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Fast fashion – Consumer perception and buying practices

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ABSTRACT

The fast fashion industry has changed the way we consume fashion today. The garment industry has continued to neglect the ongoing environmental crisis. Fast fashion focuses on the production of cheap clothing, while completely disregarding its impact on the environment and the labour involved. The concept of green marketing as well as greenwashing play a huge role in understanding how brands portray themselves as “sustainable”, to cater to consumers that value ethical consumption. This research analyses the primary reason fast fashion is appealing to consumers, their perception and buying practices, through interviews and surveys. The descriptive research elaborates on its impact on the supply chain and the concept of greenwashing. The results suggest that the respondents are reluctant to switch to sustainable alternatives since fast fashion helps them keep up with the latest trends at an affordable price.

Keywords—Fast Fashion, Sustainable Practices, Agile Supply Chain

1. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to gain insight into consumer perception and buying practices regarding fast fashion. The research also aims to generate awareness about the unethical aspects and environmental impact of the same.

2. METHOD OF ANALYSIS

For secondary research, 25 papers were referred for literature review. For primary research referral sampling was used. A questionnaire consisting of 15 questions was prepared for the same. Further, the respondents were divided into two groups, financially dependent and financially independent. The analysis is divided into three sections:

- Decision-making process while purchasing the garment.

- Views about green marketing.
- Views about switching to sustainable alternatives.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Before the 1990s the fashion industry mass-produced ready-to-wear, (RTW). The fashion cycle had four stages - (i) Introduction and adaptation by the fashion leaders (ii) growth increase of public acceptance (iii) Mass conformity (iv) decline. In the 1980s there was a sudden increase in the import of fashion apparel for women as compared to the previous years. New fashion houses emerged and focused on trends and variations. The market became buyer-driven rather than product-driven. During the 1990s the retailer's primary focus was on expanding their product range, to create a faster response. Fast fashion introduced 3-5 mid-seasons to the traditional 2 season fashion industry.

The globalization of the supply chain has enabled newer trends to become more accessible, and the prices are simultaneously lower. Brands achieve this by using hazardous materials and outsourcing their labour to developing countries. The introduction of fast fashion has compressed the production cycle of garments to provide the consumer with the latest trends as fast as possible, by closing the gap between the design process and production. The major drawback of this industry is the short product life cycle. The increase in production and consumption of clothing has led to a lot of waste generation. The US consumes the largest amount of clothing in the world, with approximately 3.8 billion pounds of clothing being sent annually to landfills as solid waste. According to Sustain Your Style (2020), the production of clothing has increased by 400% within the last 20 years. This is heavily related to the decreased production costs, increased marketing efforts due to the rise of social media, as well as the fast-paced change in fashion trends. The fashion industry for several years has been indifferent to the current acceleration of global warming and other environmental

crises. Fast fashion products leave a carbon footprint with each step of the apparel life cycle theory, generating environmental hazards that can cause irreversible and irreparable damage. Key resources like water and fossil fuels are required throughout the manufacturing, packaging and transportation stages. Some processes use hazardous or acidic chemicals which are discharged into water bodies without being treated. Manufacturing is an energy-intensive process and hazardous or acidic chemicals are used which are discharged without being treated.

Synthetic or blended fibres like polyester and lycra are used in most fast fashion products. They are inexpensive and easy to care for fibers, but they are manufactured using petrochemicals and are difficult to recycle. Natural workplace fibres like cotton take an average of 3,644 cubic meters of water to grow one ton of cotton in the top fifteen cotton-producing countries. The problem does not end here. When synthetic garments like polyester and nylon are washed microplastics are released into the water cycle. These microplastics then enter the food chain and will eventually be consumed by people.

Moreover, due to increased media coverage and greater consumer awareness about environmental concerns, there has been an increase in consumer environmental consciousness. Fashion brands have reacted to this by introducing sustainable fashion products, along with ethical supply chain practices. Popular fast fashion brands like H&M and Zara have launched their sustainable clothing lines to target consumers that value ethical consumption. Zara's parent company, Inditex, recently announced its goal for 100% of its cotton, linen, and polyester to be sustainable by 2025. The careful sourcing of these materials through the Better Cotton Initiative will help the company to reduce its environmental impact. H&M also has been working towards a more sustainable model through its Conscious Collection, which uses sustainable materials like organic cotton or recycled polyester. Another popular fast-fashion brand, Uniqlo, has taken initiatives for the elimination of hazardous chemicals throughout its supply chain.

However, these sustainable initiatives have been met with skepticism. Terms such as "eco-friendly", "sustainable" and "recycled", are often viewed as vague or ambiguous claims made by brands, which leads to greenwashing. Greenwashing refers to the act of misleading consumers by disclosing only selective environmentally friendly aspects of a brand, to build a positive corporate image and generate more sales. Green marketing has emerged as an important strategy to gain a competitive advantage in this rapidly changing market. H&M's Conscious Collection has been criticized by the Norwegian Consumer Authority (CA), for "misleading" consumers by claiming to be "sustainable, while failing to provide further details about its qualities, and why it is "sustainable".

To understand this retail model, it is important to understand the current habits of consumers and how clothes are being purchased and discarded. External factors like culture and physical environment influence consumer behaviours. They can also be influenced by internal factors like their emotions, beliefs, and attitudes. In the Indian scenario, fashion preferences depend upon region and religion. Festive season impacts their purchasing practices because fashion brands introduce new collections and offer them around the same time.

The issue that needs to be addressed is the consumer-driven approach. The market functions based on consumption patterns. Globalisation and changes in socio-cultural factors force retail manufacturers to renew merchandise quite frequently. The older

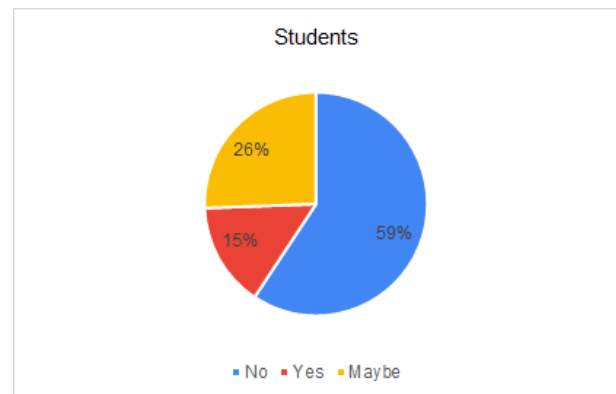
generation or Generation X would rather purchase fewer but high-quality clothing items. Whereas, a lot of the Millennials and Generation X would rather compromise on quality and have affordable but fashionable clothing and many options.

Fast fashion majorly targets Millennials and Generation Z, because they are most likely to get influenced by fashion trends and their style preferences vary based on what is currently in style. They easily give in to consumerism for the mere sense of satisfaction.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

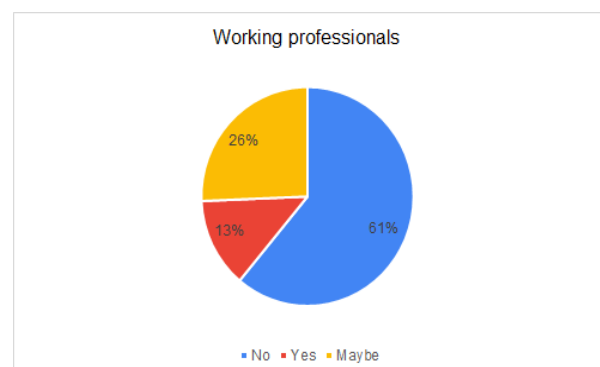
The research is based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data has been taken from several research papers and articles, and the primary data has been collected from the questionnaire survey and interviews. The survey consisted of 15 multiple choice questions and 2 questions that were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. A sample of 200 respondents was collected. Referral sampling was used for conducting the survey. From the survey, to gain further insight - based on the questions answered in the survey and understand their perspective towards sustainable alternatives, 20 respondents were interviewed over the telephone. The answers were recorded by note-taking.

Data Analysis After conducting the survey, it was found that 36% of the first section of respondents (students) consider the price perspective of the garment and 32% consider comfort. Among working professionals, 37% of the respondents consider comfort as the major factor before buying the garments, followed by the garment price (34%). 59% of students responded to "If your favourite brand(s) is/are a significant contributor towards environmental degradation, would you still prefer it?" by saying 'No', whereas 26% said 'Maybe' and 15% said yes.



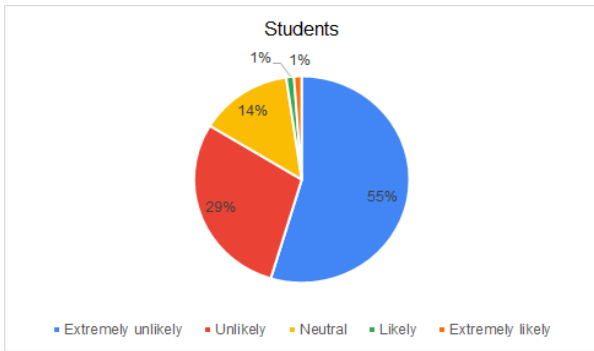
Graph - 1

Amongst the working professionals when asked, 61% of the respondents answered 'No', while 26% answered 'Yes' and 13% answered 'Maybe'.



Graph - 2

When asked “Would you still buy from a brand that has not paid its workers? 55% of the students answered with ‘Extremely unlikely’, 29% answered with ‘Unlikely’, 14% were Neutral and 1% each answered with ‘Likely’ and ‘Extremely likely’.

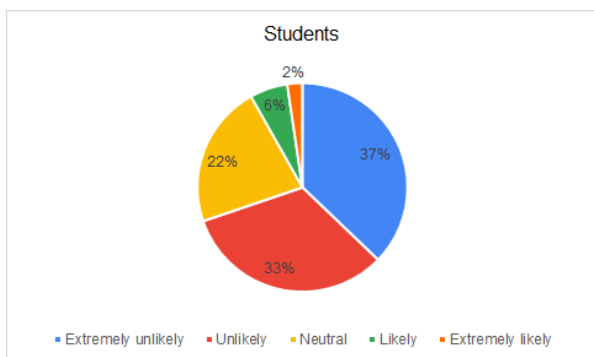


Graph – 3



Graph – 4

Amongst the working professionals 57% of the respondents answered ‘extremely unlikely’, 28% answered ‘Unlikely’, 8% Neutral and 5% ‘likely’ and 2% ‘Extremely likely’. Regarding the question, ‘2700 litres of water is used while manufacturing a T-shirt. Would you still buy it, if it is not necessary?’ Amongst students, 37% of respondents answered with an ‘extremely unlikely’, 33% with ‘unlikely’, 22% with ‘Neutral’, 6% with ‘likely’, and 2% with ‘extremely likely’.

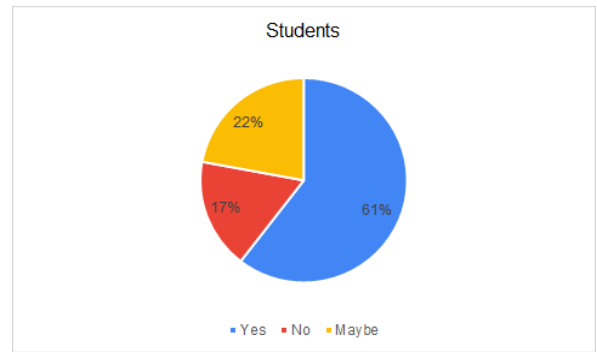


Graph – 5



Graph – 6

Amongst the working professionals, 40% chose ‘Extremely unlikely’, 38% chose ‘unlikely’, while 17% chose ‘Neutral’, 3% chose likely and 4% chose ‘Extremely likely’. When asked ‘Are you willing to switch to thrifting/ sustainable fashion?’ Amongst students 61% answered with a ‘yes’, 17% with a ‘No’, and 22% answered ‘Maybe’.



Graph 7

When the same was asked from the working respondents 42% answered with a ‘Yes’, 38% with a ‘maybe’, and 23% with a ‘No’.



Graph - 8 Interview Analysis

Interviews were conducted with respondents who answered ‘No’ and ‘extremely unlikely’ for most questions. In the beginning, semi-structured questions were asked to allow participants to answer questions comfortably, and later more structured questions were asked to get rich and in-depth data. The participants shared their concerns about not being able to find the correct size while shopping from thrifting brands, another participant shared their concern about not being comfortable while buying second-hand clothing. One participant elaborated on her thoughts about how her contribution would not make a significant difference to the environmental and unethical issues linked with fast fashion. Many participants from the working class said they don’t prefer wearing the same old/faded clothes to their workplace. Another participant said ‘I often get bored with what I have. I want to adapt myself to the changing fads so the garment’s life span doesn’t affect my buying decision but the price does.’

One interviewee described what she looks for when she goes to the store. ‘How many of us consider the environment and labour exploitation when we go out shopping? What attracts the customer is freshness and variety in sizing.’ Another interviewee talked about the impact of the perceived quality of their preferred brand. ‘It is difficult for me to switch to alternative brands. Appreciation of fast fashion brands like ZARA, H&M is mostly associated with consumer satisfaction and brand experience.’ Another participant was skeptical about sustainable/thrift shopping. ‘Most of the alternatives provided in the market are not budget-friendly. Even the thrift stores are

misleading sometimes. There are barriers to alternatives like negative perceptions, distrust, lack of awareness, high prices, and low availability.' One participant shared her concerns about not being able to afford sustainable fashion and her wishes to keep up with the current trends, which she finds difficult to follow if she switches to sustainable brands. Most participants had similar problems with thrifting and sustainable fashion and most of them suggested that unless something huge happens against the fast fashion companies they would still buy from them.

5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

After analysing the responses from the interviewees, it was found that even though in the survey they claimed that they would not buy from brands that contribute a significant amount of carbon emissions, most participants opposed their answers during the interview. This suggests that many of the respondents disagreed to switch to alternatives of fast fashion.

6. CONCLUSION

Fast fashion has expanded in different directions over the years. Consumers are accustomed to shopping from popular fast fashion brands. The whole sector is consumer-driven. As long as consumers make a conscious effort to shift their preferences, fashion retailers won't stop manufacturing. Consumers are often unaware of the consequences of their purchases. Every action has some amount of carbon footprint and one should be mindful regarding the same. Shopping from thrift stores and mending or upcycling old garments could be an approach to prolong the garment's life cycle.

Not every attempt done for the awareness towards fast fashion consumption impacts the consumer the desired way. People support sustainable and ethical consumption but it doesn't mean that they are willing to avoid fast fashion completely. Consumers are aware of the fact that there are unethical and environmental concerns linked with the fast fashion industry. However, the focus of the consumer is more on the trends in which they are investing their money rather than the concerns related to the production of the garment, and the alternatives provided are not much appreciated among the consumers as they prefer trendy and affordable clothing.

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