

# Fast Fashion in the Age of Social Media and the Role of Retailers

Sophia Calabrese

Spring 2023

***Abstract:** Fast fashion has become popular among Western consumers since the turn of the century. With the invention of social media, these two industries have become integrated through consumer interest and retailer intervention through sponsorship. This study seeks to better understand current consumer perceptions of fast fashion retail practices to explore causes of the perpetuated unethical practices in the industry. Consumer perceptions are evaluated through an online ethnographic study of TikTok to understand Western consumer perceptions and consumption of items made by laborers in the Global South. This data is supplemented by quantitative data regarding transparency of practices within the fashion industry. This study aims to contextualize the role of retailers in the exploitative relationship between consumers and producers and highlight the lack of transparency in fast fashion retail practices.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the century, the fashion industry has morphed into what we know today as fast fashion. This phenomenon is characterized by high volume production, agile supply chains, and quick turnaround times between purchase and arrival, all at a low cost to consumers. While the financial cost of these stylish garments is low, there are real repercussions of the cost cutting practices of retail companies. The current literature focuses on the negative impacts of the modern fashion industry. The popular discourse specifically focuses on two areas: the conditions for workers in developing countries, where many of these items are produced, and the environmental implications of production and consumption. The actors framed in many of these studies are either the workers or the consumers. The link between these two interconnected groups is the retailer, yet these corporations have avoided this

responsibility. These brands hold power through their choice in where they source labor and which consumer groups they target. The current dynamic set by retailers pushes for a high producing Global South and a high consuming West. Under this dynamic, consumers are led to be unaware of the conditions in which their items were made, because brands use influencers to market their products and act as the face of their business. This effectively makes consumers associate the brands with relatable and reliable faces. This is far removed from the antiquated fashion industry, where designers were the face of their brand and were deeply connected to the value of their product.

The research questions this paper seeks to answer are: (I) How do fast fashion retailers use social media to market among target consumers? (II) How does current fast fashion marketing help retail brands disguise the exploitative relations between workers and consumers in their global

supply chains? I claim fast fashion retailers utilize consumerism and conformity cultures present on social media to target vulnerable Western consumer groups, namely teenage to college-aged girls. The familiarity of influencers distracts from the broadly underreported business practices of many fashion brands. By limiting transparency in all steps of the supply chain, retailers curate their brand image to not include the negative effects of the fast fashion industry. This is achieved by maintaining an unreflective image that consumers are not only exposed to but promote on these platforms. This framing and positive image of the fast fashion industry is replicated among Western social media users as others seek to imitate popular influencers, leading to increasing amounts of fast fashion consumption. By framing my research in this manner, retailers are held accountable for the negative implications of the modern fashion industry. Through an online ethnographic study of TikTok videos pertaining to fashion content, I seek to analyze the use of consumer promotion of fast fashion brands to reach target consumers. The ethnographic study is supplemented by The Fashion Transparency Index created by Fashion Revolution in 2022. The importance of this research lies in its ability to illuminate how these brands have successfully detached from the previous practices in the industry and drawn a curtain between those that produce and those that consume their products

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Fast fashion found its roots in Western consumerism beginning in the 1980s. As part of my sources; “National Capitalisms, Global Production Networks: Fashioning the Value Chain in the UK, US, and

Germany” (Lane 2009) represents this well. The chapter studies three major Western countries and analyzes their fashion industries. The chapter goes through the historical changes, strategies, and integrations of culture in each country. By explaining the development of the industries over time, the chapter gives a firm basis for the Western shift towards high volume textile production. McNeill’s study on the consumer preference to fast fashion over ethical fashion helps inform this shift from the consumer side. The study uses a qualitative research design to understand consumer tendencies toward unethical and unsustainable fashion even with a push for sustainability. Through open-ended surveys and interviews, the research found that consumers value being on trend and cost-effective more than the implications of their purchase, such as environmental issues or labor conditions for workers (McNeill 2015). These factors are also studied in combination with the influence of social media. Through a questionnaire, different media and sustainability purchasing were studied to better understand the role of social media in sustainable fashion purchasing. This study found that social media negatively affects sustainable purchasing (Lenne 2017). Like this study, the use of social media was considered in consumer habits. Revlon-Chion (2020) offers a new perspective through their online survey regarding the level of regard towards influencers. The survey found that influencers are an integral part of fashion purchasing decisions. Another analysis of the role of fast fashion is Michaela’s study of the correlation between positive or negative videos on fast fashion and consumer habits. This source uses survey results to determine the correlation between these two variables. It reaffirmed

that social media is highly valued by consumers and consumption reflects viewership (Michaela 2015). This valuation was mirrored by the Channel 4 documentary, *Inside the Shein Machine: UNTOLD*, on Shein working conditions (All 4 2023). When buyers of the brand were interviewed, their responses were majorly based on wanting to be on trend at a low cost. The buyers in this case were young women, mainly frequent social media users. The documentary has a separate focus on the use of social media in fast fashion. Different influencers are interviewed throughout the movie to gauge their connection and perception of retail brands (All 4 2023). The consensus of this topic is that consumerism culture is the firm driver of the fast fashion industry. This with the addition of new technology and globalization, brings us to the current fast fashion industry. Retailers hold power and control over the high stakes and high gain steps of the supply chain while passing the labor-intensive stages off to contracted workers in places such as Asia and other developing markets. Lane and Probert (2009) document the shift from valuing producers to retailers in supply chain dynamics in the context of Western companies outsourcing work to Asia. The chapter explains that the dynamic has permeated throughout the industry, leading Western retailers to profit off low wages. The beginning of this trend, recognized by Stephanie O. Crofton and Luis Dopico (2007), began with the mother company of Zara, Inditex. The company was one of the first to create an agile supply chain that supplied affordable pieces. The company sought to cut costs by outsourcing sewing to Asia for a low cost through contracted workers that were then responsible for wages and working conditions. This created the exploitive labor dynamic we now see

popularized by many brands in the industry. A database of information regarding the industry, The Fashion Revolution Transparency Index, brings the same information to the forefront of the conversation on this topic. The Index seeks to document the responsibility of retail corporations on the effects of their practices. While the data is applicable to both this category and the effects on consumer and producer areas, the concept of transparency falls firmly in the power dynamics category. The data was collected via questionnaires sent to about 250 of the top retail corporations in the world. The responses were then scored under multiple categories to assess the transparency of each major retailer (Fashion Revolution 2022). The concept of transparency is integral to understanding the issues with the industry. As the Index explains, there is no real traceability so what we know is filtered through the lens of retailers which need to be seen in a positive light by consumers to earn profit. While laws and protections are in place for working conditions and there have been pushes for sustainability, there is very little control over the industry because of the complexity in supply chains with no clear group in charge. This index keeps retailers accountable the only way they can, attempting to grade their transparency. There is a consensus within academic literature that Western brands popularly outsource their labor, leading to the exploitation of workers for high volume outputs for a low cost.

The effects on consumer and producer areas can be split into two categories: environmental consequences and worker exploitation. A 2021 study evaluates the change in net environmental impacts from 2000-2015 made by the textile industry. The study uses estimates from worldwide

data sources to understand the changes in global consumption of resources and waste. This study found that while the per-garment-consumption cost had decreased, the high volume of items produced increased enough to warrant a 0.3 gigaton increase in carbon dioxide production with a 75% increase in overall textile production (Peters, Li, and Lenzen 2021). This, combined with a consumer-side study of textile waste in Florida, shows unmanageable levels of environmental strain. The consumer-side study by Julia DeVoy (2021) compares different counties in the state of Florida with various levels of wealth to determine which groups are contributing the most to textile waste from fast fashion. The study operates with an understanding that textile waste has increased by ten times since the 1960s with an estimated 34 billion pounds in the US alone. The conclusion drawn from this study is that wealthier groups contribute more waste than any other. These two studies combined illuminate the unsustainability of current practices. As for producer areas, laborers are exploited and exposed to poor working conditions with limited compensation (All 4 2023). Worker exploitation largely goes unreported which poses challenges for a comprehensive literature review. Inside the Shein Machine: UNTOLD captures women working roughly 18 hours per day with only one day off a month. The documentary explains conditions are not in compliance with Chinese labor laws. The exploitative nature of the industry is brought to light through the documentation of workers producing 500 pieces of clothing for just 19 pounds per day (All 4 2023). The literature shows that the negative impacts of the industry are severe in both consumer and producer areas and are set to rapidly increase given the growth of fast fashion consumption.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The majority of the data used to evaluate the central questions comes from an online ethnographic study of fashion content creators and other consumers in the Spring of 2023. This qualitative study on consumer-created content documents sentiments towards specific brands and types of fashion popular during this period. A digital ethnographic study of TikTok offers a comprehensive view of the positive and negative sentiments towards fast fashion, the paid promotion of fast fashion by influencers, and the demographics interested in or currently purchasing fast fashion. The qualitative nature of this study allows for documentation of consumer perspectives and retailer influence among target consumers. To best evaluate question one, the use of influencer promotion on social media will be evaluated. Question two requires supplemental data regarding retailer transparency in addition to information gathered by the main qualitative study. While the ethnography does not directly cover retailers or laborers, consumer understanding of labor exploitation and environmental harm reflects the state of transparency in the industry. The evaluation of these questions will draw on the quantitative study noted in the Literature, *The Fashion Transparency Index of 2022*.

### PARTICIPANTS

The qualitative study focuses on the users creating and interacting with videos of fashion related content on TikTok. The participants in this study, much like an in-person ethnography, are any individuals interacting with the online space. This limits the population being studied to those that have access to the platform and that are interested in fashion content. Many of

these participants are in their teens to mid-twenties, based in the United States, and predominantly women. Participants include users creating videos or commenting on videos. There are many “unseen” participants within the available data such as likes or number of shares. These numbers are not always reliable given many creators and brands purchase likes and shares to inflate their popularity statistics (All 4 2023). This practice makes studying these “unseen” participants challenging and often impossible to do so effectively. While these users are not able to be studied, they act as markers for the relevance of the information that the video presents. This adds a layer of complexity to who is categorized as a participant in this study. In addition to these numbers not always being accurate; likes and shares only reveal the number of users interacting with videos, not emotional impressions. Comment sections are the only reliable source of user reactions towards content. All users interacting with the online space offer some information of the general perceptions consumers have of fast fashion, and by default, popular retailers.

#### DATA

There are two sources of valuable information TikTok’s platform offers: videos and comment sections. Due to the divisiveness of this topic, I anticipated there to be dialogue relevant to my study in comment sections on videos both promoting and discouraging fast fashion. Videos offer information in a multitude of ways; documentation of the demographics of shoppers, volume of paid promotions by fast fashion brands, and amount of fast fashion indirectly promoted by creators. On the other hand, I am able to hear from those opposed to fast fashion that utilize the

platform to inform and discourage its purchase.

#### PROCEDURE

This research was conducted over a 4-week period with a total of 10 hours of observation. I conducted my research by utilizing the search function of the app using keywords such as “fast fashion”, “haul”, “fashion”, and “what to wear” since TikTok offers videos of many kinds of content on every “For You Page.” A variety of words that have a positive connotation of fast fashion and others that opposed it were used in these searches to include various perspectives. Comment sections revealed how the audience reacted to the content and offered insight on the demographics of each video’s viewers. Repeated content was anticipated from the beginning because much like there are trends in fashion, there are also trends in content format. I continuously sought to note the age, race, gender, and potential class of those creating videos. As a metric of popularity of particular viewpoints, likes and user following are used as the greatest factors considered.

#### LIMITATIONS

The platform automatically filters all content by relevance to each individual user based on videos they have interacted with in the past. By default, there are identity characteristics embedded in each user’s app. Users we see tend to share our age, gender, language, class, and race characteristics because of similar perspectives and interests. Due to this, the content first generated for each keyword search is usually posted by people with these shared characteristics. To mitigate the effects of this limitation in the research, the apps of individuals with the following backgrounds: Black female college student,

Asian female college student, White male college graduate, and White and Latina female college students were utilized to collect representative data. The same main keywords were used on each device to generate similar content through each algorithmic lens. The searches were most varied on my device to collect data on groups that were not represented through the other devices. Searches specific to men's fashion and other demographics were utilized to attempt to bridge gaps in representation. The age range of user platforms in the study is extremely limited due to access to others below and above the college age range. This issue was not detrimental to the results because of the prominence of both older and younger users present in all search results. Due to location and language settings of all users' apps, searches were limited to the United States and other English-speaking countries. The algorithm posed a variety of limitations to data collection, which were unique to the digital nature of this study.

#### **IV. ETHNOGRAPHIC RESULTS**

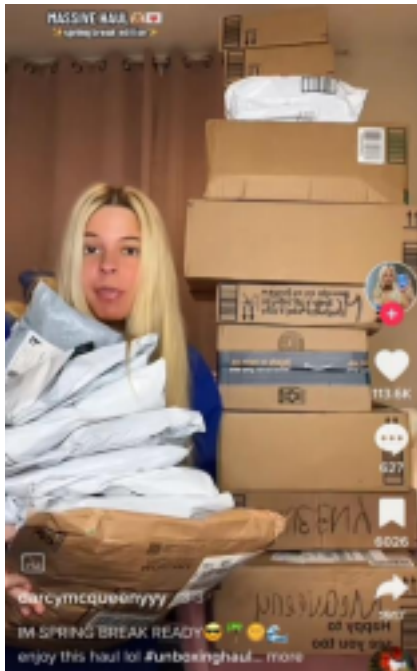
Following the completion of the digital ethnographic study of TikTok, a clear set of patterns emerged. Many of the videos encountered were nearly identical in form and purpose. Not only are certain fashion styles on trend, but specific aesthetic styles of video creation go in and out of trend. These trends change the same way as fashion, which offers new modes of content creation that communicate different meaning for ethnographic purposes. If it is popular to make videos for school outfit inspiration, that allows the researcher to understand that the target audience and the creator are in their mid to late teens or college-aged. Videos promoting fast fashion brands that sell items that resemble high-

end fashion wear inform the researcher that purchases are due to budget constraints. These trends in videos allow for varying information to be conveyed and each period of research done on these platforms will offer different results due to the impermanent nature of popular internet content.

#### **FAST FASHION VIDEOS**

The main source of relevant data comes from videos that discuss items sold by fast fashion brands. These videos can take form in two major ways: videos that are sponsored by fast fashion retailers and videos that emphasize fast fashion products with no monetary gain for content creators. These two categories have different links to retailers but by default promote the industry and influence others to purchase similar items. It is in no way assumed that these videos intentionally shift consumer perceptions to not consider the ethical implications of these purchases. In fact, it may be assumed that the users promoting such content are mostly unaware of retailer practices or at least ignorant to retail practices given the vast lack of acknowledgement. There is a sect of users that are aware and continue to purchase from retailers, a position that will be further analyzed in the *Complicit Consumers* section.

**Figure 1. March 3, 2023**



Source: TikTok.

<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRWuUgvy/>

Based on the qualitative data, most content creators post two forms of popular content within the first two categories. There are “hauls” (e.g., videos showing 5-20 or more items purchased to viewers) and inspiration videos that show other users how to style items or recommendations for different events. These haul or inspiration videos can be made either by users paid by fast fashion retailers or not. The videos promote the consumption of fast fashion in high quantities (See Figure 1). Given the environmental implications highlighted in the Literature Review, haul videos are highly problematic given consumption rates. This, combined with the amount of inspiration videos put out each week, contributes to a high consuming and fast-changing fashion culture. Considering that users are likely unaware of the ethics of

supporting such retailers, there is no check on consumption. Retailers directly influence haul content by sending select influencers multiple items at no cost in exchange for content promotion on the platform (see Figure 2). This allows retailers to control a portion of users to only share positive content about their brand. Given the crossover between social media users and fast fashion consumers, it is essential for these brands to maintain a positive online image. An interesting trend in the data is mimicry of influencers by young teens, especially in haul culture. The content found under searches of specific brands and the keyword “fashion haul” was a mix of influencers posting paid promotion videos of items fast fashion brands sent them and young teens posting similar content.

**Figure 2. March 3, 2023**



Source: TikTok.

<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRWu6Ych/>

These teens had a clear class delineation as the amount and source of the items were costly. Contrary to paid promotion videos and other major influencers, these young girls were not making money by posting their content. In this phenomenon it becomes clear the influence content creators have on young consumers. These young consumers have limited interactions with the larger body of users unlike their more popular counterparts. The low traffic on their videos documented by likes, comments, and shares implies these videos are likely posted to be seen by others they know like other traditional forms of social media. The comments show familiarity, giving more context for how these videos impact social pressure felt by users in their close circles. Mimicry videos show the prevalence in fast fashion among young consumers, allowing for deeper insight into the consumption habits of the younger generation.

Among these fast fashion videos, retailers partner with influencers to target eco-minded consumers. Green washing is a common practice among retail brands that are aware of the push for sustainably and ethically sourced clothing (All 4 2023). These items are promoted as being eco-friendly and tend to be featured in sustainable collections on brand websites. Videos highlighting such products fall into both fast fashion and anti-fast fashion content categories. The former supporting such collection and the latter criticizing brands for this practice. These items tend to either be packaged in industrially compostable packaging or be partially made of recycled fabric. These small changes allow for consumers that want to reduce their carbon footprint to feel better about their purchases with little change to retail practices.

## ANTI-FAST FASHION VIDEOS

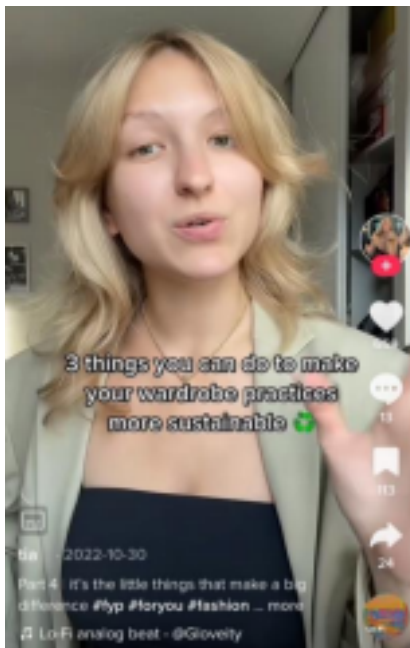
While a large portion of the content analyzed through the digital ethnographic study promoted fast fashion consumption, there was a significant subculture of users opposed to these retailers and the overall culture of the industry. These users tended to be more diverse than fast fashion content creators in terms of race, class, and gender. There is a movement against fast fashion practices and consumer consumption that becomes more prevalent depending on keywords used to search for content. Keywords such as “fast fashion” and brand names, such as Shein, offered larger amounts of videos against the purchase of fast fashion. Many of these videos sought to educate other users of the negative effects and offer alternatives to shopping these brands (See Figure 3). Another form of content was consignment clothing promotion. These videos showcased “thrifted” items (e.g., garment pieces bought second hand) that were either repurposed or styled in a way that was on trend. These videos seem to have as much traffic on them as regular fashion content. Given the large user basis and algorithm-based filtering of each user’s “For You Page,” it is possible that many users do not encounter both sects of content creation.

Content creators in this sphere interact with videos made by fast fashion creators but the reverse was only documented in cases of “complicit consumers.” The use of the reaction function was popular among videos aimed to inform consumers of the issues with fast fashion practices, showing awareness of the role social media plays in the promotion of fast fashion. These creators post videos in a similar style to their fast fashion counterparts such as fashion inspiration videos but haul culture is unique to fast fashion users. There is a



stronger emphasis on mindful purchasing and support of ethical businesses. In the same way there is a social pressure to be on trend for fast fashion creators, there is a push to adhere to ethical practices. Due to this, there is discourse within these videos on the accessibility for all people to partake in ethical purchasing.

**Figure 3. October 30, 2022**



Source: TikTok.

<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRwxMLnL/>

Contrary to fast fashion, sustainable purchasing is not always available at a low cost or accessible to all people. Many of the affordable options posed by these users come from consignment stores where items are unique and cannot be purchased by all users that see the item at a low cost, unlike fast fashion. This divides anti-fast fashion users into two major categories.

Consignment shoppers that seek low-cost items and sustainable shoppers that shop less at a much higher cost. This divides the sect of users based on class since budget is

the major division among these creators and the users interacting with the videos.

### COMMENT SECTIONS

Dialogue between users is a crucial source of data for this study as it represents the consensus and disagreement within retailers' target audience. Many comment sections support the content being offered in the video, likely due to the algorithm's ability to offer what users would like best. For the videos that do not have supportive feedback, users on both sides of this issue are able to interact with each other and clearly defend their opinion. This unique online space is the only accessible way to gauge consumer opinions aside from those presented through videos. Comment sections are not as outright as videos made by users, but they reveal more about the general user's view on those creating this content. Discourse on videos comes from two major issues: class divisions and moral arguments.

Figure 4. October 10, 2022



Source: TikTok.

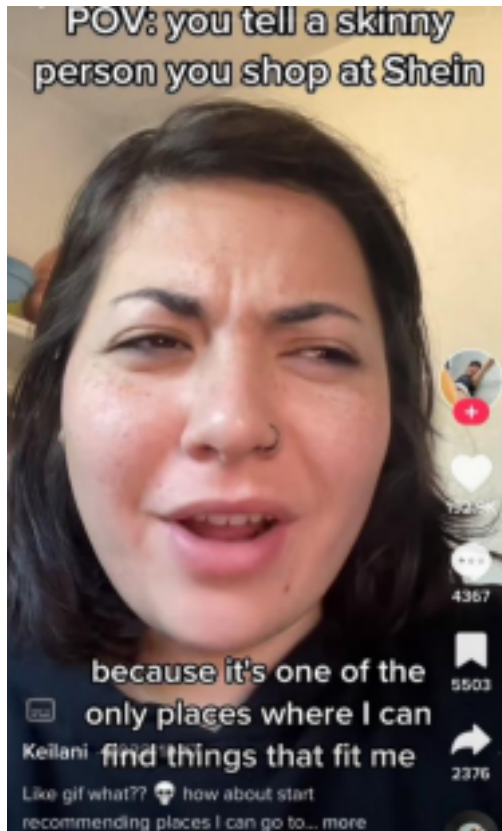
<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRwXPmy4/>

While fast fashion pieces are sold at a significantly lower cost to consumers than slow fashion, buying in bulk as seen through haul culture is costly. Comment sections of these videos tend to have the most division among consumers, showcasing users that enjoy watching others share their purchases and users who are aware of the monetary implications of these purchases (See Figure 4). These are intuitive differences that come from users being critical or supportive of content offered by creators with the means to purchase hundreds of dollars of clothing. In some cases, users will point out how these content creators will only wear an outfit once before they do not want it anymore and the waste associated with buying in bulk. The unattainable amounts of

consumption for average or lower income consumers creates polarization within the platform with comment sections offering the only space to react.

The second major use of the comment section is discourse about moral arguments. A point of polarization between users is in the case of moral arguments related to purchasing habits. When content creators make videos that shame or judge other consumers for purchasing fast fashion products, comment sections become a place for users to defend their positions. Many users express upset at this judgment due to the lack of accessible and affordable alternative ways to shop. There is also a notable emphasis on the lack of retailer responsibility which leaves consumers with limited brands they can ethically support. These moral debates show that there is less consensus among consumers than video content offers. It allows consumers to share their reservations about both fast fashion and the sustainable fashion movement without being under direct scrutiny by other users.

Figure 5. December 17, 2022.



Source: TikTok.

<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRwXffaL/>

### COMPLICIT CONSUMERS

An interesting category of user that emerged within this research was the complicit consumer. This was the most surprising sect of users I encountered within my digital ethnography of TikTok. These users expressed their knowledge of the unethical implications of fast fashion brands, such as labor exploitation and environmental harm, yet openly supported purchasing from these brands. This dissonance mainly came from marginalizing factors, such as size and income. They expressed their frustration with the sustainable fashion movement and the lack of nuance users accepted. For plus sized consumers, shopping consignment is

not a realistic option if they want to dress on trend due to the limited options (See Figure 5). This sentiment was shared among many users in this category. The alternative would be to shop sustainable brands, which come at a much higher cost to consumers. These options are limiting factors for these consumers, leaving fast fashion to be the best option to shop trendy and affordable items. Other marginalized users expressed similar sentiments about the lack of options and unnecessary judgment from sustainable buyers. There is a racial element to this category of content creator. Many of the creators in this sect come from marginalized backgrounds, which have led to lower class status and limited disposable income to spend on stylish clothing. Clothing is a source of confidence and expression for many people, so judgment on one's ability to purchase costly items or forgo their style of choice for consignment is a point of polarization. This group of content creators is heavily supported in their comment sections depicting consensus among consumers that style and cost are more important than the implications of their purchases.

### V. RETAILER TRANSPARENCY

In addition to the results of the ethnography, quantitative data on retailer practices is necessary to draw conclusions for the central research questions. This section covers the raw data collected by Fashion Revolution for their Fashion Revolution Transparency Index of 2022, as noted in the Literature Review. This index bases its data on brand responses to their questionnaire and does not value the quality of company policies, only transparency. The total average of retailer transparency in 2022 was just 23%, meaning the average disclosure of among all 250 major brands was just under one

fourth. Out of the 250 brands, 10 brands disclosed zero information, 78 brands disclosed under 10%, and only 28 brands disclosed more than 50% of the information covered on the questionnaire (Fashion Revolution 2022). My claim focuses on labor rights and environmental harm as the major areas of concern, these areas will be further evaluated through the Index.

*The Fashion Transparency Index* evaluated relevant categories to labor rights and conditions including Living Wage, Working Hours, and Child Labor. For the Living Wage category, only 27% of the 250 brands disclose their approach to offering a living wage to supply chain workers while only 4% publish their percentage of supply chain workers earning a livable wage. For Working Hours, 82% of brands publish their supplier policies while only 34% disclose how these policies are implemented. As for Child Labor, 89% of suppliers publish their policies but only 48% say how they are implemented (Fashion Revolution 2022). As for environmental harm, the main categories of relevant data are Production Amounts, Product Waste, and Carbon Footprint. Only 15% of brands publish the number of products made annually, making this a particularly underreported category. As for Product Waste, 38% of brands publish company policies while 24% publish supplier policies. Finally, for Carbon Footprint, 65% disclose the carbon footprint from their own facilities but only 22% include the emissions at a raw materials level (Fashion Revolution 2022). There is a clear lack of reporting of practices in all parts of the supply chain for these brands.

## VI. ANALYSIS

Following the collection of data through the online ethnographic study and the supplementation of data taken from *The*

*Fashion Transparency Index of 2022*, the central questions of this paper can be effectively evaluated. The questions this paper seeks to answer are (I) How do fast fashion retailers use social media to market among target consumers? (II) How does current fast fashion marketing help retail brands disguise the exploitative relations between workers and consumers in their global supply chains? My findings support my original claim that retailers weaponize consumerism and conformity culture to reach younger female target consumers on the platform. As for question two, both the ethnographic and Index findings were concurrent in the lack of detailed reporting of bad practices made available to consumers. There was more nuance present among users than expected, particularly the existence of complicit consumers. The following sections evaluate these questions in further detail.

### RESEARCH QUESTION ONE FINDINGS

The first central research question seeks to investigate how social media is utilized by retail brands as an effective marketing tactic. Fashion content often promotes fast fashion items and brands to consumers through posting reviews and inspiration videos. Retailers have employed conventionally attractive college-aged content creators through sponsorship deals. These sponsored posts aim to reach users that look to these influencers for recommendations. Many of the users that look to college-aged people are those in the same age group and younger. This age range of the target audience is purposeful as these consumers do not have income comparable to adults well into their career, making low-cost items ideal. These consumers are more vulnerable to social pressures to conform to standards set by peers. This age group often does not have

anyone financially dependent on them so there is a higher portion of income that can be spent on themselves. This allows retailers to specifically target vulnerable consumers and capitalize on the social pressure prevalent in this demographic inside and out of these online spaces.

Understanding the demographics of creators is essential to understanding the demographics of the users they target their content towards. Social media offers mirrors for creators and users to interact with those with similar backgrounds and interests. Through the weeks of observation on TikTok, the demographics of users interacting and creating content remained predominantly young White females. By using TikTok apps of users with different ethnic backgrounds, I was able to identify the differences in the racial composition of creators of fashion content. There was little to no change in the demographics of “haul” video creators, confirming these creators are predominantly White women. Racial and gender consistency in comment sections solidifies this assumption. It can be concluded from the creators and the users that there is a mix in demographics among fast fashion consumers.

Those who use the platforms to promote sustainable fashion only reach users with demonstrated interest in similar topics. With the addition of trend culture, it is unlikely for fast fashion supporters to be effectively challenged due to the ease in access and affordability. Social media effectively influences the way people present themselves, but moral issues seem to not be equally impacted due to less emphasis inherent to visual content. Pressures encourage specific looks but fall short in changing opinions on complex issues. For this reason, social media works as an effective promoter of trending fashion and may be the largest influence on

consumer behavior. Due to the conformity and consumption patterns present in trend content, it is an effective tool retailers have weaponized to target young consumers.

#### RESEARCH QUESTION TWO FINDINGS

The second central question builds on social media marketing to understand how these practices disguise the exploitative dynamics between consumers and producers in global supply chains. Retailers target vulnerable consumers in a space that continues to perpetuate their perceptions due to algorithmic echo chambers. This finding combined with the labor conditions, environmental harms, and lack of retailer transparency leaves Western consumers to perpetuate exploitive relationships with producers in the Global South. There is little reference to producers in fashion content, depicting consumer ignorance to these workers. Unlike other forms of fashion, such as high fashion and small business, it is not common to reference the creator of the garment. The humanization of production has been removed by fast fashion retailers, leading to this lack of consideration by consumers.

Similar to the lacking dialogue in reference to producers, there is a high level of consumer ignorance to the negative impacts of fast fashion. The side of this industry that consumers most interact with is positive. They are exposed to the trendy, affordable, and accessible clothes promoted by peers they respect. This appeals to consumers that want to stay on trend at a low cost. Trend shifts push consumers to keep pace with new styles and new brands which perpetuates both the problem of high waste and the high production pressures that lead to labor exploitation. The role of social media must be understood as the gateway of knowledge for consumers to understand retailer practices and a pacer to

the production of the industry. Since many individuals in the target group are reached through social media, there is limited interaction with information outside of these platforms and retail websites. Aside from the marketing tactics that isolate consumers from critical lenses of fast fashion, there is limited transparency in the industry making consumer education near impossible. Retail brands effectively limit conversations of their unethical business practices by not publishing information necessary to consumer education and governance intervention. By keeping those outside of the supply chain in the dark about business practices, retail corporations do not need to take responsibility for harm caused by their clothing production. As the data from *The Fashion Transparency Index* makes clear, not only is there limited transparency but what is published does not include the practices of outsourced steps of the supply chain (2022). The complexity of these supply chains allows retailers to avoid accountability for unethical repercussions of their work. The combination of social media marketing and lacking transparency leads to mistrusting consumers and surface level disclosure, allowing for retailers to perpetuate harm without being held accountable.

## VII. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the results of the online ethnography and levels of retailer transparency, it is evident that the results of this study are supportive of the current literature surrounding fast fashion and the role of social media. This data fills the gap of current consumer perceptions of fast fashion and gives insight into the target consumer groups social media reaches. Considering the original claim, fast fashion retailers utilize consumerism and

conformity cultures present on social media to target vulnerable Western consumer groups, this claim can be confirmed. The familiarity of influencers distracts from the broadly underreported business practices of many fashion brands. By limiting transparency in all steps of the supply chain, retailers effectively curate their brand image to not include the realities of these practices, causing consumers to unknowingly perpetuate harm.

## IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY

The observations taken from this online ethnographic study offer context to the established consensus the Literature Review establishes of the fashion industry as laid out by other authors. Consumer behavior acts as a reflection to the goods made available. Consumers can only purchase available goods and they do not control the ethics of retailer practices. Due to this, consumers are only able to shop as ethically and eco-friendly as the items they are offered. Given the lack of transparent business practices, many shoppers are unaware of the implications of their choices. As social media platforms continue to promote and integrate online shopping with fast fashion retailers, access to consumers will become even more simplified. This will likely lead to an increase in fast fashion consumption and textile waste. The tie between social media tendencies towards short-term trends and fast fashion is necessary to consider while looking towards the future.

## LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

There are a few notable limitations to this study including the demographic of participants and the time frame. The demographic of users was limited to consumers in the United States and other English-speaking countries. Given my

research, this reduced my interaction with those producing in the Global South to none. This study is inherently only able to view one side of this complex practice given the prevalence of consumer facing content on the app. Due to the platform's one-sided nature, consumers share their thoughts without regard for the experience of laborers leading to potentially more genuine responses. These unmarred opinions may have not been so openly shared in a space where both sides were present. A consumer only study may limit the voices being heard, but insights as to the dynamics consumers have with retailers and producers may be more clearly understood.

The other limitation of this study is the time frame. As this study assumes, social media trends change quickly. The consensus the platform may exhibit this month may be entirely different after some time has passed. Any new interactions with or releases of information about retail practices may entirely shift the content on the platform. For a more representative study, the time frame would ideally span over a year to capture consumers' willingness to change. This short-term study thus offers a snapshot of the viewpoints of Western consumers during the time of this study. This data may not be generalizable if new information to consumers disrupts the strong support of fast fashion on the platform.

#### FUTURE PLATFORM USE

Social media offers more than just a means of promoting fast fashion and unsustainable trend shifts. As seen through the observations, the content users encounter is not all supportive of the current industry. In the same way retailers have weaponized the platform for increased purchasing, anti-fast fashion users can

educate other users through comment interactions and video content. It would be incorrect to say that the platform's users all contribute to the problem of fast fashion. Social media may instead be one of the most effective tools in reeducating people on sustainable shopping habits. The subculture of sustainable creators is currently aiming to improve users' consumption of fast fashion by offering better solutions and recommendations. This is vital to create a shift in consumer shopping habits and move away from a retailer-positive consumer attitude. In the same way that influencers promote fast fashion, these groups can likewise increase social pressures to disincentivize consumption. Target consumers are most easily accessible on these platforms and pushing for a critical lens of retailers can only be achieved by changing the views of this group. Western facing retailers are dependent on their positive portrayal on social media platforms to maintain a consistent consumer basis. If the perception of these brands becomes critical, retailers will be pressured to improve the relationship between consumers and producers to maintain high revenue. Thus, social media plays an integral role in moving towards a more ethical and sustainable fashion industry.

#### REFERENCES

- Arrigo, Elisa. 2020. "Global Sourcing in Fast Fashion Retailers: Sourcing Locations and Sustainability Considerations." *Sustainability* 12 (2): 508.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su12020508>.

- Crofton, Stephanie O., and Luis G. Dopico. 2007. "Zara-Inditex and the Growth of Fast Fashion." *Essays in Economic and Business History* 24 (January).
- DeVoy, Julia E., Elizabeth Congiusta, Dielle J. Lundberg, Sarah Findeisen, and Sunand Bhattacharya. 2021. "Post-Consumer Textile Waste and Disposal: Differences by Socioeconomic, Demographic, and Retail Factors." *Waste Management* 136 (December): 303–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wasman.2021.10.009>.
- "FASHION TRANSPARENCY INDEX 2022 : Fashion Revolution." n.d. Accessed February 23, 2023. <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/about/transparency/>.
- Horton, Kathleen, Paige Street, and Erin O'Brien. 2022. "When Women Owe Women: Framing Consumer Responsibility in the Context of Fast Fashion." *International Journal for Crime, Justice, and Social Democracy* 11 (2): 116–28. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.2356>.
- "Inside the Shein Machine: UNTOLD." n.d. All 4. Accessed February 20, 2023. <https://www.channel4.com/programmes/inside-the-shein-machine-untold/on-demand/73730-001>.
- Lane, Christel, and Jocelyn Probert. 2009. "The Global Production Networks of US, UK, and German Firms." In *National Capitalisms, Global Production Networks*, 154–85. Oxford University Press.
- <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199214815.003.0007>.
- Lenne, Orpha de, and Laura Vandenbosch. 2017. "Media and Sustainable Apparel Buying Intention." *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal* 21 (4): 483–98. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jfmm-11-2016-0101>.
- McNeill, Lisa, and Rebecca Moore. 2015. "Sustainable Fashion Consumption and the Fast Fashion Conundrum: Fashionable Consumers and Attitudes to Sustainability in Clothing Choice." *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 39 (3): 212–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12169>.
- Michaela, Elram, and Steiner Lavie Orna. 2015. "Fashion Conscious Consumers, Fast Fashion and the Impact of Social Media on Purchase Intention." *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, December. <https://doi.org/10.5901/ajis.2015.v4n3s1p173>.
- Peters, Greg, Mengyu Li, and Manfred Lenzen. 2021. "The Need to Decelerate Fast Fashion in a Hot Climate - A Global Sustainability Perspective on the Garment Industry." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 295 (May): 126390. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.126390>.
- Revlon-Chion, E., Bolat, E. and Liang, Y. 2020. "Instant Buying of Fast Fashion: Are Influencers to Blame?"