

## **Fast, ethical and sustainable - The challenge for twenty-first century fashion producers -**

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### **Abstract**

It is recognized that the global apparel market of the twenty-first century is largely profit driven, and that the majority of producers and retailers have sourced products from the lowest cost locations. Purchase tickets of fashion goods available from 'fast' fashion retailers (at least within the UK) refrain from providing the consumer with details of the full circumstances of production. It seems that the majority of major retailers and producers are not willing to engage in levels of self-regulation which could ensure that the products offered to consumers are ethically produced and offer acceptable levels of sustainability. Meanwhile many fashion consumers have the desire to purchase sustainable products, produced ethically by workers paid fair wages in safe working environments. Consumer demand could be a powerful tool to adjust the behaviour of manufacturers and buyers. This paper proposes the introduction of international legislation demanding greater degrees of transparency than exist currently and that the full sourcing and production details of fashion products are stated clearly on the product's purchase ticket within its retail setting. With the introduction of such legislation, consumers could thus be given the opportunity of purchasing goods which they feel accommodate their own views on ethical manufacture and sustainable products. In turn, consumer pressure could ensure indirectly that retail buyers consider all ethical and sustainable aspects of production when negotiating with garment producers/suppliers. Further to this, such a negotiating stance could ensure the improvement of the terms and conditions of employment of the numerous garment workers worldwide.

*Keywords: sustainability, ethical production, fast fashion, consumer legislation*

### **I. Introduction**

Fast fashion consumption has become commonplace worldwide, at least among consumers in developed and developing economies. The sustainability of clothing items has become a concern for the fashion public. It seems that working conditions and wages associated with fashion manufacture, conducted under licence in factories located in lesser developed economies, are well below what is regarded as acceptable throughout much of the developed world. In the wake of several

recent factory disasters, large retail organisations, based mainly in Europe and North America, have expressed their desire to re-consider their relationships with producers and to review production conditions, wages and related concerns. Public relations personnel have been particularly active in providing 'informative' press releases; and responses from manufacturers and retailers have varied from expressions of 'deep regret' to the offer of compensation packages to some of the workforce and associated families. Meanwhile workers representatives claim that the responses are a case of

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'too little, too late'. All in all there appears to be a deeply ingrained unwillingness to bite the bullet of ethical production. Rather it seems that profit drives behaviour and it is believed that transparency of production circumstances would lead inevitably to the lowering of profits. This paper considers the challenge faced by twenty-first century fashion producers and retailers, in their desire to be perceived as ethical, producing products which are deemed to be sustainable, and meeting the needs of the ever demanding fashion public for faster and faster production.

## II. Fast

The term "fast fashion" is applied to clothing collections, based on the most recent fashion trends, designed and manufactured quickly, available at affordable prices, and aimed at mainstream consumers. Providing that efficiency and flexibility are maintained throughout the supply chain, and suppliers are chosen carefully, it is possible for companies to respond quickly to changes and to generate high profit margins. It is important that the entire chain is closely coordinated and works together in a collaborative way, thus ensuring minimum delay times. Simplicity of products is of importance also, with the preference for basic fabrics and yarns. The development of a fast fashion system has undoubtedly financial benefits for retailers, in terms of turnover, as well as the undoubted savings that can be made in the shorter time taken between order and delivery. Unfortunately the debate on the ethics of fast fashion has, by and large, been dominated by those with interests associated more closely with large producers and retailers rather than garment workers.

Fast fashion relies on constant change of products as well as exchange of information throughout the supply chain. Fashion consumers thrive on constant change, and expect newly-designed products to be available on a frequent basis. In order to achieve this, probably the most crucial consideration for any company is the organization of the supply chain as well as the

precise selection of suppliers. The major driver of fast fashion is profit, facilitated by communications technology and the willingness to share or pool information as rapidly as possible throughout the organization. Considerations deemed to be of importance in negotiations with suppliers include: price, responsiveness and flexibility, time of payment required, ability to meet technical and other quality specifications, stock keeping, ability to adhere to agreed delivery times and to produce to the volume agreed. The authors are unable to find evidence of convincing past concern, at this negotiating stage, for the working conditions, safety, wages and hours worked by garment workers.

## III. Ethical

The vast majority of clothes purchased worldwide are manufactured in developing economies, mainly in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and South America. A key feature of clothing manufacture is that it is labour intensive and labour costs comprise a major component of total production costs. The bulk of profit, however, appears to accrue to large retailers. Unfortunately the reality for many garment workers is that they are paid very low wages and work for long hours under dangerous, unhealthy and unsafe conditions. Sewing of the fabric often involves unsafe and unfair working conditions, long hours and low pay. It seems that in some cases, the pressure to obtain goods at lower and lower prices has had the competitive effect of decreasing wages. High Street clothing prices (at least in the UK) have gone down over the past ten years. Lower prices mean that less and less money may go to the people who make the goods, although more goods are produced. It may well be the case that "fast fashion" has created the pressure for lower and lower production costs and this has ensured the continuation of unfair working conditions and unethical employment practices.

Ethical concerns of importance include: working conditions across the supply chain; levels of wages

paid to the relevant workers; child labour and enforced labour; animal welfare; a range of environment-related issues (though these are generally considered under the heading of sustainability). Ethical issues are now firmly at the centre of the debate concerning “fast fashion”.

#### IV. Sustainable

Sustainability is an important aspect of the ethical debate. In the wake of “fast fashion”, quantities of fashion clothing produced and consumed have increased. This increased consumption in clothing has implications for the environment and the preservation of resources. The term ‘sustainability’ is used to refer to the degree to which processes and products protect the environment for future generations. Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising what the future may hold. Sustainability has economic, environmental and cultural aspects. A good concise historical review of perspectives on sustainability was provided by Scoones (2007). Various aspects of sustainability across a range of Asian countries were identified by Kesavan and Swaminathan (2008). Important considerations relating to sustainability in the context of textiles include: the increasing quantities of textile products (including clothing) consumed and disposed of; energy, water and pesticide consumption associated with different fibres and their production and processing; the ‘carbon miles’ associated with transportation; the use of hazardous chemicals and their effect on health, safety and the environment. An interesting article, dealing with environmental and health aspects associated with fashion production, was presented by Claudio (2007).

In the processing of cotton fibre, from yarn manufacture to woven and then dyed fabric, various softening agents, dyes and bleaches, all detrimental to the environment are used. If not used or disposed of properly, these chemicals can be very toxic to both people (producers as well as users) and the environment. Finished goods often need to be transported

thousands of miles by sea, road and air. This consumes oil, petrol and diesel, all detrimental to the environment and closely associated with global warming. Consumption generally involves regular laundering which consumes much energy and water. Since low prices have induced consumers to buy more clothes, they have also led to more and more clothes being thrown away (which, in turn, may lead to further difficulties if the chemically laden items are disposed of as land fill). Cotton is not the only culprit in the sustainability debate. There are also issues of sustainability related to wool production and the vast majority of man-made fibres. Fibres more sustainable than cotton include jute, ramie and hemp. Up to the moment analysis and comments on sustainability are provided by Special Reports and other commentary in *Textile Outlook International*; a relatively recent example is the *Textile Outlook International* editorial entitled ‘Overcoming Obstacles to Environmental Sustainability in the Textile and Apparel Industry’ (‘Editorial’, 2013).

#### V. In Conclusion

A large number of ethical and sustainability factors, of concern to all societies involved in fashion consumption, have been identified and rehearsed on numerous occasions at conferences and seminars over the past few decades. It is not the intention here to carry out a further rehearsal and listing of these.

Producers and retailers appear to desire the badges of ethical and sustainable production, yet appear unwilling to make changes which may jeopardise profits and their share of the consuming pot. Numerous press releases have been churned out by public relations and marketing personnel announcing ‘new’ initiatives to ensure the enforcement of ethical standards of production and acceptable levels of sustainability. What appears certain is that conditions of manufacture and levels of sustainability have not improved dramatically over the past decade. Occasionally legislation may

well exist in producing countries, but often this is not enforced with rigour, so unacceptable conditions of production are perpetuated for as long as levels of profit are sustained. It is proposed here that national and international legislative bodies give consideration to the introduction of a compulsory mechanism to ensure that consumers are made fully aware, at the point of purchase, of the production circumstances and degrees of sustainability associated with the products that they may consider purchasing. Such communication could be facilitated through the addition of relevant information on the garment's purchase ticket. An immediate reaction from retailers and producers to such enforced legislation would be that it would lead inevitably to higher costs, through forcing them to ensure that working conditions and wages of garment workers are to acceptable standards; most producers would claim that such an increase in costs would have to be borne by the consumer.

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