org

CHAPTER 4 – Shades of deception: Uncovering greenwashing in fashion

In an era where sustainability is a dominant theme in all discourses, fashion institutions have attempted to present themselves as environmentally responsible, promising ethical practices and sustainable outcomes. Nevertheless, beneath the discourse of eco-friendliness, there exists a phenomenon known as greenwashing.

"Greenwashing is defined as the intersect of two firm behaviors: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance" (Delmas & Burbano, 2011)[70].

The allure that sustainable practices have on consumers nowadays is one of the many reasons as to why the textile industry are heavily relying on it, through marketing campaigns, ad placements and customer attraction, because it eases the mind of the buyer leading them to think that the shopping they are doing is guilt – free because the clothes they are buying are marketed as items that were made taking into consideration virtuous practices and proper working conditions for the workers guaranteeing a live wage and an healthy work environment.

All of this for later on to find out about half – truths that were told unethical practices that were put in action and misleading claims that were put out to deceit their unknowing consumers.

[70] Delmas, M. A., & Burbano, V. C. (2011). The Drivers of Greenwashing

In this chapter we are going to uncover some of the practices that were put in action by some brands and what consequences were faced. All of this in other to shade some light on some of the shadowy practices that have been used by brands that have disastrous consequences on the planet on society and on the integrity of the fashion world itself. By doing all of this we'll be able to hold accountable all of the corporations for their actions and move towards a way a more sustainable and equitable future.

4.1 – Legitimacy theory in the fashion industry

It is a matter of public record that fast fashion brands have been the subject of intense scrutiny in recent times. This scrutiny has focused on the concrete actions that these brands have taken in response to the issues that have been raised. It is therefore necessary to ascertain whether the company in question is in fact implementing the policies it espouses, or whether it is merely seeking to gain the approval of the general public by making specific promises and this could be a case of legitimacy theory.

The legitimacy theory can be explained as: "the generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, believes and definitions (Suchman, M. C. 1995)[71]. The author also states that the perception or assumption aspect represents the reaction

[71] Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches. The Academy of Management Review, 20(3), 571–610.

that an observer has towards the organization as they see it and this means that ultimately the legitimacy is only possessed objectively but its created subjectively (Suchman, 1995).

These retailers typically implement specific behaviors that are intended to align with the prevailing public preferences during a given period. However, this does not guarantee that the company will ultimately pursue the same course of action (Suchman, 1995). This can be clearly seen through the campaigns that major fast fashion brands put in action that however didn't translate in concrete action because was only done to appeal to consumers.

The reasons for an organization to seek legitimacy are numerous and diverse. However, the two primary reasons for the implementation of this theory are the pursuit of credibility or continuity and the seeking of passive support rather than active support (Suchman, 1995).

The first instance is that in which legitimacy enhances the organization's stability and comprehensibility, which in turn enhance each other. However, few organizations foster these two dimensions simultaneously (Suchman, 1995).

The second dimension is the distinction between passive and active support. The legitimacy that is put into action depends on the degree and extent to which the organization seeks support from its audience. This ultimately defines the legitimacy threshold, which can be more or less stringent (Suchman, 1995).

This chapter will examine two major fast fashion brands, Zara, and H&M, to assess the claims they have made regarding sustainability. The objective is to determine whether the sustainability initiatives undertaken by these brands have resulted in meaningful change, or whether they have been merely rhetorical.

4.2 – How it all began. Inditex – Zara

Inditex was founded by Amancio Ortega in 1963, initially it started as a small dressmaking workshop Confecciones Goa through this business he wanted to improve the manufacturing and retail interface. In 1975 the first Zara was established in Coruña (Spain) and that is when Amancio decided to go from a maker to a retailer. Between late 1980 and beginning of 1990 Zara begins to expand worldwide reaching international markets like Porto, New York and Paris.

The group continues its expansion with the integration of the Pull&Bear, Massimo Dutti, Berska and Stradivarius. Between 2000a and 2001 Inditex goes public in the Madrid Stock Exchange and at the same time Oysho is launched. Between 2003 and 2017 we have the introduction of Zara Home, and the brand starts its first moves towards the online commerce also becoming a reference.

Between 2021 and 2022 we have a change in management Óscar García Maceiras becomes the new CEO and Marta Ortega Pérez takes over as Chairperson.

Inditex describes its business model as “creativity and quality design together with a rapid response to market demands” and the “democratization of fashion” (Crofton, et al., 2007).[72] In other to deliver in time with the demands of the market and at a reasonable price, the group abandoned the traditional model of seasonal lines of clothing that are designed by star designers and are heavily advertised for a model that is vertically integrated in the design process, just in time production and the distribution and sale are done at a speedy level (Crofton, et al., 2007).

This however leads to unethical practices in other to achieve the desired time to market and consequentially it overlooks specific steps that should be taken in consideration if we proclaim to have ethical commitments.

4.2.1 – Ethical Commitments with Inditex -Zara

Inditex has made a number of ethical commitments, including a commitment to prioritize the well-being of its employees. They also state: “Our philosophy of ethical improvement is what defines us and inspires us to constantly evolve, innovate and leverage the power of fashion to create positive change in the lives of people, societies and culture at large”[73]

[72] Crofton, Stephanie. "Zara-Inditex and the Growth of Fast Fashion". Essays in Economic & Business History, vol. 25, 2007, pp. 41-53.
[73] Inditex website

They also have a Code of Conduct and the Code of Conduct for Manufactures and Suppliers that are considered the cornerstones of their corporate ethics culture and the responsible conduct towards their teams and suppliers. They define principals and policies by which the corporation abides in other to ensure respect for human and labour rights but also are the same values.

In addition to the aforementioned codes of conduct, a number of other policies have been implemented such as: Anti-corruption and integrity, Transparency, Criminal Risk Prevention, and Sustainability.

The last policy is the one we are going to be divining into to look at what the corporation defines as sustainability and what are the main aspects they take into consideration.

Figure 7 – Zara employee

Figure 8 – A Zara store

4.2.2 – Zara's sustainable true or false?

An analysis of Zara's sustainability policy reveals that its primary objective is to define the principles that will sustain the relationships between the Inditex Group and its stakeholders. In addition, the policy favors the integration of sustainable practices within the company's business model. This integration is intended to ensure that the business is conducted in a manner that respects the rights of people and the environment, as well as the broader community. Furthermore, the policy aims for sustainable growth[74]. In their most recent sustainability report (2023)[75], the group underscored the significance of adhering to the regulatory guidelines established by European regulatory bodies, which aim to address specific environmental concerns unique to this sector.

The Group took pride in its commitment to the implementation of various European Union legislation pertaining to transparency and comparability between member states.

Additionally, the Group demonstrated its voluntary implementation of voluntary reporting frameworks, including the GRI sustainability reporting standards, the Principles of the United Nations Global Compact, and numerous others. The CEO additionally indicated that the group's endeavors in 2023 for sustainable advancement were considerable, particularly in light of their personal objective to achieve a minimal impact on the environment with their fibers by 2030. This objective entails the incorporation of 40% recycled fibers, 25% next-generation fibers that currently do not exist or are not available in a large scale, and 25% fibers derived from organic or regenerative practices.

[74] Inditex, Sustainability Policy. (9 November 2015, updated on 3 November 2022)
[75] Inditex, Statement of non – Financial Information (2023)

At the end of the year 2016 Zara began its project towards a more sustainable pact by introducing the line #joinlife that its main goal is to represent a process of continuous improvement always questioning what to do to move towards a more sustainable model. This campaign came to be after the wave of imperative requirements from of the wave of sustainability by international organization, the EU, and international authorities (Gheorghe et.al, 2021)[76].

According to the research cited before the study they conducted resulted a lack of natural fibers and from the 10 dresses they randomly selected 6 out of them were made of plastic and 4 were made of semi – synthetic fibers. On the following image you could see how the fibers were distributed from the 10 dressed selected (Figure 9)[77].

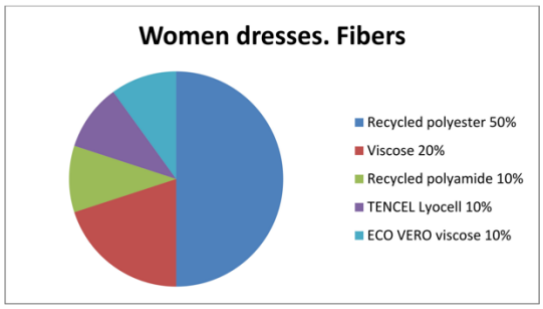

Figure 9 – From the graph we can clearly see how all the claims they made about using mostly natural fibers when from the image aside we can see it isn't so.

Another claim they made is that they would explicitly say whether the suppliers complied with the sustainable practices they wanted to implement, the water consumption for the production of the products and the condition of the workers of the factory.

[76] Gheorghe CA, Matefi R. (2021). Sustainability and Transparency—Necessary Conditions for the Transition from Fast to Slow Fashion: Zara Join Life Collection's Analysis. Sustainability. 13(19):11013.
[77] Ibid.

From the research (Gheorghe and Matefi, 2021) when it comes to the origin of the products, we have no formal recollection instead from chart (figure 10) we can see that no European suppliers were used and that would ultimately generate high cost with transport. Also, another aspect that was taken into consideration is the recycling capacity that could have been easier if the product was made for the majority of the same fiber.

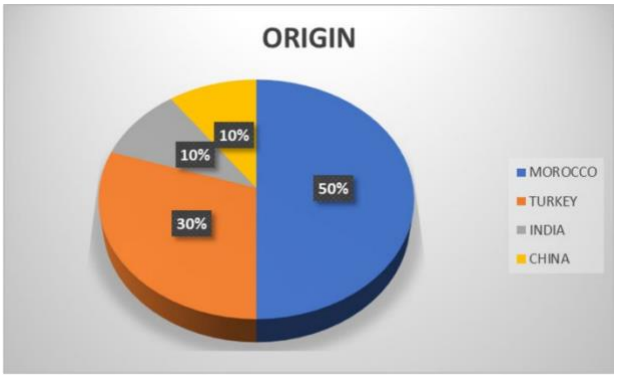

Figure 10 – The production locations of the products in question do not correspond to countries where it is straightforward to ascertain the extent to which the brand's sustainability claims are met.

Some of the conclusions drawn from the study conducted by Gheorghe and Matefi (2021) indicated that the predominant use of recycled materials in synthetic fibers was a significant aspect. This is a positive development. However, it is important to note that the initial intentions of the brand were to utilize natural fibers instead of synthetic ones.

Natural fibers, unlike synthetic ones, are not easily accessible, cost-effective, or quickly producible. The brand's original plan emphasized the importance of natural fibers in the eco-fashion movement, highlighting their sustainability throughout the entire lifecycle of garments. Natural fibers possess inherent qualities such as mechanical strength, lightweight, and health benefits for the wearer, making them highly desirable in the fashion industry. Natural fibers have inherent properties, for example, mechanical

quality, low weight and more beneficial to the wearer that has made them especially alluring"[78].

This leads to the conclusion that Zara is following a partial sustainability principle that could mislead consumers into thinking that what they are purchasing is sustainable and that they are doing impactful work for the environment. This is merely a case of green marketing.

4.3 – Green marketing

What we just analyzed is a case of greenwashing marketing where with the growing concerns around sustainability have also sought their way through various disciplines like marketing (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019)[79]. We could define green marketing as a company's marketing efforts that promote environmentally friendly practices and behaviors that always to concrete actions (Ottman, 2011)[80]. Some strategies that were similar to the one adopted by Zara where "ethical collections" like H&M conscious, ASOS Green Room and many more.

Corporations often create such collections to demonstrate their willingness to alter their production methods. These collections often feature themes related to social and

[78] Ibid.
[79] Kemper, J. A., & Ballantine, P. W. (2019). What do we mean by sustainability marketing? *Journal of Marketing Management*, *35*(3–4), 277–309.
[80] Ottman, J. A. (2011). The New Rules of Green Marketing: Strategies, Tools, and Inspiration for Sustainable Branding. Greenleaf Publishing.

environmental causes. This shift in approach can be attributed to the growing consumer awareness of sustainability and the need to prioritize the impact of their spending habits. According to a 2015 Nielsen poll showed that 66% of global consumers are willing to pay more for environmentally sustainable products (Watson, 2016)[81].

4.4 – Sustainability in H&M

Our second study case is H&M (Hannes and Mauritz) one of the most influential fast fashion retailers globally. Founded in 1947 in Sweden by the Swedish entrepreneur Erling Persson after he got inspired by his New York trip the year before[82]. The image down below (Figure 11) shows the first logotype that was designed by the founder himself.

Figure 11 – First H&M store in Stockholm

Figure 12- Inside the first H&M store

Between the '60 and the '70s, Hennes acquired the Stockholm-based hunting apparel and fishing equipment retailer Mauritz Widforss. This was the point at which the name

[81] Watson, B. (2016, August 20). The troubling evolution of corporate greenwashing. The Guardian
[82] H&M Group Website

changed to the one that is currently in use. At the same time, stores began offering men's and children's wear, in addition to the women's wear that they had already been selling. This was done in order to create a fashion that would cover all the family.

The growth was steady coming for the company with five of six stores opening every year. In 1974 it was rebranded with the abbreviation and was also listed on the Stockholm Stock Exchange.

The '80s and '90s was characterized by the laying of the global expansion, during which time they also engaged in that times e-commerce that were transactions conducted through a mail-order that was possible given the fact that they had acquired the company, Rowells. In 1998 is when the first online shopping begins in Sweden.

In the 2000 a flagship store opens in New York city realizing the founders dream, and also marking the beginning of market expansion outside of the European market.
In 2002 the first Corporate Social Responsibility Report is being published marking the beginning of the social responsibility reporting.

In 2004 H&M obtained the biggest international notoriety (Cline, 2013) by collaborating with the designer from Chanel and the artistic director of Fendi Karl Lagerfeld, and this happened because he came across a girl that was so well dresses that could have been mistaken for something you could find at Chanel however, that wasn't the case because as the girl stated her outfit was H&M because she wasn't able to afford the high end brand (Cline, 2013). It was an immense success for the brand that boosted by 24 percent its sales

just that month (Cline, 2013). H&M became a trendsetter so much that every other store wanted to generate the same effect that the partnership had for the brand by utilizing well know designers and creating the same panic-stricken early morning queues (Cline, 2013). This marked the beginning of this particular partnerships.

Figure 13 – Lagerfeld X H&M

Figure 14 – H&M collaboration with Versace

Between 2007 and 2010 up until we have a series of events like the creation of their first portfolio brand COS, later on followed by Weekday, Monki and Cheap Monday. We are introduced to home styling through H&M HOME. More brands are created in the following years like ARKET, H&M beauty, Afound and All in Equestrian.

The first completely sustainable collection lunches in 2010, a collection that is entirely made out with sustainable materials, and form there on more and more sustainable initiatives are followed like the H&M foundation a non – profit global organization that in 2015 launces The Global Challenge Award that aims to accelerate the shift from linear to circular fashion industry, we have garment collecting introduced in H&M stores to collect old textiles and reuse them or recycle them. Many more sustainable claims are made like the creation of an H&M rental service, in 2022the Group introduced the latest

climate targets educe absolute greenhouse gas emissions across the value chain by 56% by 2030, and by 90% by 2040. It creates a joint venture with Remondis to create Looper Textile and Co., which aims to collect sort and sell used and unwanted garments and textiles. In 2023 they issue a 500 million green bond to finance all of the sustainable goals they have set for themselves.

The sustainability strategy that characterizes H&M is multidimensional and this is because it aims to address numerous environmental and social issues within the fast fashion industry and that's way that their main area of focus can be categorized into three different areas: climate positivity, circular fashion promotion and ensuring fair and equal workplace.

As we've seen H&M has for a long time been actively aware of its surroundings and always making sure that consumers are aware of its interest in these matters but as we said at the beginning of this chapter are we under a case of legitimacy theory were all the claims are just made in other to be perceived a certain way or are there conscious efforts made to make this sector better?

4.4.1 – Claims and the Accusations

In an age of CSR organization are to realize that their main priority can't be solely on profit, investments returns and shareholder value (De Jong, et.al., 2018)[83]. With this

[83] De Jong, M. D. T., Harkink, K. M., & Barth, S. (2018). Making Green Stuff? Effects of Corporate Greenwashing on Consumers. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *32*(1), 77-112.

statement we could be convinced that H&M is one of the best fast fashion retailers there is, however that's not the case because it's considered one of the "dirtiest" industries when it comes to fashion pollution (European Parliament, 2021) and not just that it has been linked a connection between the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013 and H&M although the brand has been claiming to be on the socially responsible side as per their first sustainability report that dates back to 2002.

H&M doesn't own manufacturing facilities relies on the European and the Asian factories to produce it garments ultimately relying on independent subcontractors (H&M Group Supply chain n.d., Cline 2013). Working with subcontractors is known to carry risks in area of sustainable supply chain and or issues regarding child labor or forced labour and to avert any of the problems that might surge when dealing with this aspect H&M states that it performs sufficient quality controls and (…) "focus on health and safety and wellbeing, compensation, benefits and social protection, and labour rights" (H&M Group. Annual and Sustainability Report, 2023). On their website the section dedicated to the supply chain is vast and thorough explaining the steps that are required from obtaining the raw material to the product being exposed in their shops, and this has been available only following the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh one of their main and largest supply chain (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2015).

The article published in 2019 by the Clean Clothes Campaign states that in 2013, when H&M introduced the Fair Wage Method on their sustainability report, they had promised to pay a fair living wage to 850,000 workers by 2018. The company made claims stating that they had achieved their goal and exceeded expectations. This was reported in the

2018 sustainability report. However, as of the date of the article, no worker had been paid an actual living wage. Instead, the original roadmap documents, which set out the company's original ethical claims, were removed and an edited version made available. This is not the first instance in which the Group has employed this method of modifying the narrative in the course of action.

4.4.2 – The H&M green communication

H&M launched the conscious collection in 2010 that was marketed using sustainable materials like organic cotton, recycled polyester and Tencel. The Group claimed that this was a major step towards sustainable fashion emphasizing the use of eco-friendly materials and commitment to environmental responsibility.

According to a Forbes 2022 article by Matthew Stern[84] there has been a recent exposé for the group where he claims that H&M was using a scorecard system that informed customers about the environmental soundness of each product and the claims were debunked by a report that Quartz[85] where the investigation resulted in comparing some

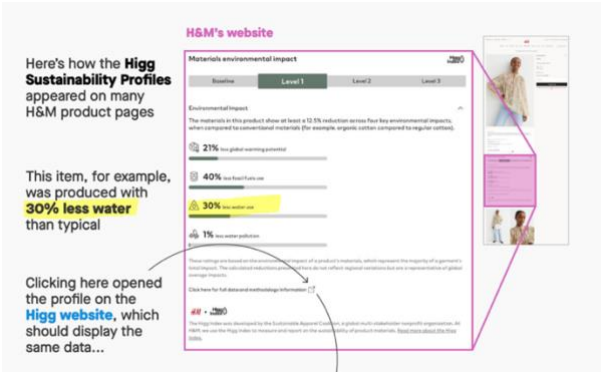

Figure 15 – Sustainability Scorecard

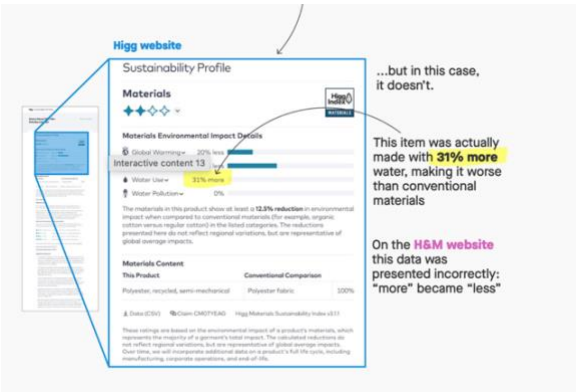

Figure 16 – Sustainability scorecard

[84] Matthew Stern. (July 13th, 2022). H&M Case Shows How Greenwashing Breaks Brand Promise. Forbes
[85] An American digitally native news organization owned by G/O media.

of the garments that were sold under the conscious collection with their normal apparel and coming to the conclusion that what they were claiming isn't the reality instead: "it was no more sustainable than comparable garments made by the company and its competitors" (Shendruk A., 2022)[86]. The scorecard was developed in accordance with the Higg Material Sustainability Index, as established by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition. The Group employed this index in a manner contrary to its intended purpose. For instance, they would score a dress at 20% in water usage, claiming that they are using 20% less water. However, in reality, the opposite was true. From the images (Figure 15 and 16) down below we can observe the research made by Quartz and see how what the is presented on the H&M website is the complete opposite to the reality.

4.5. - Sustainable Fast Fashion. A feasible oxymoron?

A comparative analysis of two of the largest fast fashion retailers has led to the conclusion that these brands are adept at brand communication. They are able to convey a message in a way that makes them always believable, in order to preserve the image, they have created of themselves as a brand. In order to reach this goal, they are willing to go above and beyond.

[86] Amanda Shendruk. (June 29th, 2022). Quartz investigation: H&M showed bogus environmental scores for its clothing. Quartz.

The question thus arises as to whether sustainable fashion is a viable concept or merely a means of garnering consumer interest. In the Forbes article, David Spear asserts that firms should treat sustainability reporting with the same rigor as they do their financial reporting. He notes that since sustainability reporting is a public record, it should be treated as such (Stern, 2022). An increasing number of firms are integrating their financial reports with their ESG reporting (Stern, 2022). This should encourage fast fashion retailers to maintain their values in order to gain approval from the general public.

Conclusion

A comparison of the two major fast fashion brands reveals that, despite both engaging in questionable practices or employing deceptive marketing strategies, H&M ultimately performed worse in every term. As evidenced by the analysis conducted by Gheorghe and Matefi (2021), Zara initially intended to utilize natural fibers for the products of their #joinlife collection. However, it ultimately employed synthetic, recycled fibers that differed from its original intention. Nevertheless, this represents a positive step in the right direction, aligning with the CEO's statements on the Statement of Non-Financial Information. It is evident that the Group as a whole is striving towards a transparent environmental and societal impact.

In contrast, H&M has long espoused its commitment to environmental responsibility and its pursuit of a transparent and ethical supply chain. However, as the analysis revealed, the company's claims lacked tangible evidence of corresponding actions. A review of the company's website reveals a multitude of sustainability initiatives. However, a recent article by the Clean Clothes Campaign highlights a discrepancy between the company's promises and its actual actions. The article details the protests of Bangladeshi workers, who allege that the company has failed to fulfill its commitment to provide a living wage. This is just one example of the company's shortcomings in achieving a more sustainable supply chain.

After having delved into some of the practices that this fast fashion brands have displayed is only fair to ask what they should be doing in other to improve their current positioning

and change the consumers perception that has gone awry the more articles have come out to highlight they're through actions and how they go against all odds.

Zara's proactive steps towards a cleaner and more transparent supply chain are commendable and should serve as a model for all fast fashion brands. One of the more notable aspects (Inditex, Statement of Non-Financial Information 2023) was the one that stated their intention to establish a more comparable and uniform framework across the countries of the European Union by aligning their reporting with the new EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). This directive aims to standardize the sustainability information disclosed by companies, placing sustainability reporting on an equal footing with financial reporting, as well as addressing the information requirements of the different stakeholders. Concurrently, the implementation of the new European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), developed by the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG), which establishes the common framework for reporting, was initiated.

The slow fashion movement, which has emerged as an effective way to improve sustainability in the fashion industry (Centobelli, et al., 2022)[87], is now gaining traction. A reevaluation of the manner in which we shop has become imperative if we are to maintain our finite resources. Another method that is being extensively utilized is the circular economy, which is one of the sustainable objectives of the European Union. The

[87] Piera Centobelli, Stefano Abbate, Simon Peter Nadeem, Jose Arturo Garza-Reyes, Slowing the fast fashion industry: An all-round perspective, Current Opinion in Green and Sustainable Chemistry. Science Direct.

objective is to transition to this movement in order to reduce the pressure on natural resources and maintain consumption within planetary boundaries. In March of 2020, the European Union adopted a new circular economy action plan (CEAP)[88] with the objective of reaching the EU's goal of climate neutrality by 2050 and halting biodiversity loss. The plan's primary objective is to establish sustainable products as the norm within the EU. It also aims to empower consumers and public buyers, focus on sectors that utilize the most resources and have the greatest potential for circularity, such as electronics and information and communication technology (ICT), batteries and vehicles, packaging, plastics, textiles, construction and buildings, food, water and nutrients, and to reduce waste. Additionally, it seeks to facilitate the implementation of circularity at the regional and city levels and to spearhead global efforts on the circular economy.

[88] European Union, (n.d.). Circular economy action plan

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