

Do the actions and choices of an individual fast fashion consumer matter given the total scale of the global fast fashion industry?

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Episode Description

In this episode of Debating Marketing & Climate Change, we debate the environmental impact of individual consumers in fast fashion industry. Through a structured debate, we discuss arguments for and against consumer responsibility, analysing the complexities surrounding sustainable choices. Join us for a thought-provoking discussion on consumer decisions and the role of large corporations in the fast fashion industry.

Transcript

Introduction – Will

Welcome everyone to this podcast episode, thank you for joining us. Today we will dive into the important topic of fast fashion and its environmental effect. The industry is currently valued at over \$100 billion globally, with experts expecting it to grow to over \$180 billion by 2030. This is supported and driven by huge growth in consumer demand for new fashion products, as well as mounting social pressure to constantly keep up with blooming trends and the next big thing. Fast fashion has a huge impact on global carbon emissions with 8-10% of global carbon emissions being attributed to the actions of industry players (World Resources Institute, 2019). For those listening, take a moment to consider the last fashion item you bought. Was this a necessary purchase? How would it rank in terms of environmental impact? What influenced you to make this purchase?

Now whilst these questions may seem to place the blame for the negative environmental effects of the industry upon consumers, there are certainly arguments that point to other actors such as businesses and governments being responsible for the detriment caused by the industry. Thus, I present our question - Do the actions and choices of an individual fast fashion consumer matter given the total scale of the global fast fashion industry?

I will now hand over to Barry who will begin the debate arguing that given the scale of the industry, the choices of individual consumers do not matter.

Against Argument: Challenging the Dominant Social Paradigm - Barry

Sure, Will! In the current social paradigm dominated by consumerism and capitalism, the power of individual consumers is extremely limited. The current Dominant Social Paradigm regards consumption as a positive behavior and believes that more is better. It also closely binds personal happiness and self-identity to consumption behavior (Kilbourne et al., 1997). This leads to hyperconsumption and consumers shop from fast fashion brands to satisfy their psychological needs.

Although some people are aware of sustainable consumption and take action in such consumerism, it is difficult to shake the deep-rooted Dominant Social Paradigm by relying on individual. If we want to shift from a Dominant Social Paradigm to a new environmental paradigm, we must rely on more powerful systemic forces, like governments, companies, and marketers, to effectively promote fundamental changes in the overall consumption ideology of society (Kilbourne et al., 1997). Patagonia launched a "Don't Buy This Jacket" marketing campaign on Black Friday, which is an excellent example of how a company raises awareness of the ecological consequences of hyper-consumption (Josie, 2013). The French Parliament also passed a bill to ban some ultra-fast fashion advertising activities, requiring these brands to indicate information on their products' reuse, repair, and environmental impact (Emily, 2024). So, to sum up, under the dominant social paradigm that promotes "more consumption is better," only systemic intervention can effectively drive society toward a sustainable development path. In contrast, an individual's choice or action does not matter.

Interjection - Will

Some great points there Barry, Emmy what do you think?

For Argument: Individuals as Influencers - Emmy

Barry, you raise a good point about the dominant social paradigm, but I'd like to challenge your view on how trends influence it. There are numerous examples of influencers driving significant behavioral changes. Have you heard of Billie Eilish? Of course you have, she's one of the biggest names in music of this generation. But what else is Billie known for? For you fashion enthusiast listeners, you may have heard of her 2022 Met Gala gown by Gucci which was actually made entirely of upcycled materials. This made a splash as the star told Vogue "Wearing only new clothes all the time is unnecessary and unsustainable", reaching millions of viewers, 6.2 million to be precise (Vogue, 2022). Not only is she making waves in music but she's making waves and paving the way as an exemplary figure in sustainable fashion.

Now that's enough on fashion, here are the hard facts: the fashion industry contributes to around 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions, consuming more energy than aviation and shipping combined (UNFCCC, 2024). Therefore, it is paramount now more than ever to start practicing sustainable fashion behaviors. With this in mind, you may be asking how this affects the DSP? Remember Billie Eilish? This is an individual with a lot of influence, taking action and speaking up. According to the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), individuals learn behaviors by observing others, particularly influential figures. Now if this theory was applied to Billie and her 120 million followers (Instagram, 2024), that's more than just a drop in the ocean isn't it, that's what we call making a wave. With the right individuals, using the right platforms their singular actions matter. It acts as social proof for other individuals to begin the normative conduct for sustainable fashion (White & Simpson, 2013), which eventually will create the domino effect (White et al., 2019), reshaping societal fashion norms for the generations to come.

Interjection - Will

A good response, any thoughts on that Barry?

Against Argument: The Attitude-Behavior Gap in Fast Fashion - Barry

I definitely see your point, Emmy, and there is no denying how influencers and celebrities have risen to have such a hold over consumers and their perceptions. Well, that's why they call them influencers, right?!

However, there is an interesting fact, although 67% of consumers express support for sustainable fashion, less than one-third are willing to pay more for eco-friendly products (Granskog et al., 2020). We have to admit that there is a clear "attitude-behavior gap" in sustainable fashion. In other words, influencers like Billie can certainly encourage their followers to feel more positive about sustainable fashion, but when it comes to actual purchases, that attitude doesn't always translate into action (Bocsi et al., 2021).

According to a survey, this gap mainly comes from price, convenience, availability, and perceived quality (Perry and Chung, 2016). Just think about it: if you're faced with a trendy, affordable, fast-fashion product and a more expensive, basic, eco-friendly option, which one would you choose? In fact, key factors like price and convenience are controlled mainly by governments and major fashion brands. For example, H&M reduced the price of sustainable fashion products by using Circulose, a low-cost and eco-friendly material, promoting more purchases (Kirsteen Mackay, 2014). What's more, the UK government has invested £10 million in "Waste and Resources Action Programme" to support the development of affordable sustainable materials and new recycling methods (Parliament UK, 2019). This shows that what can truly bridge this "attitude-behavior gap" and drive sustainable consumption forward is not relying on individual, but the government's strong support and brand strategic initiatives.

For Argument: Individuals as Boycotters - Emmy

Although I can see that there is strong theory to support the consumer attitude behaviour gap, we can see examples of people actively avoiding certain products and companies altogether. They may not pay a higher price for a sustainable product, but they will apply pressure to those undertaking the most harmful practices. Listeners, can you think of a time where you felt so strongly about something and stood up for it? Ever felt that way toward a brand or company? You're not alone. Consumer boycotts have become a frequent form of social protest in the digital age motivated by corporate malpractices such as lack of labour standards or environmental degradation. Although boycotts are rooted in history dating back to 1880, today's boycotts are often used to target large companies and have elicited concrete changes in corporate behaviour.

Back in 1995, individual consumers banded together to push for a Greenpeace campaign against Shell to abandon their plan to dispose of their oil storage tank in the North Sea (Beck, 2019). And it was a success! Now what's the logic behind this, why does it work? Consumer boycotts are easily explained by the social dilemma theory. The main premise of this theory is that members of a group face a dilemma when they must choose between maximizing their personal interest and supporting the interest of the group (Dawes, 1980; Hardin, 1968). When one's personal interest and the interest of the group do not converge, consumers are consequently confronted with the following question: should I buy this product that is cheap in price but comes with a high cost for society? In the case of a boycott, consumers not only refuse to buy the product, but they also engage in a confrontational relationship with the company that produces the product which can contribute to changes in mainstream consumers' perceptions and companies' behaviour. At the end of the day, change stems all the

way back to those someone's, those individuals, who decided to stand up and say something. Are you one of them?

For Argument: Individual Consumer Preferences Steer Industry Changes – Lydia

Thank you, Emmy, boycotts are without question a common tool for forcing industry change. Beyond boycotts, there is a subtler yet equally impactful force: consumer preference. Many studies suggest that an attraction to natural materials is almost instinctive; people tend to view them as healthier, more appealing, and more environmental-friendly (Overvliet & Soto-Faraco, 2022). This perception of 'naturalness' influences daily choices from food to fashion, where consumers may select items based on these qualities, even unconsciously (Karana, 2012).

Consider the brand MUJI. Known for simplicity and natural materials, MUJI's style aligns with sustainability—a key factor consumers now crave, whether for authenticity, comfort, or connection. As research has shown, the 'feel' of naturalness is significant, especially in textiles that we wear (Overvliet, Karana and Soto-Faraco, 2016). This instinctive preference for natural materials is something we all share as consumers. It's compelling the fast fashion industry to take notice. They begin to recognize and respond to our collective desires and will gradually guide them toward a more sustainable path.

Interjection - Will

That's a really interesting point Lydia; I think it really makes you think about the symbiotic relationship between businesses and consumers clearly showing just how powerful consumers can be in influencing business model development. I suppose there are many examples of where consumer attitude changes have paved the way for new business models.

For Argument: Individuals as Entrepreneurs - Lydia

Exactly, Will. Consumer attitude mapping is an essential part of early-stage business planning. At the same time, it's important to note that individuals play a vital role in creating new business opportunities, not to mention in an industry like fast fashion, where innovation fuels everything (Best, 2001). Thoughtful individuals can capture inspiration and turn it into brilliant business ideas, then become entrepreneurs, who push the industry forward (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994).

Meet SOJO, a UK-based startup that aims to make clothing repair as easy as ordering takeout (Webb, 2021). The founder was once a devoted fast fashion consumer, but a moment of inspiration changed everything. She transformed her identity—from a fast fashion shopper to an entrepreneur fighting against the industry. The spark? A yellow dress her grandmother wore for over 60 years, brimming with stories and memories. She wants everyone to feel that same connection to their clothes, to shift fashion away from mere trends and toward deeper meaning (TED, 2023).

SOJO promotes capsule wardrobes and 'low-consumerism' —concepts that urge us to buy fewer, more valued pieces (Todeschini et al., 2019). The founder of SOJO aims to stop the endless cycle of buy and toss. With SOJO, you are not only keeping clothes longer; you are also challenging fast fashion's throwaway culture. This is how one former consumer, now an entrepreneur, can create real change.

Against Argument: Industry Overproduction and the Polyester Problem - Reet

Thank you, Lydia, and SOJO's impact is definitely inspiring. It's great to see a company focused on extending the life of clothing. However, I'd argue that it doesn't address a major issue in fast fashion which is overproduction (Wren, 2022). This isn't just about consumers buying too much; it's about the industry itself producing far more than what anyone actually needs. Brands like H&M and Zara aren't just producing to meet demand; they're flooding the market, creating an artificial sense of urgency with new collections coming every week. We're talking billions of garments each year.

And a significant portion of these clothes are made from polyester. Sure, it's cheap and trendy, but the environmental cost is massive. Polyester is a synthetic fabric made from petroleum, tying it directly to fossil fuel use and high energy consumption—which means even more carbon emission (Pucker, 2022). Plus, polyester isn't even biodegradable. When we throw it away, it breaks down into microplastics, which end up in our oceans and even the food we eat (Sparkman, 2023).

Now, you might say that consumers should just stop buying polyester. And yes, some people definitely try to do that. But here's the reality: with less than 1% of clothing actually getting recycled, and the fast fashion sector responsible for up to 10% of global carbon emissions (Chan, 2020), we have to ask ourselves: how much responsibility can we really place on individual consumers when the system is set up to prioritize profit over sustainability?

Interjection – Will

Thank you for sharing that insight, Reet. I'm interested by your final point where you mention the potential for consumers to stop buying polyester, and I suppose there is real truth here. Why do you think it is that consumers have been reluctant to alter their purchasing decisions to avoid unsustainable materials such as this?

Against Argument: Eco-Fatigue - Reet

That's a great question, and it leads us to the fascinating concept of eco-fatigue. Let's be honest—most of us want to do our part for the environment, but constantly being bombarded with messages urging us to adopt more sustainable lifestyles can feel like a heavy burden. Imagine the psychological weight of repeatedly hearing that it's on you to save the planet. Over time, that pressure can turn into eco-fatigue, where people feel exhausted by the sheer scale of the climate crisis and their supposed role in fixing it (Hardcastle, 2022).

And Here's an interesting fact: just 100 companies are responsible for over 70% of global emissions (Riley, 2017). That's a systemic issue! So why are we putting all this pressure on individuals? It feels unfair, especially for those in lower-income communities who often don't have access to sustainable options. Organic products, electric cars, and energy-efficient appliances usually come with a hefty price tag that many people just can't afford (Tallullah, 2021).

To make matters worse, some brands exaggerate their sustainability claims, leaving consumers confused about what's actually eco-friendly (Lu et al., 2022). Take H&M for instance, the

brand's "Conscious Collection" comes with green tags and buzzwords like "eco-friendly" and "made with recycled materials," giving the impression of sustainability. But here's the issue: despite this, H&M's fast fashion model continues to rely on massive production volumes and rapid trends, producing low-cost clothes meant for short-term use (Stern, 2022). This kind of greenwashing makes it even harder for people who want to make sustainable choices as they're left feeling more helpless and fatigued. Without real corporate accountability and systemic change, it's unrealistic to expect change from individuals alone. Thus, it's time to shift the focus back to where it belongs: on the industry itself!

Conclusion - Will

Thank you, Reet for sharing this with us. I hope everyone will agree with me that this has been an extremely informative and stimulating debate. We have heard from both perspectives. Some argue that concepts such as the influence of the dominant social paradigm and the attitude-behavior gap add to the existing issues with such a large and complex industry, making it impossible for the actions of the individual consumer to contribute to real meaningful industry change. The influence of these factors, coupled with the issues causing symptoms such as eco-fatigue, really do highlight the limitations of an individual's positive actions. On the other hand, we have heard how Individuals can be spurred to make change on masse through celebrities and influencers, as well as trends to boycott negative actors. Additionally, we had points regarding how changing consumer preferences contribute to the directional change within industry, with some consumers even being inspired to become part of the business system, implementing their visions for a cleaner industry through their own businesses.

It is clear from this debate that change is required within the industry to limit the poor business practices that are taking such a toll on our planet. The solution will come from the identification of potential synergies between consumer behavioral changes, government regulation and corporate action. So that's it for this episode, we hope you've enjoyed. Thank you very much for listening and until next time!

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