

Desire, Power, and Capitalism: A Theoretical Exploration of Overconsumption in the Global Fashion Industry

Michelle Blair Gabriel
Glasgow Caledonian New York College

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<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7916-8265>

Abstract

The last 30 years have left the global fashion industry dealing with a litany of issues of its own making: labor rights issues, ecological disasters from manufacturing practices, human rights abuses, outsized carbon emissions, hazardous chemical usage, overproduction, product dumping, overconsumption, and underuse to name a few. Overconsumption undergirds the myriad problems the fashion industry faces today as the scale and scope of the industry is a major factor in issues such as water use, carbon emissions, and waste. Overconsumption makes growth possible in an already saturated fashion market. A discussion about the role of consumption in relation to the issues of the global fashion industry has grown louder over the last few years. We see this manifesting in fashion brands such as Cuyana and Mara Hoffman asking consumers to buy less but better as a marketing mantra, global fashion advocacy groups such as Fashion Revolution posting to the public via social media that “ALL YOU NEED IS LESS”, and the emergence and growth of the “Slow Fashion” movement of the last two decades. Yet, we find very few conversations seeking to unpack the complicated and nuanced relationship consumers have to fashion companies, the role and use of power in that relationship, and the role desire plays in consumer’s ability to effect change in their consumption habits and thus participate meaningfully in dynamics related to overconsumption within the fashion industry.

This research examines consumer narratives through the lens of Foucault (1978) and Barthes (2006), to understand the intersection of power and desire and their employment through the shared language of fashion. Partnering the theoretical understanding of fashion with a discussion of the role of capitalism, we can explore the unique challenges and complicated mechanisms that support fashion overconsumption. Reflecting on 100 informal and impromptu street interviews with fashion consumers in busy New York City shopping areas conducted in Spring 2019, I investigate the relationship fashion consumers have with fashion companies and how the power dynamics present in that relationship affect the ability of fashion consumers to examine their relationship to overconsumption. In better understanding the deeply embedded systems of fashion and power as well as the amplifying quality of capitalism, fashion

overconsumption can be unpacked and examined with the hope of finding ways to reduce the negative effects of this complicated issue.

Introduction

Today, a common refrain heard about the global fashion industry from professionals and employees operating within it, journalists commenting on it, and communities affected by it is that it has a *big* problem. It might be more accurate to say that the industry has *many* big problems which are simultaneously discrete and intertwined.

In the last 30 years, the global fashion industry has created, amplified, and had to contend with a number of issues related to its operational practices including human rights abuses, unsafe working conditions, ecological disasters from manufacturing practices, greenhouse gas emissions, hazardous chemical usage, overproduction, product dumping, and lack of waste management practices, to name a few. A throughline can be found across the issues of the fashion industry; overconsumption supports the myriad problems the fashion industry faces today as the scale and scope of the industry is a major factor in tackling any isolated issue. Overconsumption is necessary to make growth possible in a saturated fashion market.

A conversation has emerged about the role of consumption in the challenges of and possible solutions for the industry. Examples can be seen in the slow fashion movement, in fashion brands such as Cuyana, Mara Hoffman, and Patagonia asking consumers to buy less but better, and by advocacy organizations such as ReMake and Fashion Revolution telling social media followers that “ALL YOU NEED IS LESS.”

Despite these examples, we find very few discussions attempting to unpack the complicated and nuanced relationship consumers have to fashion companies, the use of power in that relationship, and the role of desire in consumers’ ability to effect change in their consumption habits and thus assessing their role within the greater culture of consumption and effectively reducing their own consumption behaviors.

Power is a master key to understanding consumption dynamics within fashion contexts. This discussion utilizes the complementary theories of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault to investigate the intersection of power and fashion. Barthes’s *The Language of Fashion* (2013) contextualizes clothing and fashion in semiotic terms and elevates fashion to a language in and of itself. Foucault’s work in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1980) argues at length for the understanding of language and discussion as significant tools for the utilization of power. With these theories as tools for understanding, we can see fashion as a language, and as a language a powerful tool for the use of power. Power itself must be understood if its schemes are to be uncovered. Classic theorists French and Raven (1959) along with contemporary additions from Magee and Galinsky (2008) illustrate the facets of power which reveal power’s pathways and as metrics for unpacking who or what has power in a given dynamic.

Through these collective theories – from Foucault, Barthes, French and Raven, and Magee and Galinsky – we can understand the role desire plays within fashion broadly and specifically within the dynamic of fashion consumption. Once these layers have been unpacked and better understood, we can take a final step to see how the interaction of fashion and capitalism takes a consumption dynamic already energetically charged and pushes it into overdrive. The order of this mental operation is important; both power and fashion as concepts are amorphous and deeply layered. Much like a matryoshka doll, you may feel you have investigated thoroughly down to the source of these concepts only to find there are still dolls within dolls to open. By investigating by layer, starting first with fashion as language, then power employed through language and fashion, followed by how to find and measure power, and ultimately the role desire has in fashion consumption, we can see fashion as a system interested in and supportive of overconsumption in and of itself. In this we can discuss capitalism as its peer, not its parent, in that behavior.

Fashion as Language

The first step we must take to understand fashion overconsumption dynamics is to define what *is* fashion and understand what cultural phenomena construct this definition of fashion.

Fashion is a concept that holds many meanings. The different spheres of experience – the individual, the institutional, the societal, and the global – all apply their own layers of meaning, resulting in fashion as a deeply contextual concept (Entwistle, 2000; Rocamora & Smelik; Wilson, 2019). Rocamora and Smelik (2015) provide a comprehensive definition with support from Kawamura (2005):

We understand fashion as both material culture and as symbolic system (Kawamura, 2005). It is a commercial industry producing and selling material commodities; a socio-cultural force bound up with the dynamics of modernity and post modernity; and an intangible system of signification. It is thus made of things and signs, as well as individual and collective agents, which all coalesce through practices of production, consumption, distribution and representation (p. 2).

In this definition, we can see that fashion is both conceptual and practical, defining 'intangible systems' on one hand and an entire global industry on the other. For the purposes of this paper, I will utilize 'fashion' to discuss the concept of fashion including as maker of meaning, as lexicon, and socio-cultural force; and 'fashion industry' to note the practical operations of the business of fashion. This definition from Kawamura (2005) and Rocamora and Smelik (2015) is useful in clarifying the conceptual facets of fashion; however, it is necessary to engage with additional theories to apply this conceptual understanding.

Through Roland Barthes' work *The Language of Fashion* (2013) we can understand and utilize fashion and clothing as a meaningful and functional language. Barthes (2013) dissects the components of what makes up fashion – clothing, accessories, stylings, trends – into signs and linguistic components. He argues that fashion as language and tool for discussion is made up

through the interaction between these tangible components and between the wearer and other members of a society. Clothing only evolves to be understood as fashion, and thus moves from the realm of function to the realm of meaning, when it is situated within a social context. In other words, for clothing to become fashion, it requires both a speaker (or wearer in this context) to construct a statement in clothing, and a listener (or observer of the wearer), to perceive the clothing statement. This dynamic is a discussion of sorts with clothing as the shared language. The discussion is what transforms disparate clothing elements into the status of fashion. For Barthes (2013), the collective belief in fashion and use of fashion as a language makes it greater than the sum of its parts. The component tools themselves (individual items of clothing) are limited and have an inherent ephemerality which supports the illusion of constant newness in the fashion dynamic. In reality, we recycle and reconfigure the same limited components of this language in forming the dialog. This process works because the meaning – which is created through the dialogue – is in the fashion combinations themselves, not in the individual components (Barthes, 2013).

Barthes (2013) goes on to discuss fashion's relationship to novelty and time in his analysis of the wearer's pursuit of individuality through clothing, claiming it is the dialogue created in the pursuit of individuality that creates the meaning on which the language of fashion is built; however, in order to participate in the language and culture of fashion, the individual can hardly avoid using mass produced clothing items. These mass produced items are inherently unoriginal, are subject to coded rules of the culture under which they are produced, and thus are finite in their use within the language of fashion (Barthes, 2013). Stated plainly: "you have to imitate that which is in fashion in order not to be imitable" (Barthes, 2013, p. 81). This describes a contradiction in this inherent quality of fashion: the individual utilizes fashion to try to construct a unique identity within a given social dynamic and fashion and the fashion industry strive to strike a balance between making items of clothing broadly available through mass production while signalling that fashion provides unique opportunities upon which to build an individual identity.

Fashion has, however, always had a powerful tool at its disposal which assists in striking that balance: the speed of style innovation. Barthes (2013) defines fashion as "the collective imitation of regular novelty," (p. 63). Fashion is marked by an extreme focus on the present at the expense of both the past and the future. This creates a dynamic of exceptionally finite temporal relevance for clothing items, which in turn supports the definition of fashion itself. Again, we can look to Barthes (2013) for incisive commentary:

Fashion experiences itself as a Right, the natural right of the present over the past...with long-term memory abolished and with time reduced to the duo of that which is rejected and that which is inaugurated, pure Fashion, logical Fashion is never anything other than the amnesiac substitution of the present for the past (p.110-111).

With this infatuation with the present, abandonment of the past, and willful blindness to the future, fashion forces a rapid pace of change. What fashion *is* today is gone tomorrow, requiring a new idea of what *is fashion* to be continually constructed in the present. This reliable pace of

fashion change does not require participants or society to know what is fashionable, strictly speaking, but only that which is unfashionable; according to Barthes (2013), fashion has the unique quality of being understood through *what it is not* (p.63). This comparison is important and completes the transformation of utilitarian *clothing* into *fashion*, as “what makes meaning is not repetition but difference,” (Barthes, p. 74).

Barthes’ (2013) interpretation of fashion is key to understanding the transformation of utilitarian, individual items of clothing through socio-cultural construction to be meaningful components in the shared language and phenomenon of fashion. In building a basis of understanding of the foundational qualities of the concept of fashion and its use as a language, we can discuss the understanding of power and its employment within the language of fashion and how these two concepts interact to influence consumption dynamics.

Understanding Power

To understand what motivates, maintains, and expands fashion consumption behaviors, it is necessary to understand power: how it operates, how it is leveraged, and how it can be found. In understanding these qualities of power, we can discuss how power is utilized in fashion contexts, who holds power in fashion consumption dynamics, and how power is leveraged to drive fashion overconsumption.

Power is an expansive and amorphous concept that requires context to understand and utilize. A commonly used definition of power (Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Magee & Galinsky, 2008) comes from French and Raven (1959) who define “power in terms of influence” (p. 260) and outline five distinct types of power: reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power and expert power (French & Raven, 1959). Magee and Galinsky (2008) offer some additions to the French and Raven definition of power by adding actual power and expanding the idea of legitimate power.

Though each of these power types can be investigated in isolation, in a given situation all or some of these types may be present and acting in concert, creating unique circumstances which broaden the reach of power or increase its efficacy (French & Raven, 1959; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). In naming the types of power and noting the corresponding characteristics, it is possible to find power within complicated social dynamics, and in so spotting, discuss them directly and potentially combat their effects.

French and Raven (1959) and Magee and Galinsky (2008) offer tools to define and identify power. We look to Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1980) to understand how power is utilized. The combination of Foucault (1980) and Barthes (2013) create a framework for understanding power within fashion through Barthes’s theory of fashion as language and an understanding of language and discussion as a tool for power through Foucault.

Foucault argues that power's greatest means for employment is language, and language is the manner of power's hold on sexuality. "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it," (Foucault 1980, p. 101). Fashion and clothing are in service of and served by both sexuality and power. The global fashion industry is a 2.5 trillion USD business (United States Joint Economic Committee, n.d.) that, at its core, sells sexuality (Davis, 1992). Sexuality is deeply embedded in the culture and ideas of fashion and is necessary to the adoption of fashion concepts and products (Barthes, 2018; Entwistle, 2000). Language and desire are important tools at sexuality's disposal for power's implementation. In understanding fashion as a language, we can see fashion and clothing as discursive tools used in the employment of power.

Foucault (1980) makes clear the direction of power within a discourse: "the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing" (p. 62). He goes on to say, however, that "power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (Foucault, 1980, p.86). Power may be with the listener but power has its greatest effect when it hides its true intentions; subtlety and sophistication are important. For example, in using discourse to engage with fashion consumers, fashion corporations may give the illusion that the consumer is powerful by supporting the consumer's belief that fashion is an empowerment tool, giving the illusion that the corporation in power has loosened its grip. In actuality, the fashion corporation, already in a position of power relative to the consumer, has taken a greater hold on power through increased knowledge and greater supervision of the consumer. This knowledge is utilized to more intimately understand the consumer and their behaviors to sell more goods while being packaged as power and freedom for the individual consumer. Power exerted over an individual packaged as empowerment of that same individual is power in its most compelling form (Foucault, 1980).

As a discourse, fashion functions as Foucault theorizes – as a tool seemingly in service of the 'speaker,' or in fashion's case the performing wearer of fashion who is using fashion to construct identity, but fashion is actually in service to the partner in that discourse, the provider of fashion, the fashion corporation in this case. In the wearer's need to craft identity, self-express, and participate in the greater culture of fashion, they give up more than they gain, including autonomy (by participating in fashion, the wearer has entered into a discourse which relinquishes them of agency), true individualism (as mass produced fashion items are inherently unoriginal), and economic freedom (with the power relation present in the discourse between wearer and corporation, the wearer enters into a consumption dynamic which is designed to capture the wearer in a cycle of consumption which is very challenging to exit once begun).

Arguably, Foucault's most salient point in his discussion of power is the subtle nature of power. When power moves from overt *will* to more subtle mechanisms, it embodies itself in the more covert *norm*. Bolder *will* can be undermined, rebelled against. A *will* can be pointed to and isolated. Will is exercised by the singular or few, the *them* to the *us*. Norms, however, are applied by many points and are woven deeply into the fabric of societies, institutions, classes, communities, and individuals. A norm is not easily isolated and often cannot easily be discussed directly but must be talked around. An example of this within fashion contexts can be seen when

a teenager rebels against a school dress code. The institution seeks to exert its power over desire, sexuality, and fashion by requiring girl's skirts to be a certain length. Reliably, students will roll their skirt waists to shorten and subvert the rule, which if never made a rule by the school, might not be cause for rebellion from the students. In contrast, if a teenager's peers collectively determine that short skirts are simply outside of the norm of 'coolness', the teenager would not dare to shorten their skirt nor to question the unstated rule of such sartorial norms. In this example we can see that power from one point, the school in this example, is limited and weak. Power that is made omnipresent through normalization, by peers setting unspoken standards of 'cool' in this example, is asserted from all directions and is capable of evolution, which assists in its efficacy. These qualities make countering or subverting a norm complicated and challenging.

Fashion and sexuality are normative concepts and are strong tools at power's disposal. The norm of consumptive behavior within the fashion industry is perpetuated by the conceptualization of fashion alone and is further supported by the corporations in power whose existence is predicated on the continued consumption patterns of those who seek to be fashionable and express themselves through clothing. To isolate this norm is exceptionally challenging.

Desire

With fashion as a language, and with an understanding that power, when paired with sexuality, uses language effectively to extend its influence, we can see fashion as an effective employment tool for power. Desire is a feedback loop which aids in power's effectiveness and ensnares individuals. Foucault (1980) makes clear, "Where there is desire, the power relation is already present" (p. 81).

The concept of fashion and the fashion industry are both fueled by desire: desire for individual expression, desire to be desired, desire to consume to construct identity, desire to drive consumption to perpetuate fashion businesses, and a desire to accumulate wealth through the business of fashion (Entwistle, 2015; Horton & Payne, 2018). The consumption culture which exists within both the culture and industry of fashion offers a promise to satiate desire. The dynamic of newness inherent to the concept of fashion and to the operations of the fashion industry create a reliable revolving door of desire; when one item ceases to be desirable as it inevitably and reliably becomes 'old' and out of fashion, a new item rooted in the present comes through the door to jump-start a new cycle of desire. Modern life is predicated upon purchasing and consumption; it exists through a complicated web of production and consumption with the systems of sexuality, desire, and fashion serving to reinforce that web. Fashion is an extreme example of this paradigm. These cycles of desire within fashion capture participants in a never-ending loop that does not resolve in satisfaction for the participant (Szocik et al., 2018; Fletcher, 2010).

The greatest underlying motivation to desire for the fashion consumer is to be desired (Horton & Payne, 2018; Szocik et al., 2018); sexuality has an overt role in desire for the consumer but the

desire to be emulated by those around them and the desire to be found relevant by the prevailing culture is not to be understated as reason for fashion consumption. In utilizing desire, those in positions of relative power (fashion corporations, in this case) assure their own interests (continued consumption).

Szocik et al. (2018) put a fine point on the discussion:

The ethics of consumption are defined through pleasure, relaxation and fun. Consumption and consuming have become a domain of free time...With the wide offer in the market, the question arising is not whether you want to own a product, but rather which one best 'describes' you (p. 2109).

Desiring, and purchasing to satiate that desire, gives the fashion consumer the opportunity to express themselves and construct identity in exchange for handing power to the fashion corporation. This transaction is not framed as a means of economic enslavement for the consumer, but as a tool for the liberation of the individual. In Foucault's (1980) estimation, the idea of constructing identity through consumption is leveraged by power to assure continued participation in a capitalistic cycle that is not necessarily in the individual consumer's best interest. The consumption of fashion as a pathway to identity building is a self-reinforcing cycle foundationally built on desire. The cycles and seasons of the fashion industry require a perpetual rhythm to support this pursuit of identity crafting.

Szocik et al. (2018) also argue that the act of consumption, specifically in fashion contexts, is itself a form of discussion, arguing that production is no longer the focus of capitalism but is replaced by management of 'consumptive demand', which takes power from consumers and gives it to producers (Szocik et al., 2018). We understand language and dialogue are tools primarily in service of power's employment (Foucault, 1980); if consumption itself is a mechanism for discursive power employment, it is the corporation which benefits and the consumer who relinquishes power. The consumer is relieved of power through the act of discussion, both in the form of engaging in the dialog of fashion and through the act of consumption, and by entering into a desire dynamic which entraps them and reliably relieves them of power.

Within the fashion consumer-corporation relationship and through the understanding of desire, one can understand that the fashion corporation has greater power relative to the consumer as the consumer is tethered to their desire and the corporation itself is made up of individual fashion-desiring consumers who make decisions in their role within the corporation. In this dynamic, the corporation can choose to produce or not produce, sell or not sell a specific fashion item but a consumer, once trapped in the pursuit of their desire, relinquishes power in order to have the opportunity to fulfill their desire through the mechanism of fashion. Once a consumer enters this desire dynamic, they hand over power to the corporation and become an enabler to their own unchecked consumption behavior fueled by a spiral of increasing desire. This spiral of ever-increasing desire is exceedingly challenging for consumers to extricate themselves and does not end in satisfaction for the consumer (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Szocik et al., 2018).

Consumer Interviews

This research aims to clarify the relationship fashion consumers have with fashion companies and investigate how the power dynamics present in that relationship affect the ability of fashion consumers to evaluate their relationship to consumption which is necessary to reduce overall overconsumption for the fashion industry.

We understand from Foucault (1980), French and Raven (1959), and Magee and Galinsky, (2008) that effective power structures are supported from all directions and innumerable touchpoints, not exclusively from the direction of those who are in the positions of relative power. Magee and Galinsky (2008) discuss that individuals at all levels of a power hierarchy tend to be invested in the maintenance of that hierarchy, including those in less advantaged positions. If fashion consumers are in positions of less relative power in their dynamic with fashion corporations, are they aware of their disadvantaged position? Are consumers able to see the machinations of power and desire which influence their fashion consumption behaviors? Or are consumers blind to the dynamics of power and desire within the culture and industry of fashion and thus are unable to participate meaningfully in behaviors which might change the dynamics of power and ultimately allow them to reevaluate their current consumption behaviors?

In understanding the theories and systems which support clothing overconsumption it is prudent to understand the experiences of fashion consumers who do the daily task of performing within these theoretical constructs and whose perceptions and actions activate the behaviors of the systems.

One-hundred subjects were chosen at random by two interviewers, one female and one male, over a 3-day period in high fashion consumption areas of New York City in May of 2019, including 5th Avenue near 59th Street and Rockefeller Center in midtown Manhattan, and Troutman and Wyckoff Avenues in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Subjects were approached by an interviewer and asked to participate in a five-question interview with an estimated completion time of 2 minutes. Subjects were asked permission to be recorded on the interviewer's iPhone. Subjects were chosen at random; however, some guidelines were utilized. A conscious effort was made to choose subjects of varying assumed ages, ethnicities and genders within the 100 interviewees and potential subjects with conspicuous shopping bags were favored. Potential subjects were avoided who were assumed younger than 18 years of age.

Each random subject was asked five questions in the order below. To ensure each subject was in fact a fashion consumer, Q1 was offered as a screener to challenge any assumptions about consumption habits despite the ubiquity of clothing consumption in the United States.

Q1: Have you bought an item of clothing, shoes or accessories in the last 6 months?

Q2: What power do you believe you have as a fashion consumer?

Q3: Do you believe that fashion brands to which you are loyal care about your preferences?

Q4: Do you believe that you have the ability to change the way that a fashion brand operates?

Q5: Do you believe that consumers acting together can have a measurable effect on the behavior of corporations?

The aim in conducting short form interviews with a wide range of unprepared subjects was to capture the greatest basic understanding of consumers' perception of their power when they were likely to offer the greatest amount of candor to the interviewer while in a setting of close physical proximity to the manifestations of clothing consumption.

Findings

Each individual response was first reviewed and categorized as 'yes', 'no', or 'maybe', including the arguably most subjective question Q2, before being analyzed for themes and patterns across participants. Despite Q2's open-ended structure, interview subjects consistently responded as if the question had asked *whether* they felt they had power which allowed for the responses to Q2 to be coded as 'yes', 'no', or 'maybe'.

Analysis of the 100 interviews yielded many nuanced results but the general consensus from consumers is that the majority do not feel they hold power as individuals relative to fashion corporations. This sentiment generally increased as the questions progressed. The only area where consumers overwhelmingly agreed and believed in their own power was when discussing the power held by consumers acting together.

Table 1

Quantitative Responses to Interview Questions

Interview Question	Yes	No	Maybe
Q1: Have you bought an item of clothing, shoes or accessories in the last 6 months?	98%	2%	0%
Q2: What power do you believe you have as a fashion consumer?	47%	53%	0%
Q3: Do you believe that fashion brands to which you are loyal care about your preferences?	36%	60%	4%
Q4: Do you believe that you have the ability to change the way that a fashion brand operates?	31%	65%	4%
Q5: Do you believe that consumers acting together can have a measurable effect on the behavior of corporations?	92%	2%	6%

Although there were varied perspectives within the Q2 'yes' responses, the 53% of respondents that answered 'no' were nearly uniform in their answers with responses such as "none", "zero",

“not much”, and “very little” dominating the response data. This negative response trend regarding the individual consumer’s perception of power progressively increases across the interview questions through Q4, increasing from 53% in Q2 to 60% in Q3 and topping off at 65% in Q4.

In reviewing the qualitative responses to the five interview questions, trends were easily correlated. For Q3 responses, the most robust trend within ‘no’ responses was the idea that ‘brands do their own thing and do not care about what I want as a consumer.’ Throughout responses to Q2, Q3, and Q4, consumers consistently referenced their power of choice and/or exit. The greatest portion of the responses in this trend occur in Q2. However, Q2 qualitative responses illustrate a discordant perception from consumers; several initial responses which were categorized as ‘yes’ would continue their response in a dissonant way, undermining their initial positive response. An example from Respondent 98 to Q2: “I have the power to choose where I spend my money. I don’t think that necessarily dictates the kind of factories or the work that is done but it’s something” (R98, Q2).

Although participants recognized the power of collective action, they also recognized the challenge of bringing disparate consumers together to combat a global industry as seen in Respondent 65’s response to Q5: “Together, yes. But the problem is getting them together.” (R65, Q5).

Ultimately the response data confirms that fashion consumers do not recognize their opportunities for power and ultimately do not effectively use the power that might be available to them including the power of collective action or the power to ultimately exit the consumption dynamic entirely. Per Foucault (1980), we can understand that power cannot be utilized unless it is acknowledged or used with specific intent (p. 94). With this understanding, we can see the dynamic of power overwhelming in favor of the fashion corporation.

Discussion

In understanding fashion as a discursive tool, the power dynamic present in a fashion context, and the amplifying role desire plays in that context, my theoretical analysis makes clear that consumers do not have power within fashion. In uncovering the way fashion consumers see themselves relative to fashion corporations and their perceptions of their own power within fashion contexts, my interviews with fashion consumers suggest that fashion consumers are deeply enmeshed within consumption dynamics and do not recognize or utilize tools that might offer them power in their relationship to fashion and specifically to fashion corporations. In this, consumers support the consumption motivations of fashion corporations and the fashion industry. They do not see their opportunities for exit nor do they see themselves outside of the consumption dynamic. It is necessary to discuss and interpret the implications of this research in relation to capitalism.

What is evident is that the fundamental nature of fashion is itself an engine of consumption. The moment clothing becomes fashion, through the meaning making process discussed by Barthes,

the consumption engine has been initiated. The embedded systems of desire and power motivate the system and ensure a steady production of new fashions not because of any consumer demand, but because the elevation of clothing to the status of fashion requires an ephemerality; a newness for newness' sake, only serving to create a new definition of fashion for the present so the past, in contrast, can be seen as out of fashion. The motivating forces of innovation and fleeting relevance are what define clothing as fashion. This reliable fashion engine can drive consumption and overconsumption all by itself; it is only for an industry or an economic system to take advantage of such a powerful engine to take the already reliable consumption dynamic and push it to hyperdrive.

The industrial revolution was the impetus for the creation of the world's first capitalist industry: the fashion industry. At the nascent stage of both fashion and capitalism, we see an early recognition of a mutually beneficial dynamic between the two ideologies; Barbon wrote in 1690 in his *Discourse of Trade*, "Fashion or the alteration of dress, is a great Promoter of Trade, because it occasions the Expanse of Cloaths, before the old ones are worn out: It is the Spirit of Life of Trade' (Barbon, 1690, in Briggs, 2013, p. 188). Fashion and capitalism have long been intertwined in a mutually beneficial feedback loop which supports the growth, expansion, and power of one another (Briggs, 2013; Wilson, 2019). Wilson (2019) puts it neatly: "Fashion speaks capitalism" (p. 14), and in turn it might be said that capitalism feels most itself when speaking the language of fashion.

While desire and fashion work together to drive consumption (Entwistle, 2015; Horton & Payne, 2018), fashion and capitalism work closely to both produce and grow the industry of fashion. Fashion and capitalism share many common ideas, the greatest of which is the "logic of continual change and novelty" (Horton & Payne, 2018, Pg 3). Foucault (1980) suggests that power, sex, and capitalism have been intertwined since the early stages of the industrial revolution. The economic growth that accompanied industrialization was dependent on the creation of goods at an ever increasing scale which necessitated a shift in consumption habits for all members of the industrialized society (Galbraith, 1958; Goodwin et al., 2008; Edwards, 2014) from need based to want based (Katona, 1964; Edwards, 2014). Newly christened 'consumers' entered a paradigm of working for the express purpose of acquiring funds to purchase more goods (Goodwin et al., 2008). Accordingly, a shift took place during this period, where goods were purchased increasingly because of the want of the consumer, and not the outright need (Galbraith, 1958; Katona, 1964).

Fletcher (2010) points out that the value of growth at the expense of other considerations is shared by capitalism and the fashion industry, stating that "in the fashion sector, the logic of growth is well established as the basis of power and prosperity. The system that grows fastest is considered best and is sustained because people believe in it" (Fletcher, 2010; p. 260). Both the system of fashion and the system of capitalism measure success by growth and speed and both are sustained by the belief in the validity of these metrics by participants in the systems (Fletcher, 2010). This illustrates fashion's ideological and historical alignment to capitalism but also a deep operational alignment to the 'growth and profit at all costs' mindset often perceived

to be native to capitalism. Wilson (2019) describes this dynamic between fashion and capitalism well:

Capitalism maims, kills, appropriates, lays waste. It also creates great wealth and beauty, together with a yearning for lives and opportunities that remain just beyond our reach. It manufactures dreams and images as well as things, and fashion is as much a part of the dream world of capitalism as of its economy. We therefore love and hate fashion and we love and hate capitalism itself (Wilson, 2019; p. 14).

Modern life is predicated upon purchasing and consumption; unending want, propelled by the presence of desire, is fueled by the nature of fashion itself – newness for its own sake – which, when paired with capitalism, creates the opportunity for excessive production (Fletcher, 2010). This shared value of growth and the mutually beneficial dynamic of fashion’s newness cycle result in a unique relationship between fashion, capitalism, and consumption. The power both fashion and capitalism hold allow the growth of one another and ensure the adoption of their ideologies in the broader culture in the form of norms, which are challenging to disrupt.

Conclusion

With the increase of consumption and the rise of consumer culture in the twentieth century, the fashion industry witnessed an increase in style production and turnover, largely within the confines of biannual seasonal offerings. This dynamic moved into high gear with the advent of ‘fast fashion’ in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with brands such as Forever 21, H&M, and Zara innovating in the space (Briggs, 2013; Fletcher, 2010). According to Briggs (2013), by 2004, Zara had moved to twenty seasons a year and was receiving new goods in store twice a week. This “coincided with a drop in clothing prices of 14 percent and an increase in the consumption of garments by 37 percent” within four years (p. 188).

The hedonism of fast fashion takes capitalism’s drive towards profit maximization and greater efficiency and the definition of fashion itself – “dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles” (Wilson, 2019, p. 3) – and thrusts consumption into overdrive. In a modern society, buying for buying’s sake becomes a socially acceptable, common addiction, and irrational self-sustaining behavior for fashion consumers (Szocik et al., 2018) which results in exponential consumption without satisfaction.

If consumers have almost no power relative to fashion corporations, especially specific to questioning consumption habits, if consumption is a component deeply intrinsic to the systems of both fashion and capitalism, and if consumption is managed and employed through the manipulation of desire to reliably drive consumption behaviors where need is not a consideration, how can consumers effectively support any reduction or reevaluation of their own consumption behaviors? My theoretical analysis indicates, and my exploratory consumer interview confirms, that consumers lack meaningful power to overcome the patterns of overconsumption.

The problem of overconsumption requires policy at global, national, regional, and local levels in the form of regulation of over production, dumping of product, advertising claims, and end of life considerations for the fashion industry. Overconsumption is supported by myriad incentives within both fashion and capitalism, and leverages many fundamental components of the psychology of consumers, and as such, must be tackled from many points simultaneously if it is to be reduced. And given the fundamental nature of fashion, reduction might be all we can hope for. As long as clothing is reliably transformed and utilized as fashion—as a means to construct identity, as a tool for communication, and as a mechanism for liberation—it will inevitably enslave us in consumption, manufacturing desires in the turnover which defines fashion itself.

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