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Marketing in Fast Fashion: Greenwashing and Celebrities as Smokescreens

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Abstract. Fast fashion—an industry defined by fast turnover rates and low prices—is projected to grow to a valuation of 29.1 billion USD by 2032 with a CAGR of 10.7%. As the fast fashion model dominates the industry, its dependence on international labor exploitation and its exponentially negative environmental impact continue to trouble consumers. Younger consumers in particular have widely expressed a commitment to ethical consumption and brand engagement. Nevertheless, these same consumers continue to support the growth of fast fashion. This paper first outlines the harms created by the fast fashion industry in regards to international labor exploitation and environmental degradation; then it investigates the marketing strategies used by fast fashion companies to continue to engage consumers. Greenwashing and the use of celebrities, in particular, are found to be effective in creating protective barriers around fast fashion companies, allowing them to continue exploitative practices while winning over consumers that profess a high valuation of ethical business practices in regards to both labor and sustainability.

Keywords. Fast fashion, consumer behavior, ethical consumption, greenwashing, international labor exploitation

1. Introduction

Fast fashion companies like Zara, Shein, and Boohoo are all growing at exponential rates due to desirable low prices, trendy designs, and ready accessibility [1]. Once thought to be a temporary bubble resulting from lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic, the fast fashion industry has persistently dominated the fashion world. Indeed, the fast fashion industry is projected to grow to a valuation of 291.1 billion USD by 2032 with a CAGR of 10.7% [2]. In contrast, luxury brands are seeing a notable decline in growth and engagement in the last handful of years [2]. However, it is no secret that fast fashion companies are able to grow their profits and business through the exploitation of both international labor forces and the environment [3]. Indeed, the high production costs that are associated with fair labor standards and eco-friendly practices seem at times necessarily contradictory to the fast fashion model [4]. Despite polls and surveys that suggest younger generations are far more committed to engaging with ethical businesses, it is these very consumer bases that are contributing to the rapid expansion of the fast fashion industry [5]. The apparent contradiction in the professed practices of consumers and the actual reality of their engagement begs for further investigation.

This paper investigates the impact of the deceptive marketing tactics used by fast fashion companies on sustaining engagement from the target consumer base. Greenwashing and the

employment of celebrity influence are both powerful and central strategies used to cover up labor exploitation scandals, promote a falsified image of sustainability, and in general increase the relevance and popularity of the brand in order to protect it from past and future backlash.

This paper argues that these strategies are fundamental to ensuring a constant flow of consumers, which in turn continues to fuel these companies' massive labor exploitation programs and accelerated environmental degradation. This paper will discuss the following: first, the harms of the fast fashion industry as a global industry dependent on rapid environmental degradation and international labor exploitation; second, an analysis of greenwashing marketing tactics and celebrity influencer marketing; finally, a reflection on consumer behavior and directions for future research.

2. Harms: Exploitation of Labor and Environment

In the pursuit of maximizing profits at all costs, the exploitation of poor labor regulations in third world countries was imminent. Fast fashion companies are on an everlasting hunt to find the cheapest and most efficient labor forces, and from the get-go they have focused on expanding influence in emerging countries in order to capitalize on lower labor expenses and more lenient labor regulations [4]. As of mid-2023, it was estimated that the fast fashion industry employs approximately 75 million factory workers worldwide [4]. Much of this labor force is concentrated in Asia, as the continent has “emerged as the garment and textile producing factory of the world [6].” Companies like Intidex, the parent company of Zara, have also been linked to slave labor in countries like Brazil and Argentina, as well as general labor exploitation in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America [7]. Additionally, fast fashion companies are quick to come under fire for child labor allegations [8]. Fast fashion companies are generally deterred from doing business in the global West, given strict labor regulations and protections, which reduce profit margins [8]. Operating in third world countries allows fast fashion companies to take advantage of loose regulations and pay their labor force expressly low wages for exorbitantly high numbers of working hours [9]. However, with the boom of fast fashion, such factory working conditions are often presented as the best options available to the emerging labor force [6]. As fast fashion giants take over the job opportunity markets in these regions, the companies generate millions in profits while local economies and laborers remain trapped in poverty cycles [6]. The presence of fast fashion companies in these countries is negatively impacting the upward mobility of individual laborers in addition to harming potential infrastructure development through extractive and exploitative labor practices.

Not only do these fast fashion companies force laborers to survive long hours with less-than-bare-minimum pay, safety conditions in these factories have come under public scrutiny multiple times in the last handful of years. Even prior to the launch of the fast fashion model, safe working conditions in garment factories around the world were a cause for major concern. From the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911 and beyond, labor activists have worked to bring attention to the hazardous working conditions in factories; and although many victories and protections have been won in the U.S. and the rest of the Western world, the problem has not disappeared, but has shifted overseas [9]. The notorious 2013 factory accident in Bangladesh made global headlines and triggered mass public outcry at the preventability of such a tragedy [10]. However, recent research suggests that the fast fashion business model not only makes factory accidents and loss of life far more likely than before, but that these incidents now seem almost inevitable in the framework of fast fashion [10]. There is an incidentally insidious collaboration between local factory owners looking out for their own self interest, Western consumers who have become accustomed to the low prices and accessibility of fast fashion, and an international trade model that both permits and encourages this form of

international exploitation [10]. In this way, these laborers' lives are treated as entirely disposable—just another usable resource with fast turnover and high profit margins. It is inherently dehumanizing and wholly reprehensible.

There have been efforts to curb these exploitative labor practices, specifically through movements for stricter disclosure laws; however they have been largely unsuccessful or entirely ineffective [11]. Without constant pressure and additional regulations on these business enterprises, companies continue to have free roam to take advantage of the existing international trade and labor reality to continue churning out quickly overturning, trendy items for low prices at the expense of tens of millions of laborers in the developing world. Any economic progress seen in these nations has come at high social and environmental costs, and there is a clear need for re-evaluation of methods and the long-term sustainability of these practices [6].

Similarly, the environmental impacts of the fast fashion business model are manifold and clear. The fast fashion industry is recognized by the United Nations' ActNow Climate Campaign as one of the most environmentally harmful sectors globally—it consumes more energy than both the aviation and shipping industries combined [4]. In order to keep prices low and profits high, companies are irresistibly incentivized to use cheap materials—cloths and fabrics that are undeniably harmful for the environment [12]. The fashion industry as a whole already struggled with major environmental issues related to resource competition, greenhouse gas emissions, land use, toxic production processes, and landfills; the fast fashion industry accelerates the negative effect of all these factors through the promotion of overproduction and overconsumption [13]. The model of fast fashion demands the production of an exorbitant amount of clothing every day in order to meet consumer demands for more options and the verelusive pursuit of rapidly changing trends. Thus, the growth of the fast fashion industry in the fashion sector of the global market has exponentially exacerbated the extant issues. Performative shifts towards biodegradable fabrics and “eco-friendly” collections are far outweighed by the sheer amount of production and waste created by fast fashion—not only in their factories, but also in the model of business that encourages fast turnover through clothing meant to be worn once and quickly discarded [4].

The negative environmental impacts of fast fashion are not evenly experienced throughout the global community. In general, the stresses of climate change and environmental strain are disproportionately felt in developing nations [14]. Moreover, when it comes to fast fashion specifically, both environmental and occupational burdens involved in mass production and disposal are displaced from high income countries—where many of these fast fashion companies are housed—to under-resourced and developing nations [9]. The U.S. alone produces a huge amount of clothing waste per year, almost all of which is dumped in other nations [15]. In addition to the negative effects on local industry development outlined earlier in this section, these environmental burdens are expressed through the additional complications placed on the other dominant industry in many of these nations—agriculture. It takes 700 gallons of water to produce one cotton shirt and 2,000 gallons to produce one pair of jeans [16]. Fast fashion not only sucks communities dry of much needed water resources, it is also the number two global contributor to water pollution [16]. Those who work in and live near these fast fashion factories are the ones directly experiencing the environmental health hazards of the industry [9]. In these ways, the fast fashion industry's environmental recklessness is another form of international exploitation. Indeed, scholars identify a “global environmental justice dilemma” at the heart of the industry [9]. The people of the developing world are thus doubly exploited by fast fashion—first as laborers, and then as citizens of the earth.

3. Marketing Tactics

This section takes a closer look at the marketing tactics used by fast fashion companies in order to better understand the relationship between a self-proclaimed “ethically conscious” consumer-base and the ever-growing fast fashion industry.

Greenwashing has emerged as the catch-all marketing strategy to distract consumers simultaneously from exploitative labor practices and from negative environmental impacts produced by fast fashion. Greenwashing is generally defined as “the act of companies capitalizing on the market demand for sustainability by making false or misleading claims about their environmental practices” and can be further identified through “the intersection of two firm behaviors: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance [4].” Greenwashing is not a new invention of the fast fashion era, but rather developed in the 1980s in response to the growing demand for eco-friendly products [17]. The FTC has since released and continues to update guidelines for identifying truly green products and industry practices in an attempt to protect consumers from greenwashing [18]. It is nevertheless undeniable that greenwashing is an incredibly effective and strategic marketing tool used by industry giants across various sectors.

A comprehensive study outlines the following seven tactics as the most popular tricks of greenwashing: [4]

- Hidden trade-off — a product is labeled as “green” based on an extremely narrow definition or set of characteristics; this tactic intentionally disregards several other and usually more significant environmental factors.
- No proof — companies will make strong claims about positive environmental interaction without any data or third-party certification.
- Vagueness — companies will make overly ambiguous and general statements with plenty of catchy and trendy words; this strategy relies on consumers seeing keywords and making automatic associations with sustainability.
- Irrelevance — this occurs when a company makes a claim that, although true, is not truly helpful or relevant to the process of determining whether a product is environmentally friendly or not.
- Lesser of two evils — this strategy might make accurate claims about a company’s practices, but it does so in order to divert attention away from broader negative environmental impacts.
- Fibbing — although this is the least common tactic as it is the easiest to prosecute, at times companies will be explicitly dishonest about their environmental impact.
- Worshiping false labels — this practice involves creating the impression of third-party endorsement when, in reality, none exists; this practice is also known as fraudulent labeling.

Numerous fast fashion companies have been publicly accused of greenwashing over the last handful of years. ASOS released a “Responsible Edit,” which introduced recycled products into its catalog and claimed that the use of recycled materials would result in water and energy savings. Similarly, companies like Zara and H&M have launched eco-friendly collections and released pledges to phase out toxic chemicals and materials. Zara and H&M both throw around terms like “organic cotton” and “recycled wool” in the hopes that consumers will latch onto the key words and make environmentally friendly associations with the rest of the brand. These commitments are deceptive: even if the companies follow through with their pledges, “organic cotton” and “recycled wool” are not truly environmentally friendly alternatives, despite very much sounding in line with sustainability initiatives. Phrases like “biodegradable” are highly

suspect: there's no legal time limit on biodegradability, which means that companies have the leeway to make this claim without specifying whether the breakdown would take a week or 400 years [19]. Moreover, even if these companies were being fully transparent, none of these initiatives—the limited edition collections and the promises of phasing out certain materials—are nearly sufficient to reasonably offset the environmental harm caused by these companies and by the industry as a whole. As outlined in the previous section, the fundamental nature of the fast fashion industry turns on practices over overconsumption and overproduction, both of which will continue to propel the industry towards environmental ruin; initiatives like these would barely make a dent.

Other companies that have been accused of greenwashing have also been accused of doing so to cover up labor-exploitation scandals. Primark, like other fast fashion companies, is able to offer such low prices specifically because of its exploitation of laborers from poor countries. When Primark was exposed for using child labor, the company was able to shift its negative image by capitalizing on the current consumer obsession with companies that present as environmentally-friendly: Primark created a collection of denim-wear in which the clothing was made from sustainable cotton from India and Pakistan, the very countries in which the company was accused of using child labor. Primark's FAQ page now has a statement that strongly condemns child labor and assures that it is not present at any point in the supply chain, and the company has not since come under heated scrutiny over its continued engagement with cheap, exploitative labor in South Asia. In this way, the company was able to capitalize on greenwashing to distract from its labor exploitation practices and succeeded at winning back enough public goodwill to continue its growth. In a similar effort to re-brand, & Other Stories pushes the centrality of Sweden in its production chain in order to promote an image of fair labor practices; in reality, & Other Stories does most of its production in China, Bulgaria, and Bangladesh. What becomes clear through these examples is the power of re-branding and the short-lived nature of public outcry in the face of exposure—it seems that consumers are willing to buy into the stories that brands are putting out about themselves in the aftermath of scandal. Whether this is a willful ignorance in order to continue to enjoy low prices without feeling the weight of ethical qualms or if it is truly a result of lack of information is less clear. Some scholars argue that continuing to raise consumer awareness about greenwashing, environmental harm, and labor exploitation will shift consumer behavior and that the issue lies in lack of understanding [20]. However, others argue that the pursuit of fashion might always outweigh ethical considerations [20].

Additionally, the power of celebrity and influencer marketing has come to play a similarly powerful role in a company's rebranding efforts and success distracting consumers from the realities of their business practices. Celebrity and influence culture, vis-a-vis social media and media more generally, is already a large contributor to cultures of consumption – everyone wants to wear what the Kardashians of the world are wearing, and what they are wearing is constantly changing. In the social media era, fashion trends are constantly shifting and updating, and everyone from adolescents to young adults to older generations feels the immanent pressure to keep up through over-consumption. Perhaps more insidious, however, is the employment of these figures to increase the general popularity of these brands to paper over any scandalous associations.

The power of celebrity has long been established in the world of marketing and advertising. Celebrity associations with brands and appearances in ads show a high effect on purchasing intent amongst consumers [21]. Celebrity endorsements of particular products show an even greater impact [21]. The most effective celebrity ambassadors are those who are not only well-

suited to a brand's image, but who are also generally popular amongst the target audience [22]. With fast fashion companies, however, it is far easier for brands to adapt to their celebrity and influencer ambassadors—since the fast fashion model is already centered around fast production and the overproduction of different styles, fast fashion companies are able to employ almost anyone they like and simply create a collection tailored to that person. For example, Megan Fox completed two collaborations with Boohoo that were marketed as opportunities for anyone to take on Megan Fox's signature styles. She was photographed out in public wearing her Boohoo collection items as if they were simply a part of her closet and she promoted them with a similar messaging. Similarly, Cardi B has become the face of Fashion Nova and her name became functionally synonymous with the brand. These associations created boundaries of protection for these fast fashion companies, in which a certain percentage of their consumer base felt guaranteed simply because of the positive association between the brand and the celebrity. These consumers, more enthralled by the employment of celebrity than anything else, are far more likely to turn a blind eye to unethical practices.

In certain cases, celebrity marketing has been employed explicitly in conjunction with greenwashing, as opposed to just as a general distraction and popularity tactic. Kim Kardashian infamously served as Boohoo's "sustainability ambassador"—the exact parameters of this role and how the relationship was intended to increase sustainability efforts in Boohoo's supply chain remains unclear. Nevertheless, as with all greenwashing tactics, the use of key buzzwords has a powerful effect on the subconscious of the consumer. The combination of greenwashing tactics and celebrity popularity is lethal. H&M employed a similar tactic when it named Game of Thrones star Maisie Williams as their very own "sustainability ambassador." Shein – a brand that, in the West, is perhaps the most notorious for its poor labor practices and adverse environmental impact—launched a design competition that employed celebrity superstar names like Kourtney Kardashian and Law Roach as judges and mentors. Part of the campaign involved using these celebrities and their mentees as spokespersons to dismiss controversy surrounding exploitative practices [23]. Although these companies and their celebrity associations do often come under fire—in Instagram comments and blog posts—the backlash is far outweighed by the general support and the barrier of protection afforded to these figures by their sheer popularity; a layer of protection that is then transferred from these celebrity figures to these fast fashion companies by association.

4. Consumer Behavior and Further Investigation

As fast fashion companies continue to employ deceptive marketing tactics to lure customers into their stores and onto their websites, consumers must be wary of these strategies and be conscious of the impacts of engaging with the fast fashion industry. Although second-hand shopping ethical engagement are increasing, the fast fashion industry continues to boom. It would be easy to simply place the blame on the green of these giants of industry, but research is clear that it is a combination of supply strategy and sheer demand that undergirds this industry. It seems that the very nature of the industry—impossibly high demand irresistibly low prices—creates a fundamental paradox in a generation of consumers that, on the surface, are committed to "new consumption paradigms, such as anti-consumerism, eco-friendliness, and ethical consumption [24]."

Is this vicious cycle one that can reasonably be broken? Further research is required into consumer behavior and motivations in relation to fast fashion and these new paradigms of

consumption in order to better understand the apparent contradictions in consumer ethics and consumer engagement. Moreover, further research into policy and regulation would also be prudent at this point. It is time to think more critically about the role that governments all over the world play in enabling and incentivizing international labor exploitation and the reckless destruction of the environment. Finally, there ought to be greater contributions to the existing research on the sustainability of the fast fashion industry and whether or not there is any way forward; or if the very nature of this industry unavoidably mandates exploitation and waste at this scale.

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