

[Commentary] Fashion: Workers as Slaves to Consumer Trends?

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Abstract

Ultra fast fashion is popular with consumers because of its low cost and fast delivery. Behind this glamorous face lies a much less glamorous reality: the exploitation of workers and an activity that contributes to environmental and climate degradation.

The days when the fashion industry divided its production into two collections, "autumn-winter" and "spring-summer", are long gone. At first, companies like Zara renewed their models every six weeks: fast fashion was born. This led to the introduction of low-priced, low-quality clothes that could be quickly replaced in the wardrobe.

This change in consumption patterns has accelerated in recent years with the emergence of ultrafast fashion. It is accompanied by a strong evolution of the entire clothing ecosystem, from design to manufacturing to distribution. At the beginning of 2022, the newspaper Le Monde devoted an article to the Chinese fast fashion company Shein. The operating principle of this company is to renew its range of clothes very often, which are promoted on its website or on social networks by female influencers (a predominantly female and young clientele is the priority target). As the prices are low, it is a question of triggering "love" purchases. To obtain such low prices, manufacturing is subcontracted to Chinese SMEs that have little regard for labour legislation: very flexible working hours to adapt to orders, no employment contract for the workers for whom no social security contributions are paid, very difficult working conditions with infernal pace. There is also the problem of the distance between the places of production and consumption in developed countries: even an express delivery takes about ten days and costs a lot of money compared to the cost of the articles.

The Californian company Fashion Nova has created its model based on reactivity, which is broadly similar to that of Shein. The logic is the same for all manufacturing: subcontracting the entire production process (from design to manufacture) of mediocre quality to companies based close to the places of consumption. The result was a relocation of production to the United States itself, or to Mexican factories located on the border. The issue of labour costs in the garment factories remained to be resolved. In order to ensure their invisibility, these companies adapt to the minimum six-week delay required by the administration to trigger inspections, by moving and changing their company name on a regular basis: in this way they can recruit a workforce that can be cut and chopped at will. Workers are paid well below the minimum wage (already low in the United States), overtime is not paid or not paid at all, and working conditions are very

poor.

A garment model accepted by Fashion Nova on Sunday evening will be promoted by influencers on social networks on Tuesday morning for immediate order and delivery in the afternoon or the next day. We have gone from Shein's fast fashion to ultra-fast fashion, with an even greater emphasis on impulse buying since delivery is almost immediate: the company offers several thousand different models every month. The only link between Fashion Nova and its subcontractors is a commercial relationship, and no audits are conducted, in the name of non-interference by one company in the affairs of another.

In the United Kingdom, an almost identical model is used by the company Boohoo. Most of the semi-clandestine manufacturing facilities are based in the Leicester area and employ labour from the Indian subcontinent, paid at hourly rates of around £3 (€3.60).

The period of the Covid-19 health crisis confinements was very profitable for the company, which grew strongly, but it also saw a surge in the number of sick workers in Leicester, which spread throughout the hard-hit region. The dilapidated workshops, where workers were forced by poverty to come to work despite their health, were incubators for the pandemic. An investigation was carried out and concluded that the practices were similar to modern slavery. It should be noted that these findings were accepted by Boohoo, which committed itself to changing its production model.

These examples are an excellent illustration of the evolution of consumer practices made possible by information and communication technologies (ICTs) and all the new technologies that flow from them (automation, information systems, etc.) ^[1]. For companies, it is a question of improving the customer experience, i.e. the customer's perception of all his interactions with the company throughout his purchasing journey. In the cases described here, he can choose a garment from a large catalogue at a very low price, at a time that suits him best.

He will have the feeling of exclusivity since it is a short series, renewed very frequently. It will be delivered (especially if the production is done nearby) in a very short time, with exchange possibilities.

Unfortunately, in many cases, this improved customer experience comes at the expense of working conditions. The miserable working conditions of textile workers in subcontracting companies were mentioned earlier, but a similar reasoning could be replicated by looking at the working conditions of logistics employees, without whom delivery could not take place in such short timeframes. ICTs allow a high degree of automation of this activity and logistics has become an essential element in value chains: the current supply problems resulting largely from the deterioration of logistics chains following the health crisis clearly show the strategic role of this activity. This automation is not complete and humans are still superior to machines for certain tasks requiring manual dexterity and situational intelligence. Several studies show that the work rhythm adopted is that of the machine rather than that of the worker, who is condemned to adapt, with a certain number of harmful consequences for health.

In fact, although some people find this new way of consuming to be beneficial, it is clear that it is accompanied by environmental damage: increased pollution (fertilisers, pesticides) of natural resources (water and land) through the

expansion of cotton crops in particular, and energy wastage (in manufacturing, logistics and waste disposal). It also results in the alienation of workers through working conditions that are too often unacceptable.

This ultra-fast fashion, like the development of distance trade, platformisation (uberisation) in the broad sense and their attendant home deliveries and labour market flexibilisation, are fully in line with the supply-side policies favoured for several decades. They are beginning to encounter some social resistance, linked to the defence of workers' rights or the environment ^[2]. But they also enjoy the broad support of a growing proportion of consumers (of all generations), and even of governments (in the name of fake job creation). In the short to medium term, it is conceivable that they will continue to flourish. A reasonable assumption is that beyond that, they, like the entire consumption system of the developed countries, come up against physical limits: the Earth's resources are not extensible and recycling techniques generally have an efficiency coefficient well below one.

References

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