

## How Sustainable is Fast Fashion? An Investigation of Shopper Opinions in the Zaras of Taiwan, Thailand and India

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### Abstract

The fashion industry has significantly evolved since the 1990s, forcing retailers to adopt low cost strategies in design and quality to remain competitive. In this context, the so-called “fast” fashion requires companies to react quickly to changing tastes. Fast fashion refers to low-cost clothing styles that mimic luxury trends (haute couture), but in considerably unsustainable ways. It leads to premature obsolescence and in economic terms to “negative externalities”. Indeed the environmental impact of this business model forces policymakers to enact initiatives such as waste disposal regulations and production taxes.

We address in this paper dissonances among fast fashion consumers from Thailand, Taiwan and India, who share various levels of ecological concern. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, showing that there is a growing awareness of environmental issues; however a gap between attitude and behaviour remains. We interrogate fast fashion in the context of climate change, and discover innovative and downright sexy ways of promoting sustainable fashion in order to counter climatic threats wherever you are and whatever you do.

**Keywords:** Sustainable, Fast fashion, Shopper, Zaras

### INTRODUCTION

“Fast fashion” is a business model that offers fashionable clothes at affordable prices [1]. Historically, fashion shows were the biggest inspiration for the industry. They were primarily restricted to designers, buyers and other fashion managers. In the space of just a few decades however, from the end of the 1990s, things changed. Retailers such as Zara, H&M, Mango, New Look, Top Shop or Uniqlo began to store exclusive designs inspired from the runways, which were renewed every three to five weeks. Such acceleration of fashion cycles influenced the ways in which people shop and react to trends. It caused garment consumption to skyrocket [2]. Zara, a leader in the industry, has offered brilliant lessons to navigate the volatility an industry where consumer preferences “shift literally overnight” [3]. Studies of Zara and similar business models show a combination of global and local suppliers that deliver goods at an agreed quality with fast delivery [4]. Zara has turned to sourcing from suppliers in Morocco, India, Turkey and other countries that have developed the competence to manufacture high-quality garments with the required speed. So that Zara did not change the geography of jobs; rather the geography of jobs has changed Zara [5].

In this paper we first look into the environmental and social problems caused by fast fashion production, before reviewing known solutions (slow fashion, creative designs and new technologies). A transition to the consumption of fast fashion will lead us to describe our methods and findings in Taiwan, Thailand and India.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Environmental and social costs of fast fashion*

Since it relies on the cheap manufacturing of short-lived garment use, fast fashion is environmentally unfriendly with its overuse of water (to grow water-intensive cotton), chemical pollution (with the release of untreated dyes into local water sources), CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and textile waste. Recent estimates have recorded over 90 million tons of waste and 79 trillion of litres of water consumed [6]. Led like Zara in the late 1990s, many companies leapt at the opportunity to outsource production to low-wage countries in Asia. Total fibre production has doubled between 2000 and 2018, showing a dramatic disconnection from the amount of fibre used in the 20th century [7].

Social costs are also appalling with low wages and poor working conditions [8]. Brooks [9] implores us to think anew about what we wear, about our role in global exploitation: “you look good in those jeans. But are those jeans themselves good? Have you ever looked into where they came from and who made them?” His study looks at worldwide commodity chains and hidden networks in Mozambique, Nigeria, Bolivia, up to the London vintage shops, that perpetuate poverty. For this reason Taplin [10] finds it enough to blame “Western consumers”, whose insatiable appetite for fashion feeds a retail system that takes advantage of changing international trade regimes. However, should they really take the blame when in reality they were “greenwashed” to associate big names (H&M, Zara, Uniqlo) to “eco-friendly fabric” keywords summarising their perception of sustainable policies [11] ? Most people are in the dark about what happens in the supply chain, and feel either uninterested in, or incapable of playing an active role in it. Besides, the strategic creation of scarcity by marketers influences behaviours - shoppers feel that it is urgent to buy and, in turn, shops develop more competitive in-store hoarding and even in-store hiding [12].

### *Can fashion slow down?*

Such environmental and social impact calls for a deceleration of manufacturing and the introduction of sustainable practices throughout the supply chain toward an *old-fashioned, conservative*, and in many ways *unexciting* return to “slow” fashion. Calls have been made for more responsible corporate behaviour and greater legal scrutiny. Slow fashion would connect suppliers and producers more closely with consumers, thereby enhancing sustainability [13]. Take the old-fashioned *kimono*: it takes time to create, and has a long lifespan. The Kyoto kimono-making industry demonstrates a simultaneous speeding up and slowing down of various aspects of Japanese clothing. This means it is difficult to even *categorise* production techniques as “fast” or “slow” [14]. What matters is to develop an awareness of the consequences of fast fashion consumption, and to promote new ways of manufacturing that lessen its social and environmental impacts [15].

Can we achieve this? More importantly, do we really *want* to become so backward, so outdated, so uncreative, in a word so *boring* for the sake of preserving the planet?

Let us examine two alternatives to break or slow down this acceleration of fashion cycles. One is to get people to buy *fewer*, but *better* stuff; the other is to get them to buy the *same* stuff, but *differently*. The latter proposition comes from clearly deluded research that believe in “collaborative consumption” via “clothing libraries”. Imagine a scenario in which you borrow clothes, only to return them later; nothing is really yours; eventually, and whether you like what you wear, you will have to let it go, and wear other clothes in a “homeless” sort of cycle. Now do not get us wrong: we would love

to abolish any manifestation of property; but we also know that humans, especially those in power, will never do it (property is precisely what gave them power). The “collaborative” plan is further burdened, in the opinion of its very proponents [16], by “the risk of problem shifting: increased customer transportation can completely offset the benefits gained from reduced production.” Thank you then for your brave suggestion but... no, thank you.

A far stronger answer, in our opinion, is to take the first option seriously and buy fewer, but better stuff. It is to encourage, following Joy *et al.* [17] the consumption of *actual* rather than faux luxury brands. Indeed fast fashion only *mimic* luxury fashion trends in unsustainable ways, whereas *authentic* luxury fashion respects both artisans and the environment. As fashion experts and collectors of rare items ourselves, we believe that if you *respect* yourself, you will go for the *real deal*, even if it means buying on credit, saving for years, or borrowing from your friends to get this hot items on your dream list - the *haute couture* dress you have pictured yourself into a million times, the piece of jewelry that would fit your most elegant top in your wardrobe, down to this pair of high-heels that only *you* will be seen wearing. Resist the temptation to compromise with quality and acquire rare, therefore sustainable, items. Buying the cheap stuff will make you guilty of supporting unsustainable lifestyles - why cheat yourself when you can purchase the high quality you deserve, from the most reputable fashion houses?

### ***Back to the basics: Haute Couture and design***

So here we are. We have reached this simple, but critical point in our argumentation, which could be crudely expressed as follows:

*The best way to respect the planet is to respect yourself. Save yourself five trips to a fast fashion retailer (resulting in another five cheap items cluttering your wardrobe) and get one Chanel piece that will impress your peers.*

We are not, mind you, advocating a “minimalist” lifestyle. Fashion aficionados like us cannot stand the very idea of living with only four shirts and two trousers year long. We only wish to stress the positive environmental and aesthetic impact of haute couture.

Haute couture is a prestigious front for the original design of expensive garments. Its designers like to use the finest materials and techniques. The levels of publicity it generates funnel down into sales in the “ready-to-wear”, mass production stages. Besides legal reproductions, the persistence of counterfeit fashion is certainly due to the imitative nature of fashion. Our consumer society is based on a perpetuation of desire for new products - triggered, in other words, by fashion processes [18].

This is where problems begin to rise: most clothes in fast fashion outlets are replicas of runway designs from around the world. Forever 21 and H&M are prime examples of retailers using the major designers’ works and changing only slight details; some companies have gone so far as to copy other fast-fashion retailers to sell products at an even lower price. New designs are sent to factories on an almost daily basis, so that new clothes can be available in store every week. Many of them are made cheaply and haphazardly, causing them to fall apart after one use, which results in consumers buying more. In this way, we are taught to think of clothes as disposable and to renew our wardrobe every season. The more we buy, the more we throw out, and huge amounts of clothing are going directly into landfills. Made of synthetic, petroleum-based fibres, these garments will remain in those landfills for decades [19]. To reiterate then, if you go for the real brand, it will cost you a lot more but you will also acquire a lot more

social, environmental and aesthetic value. A luxurious garment is unlikely to break or easily wear off. It has a long and possibly eternal lifespan.

Sustainability, in other words, is always a question of production design that will orient consumer choices in the right direction. Increasingly, textile companies apply their expertise to reuse previously discarded fabric waste. Design strategies such as zero-waste pattern-cutting are becoming the norm. The industry needs to educate the next generation of designers to the creative potential of reuse, and promotes basic principles of circular economy [20]. Specific products typically travel quickly through a cycle, while others are slow. We therefore need to adopt such dynamic views of product cycles for fashion [21], on both production and consumption sides. For example, it was found that fast fashion consumers are more likely to resell or swap unwanted textiles than “non-fashion” consumers. This means that textile consumption cannot be directly equated with textile waste since fast fashion consumers have a lower disposal rate than non-fashion consumers (38 percent to 50 percent, respectively, in Weber, Lynes and Young [22] study).

### ***Smart textiles***

Production design naturally begins with how garments are made. The arrival of “nano” materials through artificial intelligence or 3-D printing techniques in textile industries enable the creation of new lines of biomaterials, which demonstrate anti-static and anti-bacterial properties, Ultra Violet protection, soil and wrinkle resistance, stain and water repellence, increased durability and so on. Opportunities for sustainable development can be spotted in such innovations [23]. Specifically, these are opportunities for transparency and behaviour change through “track-and-trace” or “smart textile” technologies. New technologies are about to save us again! As Farrer and Finn [24] explain, the future of our sustainable fashion industry is just around the corner, as long as we keep faith in the power of these technologies:

*Ubiquitous computing and digital systems will pass information to the retailer and consumer through the supply chain and back. Affective computing will be used to inform the fashion textile consumer, the designer and the business in an environmental, social and economically positive way. Farmers, manufacturers, retailers and disposal agencies will be able to address the emerging social, environmental, personal and technological concerns of all users. Interdisciplinary and applied research collaboration will be the new thinking in fashion textiles sustainability, supplying brands that cater to innovative consumers with up-to-date research on global supply chain issues, best practice and developing consumer preferences. Smart textile technology will create stronger emotional connections between consumers, makers and products which will become more human-centric, providing psychological benefits to the wearer. Digitally enhanced clothing which takes advantage of mobile wireless networks and customisation will be the new paradigm for design. Design aesthetics will be dynamically personalised and will encourage new ways of creative thinking and personal interaction through clothing. Wide-scale design of infrastructure for computation, communication and collaboration will contribute to ‘design for appropriation’ in the urban landscape. Ultimately, the demise of the ‘unknowns’ and of the built-in obsolescence of fashion, the inclusion of garment miles and carbon footprint information in labelling, and a demand for high-specification up-cycled products under sustainable production will take place.*

Combine this “technological” utopia with our previous comments on haute couture and design and the sustainability problem is already solved - it is only a matter of choice! As fashion aficionados again, we care about the best techniques applied to the best material when purchasing clothes. This simple message, we believe, is easy to grasp even for those who are only remotely interested in fashion, because as everyone knows, you are what you wear. Chinese wisdom tells us that people need clothes just as the Buddha is draped with gold (人要衣裳佛要金装): the tailor makes the man. And as a result, the most sustainable behaviour is to:

*Respect yourself  
Treat yourself  
Be yourself*

This motto will rid you of any shame you used to experience when buying “yet another” fashionable item. Remind yourself that you cannot compromise with quality, and go for the full package, in the L’Oréal way, “because you’re worth it”. deserve it, and don’t save on it.

### ***Experimental fashion***

The significance of our recommendation is best exemplified in Lady Gaga’s infamous “meat dress”. The dress, by designer Sam the Butcher, sparked controversy in 2010 as Gaga exhibited a shredded, bloody-looking garment topped off with a hat that looked like a slab of raw flank steak. Gaga's fashion choices have always “queered” our notions of sexuality, sexiness and fame, but the meat dress could further represent a legacy of feminism concerned with food and the body [25]. More generally, the proliferation of the grotesque and the carnivalesque within contemporary fashion is what Granata [26] calls “experimental fashion”. In the bridges it builds between fashion and performance art, celebrities explore established codes of what represents the fashionable body. These innovative people challenge taken-for-granted notions via parody, humour and dynamic strategies of inversion. Thus polemics around Lady Gaga deal with her representation of an objectified female body, one that is subject to violence. Gothic conventions displayed in her art blur the lines between self and other toward fluid, performative identities. Such is the powerful trend of the day, relayed by the “woke” movement: we are not men, nor women, nor straight, nor gay, nor black, nor white, because ultimately, thanks to sustainable fashion, we can be anyone we want.

Indeed, while practical “waste management” approaches are key to developing a sustainable fashion industry, they can also obscure the materiality of waste. As a counter-approach, Binotto and Payne [27] highlight the poetic dimension of the worn and wasted. Their goal is to celebrate fashion through elevating, rather than disguising waste. If literature is one important experimental field, the other is obviously science (we refer you to the previous section). Electronic textiles, for example, can sense changes in the environment and respond to it. This new class of wearable systems has met new applications in the military, healthcare, and consumer fitness fields [28].

### ***Consuming fast fashion***

The growth of sustainable fashion from a production side provides grounding for the emergence of a new “ethical” consumer market. Key selling features of sustainable fashion revolve around timeless and unique cuts, durability, natural materials and perceived health

benefits. This means that sustainable brands are unlikely to compete on high turnover of products. And they will need alternative means of business growth, which could include repair and recycling services, interchangeable accessories, and other carefully selected public relations and marketing innovations. For this reason the aforementioned “slow fashion” expression does not engage with a holistic view of sustainability [29]. There is a paucity of studies of fast fashion consumption, that of McNeill and Moore [30] notwithstanding. They argue that fast fashion consumers view fashion in three distinct and conflicting ways - “self” consumers are concerned with hedonistic needs, “social” consumers with their social image and “sacrifice” consumers with ethical concerns. Such categorisation deserves a little expansion, before we can ask our own research question.

“Self” consumers hold unfavourable or neutral views toward sustainable fashion, meaning that they are the furthest from ethical concerns. They prioritise price and speed of turn-over of items to any other concerns. By contrast, “social” consumers have emergent sustainable fashion consumption behaviour, because they are concerned with the opinions of their peers. However, a number of perceived barriers prevents the widespread adoption of sustainable fashion, including unawareness, a perceived lack of social acceptance for sustainable fashion, and perceived high prices. Unlike the “self” group though, they have few reservations paying large sums of money for items of clothing they strongly desire. The last group of consumers exhibits very high levels of concern for the environment. As such, these “sacrifice” consumers are negative toward fast fashion and would avoid corresponding products and brands. Needless to say, the impulse buying culture of the fashion industry has little impact on these consumers and “fashion seasons” are unlikely change their buying habits.

At this stage we wonder whether such categorisation is applicable to that of consumers in Taiwan, Thailand and India. In order to find out more about regional behaviours toward sustainable fashion, we have elaborated methods that were replicated in the authors’ respective locations.

## METHODS

The research was undertaken from an interpretive perspective, with a total of 30 individuals interviewed in Zara shops in three different locations (10 in Taipei, 10 in Bangkok, 10 in New Delhi). 20 were female and 10 male, mostly between 25 and 35 years of age. They were audio-recorded and the raw data was content analysed and discussed among us, until the final identification of themes linked to the literature review.

Shoppers were asked about their perceptions of sustainability and ethics in relation to their consumption choices. Questions were open-ended:

*Can you tell us about your shopping experience in Zara?*

*Do you think about “sustainability” and “ethics” when you shop in Zara?*

*What do these terms mean to you?*

*Do you sometimes think you should shop differently?*

*Don’t you feel guilty at all? Are you sure? Have you thought about poor working conditions and the planet?*

Such excellent questions helped to generate rich and deeper insights of consumers’ experiences for luxury and fast-fashion brands. The face-to-face interviews lasted between 10

to 20 minutes. Prior to the interview, the authors informed participants that they could withdraw at any time and assured them that their responses would be kept anonymous.

Themes taken from the raw data were selected on an inductive basis, and thoroughly debated before being confirmed.

## FINDINGS

### *Fast fashion makes identities*

Our data suggests that participants are attracted to fast fashion because they enjoy “trying different identities”. Most of them love Zara because it fits their taste and style. The brand shows who they are or would like to be. They state that Zara gives meaning to their identity, reassure themselves, and signal to others what kind of person they are. They observe that they keep coming to Zara because the company allows them to unveil a consistent identity that fit their true self. As Tzu-yun (Taipei) says,

*“It speaks to me and attracts me more than other shops. Zara designs things that fit my style, know what I mean?”*

Saroot (Bangkok) expresses the same idea:

*“Zara is me, it’s who I am, look [pointing at herself]: it’s me, me, me. Simple as that. [Laughs]”*

Krishna (New Delhi) and so many others agree:

*“Your question is kind of difficult, but also kind of easy. So, why am I here in Zara, right? Because this is part of me, this is my personality. You know Ganga? Ganga spirit of the divine. We celebrate. Guitar, tabla, and vocal. Zara is the spirit of me. They fit my personality.”*

Some participants added that Zara is useful for differentiation. Shopping is a way of belonging to a certain social group distinct from others. As Xiang-ting (Taipei) puts it,

*“When you wear this, look [she shows a miniskirt], cute right? Well, it shows the way you live and [hints at the fact that] your friends are cute, too. This is who you are, not this thing over there [points at an ugly long dress], no, but this one yes [grabs the cute miniskirt], see? Easy.”*

Navya (New Delhi) concurs:

*“You know what my lifestyle is? It’s something Zara plays a role into. If the shop disappears, I cannot get what I want, I will feel like a different person.”*

This finding is consistent with the view that people consume products that symbolise status or perceived rank. Fast fashion is a way of life in general, rather than just a consumption habit. As Busarakham (Bangkok) confirms,

*“I’m going to buy this thing, look [showing a pair of high-heels], and you know they*

*look very expensive. And so you know [giggles] ... People will think it's a luxury brand and it shows I have a great job that makes me rich."*

Impression management is an important theme we found in all Zara customers, regardless of their geographical location. Shoppers care for their appearance because they know the presentation of the self is determinant in social life; it can always change the odds, and like beauty can make you move up that social ladder. Most interviewees referred to promotion, wealth and success. As Marta (Taipei) confesses:

*"I want to wear something that will grab attention. Something that shows I'm important. If people think you can afford it, they'll see you as someone special, you know, rich or famous or both. And I don't have to keep working so hard. I can become manager instead. And stop doing the hard work, but make other people do it for me."*

Anaisha (New Delhi) stresses that

*"Many people know Dolce & Gabbana, but few can recognise it on the street. So if I wear something with a Dolce & Gabbana feeling to it, most people won't try to verify whether it's real or from Zara. And... so they'll start thinking positively about me and they'll be impressed. And so I'll achieve respect and... you know, I'll be reflecting: 'wasn't that short trip to Zara worth my while after all?'"*

Chariya (Bangkok) is on the same wave:

*"You know when you're like 'Oh wow, she's wearing that Louis Vuitton bag and that means... she has money...' We all think like that. We make inferences from our first glance, and usually we guess it right. Or maybe we wanna know if she's just married a rich businessman. Or she could be a lawyer or someone important."*

We would like to suggest, in sum, that the main motivation for a trip to Zara is to enhance the self. Shoppers worry about how others will judge them based on their looks, because they know the displayed wealth is more important than the product's value itself. Given the acquired reward, participants are motivated to turn their purchases into objects of desire status symbols. A celebrity syndrome is at work here, indicating the importance of certain luxury designer collections attached to Zara.

### ***Fast fashion is a consumption habit***

Our data also indicates that shoppers restrict their purchase decisions to their favourite shops, ignoring others. It is much easier to come back to a safe and predictable location when you need something to wear, just like going to McDonald's when hungry will offer no bad surprises. As Kamlai (Bangkok) told us:

*"I'm so much into this brand that I sometimes feel I'm becoming the brand. Maybe I'll keep the same style until I'm fifty, because I just feel like buying the same style over and over again."*

June (Taipei) feels the same about her purchases in Zara:

*“You wanna know why I have this original and unique style? It’s all based on repetition. I buy the same colours and patterns, because I feel pretty in them [she holds a pink cardigan]: here this is my colour, I can’t explain why. Has to do with my complexion, with my make-up, my hair dye. Right? It’s nothing fancy, I won’t go for stripes or complicated drawings. Just plain pink, and if you ask me I could accept fuchsia, but not any kind of purple okay? Can’t compare...”*

Raunak's (New Delhi) communicates a similar idea in different words:

*“They tell me my style is repetitive. Yes, it’s repetitive sir. And why? Why don’t I want to try different things? It’s not that I’m not open to other fashions out there, sir. It’s because if I wear something I’m not too happy about, I feel I’m not Raunak anymore. I feel I’m someone else. So I’d better be consistent with myself, otherwise I’ll lose myself!”*

So for some individuals, the shopping experience may involve a paradoxical journey starting from a desire to shape one’s identity or social status, but ending in a dependency on the fast fashion cycles that Zara among other retails impose on us. Fast trends mean that our fashion calendar is always rapidly outdated. Our interviewees stated that they can no longer update their fashion wardrobe only once in a season. This is why they go to Zara, which provides them with a wide assortment of items that are regularly refreshed. The novelty in the weekly launched collections makes them feel fashionable and up-to-date. Affected by social media and its fandom culture, our data shows evidence of this craving need for new things. In Cindy’s (Taipei) words,

*“Styles change all the time, I love it. Every week there’s something new and different. When you wear it, you can’t go wrong. And when a new trend appears on IG [Instagram], I want it right now. The only way to get it on time is to buy it from Zara.”*

Most informants expressed their fear of being left out or “has been”, unfashionable. This leads to irresistible temptations to visit Zara stores more often and purchase in larger quantities. Lawana (Bangkok) wants us to know that

*“there’s always a new collection at my disposal and I don’t have to wait to be up-to-date. It’s super fast and it keeps up with the needs of modern women. I know that whenever I want to update my wardrobe, I always have a new collection available at Zara. You know it’s like George Clooney in the coffee ad, ‘what else?’ [giggles] ... Yes, I can say I don’t need much. I’m satisfied with Zara, because Zara is always here, but always different. It’s like going to a different shop every time. Like, look, I’m here, and next week I’ll be here again, yet it will be somewhere else - Genius!”*

What these shoppers love is that Zara offers popular trends, including the latest designs that celebrities wear or that stylists launch. In this way, our respondents believe that fast-fashion provides good value for money compared to the price tag of other fashion brands. This allows them to keep pace with the most exciting designs they could not afford to buy from luxury brands. The short-lived nature of fast fashion combined to this impression of getting a “good bargain” is manifest in much of our data. As Shrishti (New Delhi) testifies:

*“Yeeees you understand how I feel... I just can’t stop myself to buy from Zara... Prices are affordable and I trust the company. They always have something trendy and cute in store. I feel I get good value.”*

I-ting (Taipei) always parrots her Indian counterpart:

*“Their clothes are pretty nice, very fashionable and so cheap... Look at this, look [showing the label of a beautiful shirt] ! This cool shirt for just 500NT, why say no to it?”*

Value for money and time savings are two sides of the same coin. Accordingly, some interviewees commented on Zara’s global ubiquity, elaborating on the benefits they receive from saving not just money, but time. For example the same Kamlai (Bangkok) insisted that

*“Zara is everywhere and I can find everything I want. Some of my friends recommend I check out other places, but what for? I’ve been there, and what you can find is similar stuff priced higher than here [makes a sweeping gesture with her hand, as if to introduce the Zara environment, and winks]... ”*

Zara customers therefore value the convenience and affordability of this “simple shopping experience”, which translates into an emotional bond with the brand. Most fast fashion consumers enjoy renewing their wardrobes, and must rely on stores that will provide a variety of styles, prints, colours, fabrics and sizes. Diversity stimulates their urge to dive into this “ocean of possibilities”. Thus Keke (Taipei) admits that she

*“always find[s] a massive selection of products ranging from formal clothes to casual ones. [She] gets [herself] shoes, jackets and tops at reasonable prices.”*

Siriwan (Bangkok) similarly says:

*“The great thing about Zara is that I can go shopping there for both formal and informal events... I know that any style I need will be available in store, plus I can try many garments in the dressing room to make sure they fit.”*

Taara (New Delhi) adds that she loves browsing “limited-edition” collections in partnership with designer brands:

*“I saw news about Zara collaborating with Khloé Kardashian and ran to the shop. I heard they worked with KASSL Editions last year or something, and now they’re hiring Susan Fang as a designer for the Asian market. Just wondering if we’ll get to see her work in India... Anyway, maybe they want to follow H&M that stored Moschino designs and so on...”*

The above findings show that the constant renewal of a diversity of collections helps buyers keep up with fashion cycles. People become addicted to shopping in fast fashion venues. Many participants elaborated on how clothing enabled them to be comfortable in their own skin and gain self-confidence. They felt that they voices their personality, values and opinions through fashion. “Looking good” was a recurring expression, showing that fast fashion has physical and psychological benefits.

### ***Sustainable fashion and ethical consumption***

Zara consumers in the three locations were mostly unconcerned about questions of sustainability and ethics. At the end of the day, people with limited resources are fond of low prices, discounts and bargains. As researchers and fashion aficionados, we feel lucky that “money is never an issue” for us. We are always happy to spend more on a genuine Chanel or Yves Saint-Laurent garment. But we also understand that luxury is inaccessible for a majority of people, who cannot be blamed for relying on fast fashion. In fact, one of us buys both from reputable houses (in particular Hermès and Dior) and Zara, because items from Zara can always be given away to poorer friends when they are worn-out or outdated. In this way, everyone is happy. We suggested earlier that the most sustainable behaviour was to respect yourself, treat yourself and be yourself. In this connection, the mirror version of our pearl of wisdom is equally true:

*Respect others  
Treat others  
Be like others*

The consumers we met in the Zaras of Taiwan, Thailand and India feel sustainable clothing is just not a very good deal. As Migo (Taipei) tells us,

*“Yeah, the quality might be higher elsewhere but why pay the premium price? I have to think about what I’m paying for. The quality is kind of okay and sometimes similar, that’s enough for me. And you know, even if I find something I love, I won’t wear it again and again for so many years. So, there’s no use spending so much if I’ll wear it for half a year. You know, people can also believe you’re poor if you wear the same outfits all the time.”*

Chariya (Bangkok, see above) would agree:

*“Some of my friends think that wearing the same clothes is cool because they won’t have to buy new ones too often. But by saving money like that, in the long run they lose their dignity. I’ve lost two friends because I disapproved their looks. Everyday the same. They weren’t fashionable enough to stay in my clique... [She frowns]. See, my job requires me to look presentable. Most of my friends are models, so that puts pressure on me to stay pretty.”*

Regular consumers of fast fashion fail to see the benefits of switching to sustainable brands. They care little for “timeless cuts” or “classic styles” if they are not part of the current fashion. For example Alex’s (New Delhi) opinion is as follows:

*“Sir, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not here to save the planet. I have two objectives in life and I call them HW. You know what it means? [Laughs] ... It’s health and wealth. I’m here to make money and provide for my family. I have two daughters, and they need help with their homework. Yeah, my beautiful princesses... So, I don’t want anything too fancy or too formal when I shop for them. You know what I eat? Simple and healthy. And what I wear? Same, same! I don’t need something very impressive or very fashionable, I buy cheap stuff and if they break, they break. Chances are they won’t. And chances are, they’d break anyway if they were expensive. Do you get my point, sir?”*

Tammy’s (Taipei) reasoning is consistent with Alex’s:

*“I won’t spend a lot of time shopping, I follow the trend and just check if what I select fits my body size. The colours I pick have to match my tattoos as well [she shows her tattooed shoulder and neck]. I know what you mean about sustainability, so I try not to buy too many items if I’m not sure I’ll wear them for a long time. But it’s cheap enough so, well, I still have quite a lot of stuff at home [winks].”*

Saroot (Bangkok) has a point about the disadvantages of quality fabrics:

*“See, I used to think like you. Expensive, natural, green products... But the truth is, such products are harder to take care of. ‘Natural’ something cotton or linen: it means wrinkles everywhere, you can’t iron them. ‘Bambou’, ‘wood’ something: yeah, sure, less pesticides, but it’s either uncomfortable or it will age fast and look ugly. Personally, I believe in new technologies to create fabrics that are both resistant and cheap. Things that can stand the test of time, or even go beyond normal wear-and-tear periods.”*

Tzu-yun (Taipei), also states:

*“Very few people have skin allergies such as eczema when they wear synthetic fabrics. I think most skins can accept the ‘nonnatural’, and it’s usually cheaper and easier to take care of. I like wool, but it’s such a pain to clean... You can’t just put it in the washing machine. Zara gives you ‘easy care’ sorts of fabric”.*

Moreover, our respondents acknowledge that sustainable consumption is important, yet not a priority when compared to their well-being and appearance. In the words of Cindy (Taipei),

*“I think you’re right, we have to care about the world we live in. We do what we can. So for example I buy organic vegetables from the market sometimes, even if they’re really pricey. But then I won’t buy organic fabrics because even if they might last longer, I’ll sacrifice too much of my salary for things I could stop wearing in the future. I’m careful with what I buy. My motto is, ‘buy smart’ [she laughs]”*

Raunak (New Delhi) links environmental disaster to one of its harbingers in popular culture:

*“I love trees, birds, the blue sky... But in big cities it’s all polluted. I’d like a future where people can enjoy nature. If we’re not careful we’ll end up in a world like Wall-E. So I say to my friends: ‘you guys buy what you need, but don’t overspend, don’t accumulate too many things.’ Cuz one day, by the way, we might have to move out and everything becomes a hassle! Sure, you can contact a moving company, but that will cost you money! My conclusion is, it’s cost-effective to control your purchases.”*

Siriwan (Bangkok) told us that she felt

*“even more excited when I see a branded ‘eco’ stuff, I feel even happier to buy it. If no green label is there, no big deal, price is always what I check first and that’s how I got myself so many good bargains. This being said, you know, if clothes have been produced with a reduced impact on the environment, then so much the better... I remember seeing more and more clothes made from ‘recycled’ materials, or ‘biodegradable’ stuff, which is pretty cool. It reduces waste. To be honest, I’m for sustainability, and I try to support the environment*

*whenever I can. When I buy a detergent, I check the label to see if it's not too toxic for the earth, things like that. I'm no expert, but you know, I consider myself green".*

These extracts reflect important views on Zara customers' attitude toward the environment. None of the respondents showed evidence of scientific knowledge of fabrics, but nearly all expressed positive attitudes to efforts toward sustainability. Many of our participants stated that sustainable fashion is not widely available, so that they find it difficult to "buy smart", especially under time constraints. In other words, while showing enthusiasm for sustainable goals, they do not feel guilty about buying non-sustainable items. Their life goal beyond "buying smart" is certainly "looking good". They are driven by egoistic needs of being pleased with themselves, and this comes at the cost of becoming informed. Asked about issues of social justice, finally, they exhibit the same attitudes - they care, but not enough to sacrifice on price. As Shrishti (New Delhi) mentions,

*"I know what you have in mind. I'm also disgusted by some of the working conditions around the world. I heard stories about people being chained to sewing machines, or not being given enough sleep, and those children working like slaves, or people handling dangerous chemicals, it's sad... But well, if they didn't work in sweatshops where would they go? They'd probably beg in the streets, sleep under bridges and in dirty undergrounds... At least many of these workers have dormitories and electricity. If you ask me, it's not bad, not bad at all."*

A few other respondents showed concern for sweatshop labour, but also felt helpless with regard to the situation. As Marta (Taipei) puts it,

*"I know that sometimes I'm wearing something made by a poor woman or a child somewhere, and I don't like the idea. But at the same time my purchases is my modest contribution to their welfare. We sort of need each other. When I buy clothes, I keep these people working and they'd be in immediate danger if we all stopped buying from them. They'd lose their job and die."*

Busarakham (Bangkok) recounts an experience:

*"I bought socks on day, not from Zara, but out on the street. They were made by a single mother who recycled fabric, I don't remember where. She looked unhappy. I thought her socks looked horrible, but I still bought a pair out of charity. The next day I was in Zara buying what I would actually wear at work."*

I-Ting (Taipei) tells us that ethical concerns are not part of her shopping expeditions:

*"I don't think sweat shop labour is that important to me. Okay, nobody likes it and it's not something humanity should be proud of, but it won't make me change my decisions. I still have ten pairs of cheap shoes that were made in China, and I don't wear them a lot"*.

Taara (New Delhi) reviews alternatives before rejecting them:

*"So, apart from unaffordable shops, what do we have? The Zara type, and the dodgy markets, and the second-hand stores. Good luck with the last two... They smell old, musty, and the lighting is always wrong, too bright or really gloomy. And what's the point of wearing old*

*shoes, whatever their quality? They just look old and you have no idea who put their toes and dirty socks in there. When you can get a new one for a cheaper price, why bother?"*

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the Zara shoppers we interviewed in three different countries delivered consistent discourses, aligned to a self-centred perspective. This explains the success of fast fashion despite a wide awareness of its violations of sustainability principles and work ethics. It also raises the issue of what would happen should "slow fashion" become the industry norm. Indeed these frequent buyers do not show a predisposition to reduce consumption.

If we return to McNeill and Moore's [30] "self", "social" and "sacrifice" typology of fashion consumers, our sample interviewed in Zara clearly belongs to the "self" category. They were mainly concerned with their own desire for acquisition so as to enhance their self-image. Multiple "seasons" and fast turnover styles were seen as attractive, and reinforced through online and offline peer pressure (social media, friend circles). People can therefore be reluctant to adopt more sustainable fashion consumption behaviours (such as second-hand or recycled clothes) unless it is perceived to be a social norm and acceptable to their peers.

Broader concerns for the environment or social welfare were often missing or underdeveloped in the opinions we collected in Zara. Unlike the "social" and "sacrifice" types of consumers, benefits for the self overrode considerations on sustainability or human rights. For example, comments on the alternative between sweatshop labour and not having a job at all showed the weak influence of such themes on motivations to buy. Further, a lack of knowledge around what was sustainable or ethically produced was consistent through all three interviews.

Further research is needed to in both "fast" and "slow" fashion places, in order to collect more data on "social" and "sacrifice" types of shoppers and analyse their motivations. Indeed, we posit that:

*More data removes "research limitations";  
More data leads to research that is true and complete;  
More data is better for everyone, not just for data lovers.*

### ***Toward the promotion of sustainable fashion: the concept of respect***

In this context, we would like to offer innovative and "sexy" ways of promoting sustainable fashion. It is clear that social conditioning acts as a barrier to ethical consumption. Fast fashion as a consumption habit (see relevant section above) means that people have integrated unsustainable practices as the norm. They are used to (mentally) solving contradictions between what they believe and what they do. They trick their own minds, in line with the demands of the market and with peer pressures, to the extent that they reach a form of skepticism concerning shopping. They may feel empowered by "green washing", while realising that it is mostly a marketing gimmick. They may feel happy to make a "sustainable purchase", while knowing that any purchase is unlikely to represent a sustainable act. We therefore suggest that governments could enforce "sexy policies" that promote the haute couture we discussed, with noble ideas of slowness and human rights. Sexiness is always

reached at the slow speeds of mutually respectful relationships, which give us the following formula (complete, this time):

*Respect yourself if you want to respect others;  
Treat yourself if you want to treat others;  
Be yourself if you want to be like others.*

We urge governments to create an international standard of sustainable fashion. At the same time, we know that a political conscience will not appear and spread out, among the global crowd, as if by magic. Government intervention must fashion a new ethical conscience - i.e. it must fabricate a message that is as powerful and viral as fashion. We propose that this is precisely achievable through the subtle concept of respect, at the root of all other shapers of identity.

Let us clarify what we mean with a quick return to the case of Lady Gaga's meat dress. Everyone saw the dress on the news and across social media, simply because of Gaga's stardom (wearing an eccentric outfit does not secure fame, a celebrity must be wearing it for virality to operate). This simple example shows that a political message can be "worn". Fashion has more than just an aesthetic dimension; it is always part and parcel of business, because most business is show business. The reason we like the "showbiz" term, and find it useful to conclude our study, is that it encompasses the theatrical character of all human transactions. Showbiz mostly depends on the visual, and the extremely quick reactions (automatic reflexes, uncontrollable emotions) this visual inspires.

Thus Lady Gaga in a meat dress automatically generates debates - people fight over interpretations of what the dress is supposed to symbolise. Branding and fashion send more or less ambiguous meanings to consumers, who work to decipher them, making them theirs. Asked about such meanings on Ellen DeGeneres' show, the celebrity replies verbatim: "It's certainly no disrespect to anyone that's vegan or vegetarian". The question of respect is the first to be cleared out! It was not a message against animal rights, but a protest against the military's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy and a statement against "restrictions placed on the rights of gay soldiers." [31]. This simple anecdote from celebrity culture proves again that "the medium is the message" - any fashionable item can make a political statement, in that everyone sees it and reacts to it. We therefore advocate that the next message a dress ought to deliver, aside from gay rights, is sustainability. And we thank in advance all those who will take it seriously.

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