

Sustainable Innovation 2021

Accelerating Sustainability in Fashion, Clothing, Sportswear & Accessories

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Business School for the Creative Industries

University for the Creative Arts

Epsom, Surrey, UK

Ethics of Care Disrupting Unsustainable Fashion Design Radical Change & Innovation Methodologies

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The fashion industry has begun its move toward sustainable strategies, however, the dominant social paradigm that drives the system is still that of growth-based consumerism and capitalism. Consequently, environmental sustainability is often not the primary focus in design education, commercial practice and in the fashion industry. Within this context, the contemporary system of advertising and cultural practices promise customer satisfaction by encouraging the consumption of less ethical products such as ‘fast fashion’, not for sustainable societal futures, and by catering for technology or skills demands, not for ethical needs (Nel 2018:vi, Descatoires 2017; Business of Fashion 2015). Moreover, fashion products are designed to meet consumerist sales goals in the capitalist society, instead of for the promotion of true customer satisfaction. Therefore, consumers need to consume more and more cultural goods such as fashionable clothing, in an attempt to construct their cultural identities (Crane 2000:11; Ehrenfeld 2018:4). However, natural resources are not infinite and the unethical waste and destruction of these resources and consequent sustainability deficits are caused by a general lack of ethics throughout the fashion industry. Walker (2017:53) agrees that this lack of values restricts human’s perceptions of reality and compounds the destruction of natural resources. In contrast, ethics can be a powerful tool to defend the environment, as societies bear an ethical responsibility to help stop life-threatening harm caused by pollution (Ehrlich & Ehrlich 1996:154), and a democratic responsibility, as people have fundamental human rights to equal consideration (Hamington 2019: 91; Nel 2018; Shrader-Frechette 2012:326-328). However, when dealing with human rights issues, utilitarian principles do not always provide all of the solutions toward ethical conduct. Therefore, alternative and more inclusive approaches are required to rebuild new paradigms and to address the issues of holistic human flourishing. Aristotle (1948) argued that the notion of flourishing comprises of sufficient levels of material comfort, combined with aspects of success, fulfilment and self-realization (Cheng & HO 2013: 385). Consequently, how can ethics be used as a tool to disrupt unsustainable design paradigms towards flourishing in the fashion system?

A finding from a recent master's research project indicates that many of the ethical deficits in the fashion system can be countered by the positive features that the philosophy of an ethics of care can offer. Such as the aim to address the oppression of any groups in systems, and the focus on female ways of moral reasoning, which emphasises aspects such as community, relationships and connection (Jaggar 1992:363-364), for example. Therefore, feminist ethics of care is identified as a potential moral foundation to assess whether an approach is consumption-based or ethically grounded, and as a tool to uncover counter-strategies for the reawakening of ethical agency towards fashion sustainability (Nel 2018).

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A grounded theory paper is undertaken, and the methods of investigation are those of critical analysis and synthesis of theoretical data (Strauss & Corbin 1998; Leedy & Ormrod 2005: 136,140). An inductive theory-building research approach and a grounded theory methodology were used to generate qualitative data (Kawamura 2011:2). A literature review includes contextual material from theorists in relevant fields. The paradigms of the ethics of care, environmental sustainability, and the notion of agency in fashion design were triangulated. Data analysis by interpretation and linking of the data from the theories to the proposition through the constant comparative method of coding and pattern-seeking was used to interpret the data. The paper, therefore, aims towards disrupting the current system by exploring an optimal and ethical fashion system that moves away from exploitation and aims towards the activation of positive agency for agents in the system.