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Fast Fashion, Honor, and the Value of Overconsumption

Kwane Anthony Appiah's 2010 book, *The Honor Code*, focuses on the role of honor in shaping how behaviors are viewed as acceptable by a society, and how this relationship can change over time. Appiah notes that honor does not necessarily require an infusion of morality, but rather how a society views a particular action as honorable or shameful. An immoral habit or action might be viewed as acceptable or favorable, until it ultimately falls out of favor with the masses of a society. Appiah uses the practice of foot binding in China as an example of the role of honor and shame in a societies' practice. He notes that foot binding was an acceptable and favored practice in China, until Western presence in China began to turn public arguments of the practice.

In a post-modern Western society, which is fueled by consumption, the garment industry has changed drastically in the past several decades and grown to massive proportions. Clothing and fashion are linked to status in many societies around the world, while this might not be a new phenomenon, it has grown more economically accessible in modern societies and has led to a moral question of the human and environmental impact of production on such a low-cost model. The garment industry is now the second largest contributor to pollution in the world, only behind the oil industry (Givhan). Until this trend falls out of favor with the majority of those within society, it will continue to grow to unsustainable proportions.

For consumers, products are getting less expensive and choices are expanding. Yet, this has much more of an environmental and social impact than it may appear on the surface. Many “fast fashion” retailers will attempt to cite the problems of textile waste has on the planet, but do not admit fault as a structural cause for this waste. This often results in greenwashing campaigns that look to signal a brands commitment to reducing or recycling elements of their supply chain but does not address all concerns or parts of their structure. The second-largest fast fashion retailer, H&M has made a public stance in their commitment to environmentalism. This was shown through their Conscious Collection which launched in 2011 (Silver). This collection specifically aimed to target those consumers who understand what to feel more honorable and make more informed choices that will minimize the environmental impact on the planet, but do not understand the depth of the role fast fashion plays. Typically, these campaigns are made on the part of a large-scale retailers attempting to curb their consumer base into believing they are reforming the system at a large. When in fact, what retailers are trying to promote is a greater sense of honor in the consumer, so they can feel positive about their purchase, rather than be shamed for its broader impact. The issue does not come from the manufacture side alone, consumers play a pivotal role in how waste accumulates once it is produced and sold.

In the U.S. average consumer spending remains flat on the amount of clothing purchased for year, but the number of items purchased has increased by 60% since the 1950’s (Givhan). The reduction in costs of labor from exporting textile manufacturing overseas has allowed consumption to increase substantially. While this consumption is increasing, so is consumer waste. On average in the United States, 10.5 million tons of textile waste a year are sent to landfills, with only about 15% being recycled by the consumer (Cline). While almost half of donated clothing goes to be sold second hand, there has been an almost 40% increase in donated

clothing from 1990-2009 (Cline). Due to the nature of the cheaper mass produced clothing, its lifespan has become shorter and the need for broker for profit companies have emerged that export a significant portion of clothing that could not be sold by charities to the developing world. One exported, this clothing is either sold in marketplaces in the developing world, or burned, releasing even more toxic chemicals in the atmosphere and local water supplies (Cline). The problem of fast fashion must be analyzed not only from the producers and manufactures, but also in the way consumption is viewed by consumers, ultimately perpetuating a much larger cycle of pollution and human impact across the developing world.

Many individuals in developed countries will acknowledge the ramifications of consuming more but will stay course and continue to purchase at blooming rates. Wealthy individuals in society play a key role in continuing to promote and drive overconsumption, while attempting to alleviate people's concerns over the potential environmental impacts. As Appiah states when speaking of immoral practices like slavery, foot binding, and dueling that were morally honorable in the past, "Not only were the [moral] arguments already there, they were made in terms that we...can recognize and understand" (12). Nevertheless, while these practices have been dishonorable or shameful, they were continued. Both the fashion industry and every day consumers admit that textile waste is becoming a rapidly growing concern but are not yet to the point where shame is introduced, but rather this consumption is encouraged broadly. Therefore, the practice of consumption of fast fashion goods will continue until there is a significant amount of shame introduced to these practices.

This shift in consumption has been most notable only after the rise of fast fashion retailers. This is mostly occurred because of a variety of different factors. Advancements in manufacturing technologies, introduction of free-trading-blocks, and reduction in transportation

costs by way of shipment containers have all broken down barriers in the traditional models of both consumption and in manufacturing. Now, “Fashion’s fundamental operating principle rests on planned obsolescence, brands are in a ceaseless cycle of replacement and replenishment” (Givhan). It is not that fashion now plays a significant role in society and in everyday life, but that it has changed shape and accessibility is stronger than it ever has been. Overconsumption has pushed prices lower, but also has caused a significant environmental and human impacts. The growth of fast fashion has emerged mostly due to the influence of the luxury fashion industry, and those who companies that want to copy designers for a fraction of the price. This means for the consumer, is the ability to emulate the prestige and honor of designer goods, but at a price that is easily accessed by most individuals.

In the fashion industry, models emulate honor through their walk down the runway. “The psychology of honor is deeply connected with walking tall and looking the world in the eye” (Appiah 17). The connection Appiah was attempting to make with honor and an individual’s actions, is that it imbues an element of pride and it radiates further out into the larger society. The role that fast fashion plays in honor is that it allows anyone in society, for a low cost to obtain a piece of the honor of others. On average, fast fashion retailers do not operate on the traditional schedule of the fashion industry. Instead of producing only two collections a year, there is around 52. In the case of Forever 21, about 539 new items are shipped to stores each week (Indvik). Fast fashion retails have more flexible supply chains are quickly about to take an article of clothing featured on a runway and have them shipped to stores only a few days later (Givhan). The fast fashion industry also allows for the gratification of overconsumption and allows accessibility to those who may not be able to afford higher end articles of clothing. With

the expanse of fast fashion, honor through fashion, is much more a tool of the common person in a society than it was historically.

The apparel industry and more broadly the fast fashion industry plays a pivotal role in the U.S. economy and in individual's daily lives. The mentality of consumption has shifted as individuals try to present wealth through material means. This is not necessarily a new phenomenon, as clothing has always been a signifier of wealth. Anthony Appiah notes that, "We human beings need others to respond appropriately to who we are and to what we do" (13). This need is shown through the accumulation of material wealth in post-modern societies. Individuals play a key role in perpetuating what is important and significant, as well as what is acceptable. While fashion was once a means to signify wealth, it has become both a means to promote wealth, but has also been used as a tool to mimic wealth. Appiah notes that there is a significant difference in the role of both morality and honor in whether a practice is in favor or falls out of favor in a society. While consumers and companies alike are realizing the effects of the fashion industry, it will not be morality that turns the current trend of production and consumption. Public favor turned to shame towards apparel manufacturers after they are given enough information to be shamed away from a brand or practice. As was the case in 2013 with the Rana Plaza factory disaster, resulting in the death of 1,134 people, mostly women as well as some children (Webster). The unsafe working conditions came to the forefront in western media, showing that many U.S. based brands were being manufactured in the factory, including Gap, Walmart, and the Children's Place. Public outrage could only be sustained for so long, and many of the retailers defended themselves, claiming they were unaware of such conditions within their supply chain. As many disasters unfold around the world and disparities are brought to light,

there is evidence to support Appiah's argument that honor, not morality will be the driving force for whether the global fashion industry will change.

The largest growing industry of consumption will continue to be in the apparel industry. As companies continue to reduce cost, by exploiting labor and resources of poorer countries, the logic will be, that the consumer will obtain more. These effects are often seen when viewing the supply chain. The supply chain is comprised of raw materials, dye and tanning processes, manufactures and warehouse before it finally ends up to market. Most consumers do not have the ability to regularly access a company's supply chain to discover the true effects of clothing production and manufacturing. Even though ethically sourced, high quality garments are available, it is not readily available or pushed to the market. In a capitalist society, consumption will be the main goal and these types of garments serve as the antithesis of this. The real change must come from within a society, and honor plays a pivotal role in making this change. While the broad scope of fast fashions' impact on the environment is not fully known, information is accessible to consumers. It is not for the lack of information that drives the rapid overconsumption, but rather the agreement amongst most members within the society that this level of consumption is honorable.

As more information becomes readily available to consumers about the environmental and human impact of fast fashion, it will come down to not just information, but the power that shame and honor will play in continuing to promote these immoral habits. While it might seem moral to purchase second-hand clothing, or to find a more sustainably sourced alternative to fast fashion goods, it will only be when a strong signal both internally and externally marks these practices as shameful. Appiah notes that, "changes in honor codes can reshape honor, mobilizing it in the service of the good" (170). These changes in the industry and in consumer opinions are

shifting gradually as time goes on, but until the system can mobilize consumers in a different direction, the immoral practice of unfettered consumption. The parts of the fashion industry that project an image of honor have to be able to reshape the system to make fast fashion dishonorable and reshape the way consumers view their own impact on the global supply chain before any real significant change can be made.

Many companies are looking to signal a stronger commitment to reducing their environmental impact. Customers respond well, allowing temporarily to bask in the light of corporate greenwashing, but the only real solution to the ever-growing impact, is to cut consumption. The difficulty lies in the foundations of societies built upon this notion. Until the broader fold of society no longer views consumption as an honorable notion, consumption will still serve a pivotal role in a post-industrial society. There has to a continued commitment from individuals and companies inside of the fashion industry that work to shame fast fashion and its environmental and social impact. As Appiah points out that “collective shaming requires a coalition of insiders and outsiders if it is to work...” (166). This is not to claim that progress has not been made to confront serious environmental and human impacts, but until significant portions of a society are willing to mitigate overconsumption, it will continue to be the status quo. It is up to the fashion industry and wealthier consumers to call out practice of fast fashion before real change is possible.

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