



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

Master Degree Project in Marketing and Consumption

Do Fast Fashion Retailers have to be Alert to Changing Customer Values?

An examination of the material and meaning elements of the fast fashion practice

Daria Kalinin

Supervisor: Cecilia Solér
Master Degree Project No. 2013:68
Graduate School

Preface

Working on this thesis provided me with the opportunity to work on two of my favourite topics: fashion and social construction. I am very grateful for this time which proved to be very insightful.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my supervisor, Cecilia Solér, who guided me throughout the entire process and gave me advice. Her in-depth knowledge of topic is both impressive and inspiring at the same time, her passion and engagement very motivational.

Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to my family, especially to my mother, who always supported and believed in me. Last but not least, I would like to thank my friends who kept on motivating me during the difficult working phases.

Abstract

The latest clothing styles at low prices are the key to the success of fast fashion retailers. However, low prices come with low product quality and negative environmental and social impacts. According to the predominant value-based paradigm, these factors might affect customer acquisition and retention as a result of shifting consumer values towards qualitatively, environmentally, and ethically higher performing fashion products. Yet, fast fashion is not exempt from the value-action gap, a discrepancy between values hold by consumers and their actual behaviour. Using secondary data, this conceptual study takes on a practice theory perspective and explicitly considers the material dimension. The purpose is to identify the configuration of material and meaning elements sustaining the current fast fashion practice. The study suggests that personal values are not guiding consumer actions isolated from the context. Material artefacts, such as retail stores and the clothes as such, play a crucial role in forming and reinforcing the meaning of fast fashion and contributing to its success.

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1. Introduction

This conceptual thesis focuses on how material elements of the contemporary fast fashion practice reinforce the meanings associated with it and, thus explain why personal values favouring higher quality or better ethical performance do not lead to a change in fashion consumption.

During the past two decades the fashion industry changed considerably. So called fast fashion retailers, such as H&M and Zara, grew dramatically and succeeded in placing their clothing items as fashionable on an international scale. The Swedish fast fashion retailer H&M, for instance, has been ranked 26th on the list of best global brands in 2012 by Interbrand – only a few ranks behind Louis Vuitton (17th) and ahead of the sports fashion retailer Nike (26th). Zara is ranked 37th in the same ranking, with the next fashion retailer in the ranking being another sports fashion retailer, adidas, ranked 60th (Interbrand, 2013). It is remarkable that only one high fashion brand is ranked higher than the two fast fashion retailers, especially since neither H&M nor Zara appeared in that ranking in 2002. The placement in the Interbrand ranking, which combines the financial performance of the branded products, the role of the brand in the purchase decision, and brand strength in one monetary measure, mirrors the tremendous success of these fast fashion retailers.

Though according to the brand value, internationally seen, H&M and Zara are the top players, these fast fashion retailers are by no means the only ones that succeeded and grew during the past years. Overall, the fast fashion segment experienced a greater growth than the fashion industry as a whole (Cachon and Swinney, 2011; Mihm, 2010). Fast fashion retailers are now omnipresent and it is hard to spot a person on the streets who does not wear at least one fast fashion clothing item.

Moreover, the success of fast fashion influenced the entire fashion industry in so far that retailers are forced to adapt to the speed of fast fashion retailers by introducing more seasons and update their assortments with the latest trends (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010).

The secret to the success of fast fashion is quite simple: Making the latest trends available to everyone is the idea that stands behind the fast fashion business model. Low prices and efficient supply chains make it possible.

Yet, low prices for fashionable clothing items come at a cost: Compromises are made on the quality in terms of textiles, stitching, and consequently durability. Furthermore, the entire fast fashion business model is the epitome of unsustainability. Fast assortment rotation, great volumes, and planned obsolescence lead to, amongst others, high volumes of waste – hence the term ‘disposable fashion’.

While the current fast fashion business model ensures high margins and worldwide success, fast fashion retailers face two major concerns. The consumers who grew up with fast fashion, the so called Generation Y (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010), are growing older and becoming richer (Sull and Turconi, 2008). At the same time, environmental awareness among Western affluent societies is growing and awareness of the negative environmental impacts of throwaway fashion is reality (Niinimäki, 2010). What if consumers’ preferences will favour more qualitative products and what if actual purchase behaviour will catch up the ethical or environmental values held by consumers? Will fast fashion consumers turn their backs on disposable fashion as a result of changing values?

While there are voices that claim the times of shrinking replacement cycles and ever decreasing prices of fashion are over (Burshtein, 2012) and that environmental values will lead to more ethical decisions (Carrigan and Attala, 2001), clothing purchases are not exempt from the so called value-action or attitude-behaviour gap (Niinimäki, 2010). Even fast fashion consumers who express high environmental concerns and try to implement these in their lives by, for instance, recycling do not make efforts to change their consumption habits in the area of fashion (Joy et al., 2012). This finding suggests that environmental values are an important but not a sufficient condition for fast fashion retailers to truly change their business model.

To shed more light on the value-action gap in respect to fast fashion consumption and consequently to better understand whether changing values represent a threat to the marketing of fast fashion products or not and why, this study employs the practice theory perspective. Practice theory has been shown to be a fruitful approach in investigating consumption and sustainable consumption. The advantage of a practice theory approach is the explicit consideration of materiality in contrast to the sole examination of meaning dimensions of consumption.

Materiality is a crucial part because the material ultimately affects the meaning associated with a practice. In the development of the Nordic Walking practice, for instance, the walking sticks initially represented a barrier for the diffusion of the practice because walking sticks were associated with seniority and weakness. Here, the material (the walking sticks) affected the meaning negatively.

How products are consumed depends on “culturally and temporally specific expectations of doing and having” (Røpke, 2009, p. 2495). That means that the meaning of a practice (emotions, beliefs, ideas) ultimately influences the competence dimension, i.e. what is the ‘right’ thing to do, and that it has to be placed in the wider cultural context.

One example of how material affects meaning and competence is the market for bottled water in the American market. The technological advancements that allowed PET to be used for small bottles opened up for new uses of bottled water by consumers due to increased durability and light weight (Holt, 2012). This technical innovation facilitated a recombination of the elements material, meaning, and competence in the practice of drinking water.

Due to a limited time frame, the study excludes the competence dimension and aims to identify the material and meaning elements of fast fashion practice.

The research question to be answered is: Which material and meaning elements are reinforcing the fast fashion practice?

The results of the study can shed more light on consumption patterns of fast fashion and hence are of importance for those who are interested in fast fashion as a study area, be it from a perspective of a proponent of sustainable fashion or from that of a fast fashion marketer. The understanding of the fast fashion practice can aid in identifying trends in consumers’ decisions as well as possibilities for slow fashion to be marketed. Also the political arena can benefit from the insights and use these for policies which aim at promoting sustainable consumption.

2. Literature review

Previous research on clothing and fashion is arranged around the core topic of identity formation in contemporary consumer culture. When screening studies on clothing and fashion, several interconnected core topics emerge and will be outlined next. First, the topic of clothing as a means of identity formation will be presented, followed by selected sub-topics: the connection between ever-increasing affluent consumption (consumption of novelty) and fashion, the role of fashion in each individual's pursuit of a solution to the duality between individuality and conformity, and the connection between fashion and anxiety. It is important to stress that these topics cannot be separated clearly from one another and that this discussion is taking place against the background of contemporary consumerist culture in western affluent societies.

2.1. Consumer Culture, Identity Building, and Fashion

Contemporary society is characterised by a decline of importance of, or even a lack of traditional institutions, such as class or religion. These cultural institutions used to determine individuals' identities to a big extent and provided a sense of stability (Clarke and Miller, 2002; Dittmar, 2008). With the lack of boundaries, which individuals are born into, identity is no longer prescribed and can be shaped by each individual.

In fact, individuals seek "a new form of moral consolidation" (Clarke and Miller, 2002, p.2010). Material possessions can be said to have replaced these traditional institutions and, hence, became vital for the construction, expression, and maintenance of identity as the subjective self-concept held by a person (Dittmar, 2008). Campbell (2004) suggests that shopping and consumption are means to discover one's own identity and to be sure of one's existence. He argues that shopping is "an ideal context in which to pursue this quest for meaning" (Campbell, 2004, p.36). Consequently, identity-related aspects are also drivers of consumption. According to Dittmar (2008), "the desire to express or enhance identity" (p.4) is playing a role in peoples' motivation to acquire new products.

Individuals hold an ideal identity which is shaped by consumer culture ideals. By appropriating and consuming goods and their associated meaning, individuals aspire to come closer to this individually held ideal identity. Functional buying motives play a subordinate role. The drive towards the ideal identity and happiness is stronger than, for instance, concerns about practical purpose of the acquired goods (Dittmar, 2008).

Clothing is an integral part in every individual's life. It is widely agreed upon that, in the contemporary consumer culture, clothing plays a significant role in the construction of individuals' social identity and the communication of it to the outside as well as in the construction of the self (Feinberg et al., 1992; Niinimäki, 2010; Simmel in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997; Miller, 2010; Campbell, 2004; Dittmar, 2008). Daily use, a high level of public display, and the ease of manipulating choice are reasons why clothing is used in identity definition (Feinberg et al., 1992). Research on clothing shows that clothing affects perceptions of and behaviours towards the wearer by the outside, and that individuals choose clothing, which in their own perception matches the identity that is held by them (Feinberg et al., 1992).

Individuals try to imitate those whom they aspire to and who embody – in these individuals' eyes – a good and successful life (Dittmar, 2008). In his account on "Fashion, Adornment and Style" Simmel explains that the imitation of higher strata – those whom people from lower classes aspire to – is most easily achieved within fashion as only money is required, not "an

individual proof of worthiness” (Simmel in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997, p.190). McCracken (1988) states that clothes are purchased in order to come closer to a desired lifestyle.

Consuming fast moving fashion has been associated with the ‘affluent identity’ by Hurth (2010). The affluent identity has strong social support within consumerist societies. It is promoted by advertising and in fashion industries as the material ‘good life’ (Dittmar, 2008) and actualised through consumption, especially consumption “that has strong social and market presence” (Hurth, 2010, p.128).

Now, having introduced how identity building is played out in mass consumer societies, it is important to stress that an individual does not possess one unified identity. Rather, an individual holds several self-concepts (Dittmar, 2008), which result from the multiplicity of daily life and, hence, the multiplicity of social roles (e.g. working life versus family life). “As Binkley (2008: 602) argues, the idea of “multiple selves in evolution” is central to fast fashion lovers.” (Joy et al., 2012, p.276).

2.2. Consumption of Novelty and Fashion

Remarkable in modern consumerist society is the ever-increasing consumption of products, including clothing and fashion. There seems to be a sheer endless desire for novelty. Campbell (1994) explains that individuals desire novel products based on their imagined emotions associated with the imagined acquisition; daydreaming about these pleasurable emotions leads to actual desire for the acquisition of the product in question with the aim to experience the pleasurable emotions which the individual experienced imaginatively (Campbell, 1994).

Crucial in this context is the existence of a strong emotional response to products or services. This emotional response serves as a reassurance of ‘reality’ of one’s existence. According to Campbell (2004), this emotional response is the source for consumption of novelty as the same products or services cannot elicit an emotional response of the same strength after initial exposure. Hence, individuals seek out new products and/or services, driven by their need for reassurance of their existence and maintenance of a sense of identity.

Another aspect driving consumption is the perceived gap between the actual and ideal identity. It is argued that by acquiring one product, the ideal lifestyle cannot be achieved (Niinimäki, 2010) and novel products provide only a “momentary high” (Dittmar, 2008, p.202). Hence, after the acquisition of a novel product the desire for new products is inevitable.

2.3. Duality between Individuality and Conformity and Fashion

Identity building occurs in a tension between individuality versus belongingness to social groups or autonomy versus conformity (Thompson and Haytko, 1997).

Simmel looks upon fashion as a way of individual expression (Clarke and Miller, 2002). Fashion is argued to result from a dualism between conformity and creativity. On the one hand, fashion is argued to be “the imitation of a given pattern and thus satisfies the need for social adaptation” (Simmel in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997, p.189). On the other hand, fashion also satisfies the need for differentiation through novel designs as well as the difference of fashions between classes. It is important to notice that fashion is by no means the only way in which individuals strive to solve the duality between social equalisation and the need for differentiation (Simmel in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997).

According to Simmel, fashion results from class division. Hence, fashion can differentiate social groups; it holds groups together and distincts them from other social groups. In Simmel's account, however, these social groups refer to groups which are different in status, not social groups of equal status. Lower social groups strive towards higher strata that in turn strive for novelty as soon as the lower groups achieve imitation. This longing of lower strata for imitation of higher strata which in turn strive to differentiate from the lower ones is most easily played out in areas which are subject to fashion (Simmel in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997).

Hence, Simmel (in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997) argues that fashion is a result of formal social motivations (connection and differentiation). The lack of some objectively measurable 'sense' in the different fashions (e.g. length and width of a skirt), and which clothing is appropriate in which instance serve as evidence for this conclusion. Moreover, as the appropriation of fashions is only dependent on the availability of the necessary budget, Simmel (in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997) predicts a speeding up of this process (imitation and differentiation) and thus explains consumption of novelty within areas which are subject to fashion.

Clarke and Miller (2002) argue that individuals are faced with creating their own morality in contemporary society. Hence, they consult support systems, such as magazines or family members, to make the 'normative' choice. Conformity is thus important in the social context.

2.4. Fashion and Anxiety

As much freedom the ability of constructing one's own identity brings, as much problematic this new freedom turns out to be. In a society with a variety of products and activities embodying different meanings, which in turn can be used by individuals to shape the multiple social identities against the background of a tension between belongingness versus autonomy, insecurity is an almost unavoidable consequence. As Zukin and Maguire (2004) note: "Identity shifts from a fixed set of characteristics determined by birth and ascription to a reflexive, ongoing, individual project shaped by appearance and performance. This freedom, however, comes at the cost of security; without fixed rules, the individual is constantly at risk of getting it wrong, and anxiety attends each choice." (pp.180-181).

As fashion is playing an important part in identity construction, it is not surprising that fashion choice has been found to be associated with anxiety for female consumers by Clarke and Miller (2002). The anthropological account on fashion and anxiety points out that fashion choice is largely dependent on the social context of wearing clothes (such as different occasions), not on the fashion industry and advertising. The important question for the consumer is what she should wear. Embarrassment and anxiety are found to attend clothing choice as a result of the social context.

Considerations of "more adventurous or diverse clothing" (Clarke and Miller, 2002, p.192) lead to fears which are coped with by referring to different institutions and relationships. By referring to, for instance, the mother or clothing catalogues the individual seeks to 'get it right' by following the normative choice. The search for the normative choice is a result of the desire for self-reassurance following from the pressure of creating one's own identity (Clarke and Miller, 2002).

Anxiety, however, does not necessarily attend every consumption choice (Warde, 1994) and not every female experiences distress and insecurity when faced with the decision what to wear (Clarke and Miller, 2002).

2.5. Clothing and Fashion Research - In a Nutshell

As evident from the literature review, the body on fashion research is mainly concerned with sociocultural and identity-building aspects of fashion consumption; less so with materiality, ‘stuff’ and ideas, aspirations and symbolic meanings characteristic of fast fashion.

From a consumer culture perspective, patterns of consumption are a result of personal values that represent the consumerist imagery. A transformation in consumption patterns is brought about by changes in personal values (Holt, 2012). Holt (2012) discusses this view in relation to sustainable consumption and explains that the resulting approach to change unsustainable consumption is to educate individuals about environmental impacts of their consumption and to provide incentives that make sustainable consumption more attractive. This is equally applicable to consumption in general: as soon as individuals become reflexive about their consumption outcomes, values can change resulting in changed consumption patterns. Consequently, the title question “Do fast fashion retailers have to be alert to changing customer values?” of this study could quickly be answered with a “Yes!”.

However, this causal perspective on the link between values and consumption has shown not to be true in the field of sustainable consumption (Holt, 2012) and a body of scholarly work on the so called value-action or attitude-behaviour gap developed. It has been shown to exist in purchasing behaviour of clothing (Niinimäki, 2010). Even though the focus of the study does not solely lie on ethical values and unsustainable consumption, it does, however, lie on values leading to the ever-increasing consumption of fast fashion products.

Within fast fashion consumption, individuals have to compromise on quality and ethical performance. Nevertheless, fast fashion business’ success is continuing. Thus, it can be argued that an approach which goes beyond the examination of identity-building and meanings of fast fashion consumption is necessary to answer the title question.

Before the theoretical perspective will be introduced, a short overview of the fast fashion business model will be presented next.

2.6. The Fast Fashion Business Model and its Impact

Fast fashion has been defined by Byun and Sternquist (2008) as a “marketing approach to respond to the latest trends by turning the inventory at a rapid rate”.

The so called fast fashion model has its name since the 1990s and builds on the idea of quick response (Martínez de Albéniz Margalef, 2009). The business model consists of certain characteristics: permanent assortment rotation, limited supply, low prices, an efficient and agile supply chain, and short lead times (Martínez de Albéniz Margalef, 2009; Byun and Sternquist, 2011; Joy et al., 2012). It is worth noticing that the rise of fast fashion occurred parallel to the development of less restrictive import and trade regulations (Burshtein, 2012).

The fast, permanent assortment rotation represents a big deviation to the traditional fashion business model where collections used to be updated semi-annually (Sull and Turconi, 2008). Instead, fast fashion retailers such as H&M and Zara update their collections on an ongoing basis. At Zara, for instance, new products arrive every week. In addition to that, the display of the clothes is changed on a weekly or even daily basis (Martínez de Albéniz Margalef, 2009).

Moreover, product supply is often limited deliberately (Byun and Sternquist, 2011). A sense of exclusivity – ‘massclusivity’ (Joy et al., 2012) – is created and is driving demand. Consumers believe that they have to buy a product straight away (Byun and Sternquist, 2011)

or they “will not be able to get it later” (Lynn cited in Joy et al., 2012, p.282). A very good example is the Swedish fast fashion retailer H&M. The retailer regularly features collections which have been designed in cooperation with celebrities or famous designers, such as Madonna or Karl Lagerfeld. Customers are rushing to buy the limited products which sold out stocks within a few days.

Low prices are ensured by high production volumes and low textile and stitching quality. On average, fast fashion products are made to last ten washings (Joy et al., 2012) – fast fashion is made to be disposable. Both factors together once again shorten the replacement cycle and consequently enforce consumers’ drive to frequent the retail outlets more often and to buy more often (Byun and Sternquist, 2011; Joy et al., 2012). In fact, Martínez de Albéniz Margalef (2009) states that fast fashion consumers frequent the stores more often and are more likely to buy impulsively.

Even though the fast assortment rotation demands first and foremost more costly design work, the higher costs are set off by low production costs and higher sales; the margins within the fast fashion segment lie above those within the one of more traditional fashion (Martínez de Albéniz Margalef, 2009; Sull and Turconi, 2008).

In order to deliver the high variety of products and in order to be able to respond to the latest fashion trends, fast fashion retailers need a high control of their supply chain. At the same time it is vital that the supply chain is very agile (Martínez de Albéniz Margalef, 2009). Lead times within the fast fashion segment for individual products can be as short as just ten days (Martínez de Albéniz Margalef, 2011). The short lead times allow fast fashion retailers to imitate the newest trends on high fashion catwalks or the fashion pieces worn by, for instance, celebrities.

The permanent assortment rotation provides fast fashion retailers with a competitive edge over retailers with a more traditional approach. According to Martínez de Albéniz Margalef (2009), customers will rather go to the retailers who employ permanent assortment rotation as they will expect to find new products. Consequently, the fast fashion model influenced the entire fashion industry: traditional fashion retailers attempted to compete on the basis of prices, which in the long term led to the bankruptcy of many retailers, leaving a highly consolidated fashion industry consisting of basically only very high priced and very low priced clothing (Cline, 2012).

The general environmental trend is, at least partly, embraced by fast fashion retailers. H&M, for instance, produces a ‘Conscious Collection’.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Perspective

Following more than 20 years of consumption investigation from a cultural perspective with a focus on the sociocultural context of consumption, consumers' experiences, and the symbolism and ideologies of consumption of certain products and/or services (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), an increased interest in practice theories brought about an increased application of these theories in the study of consumption (Warde, 2005; Røpke, 2009). It is argued that the investigation of symbolic meanings of consumption and its role in self-identity development of the consumer provides only a partial understanding of consumption (Warde, 2005). Theories of practice have the potential to provide new insights into consumption (Warde, 2004), and allow to develop a new perspective on affluent consumption characterised by quantity and novelty (Solér, 2013, under review).

Another advantage of a practice theory approach is the bridging of the dualism between existing social order, i.e. the social totality, and the individual (Røpke, 2009). Social is neither located within the individual nor within the social order; the social is located in practices. The only logical consequence is that, amongst others, economic, cultural, political, and legal institutions – Røpke (2009) names these 'social patterns' – are constituted by practices. At the same time, they also provide a frame for practices as performances (Røpke, 2009), i.e. there is clearly a path dependence which makes the analysis of history a necessary part of analysis.

It is important to notice that there is no homogeneous practice theory with consistent definitions and a unified way of application in research. For the scope of the study, practices will be defined as following: "[Practices] involve the active integration of materials, meanings and forms of competence" (Shove and Pantzar, 2005, p.45). This definition of practice has been chosen as the application of the three constituting dimensions/elements/linkages – material, meaning, and competence – has been shown to be fruitful and relatively uncomplicated to handle (Røpke, 2009).

The competence component represents knowledge and skills. A practitioner acquires the necessary skills to carry out a practice throughout time through experience and training (Røpke, 2009). Competence is not only described by rules and principles, but is also embodied by the practitioner in the shape of know-how. The meaning component explains how practitioners make sense of a practice. This includes ideas, emotions, beliefs, and understandings. Meanings can be shared by several practices. The material dimension includes 'stuff' as well as practitioners' bodies. The components of practices are interconnected and clear boundaries between the components cannot be drawn (Røpke, 2009).

Practices evolve and develop as relations between the three elements change; the relations are thus "of defining importance" (Shove and Pantzar, 2005, p.45) in the examination of changes in practices and consequently are the key to understand changed behaviour (Warde, 2005). Relations between the elements are defined in the enactment of practices by individuals (actors), thus sustaining or transforming practices (Warde, 2005). Consumption is occurring as a consequence of the enactment of practices because practitioners require material requisites to perform practices. Thus, the development of practices has implications on consumption patterns (Shove et al., 2012) and practices become the subject of investigation.

Due to time constraints, the focus lies on the interaction of material and meaning elements of the fast fashion practice. The competence elements are not examined explicitly and only

appear in the analysis as a result of a lack of clear boundaries between the three dimensions of social practice.

3.2. Data collection – Inspiration and Procedure

The study is of conceptual character is oriented mainly by the application of a practice theory approach by Shove and Pantzar (2005) and, to a lesser degree, by the market construction paradigm as outlined by Holt (2012). While Holt (2012) explicitly focuses on the market construction using a practice theory perspective when considering material aspects such as technologies and medially transmitted messages, Shove and Pantzar (2005) study the development of a market indirectly, by studying the dynamics of the emergence and development of a practice.

In their account on the emergence and development of Nordic walking Shove and Pantzar (2005) explore the roles played by consumers and producers. Using secondary data, the authors develop an account on ‘doing walking’ in the first step and then elaborate on the practice of Nordic walking in United Kingdom and Finland separately by outlining the material, meaning, and competence elements. For this part, Shove and Pantzar (2005) employ data obtained from interviews with people involved in production and distribution of Nordic walking sticks, people who promote Nordic walking, and physical and online advertisements and articles from popular and trade press. A focus group study and the authors’ participation in a Nordic walking course supplement the data, representing the consumer side.

In the same vein, this study employs data that covers retailers of fast fashion, consumers of fast fashion, and the representation of fast fashion in media. Due to a limited time frame and a lack of previous research on fast fashion from a practice perspective, no interviews have been conducted. Consumers’ views and doings have been investigated with the help of previous research on fashion consumption and sustainability and a search on the video platform YouTube. The producers’ side has been covered by general information on the fast fashion business model and retailers’ online shops and company websites (mainly H&M/H&M Group and Zara/Inditex Group). Journalistic online articles and video material supplemented the data by representing the representation of fast fashion in media. This material also contained statement of fast fashion consumers.

Furthermore, Cline’s (2012) recent publication on low priced clothing in the US context informed the data collection and analysis to a high degree. Being engaged in fast fashion practice, the author’s previous knowledge on the topic guided data collection substantially.

3.3. Validity of Findings

The findings of this study put different streams of literature together, thus offering an overview of the fast fashion practice. The application of the theoretical perspective in the context of the presence of a value-action gap is supported by previous research (see Holt, 2012). Moreover, the findings of the thesis are supported by literature on clothing, fashion, and consumer culture.

However, the validity is limited due to several factors and the findings should be looked upon critically in further research. One major point is that the time constraints did not allow interviews with consumers or people involved in the marketing of fast fashion. Moreover, the data collection is by no means exhaustive and represents rather a highly visible sample on the Internet.

A more accurate account of meaning elements tied into the fast fashion practice could be developed by combining (1) ethnological interviews with consumers, (2) interviews of marketers of fast fashion, (3) a thorough content analysis of fast fashion advertising, and (4) the representation of fast fashion in online and print media.

It is important to notice that the findings of the study draw on data from different continents, mainly US and Western Europe. It is likely that meanings and material elements vary especially across US, Western Europe, Asian countries, and depend on the time of mainstream success of fast fashion, as practices, according to Shove and Pantzar (2005), are not simply transferred but rather reinvented against cultural characteristics of markets. More meanings than those accounted for within the scope of the present study are likely to exist. These can depend on demographic factors but also on level of knowledge and involvement in the practice.

However, results of this study can be argued to be applicable to female, rather heavy consumers of fast fashion aged under 25 years, as these are typically the demographic group that is engaged in fashion and at the same time has a limited income at disposal (Cline, 2012).

4. Results and Analysis

Following the example of Shove and Pantzar (2005), a brief summary of the role of clothing is presented. This serves as a means to develop a basic understanding of the routine activity of clothing. In a next step, the material elements of the fast fashion business model will be explained in more detail, leading over to the meaning elements associated with fast fashion. The last section of this chapter attempts then to emphasise how the elements configure each other against the background of contemporary consumer culture and what the implications for identity formation, as outlined in the literature review, are.

4.1. The Role of Clothing

Every individual learns from the childhood on what clothing means and how it should be practiced. Clothing has clearly two different ‘roles’: on the one hand, clothing has functional properties; on the other hand, clothing carries meaning and can have signalling character. These roles of clothing are not necessarily clearly distinct from one another.

The most basic function of clothing items is the protection of the body from the environment. Clothes serve the thermal insulation of the body when it is too cold, when it is raining or snowing. In a working environment, clothing items such as hard-toed shoes can protect from injuries. Moreover, clothing allows individuals to take part in public life as it is unacceptable to show the naked body in public.

Strictly speaking, the functional properties of clothing are exhausted already at that point and clothing items become symbolic resources. Boys and girls, man and women wear different clothes which differ in cut and, most often, in colours and fabric. Clothes can either accentuate anatomical gender properties or hide them. Moreover, clothing has to suit different occasions. For instance, clothes worn during working time and those worn during leisure time most likely differ in style. Clothes can signal to the outside which occupation a person has (e.g. the suit of a banker versus the uniform of a servant versus clothes of security staff). In leisure time, clothes can differ significantly depending on the occasion (e.g. family festivities versus watching TV at home versus eating dinner out). Through elaborate design or expensive materials, clothing has the potential to signal the level of wealth of a person.

Individuals are aware of this symbolic power of clothing items and do not only form cues about others with the help of the clothing these people wear, but also chose clothes which are perceived to represent their own character (see “Literature Review”).

In early years of every individual’s life, clothing is less a personal choice. It rather depends on parents and their views on appropriate clothing. Parents are the first ‘institution’ that teaches individuals where to buy clothes, how often to buy clothes, how to dress, how often to change clothes, etc. With a growing age, individuals gain more freedom in choosing own clothes. However, as Clarke and Miller (2002) illustrate, with increasing freedom, individuals continue to seek a normative choice by referring to expert systems.

This basic outline of clothing makes clear that individuals are aware of the cultural significance of clothing as this is what they learn.

4.2. Material and Meaning Elements of Fast Fashion

With the end of World War II, a boom in consumption began and the current consumerist society with associated values and beliefs had started to develop. So began the fashion

industry and consumption patterns of clothing to change. This part outlines the material and meaning elements of fast fashion separately.

4.2.1. Material Elements

The starting point in the examination is Reckwitz's (2002) argument that carrying out a practice requires artefacts which are used in a specific way. Just as every social practice, the practice of fast fashion involves materials. Material elements include "things, technologies,, tangible physical entities, and the stuff of which objects are made" (Shove et al., 2012, p.14). For the purposes of the study, the focus lies on the materialisation of the fast fashion business model visible for end-consumers and leaves out aspects such as technological changes in manufacturing.

Firstly, the material elements are the fast fashion clothing items as such, including their properties such as durability, possibilities for mending, colours, cuts, textiles, amounts produced, and price. Moreover, the retail stores, including location, accessibility, store density, size, in-store design, product display are also elements of the practice as they accommodate the fast fashion clothing items to be explored. Advertising is considered, too.

Retail stores

The high demand for low priced clothes allowed for openings of numerous stores, making fast fashion available basically everywhere and, in times of online retailing, at every point in time. The Swedish H&M Group, for instance, has approximately 2.800 physical stores in 49 countries, which includes the brands H&M, H&M Home, COS, Monki, Weekday, Cheap Monday, and & Other Stories (H&M, 2013a). Moreover, the fast fashion retailer operates online sales platforms in eight of its markets (H&M, 2013b). The growth strategy for the year 2013 includes the opening of 350 new stores throughout the year and the introduction of online sales in the United States (H&M, 2013b). The Spanish fast fashion retailer Zara, that is part of the Inditex Group, has 1.751 shops in 86 countries (Inditex, 2013a), and, as H&M, operates an online shopping platform. Moreover, the Inditex Group has numerous other brand concepts offering fast fashion for different target groups in physical and online stores. In addition to global fast fashion giants, there are numerous local fast fashion retailers, making fast fashion omnipresent.

Moreover, fast fashion outlets are not, as one could probably think, located in out of town locations to promote cost savings in store rent as this is the case for super- and hypermarkets. The internationally successful chains H&M and Zara made it part of their business strategy to locate their stores in the best and consequently expensive locations (H&M, 2013b; Inditex, 2013a). Consequently, fast fashion becomes easily accessible and with the number of physical and online shops omnipresent.

Already the US fashion chain The Gap, which revolutionized the American fashion landscape many years ago (and by now is out of fashion), has had success with the strategy of easily accessible shops close to consumers. In his article for Vogue, Van Meter (1990) noted that Americans could "simply pop into the neighborhood Gap as they do the 7-Eleven and, without much commitment or thought, come out looking as if they were *born* with good taste." (Van Meter, 1990 cited in Cline, 2012, p.19).

The interior of known fast fashion retailers' stores mirrors the fast fashion's claim of fashion and not only cheap clothing. Stores of, amongst others, H&M, Zara, Bershka, Mango, and Forever 21 are brightly lit, display clothes by department, colour, and style, present

fashionable combinations on mannequins, and do not make extensive use of big (red) price tags advertising deals (Appendix I). In the same vein, Cline (2012) notes: “H&M is alluring because it doesn’t *seem* cheap. Where discounters of decades past were fluorescent-lit and disorganized, H&M stores are all gleaming white walls and polished ash wood floors.” (Cline, 2012, p.33).

Clothing items

Not that long ago, clothes represented valuable items which were taken care of. According to a study by the U.S. Department of Labor (2006), the average American family spent about 20% of the household income on apparel in 1901 (VisualEconomics, 2013), compared to 2.8% in 2010 (The Nest, 2013). Euromonitor International (2013) reported that 5.6% of total consumer expenditure were spent on clothing and footwear in United Kingdom in 2011 (Germany: 5.0, Sweden: 4.9; EU: 5.3%). The decline in relative consumer spending on clothes can be explained by the decrease of prices for clothing and the shift of preferences towards the cheap fashion items by consumers. In fact, the amount of clothes individuals in developed countries possess today increased and would suggest that relative consumer spending should have increased or at least remained more or less stable – the opposite of what is reality as illustrated before. The American Apparel and Footwear Association (2008) reported that an American purchases an average of 64 clothing items per year. In the United Kingdom, six billion clothing items, 100 per person, are owned (CompareMySpend, 2012).

The main properties of the fast fashion clothing items can be summed up pretty quickly: low priced, limited durability, including limited quality and limited options for mending, most often basic in cut and up to date in colour, textile, details.

Characteristic of fast fashion clothing items is the price level these products are sold at. Fast fashion is typically low priced, whereas prices vary depending on the elaborateness of the design and on production country. Rather simple styles of tops or jeans are sold at the lowest prices; these clothing items are usually referred to as basics. In 2006, the assortment composition at H&M consisted of about 70% basic clothing items and 30% fashion items. The share of fashion items at Zara accounted for 60% of the assortment in the same year, while The Gap sold mainly basic products (99%) (Martinez de Albeniz, 2011). A basic top at H&M is sold for 4.95€ in 2013, the lowest price for a jeans is 9.95€. These basic products can be found constantly in the assortments of fast fashion retailers and do not need to be redesigned from year to year. They can be preordered a long time in advance making the production in overseas factories possible. Basic designs are also less susceptible to fashion trends and can be produced in very big amounts without a high risk. As labour costs, alongside with the amount, are the main source of cost savings, very low prices can be achieved and maintained.

Overall, price levels stay in the lower segment. At the time of the data collection for this study, the highest price for a pair of jeans at H&M was 39.95€. The overall price level at Zara is higher than that of H&M (Martinez de Albeniz, 2011). This price difference has probably its source in the difference of the assortment composition with Zara putting a bigger emphasis on fashion items. Because fashion demand cannot be predicted a fast response to newest trends is necessary (Christopher et al., 2004); a short lead time becomes crucial for success and reduced risk for unsold stock. Products need to be produced closer to the point of sale. Indeed, Zara sourced approximately 64% of its products from Europe in 2006, while H&M sourced less than 40% from Europe. Typically, fashion items are priced higher than basic

items. Not only because they often require production in countries with higher labour costs, but because fashion items require the work of designers.

Fashion items imitate the latest trends from high fashion catwalks (unsurprisingly leading to many copyright lawsuits). In 2007, the Inditex Group produced 30,000 different designs. On average, an item at Zara has a store life of four weeks and new products are introduced weekly (Martinez de Albeniz, 2011); the assortment rotates permanently. This strategy of fast assortment rotation is typical for fast fashion retailers. It increases store traffic and, by creating a feeling of scarcity, it forces impulse buying leading to earlier realized sales (Martinez de Albeniz, 2011).

The quality of fast fashion clothing is rather limited. On its official web presence, the H&M Group states: “Our business concept is to give the customer unbeatable value by offering fashion and quality at the best price.” (H&M, 2013c). Fast fashion holds typical characteristics of planned obsolescence as identified by Guiltinan (2009, in Joy et al., 2012). This strategy allows for cost savings and maintenance of the low prices.

Special Limited Collections

Several fast fashion retailers offer limited collections created in cooperation with high fashion designers, models, and other stars. Examples of such collaborations are H&M’s collaborations with Versace, Karl Lagerfeld, Madonna, and Lana Del Rey, Mango’s collaboration with Kate Moss, Forever 21’s collaboration with Brian Lichtenberg, and many more. Such collaborations are usually promoted heavily before their launch, and are sold out within few days. H&M has special rules for shopping items of such special collections in physical stores and its online store is regularly unable to cope with the high traffic resulting from the high demand for the limited items with a touch of high fashion. The Swedish fast fashion giant H&M also features a “Conscious Collection” which is a reaction to the growing environmental awareness.

Advertising

Not all fast fashion retailers advertise their products. Unlike H&M, the Spanish retailer Zara has a low marketing budget which is dedicated to in-store promotion (Sull and Turconi, 2008). However, it is worth taking a look at highly visible advertising, such as that of H&M, as it can be argued to affect fast fashion imagery. Clothing items are presented by seemingly flawless models. Recently, the fast fashion retailer introduced four new models, who now present clothing items in the catalogue, as “The new icons” (Appendix II). The models are presented with names and are presenting numerous different styles. In a fashion update catalogue from 2013, one model (Joan) is presenting 24 different outfits on the 39 pages which feature new clothing items for women.

4.2.2. Meaning Elements

Cline (2012) states that low priced fashion remade the clothing industry and, which is more important for this study, “changed the way we think about clothing” (Cline, 2012, p.3). That is, the fast fashion business, the materialization of it, affected what clothing means to consumers. Three major topics could be identified: disposable fashion, democratizing fashion and cheap chic, and bargain hunters’ pride. Throughout all topics, price plays a prominent role. Low prices play not only an important role in generating revenues for fast fashion retailers and staying competitive but also affected the meaning of clothes. The identified meaning dimensions are outlined next.

Disposable fashion

As a consequence of low prices, consumer not only purchase higher quantities of clothes, but it appears that they often simply do not care about spending money on a clothing item, even if it might be out of fashion soon or break apart quickly or if it is simply unnecessary. Councell, a 23-year old woman who was accompanied by Cline (2012) during a shopping trip and of whom friends say that she owns “enough clothing to open a store” (Councell cited in Cline, 2012, p.11), states: “If it’s under \$20, honestly I don’t mind spending it” (Councell cited in Cline, 2012, p.13). It appears that there is no need to consider whether a new item is needed, whether it contributes to the variety of the wardrobe, whether it fulfills a specific function, or how long and often the item would be used.

In the same vein, an anonymous interviewee from UK states: “If it’s cheap, then it doesn’t matter if you wear it once or twice and then it’s not fashionable anymore because you’ve only spent about four quid.” (Anonymous interviewee in ioio622, 2007).

Another interviewee proclaims: “I bought that top for like 2.99 [£]. I don’t give a shit” (Anonymous interviewee in ioio622, 2007).

Consequently, many clothing items land in closets never or barely worn (Cline, 2012). According to WRAP, the Waste Prevention Organisation in UK, 30% of the clothes in UK (accounts for about 1.7 billion items) remain unworn after being purchased (CompareMySpend, 2012).

As low prices allow fast fashion retailers to bring more clothing items on a more regular basis to the consumer, the continuous change in fashion speeds up. While traditional fashion retailers introduced products semi-annually, new trends can appear on a weekly basis now. Fashion is not durable, and the low prices reinforce this state. Consumers buy the low priced products because they expect the items to be out of fashion quickly (as seen in the statement by the first anonymous interviewee). This goes so far, that at least a part of consumers believe that fashion is supposed to be throwaway. Shada, a 23-year old personal assistant from London thinks that fashion is supposed to be disposable, even though, according to her, she is buying many clothing items from high street brands. She is giving an ordinary top away to a charity shop after having worn it for five or six times (Howardrjohnson, 2009).

The attitude towards clothing a throwaway items becomes also clear in the statement by Alan Ng, the owner of the Dynotex garment factory in New York: “The most general consumer would rather buy the cheap stuff because they don’t want their clothes the next season” [...] “They will spend \$20 [on a garment], so they can buy sixty or one hundred pieces, but they will not spend \$150 dollars [on one garment and buy fewer pieces]. It’s very wasteful.” (Ng cited in Cline, 2012, p.59).

This stands in contrast to the attitude and relation of people towards clothes only a few decades ago, when individuals possessed only a limited amount of clothes which have been all worn, taken care of and mended and retailored until they became unusable (Cline, 2012).

Democratizing Fashion

Fast fashion is strongly associated with the democratization of fashion, i.e. the development away from extremely expensive fashion being designed by couturiers for patronage by elite groups towards fashion being available for everyone (English, 2007). In an online article summarizing the history of the democratization of fashion for Time Magazine, Pous (2013)

lists fast fashion as one aspect of this development due to the three material aspects of the fast fashion business model: clothing design that is imitating latest catwalk trends and the omnipresence of fast fashion retailers, and the price level which makes the fast fashion clothing items affordable to everyone.

This development goes in line with the general societal transformations such as emancipation of individuals from traditional authoritarian institutions and rise of equality as mentioned by Clarke and Miller (2002).

The democratization of fashion, in line with general equalisation of society, is accompanied by a certain anti-elite sentiment. H&M made it part of the business concept to “interpret the latest fashion trends and create collections that are accessible to all” (H&M, 2013c). The perhaps most evident occurrence of the democratization of fashion through fast fashion are the limited collections created in collaboration with known designers and stars as described in the chapter on the materialisation of the fast fashion business model.

Celebrities are rarely seen wearing one clothing item more than once (Cline, 2012). Price levels of fast fashion makes it possible for virtually everybody to wear a new outfit every day or at least to come closer to this ideal.

Bargain Hunters’ Pride

In line with the sense for equality within contemporary western affluent societies and the anti-elite sentiment is the meaning dimension named “Bargain Hunters’ Pride” here. Buying large quantities of fashionable clothes are associated with pride today. Buying low priced fashion clothes is not seen as a compromise resulting from a restricted budget available for spending anymore. In an interview with the New York Times, Sara Jessica Parker, who performed the role of Carrie in the hyped TV show “Sex and the City”, recalls an incidence when she admired trousers of a woman who subsequently told these trousers were bought in H&M for fourteen dollars. “[Now] people have bragging rights about what they paid,” concludes Parker (Cline, 2012, p.33).

A phenomenon mirroring this development is the mushrooming of so called fashion hauls which can be found on the video platform YouTube. The fashion hauls are DIY videos made by ordinary consumers, typically females aged below 25, showing and superficially describing their newest fast fashion acquisitions, how much they cost and where these can be purchased (Cline, 2012). As Cline (2012) notes, fashion hauls are hardly imaginable with higher priced clothes as these videos rely on frequent purchases of new clothing items. Semi-annually uploaded fashion hauls would hardly engage as many consumers. Fashion hauls, as that by the user Macbarbie07, can receive up to 3 million views, although view numbers vary substantially (from a few thousand up to millions). Shopping hauls are said to be a way of strategizing about buying big quantities of fashionable clothes with a low budget (Cline, 2012). At the same time, fashion haulers typically make videos featuring outfits for different occasions such as ‘back-to-school’ outfits (e.g. StilaBabe09, 2012a) or seasonal outfits (e.g. StilaBabe09, 2012b).

Even the traditionally rather to high fashion dedicated glossy magazine Vogue started to feature a column named “Steal of the month”. Even though what a ‘steal’ is in the eyes of a Vogue editor does not necessarily match with the perceptions of a good deal for the majority of people, as for instance voiced by Julia Felsenthal, who is criticizing this column for naming jeans priced below \$500 a steal (Felsenthal, 2012), it certainly mirrors the appeal fashion bargains appear to have today for a consumers. Furthermore, Cline (2012) notes that “[cheap-

fashion] blogs such as The Budget Babe, Frugal Fashionista, and The Recessionista have proliferated in recent years.” (Cline, 2012, p.34).

Arguably, fashion bargain hunting could become only a socially widely supported practice with the understanding that fast fashion is indeed chic. This meaning dimension shall be presented next.

Cheap chic

Wilson (2000) titles her article for Chain Store Age, a newsmagazine for the retail industry, on the opening of an H&M retail store on the Fifth Avenue “Disposable chic at H&M”. Cheap fashion indeed became chic. According to Metcheck, president of the California Fashion Association with a background in manufacturing, Sharon Stone’s combination of a high fashion designer skirt by Valentino with a Gap turtleneck at the Oscars in 1996 marked the start of the development of fast fashion towards an acceptable fashion choice (Metcheck cited in Cline, 2012).

More and more celebrities wear fast fashion items today, thus adding to the appeal of fast fashion. Kate Middleton is known to wear products from the fast fashion retailer Zara, Kim Kardashian is known to wear both, H&M and Zara product (Fashionbase 2013a; Fashionbase 2013b). Lifestyle websites feature articles such as “Celebs Love Wearing H&M – Can You Guess Which Piece It Is? “ (see Popsugar, 2013).

Michelle Obama is hyped for her combination of high-end fashion with cheap fashion from retailers such as H&M, Zara, and The Gap. “She embraces that modern trend of wearing things that are very high-end and also things that are very affordable” (Mears cited in AFP, 2013). In the book “Michelle Obama: First Lady of Fashion and Style”, Swimmer (2009) states that Michelle Obama is “savvy enough to embrace the new, stylish discounters such as H&M” (p.27).

Since the financial crisis hit the global economy, even in Japan, where haute couture brands traditionally have been favoured, fast fashion took off and is not only an acceptable but even desirable choice – again with reference to celebrities and portrayals in celebrity magazines (unmaskingjapan, 2010).

DIY videos on YouTube as well as magazines show how to copy expensive celebrity styles with low priced clothing (e.g. StilaBabe09, 2012c).

4.2.3. Material, Meaning, Consumer Culture, and Identity

From the account on the material and meaning elements associated with the fast fashion practice two points become clear: (1) There are no clear boundaries between the material and meaning elements of the fast fashion practice and they configure each other through the enactment of the practice and (2) the discussion needs to be placed within the broader context of current consumer culture imagery. This interconnectedness complicates a clearly structured discussion. A model has been developed to illustrate the dynamics between material and meaning elements of the fast fashion practice and consumer culture imagery to aid the understanding of the topic (Figure 1).

In the centre is the the enactment of the fast fashion practice, i.e. the fast fashion practice as performance. Through performance of a practice, the practitioners integrate the elements

constituting a practice as entity (Røpke, 2009). The associated elements, in this case the material and meaning elements are sustained or reinvented.

The practice of fast fashion with the associated elements takes place in the context of a mass consumption society. The images of the affluent identity or the “good life” and the idea that identity is pursued through consumption play a vital role. The consumer culture imagery influences how the practice of fast fashion is enacted, and at the same time it influences the material and meaning elements.

The model neither suggests that the competence dimension of the fast fashion practice does not play a role, nor is stating that there are no further factors which play a role in the constitution and reinforcement of the fast fashion practice. These aspects are simply not part of this discussion because drawing more inclusive boundaries goes beyond the possibilities within the scope of this study.

What follows is a discussion of how material and meaning elements of the fast fashion practice interact, how consumer culture imagery affects these elements, and the implications of these dynamics for identity formation and maintenance.

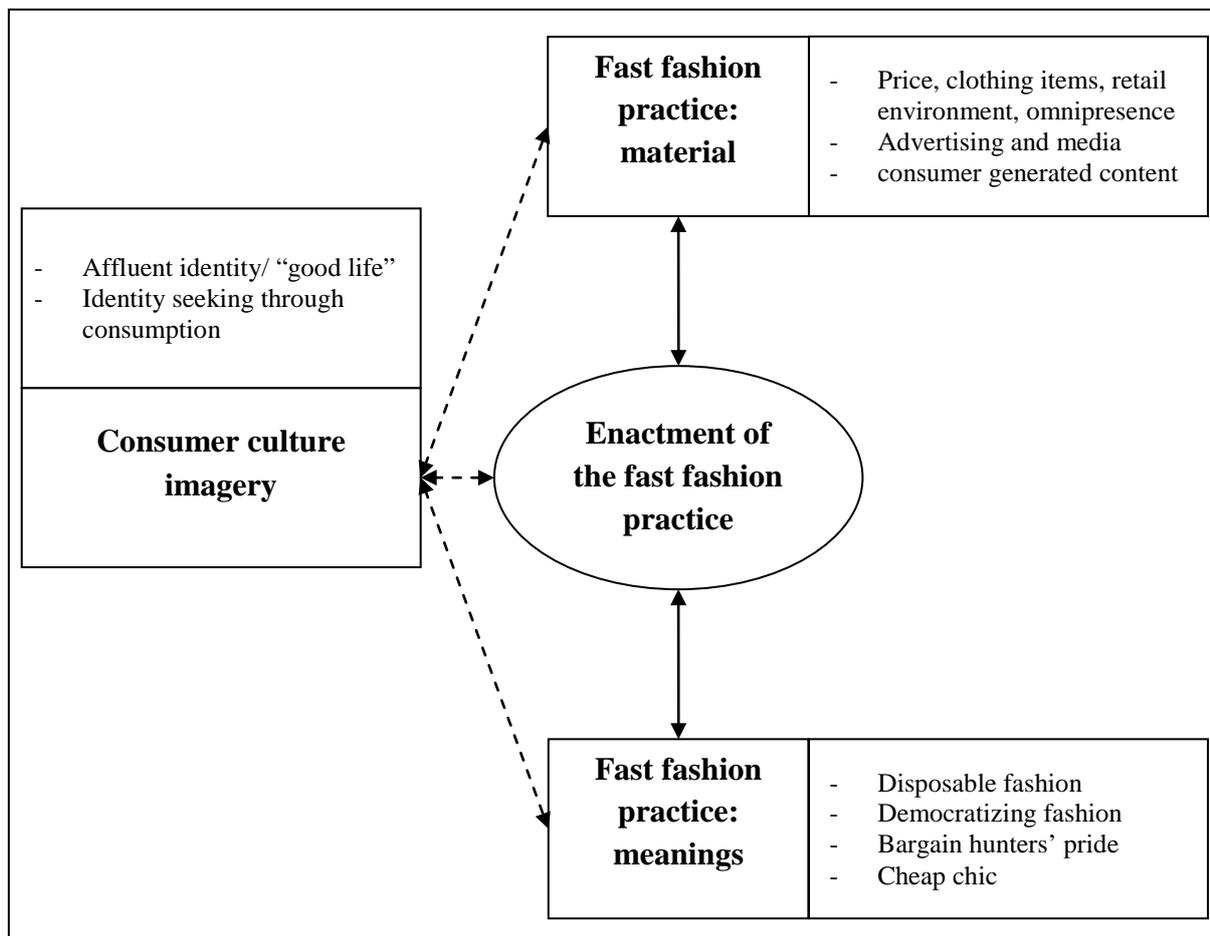


Figure 1 - Dynamics between material, meanings, and consumer culture imagery

It appears that with the rise of fast fashion, functional properties of clothes, such as insulation properties and durability, decreased in importance. “Anyway, this is more about style” states a 27-year old Web-designer about clothing items at H&M (Wilson, 2000). This clearly shows, that it is the look which is important.

A presentation of fast fashion clothing by models in a catalogue, as it is practiced by H&M, undoubtedly falls into the image of the ‘good life’ as described by Dittmar (2008). Associations as to how many outfits a happy person possesses and how often these outfits are to be changed can arise.

The meaning elements are not only reproduced by fashion magazines in such columns as “Steal of the month” and by consumer generated content, such as cheap fashion blogs and fashion hauls, but also by advertising of “Summer favourites – Sensual summer” and “Trend update – the new mix” by fast fashion retailers. Within the fast fashion practice, clothing became, at least partly, a routine where considerations of the ‘why’ buying a product do not arise. It is still subject to considerations of purpose in the sense of imagined occasions to wear it (“It’ll be good for the beach”, Caryn cited in Cline, 2012, p.16). This confirms Dittmar’s (2008) statement that goods are bought for their imagined ability to bring the consumer closer to his/her ideal identity and that practical purposes play a subordinate role.

The popular practice of mimicking high fashion and outfits of celebrities is mirroring the aspiration to the ideal of the ‘good life’ (Dittmar, 2008) and accordingly the dominating and socially supported ‘affluent identity’ (Hurth, 2010).

The constant assortment rotation can be argued to trigger individuals’ desire for novelty in the sense of discovery of one’s own identity and reassurance of one’s existence as described by Campbell (2004). Especially the low prices allow many individuals with a limited budget to pursue this quest for meaning.

However, the pursuit of an ideal identity through fast fashion clothing consumption can have negative effects which in turn, paradoxically, reinforce the fast fashion practice with all associated meanings. According to Dittmar (2008), favourite material possessions provide individuals with a sense of “inner stability and self-continuity” (Dittmar, 2008, p.201), as these possessions act as symbolic representations, narrating individuals’ identity development. It can be argued that a few centuries ago, this function could have been fulfilled by clothing items when these were valuable possessions that have not be thrown away, have been mended and re-invented, and eventually passed on within the family. Fast fashion, on the other hand, acts in exactly the opposite way, as fast fashion increased the speed of changing trends, making acquired clothing items quickly obsolete. Clothing items that are constantly discarded and replaced by new ones consequently bring about continuous change instead of continuity. So, while the individual strives to come closer to an ideal identity as represented by current consumer culture (affluent ‘good life’ and potentially ‘body perfect’) and is potentially experiencing well-being in the short term after acquisition, the quickly shifting trends lead to discontent because as new trends appear, these individuals are moved again further away from the ideal identity. Furthermore, the social image, which individuals’ seek to upgrade by new acquisitions (Dittmar, 2008), constantly needs to be ‘re-upgraded’ as with the appearance of new trends, the shortly acquired clothing items are not good enough anymore, degrading the individual in the social context.

However, as the reasons for discontent are not seen to lie in consumerist images, this gap between ideal and perceived identity is attempted to be closed by further consumption of fast fashion clothing items. A vicious circle of fast fashion clothing consumption, discontent with one’s identity and negative emotions, and further consumption develops and constantly reinforces the meanings of fast fashion practice and consumer culture values. This is the mechanism which has been termed by Dittmar (2008) as the ‘cage within’. In the same manner Cline (2012) notes that “we seem to have lost our sense of self along with changing trends” (p.6).

Fast fashion can be further argued to increase the insecurity and anxiety as associated with fashion choice by Clarke and Miller (2002). With an accelerated change of trends, discontent with already acquired clothing items develops (Shomali, 2012). What was a normative and reassuring choice yesterday, is not anymore today. The individual is faced again with the need to choose what to wear.

Consumers' price consciousness and the hunt for cheap deals puts more pressure on retailers to lower prices, which in turn virtually erodes the middle-priced segment for clothing (Cline, 2012). In order to survive, a clothing retailer is either forced to move into the high fashion segment or to compete with the big fast fashion retailers on based on prices. Price competition is impossible for small retailers or producers as it requires high volumes. Hence, the result is a rather homogeneous fashion landscape with big fast fashion retailers and conglomerates of luxury brands with prices higher than ever.

The already existent an anti-high fashion attitude, which is part of the democratization of society, is fuelled further, as the awareness of the high prices of high fashion brands has a demand-driving effect for fast fashion (Cline, 2012). Especially bargain oriented customers are even proud of paying little money for good looking clothing items instead of spending a fortune on a clothing item with a designer name (Cline, 2012). On the other hand, limited collections of fast fashion retailers featuring famous designer names or celebrity names are highly desired, again reproducing the meaning of fast fashion as being chic and a part of the 'good life', in a democratized way, so to say.

5. Conclusions

This study sought to address the importance of materiality in the constitution of the meanings of the fast fashion practice as it is reproduced today as a means to understand whether changing customer values can affect the fast fashion business in a negative way. The explicit consideration of the material dimension is based on the finding by Shove et al. (2012) that the connection between material and socialness is undertheorized and on the existence of the so called value-action gap within fashion consumption (Joy et al., 2010; Niinimäki, 2010). During the course of the examination of the material and meaning dimensions of the fashion practice and their interaction, it became clear that it is impossible to isolate the subject from the broader social context. The fast fashion practice is not enacted in a vacuum, but is strongly embedded in the contemporary consumerist culture with the images of the affluent “good life”.

Against the background of values of contemporary consumerist society, the materialisation of the fast fashion business model has driven the development of the meanings of fast fashion practice substantially. These meanings (disposable fashion, cheap chic, bargain hunting) are constantly reproduced by consumers through their consumption patterns, by consumer generated content (blogs, videos), by lifestyle and fashion magazines, highly visible personalities (celebrities), and the fashion business.

Given the current understanding of appropriate pricing and the connected understanding of relative quality it is unlikely that vast numbers of consumers would turn their backs on fast fashion as this would include a reduction in clothing items purchases; unimaginable in a consumerist society where shopping is a popular pastime and where fast shifting trends make individuals who do not keep up with the newest fashions instantly visible. Especially those consumers who hold an affluent identity are unlikely to change consumption patterns.

It is important to emphasize that, even though individuals’ values can change in favour of products which are performing higher in terms of quality and environment, these values are still embedded in the context of consumer culture imagery. Hence, these values will be acted upon, if at all, in a manner which is compatible with the socially accepted and supported affluent identity, which, as Hurth (2010) suggests, is associated with consumption, especially that with a strong presence in society and on the market. An example for this would be the practice of giving away of clothing items to charity, as done by a number of individuals. A reduction in fashion consumption in general is not (yet) part of consumer society imagery.

Moreover, alternatives to fast fashion are rather limited since the middle-priced fashion market is virtually non-existent, high fashion products are as expensive as never before, and, at the same time, fast fashion is ubiquitous.

Fast fashion retailers form and reproduce understandings of fair pricing, quality, design, and the social acceptance of fast fashion. They are supported by expert systems such as magazines and consumer generated content. Furthermore, the social acceptance in combination with the omnipresence of fast fashion and fast fashion retailers, empowers especially the internationally leading fast fashion retailers to shape the meanings and images associated with fast fashion further. With collections such as “Conscious Collection” and “Premium Quality products”, the leading and pathbreaking international fast fashion retailer H&M is actively taking advantage of this fact and forms ideas about appropriate pricing for environmentally conscious and highly qualitative clothing items, what premium quality is, and which properties environmentally conscious clothing items feature. Arguably, such business

strategies pre-empt a mismatch between consumers' values (quality and environmental performance) and the perception of fast fashion performance within these value dimensions.

As Dittmar (2008) concludes, the idealised imagery of contemporary consumer culture is unlikely to change in the short term. In combination with the aspects outlined above, it can be concluded that, altogether, changing customer values alone are highly unlikely to have a substantial negative impact fast fashion meaning elements and consequently on customer acquisition and retention in the short term.

However, fast fashion retailers should pay attention to customer values and to societal trends which go beyond the fashion industry to adapt their marketing strategies in time in case of substantial changes. Substantial changes can be brought about by critical events. Holt (2012), for instance, illustrates how cases of death resulting from drinking tap water in combination with wide media coverage and campaigning by NGOs led consumers to abandon an established practice of using tap water and ultimately contributed substantially to the development of the market for bottled water.

This study is in no way an exhaustive account of the contemporary fast fashion practice, as the competence dimension has been left out and the analysis has been kept on a very general level by not differentiating between different countries. A better understanding of the fast fashion practice can be developed by introducing the competence elements into the analysis. It is advisable to differentiate between, for instance, the US market, the European market, and the Asian market, or even to differentiate between individual countries. The reasoning for such an extensive approach lies in the development of practices, which do not simply transfer from country to country, but are rather reproduced against the background of local cultures (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Due to differences in cultural institutions and the stage of development of the fast fashion practice from country to country, differences in meanings and ideologies are likely to evolve. Hence, it is important to proceed market by market; be it with the aim to bring about a transformation as Holt (2012) suggest or with the aim of spotting market developments and potential marketing opportunities.

Another limitation is that the findings cannot be generalised to all fast fashion consumers. Not all fast fashion consumers engage in regular shopping trips and the hunt for newest trends. These are typically teenage girls and young women aged below 25 years. However, these 'heavy' consumers of fast fashion are those who reproduce the meanings of fast fashion practice, and eventually spread them by not merely engaging in the fast fashion practice but also by producing material, such as blogs and videos.

Further research could include the competence elements of the fast fashion practice into the analysis and focus upon specifically chosen demographic groups. With the rising interest in fast fashion in China, it could be of interest to compare the rise of the fast fashion practice in US and UK to the development of fast fashion in China.

As market construction studies from a practice perspective are especially suitable in the context of affluent consumption and how sustainable consumption can be promoted, future research could focus explicitly on possibilities to shape meaning elements of contemporary mainstream clothing practice in favour of eco-fashion.

Appendix I



Photograph 1 - H&M Regent Street store, London, United Kingdom.
[http://www.myretailmedia.com/blog/7193/h_m_sales_steady_despite_eurozone_woes.php]



Photograph 2 - Zara Chadstone Shopping Centre store, Chadstone (Melbourne), Australia.
[<http://hayleymehmet.blogspot.se/2012/08/zara-opens-chadstone-store.html>]



Photograph 3 - Bershka store, Berlin, Germany. [<http://www.mode.net/22028-bershka-berlin-ansturm-auf-den-1-store-in-deutschland>]



Photograph 4 - Mango store, Munich, Germany. [<http://www.mode.net/22028-bershka-berlin-ansturm-auf-den-1-store-in-deutschland>]



Photograph 5 - Forever 21 store, Fifth Avenue, New York, United States.
[<http://lilyisrandom.blogspot.se/2010/12/forever-21-on-5th-avenue.html>]

Appendix II



Image 1 - The New Icons campaign by H&M [<http://www.designscene.net/2013/04/daphne-groeneveld-joan-smalls-lindsey-wixson-liu-wen-hm.html>]

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