

Sustainable Innovation 2021

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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 growth-based consumerism and capitalism. Consequently, environmental sustainability is often not the primary focus in design education, commercial practice and the fashion industry. Within this context, the current 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 promoting 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. The unethical waste and destruction of these resources and resulting 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 foster democratic responsibility. People have fundamental human rights to equal consideration (Hamington 2019:91; Nel 2018:11; Shrader-Frechette 2012:326-328). However, when dealing with human rights issues, utilitarian principles do not always provide ethical conduct solutions. Therefore, alternative and more inclusive approaches are required to rebuild new paradigms and address holistic human flourishing issues. Aristotle (1948) argued that the notion of flourishing comprises of sufficient levels of material comfort, combined with aspects of success, fulfilment and self-realisation (Cheng & HO 2013:385). The problem is that the fashion industry is driven by consumption and therefore, to survive and grow, the industry needs to undermine and exploit individual agency to meet capitalist needs. Consequently, how can ethics be used as a tool to disrupt unsustainable design paradigms towards flourishing in the fashion system? A grounded theory paper is undertaken, and the methods of investigation are those of critical analysis and synthesis of theoretical data through desktop analysis to generate the emergent theory and qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin 1998; Leedy & Ormrod 2005: 136,140; Kawamura 2011:2).

A finding from Nel's (2018) recent master's research project indicates that many of the fashion system's ethical deficits can be countered by the positive features that the ethics of care philosophy can offer. This approach aims to address the oppression of any groups in systems, and the focus on female ways of moral reasoning emphasising aspects such as community, relationships and connection (Jaggar 1992:363-364). Furthermore, the areas of lack (that undermine individual agency) play out based on the Marxist, Freudian and Baudrillardian notions of the fetish. Kaiser's (2012) five integrated domains of the fashion supply chain contextualise how

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individual agency is exploited through these fetish notions. Nel's (2018) master's study demonstrates how the three fetish notions are exploited to undermine individual agency in Kaiser's (2012:14) five domains, thereby pointing out the potential weaknesses or 'lacks' in the fashion system that lead to unsustainability.

This paper aims to present the dynamics that would lead to an integrated and realigned ethical agency to engage with unsustainability in the fashion industry. Firstly, it offers ethics of care as an agentising dynamic to counter the consumerist and capitalist ethics in the fashion system through Tronto's (1993:136) four moral dynamics. Secondly, it applies these four dynamics of ethics of care to each identified area of lack as that particular lack might play out in the five Kaiser (2012:14) domains. Consequently, ethics of care is used to integrate and realign ethical agency to counter unsustainability in the fashion industry. Therefore, an ethics of care approach holds the potential to disrupt the current system by exploring an optimal and ethical fashion system that moves away from exploitation and aims to integrate agency through the ethics of care approach.