

Making sense of the sustainability buzzword:

ETHICAL CONSUMPTION
WITHIN THE CLOTHING
INDUSTRY



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ethical consumption within the clothing industry

Master Thesis
Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

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This research was conducted in a weird time. A time full of covid-19 regulations and lockdowns. A time in which conducting fieldwork luckily is made easier due to digital technologies such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype. A time in which social media makes it easier to connect with someone. And a time in which I became a cultural anthropologist. As a result of this weird time, I have been lucky to have been in contact with, worked with and been inspired by many people, which I would all like to thank below.

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INTRODUCTION

“(...) in 2013, when the huge factory, or building actually, Rana Plaza collapsed in Bangladesh and more than 1100 people were killed. And in the following days lots of labels were found among the rubble, which was broadcasted on the news, as it was worldwide, big news. And those labels were from brands such as [popular fast fashion brands], brands, stores where I bought my clothes as well. And that was actually the first time for me to realize that wow, the cheap clothing really has a downside. And not much later that year the news came out, or I saw a video on my Facebook timeline from animal organization PETA, that showed a video how they actually plucked rabbits who were alive. (...) You just saw, they were screaming in pain and terror and were not sedated. And those hairs were then processed into clothing for, among others [popular fast fashion brand]. And I had just, well I think a few weeks before, bought some super soft cardigans from [popular fast fashion brand]. So, I look into my closet, as you can of course look at the label. And indeed it said, angora wool, that’s what the rabbits are called, angora rabbits. And then I was really, that was really shocking to me. (...) I just immediately thought, I don’t want to contribute to this, because as I buy from those brands, I contribute to this kind of suffering. I don’t want.. I didn’t like wearing those cardigans anymore either”.

Emy¹

¹ Emy Demkes said this in the podcast Damn, Honey about fast fashion (Demkes, 2019).

As mentioned in the quote above, the Rana Plaza building, a clothing factory complex in Bangladesh, collapsed in 2013 (Demkes, 2019). During this drama over 1100 people died and hundreds more got injured. Afterwards news outlets argued that this tragedy could have been prevented. The day before, multiple workers told their supervisors about the unsafe workplace. They had noticed cracks in the building and felt unsafe. While lower levels of the building remained evacuated, the garment factories were opened again the next day. Due to pressuring deadlines of buyers around the world, the garment workers were pressured to return to work. They received threats of not receiving their monthly salary if they did not show. And with thousands of people being forced to go back to work, the seventh floor collapsed and set off a chain reaction, resulting in the whole building being brought to the ground within seconds. Investigations later found out that the building, which produced clothing for popular global fast fashion brands, had not been properly inspected and was constructed with materials of sub-standard quality (Prentice, 2019).

The tragedy in Bangladesh opened the eyes of many people to acknowledge the societal, economic and ecological issues that are connected to the clothing industry. Due to many activists and labor groups, an accord was made to create a working environment in which every (garment) worker can feel free of fears of fires, property collapses and other accidents in the workplace that could be prevented due to health and safety measurements (Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, 2021). As the deadliest fail in industrial structure, the Rana Plaza disaster also became a shift in the topic of sustainable materials, environmental improvements and human rights within clothing supply chains (Fairtrade International, 2021). But even after the accord and other measurements were taken by stakeholders within the clothing industry, there are still a lot of accidents and fires happening. In November 2020, 12 workers of a cotton factory were killed as a result of the warehouse collapsing (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2020). In March 2021, at least 20 people died in a fire at a clothing factory in Cairo, Egypt (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2021). And that same month, 8 other people were killed in Cairo after a garment factory collapsed due to an explosion, leaving 29 more people injured (MCL News & Media, 2021).

These tragedies are unfortunately not the only issues that garment workers and other stakeholders within the clothing industry experience every day. Many garment workers experience high working pressure and lots of unpaid overtime, there are still suspicions of child labor and enclosed workspaces in contemporary times and health issues are still common within the garment workers due to unsafe and ineffective protective equipment when working with toxic chemicals (Hobson, 2013). In a like manner, garment workers all over the world are still experiencing poverty due to the exploitation of cheap labor. These workers still do not yet receive a living wage, even though receiving a living wage is a human right (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2021). And another issue is the sexual harassment and violence that garment workers often experience at work (Fashion Revolution, 2021).

Besides these social issues, the clothing industry also faces lots of environmental concerns. To name a few, the clothing industry produces 4-5 billion tons of global CO₂ emissions annually, consumes about 79 trillion liters of water per year, contributes to more than 92 million tons of textile waste every year, adds about 190.000 tons of microplastic pollution in our oceans every year and contributes to the pollution of 20% of industrial water from textile dyeing and treatment (Niinimäki, et al, 2020). Materials such as polyester appear to have a great environmental footprint as the production demands large amount of oil and releases various toxic emissions (Claudio, 2007).

A positive outcome of the Rana Plaza tragedy is the increased interest in sustainable and ethical practices within the clothing industry. It became an awakening for many people to start looking into the environmental and social issues within the clothing industry. Consumers started to see the consequences of fast fashion (Good On You, 2021). Fast fashion is a business model

in which consumers are frequently offered new forms of trendy, low priced clothing. As a result there is an increase in both textile production and clothing consumption. With the fast fashion business model brands rely on impulsive consumption and recurring consumption by their consumers (Niinimäki et al, 2020). Clothing is cheap and produced in big quantities and people buy more clothes and wear them less. Often also because the quality is poor due to fast production, which influences the consumer to replace their garments often (Fletcher, 2010). As a reaction on fast fashion a new movement has appeared that focusses on the production of slow fashion. Slow fashion is not only slowing down the processes within the clothing industry, it encourages a change in the values of fast fashion (Fletcher & Grose, 2012). Instead of mass production and the fast production of trendy clothes, it focusses on high quality garments, environmental friendly production and fair prices for the consumer and the producer. It thus encourages sustainable clothing (Project CeCe, 2021).

The field

One in five Dutch people want to live a more sustainable life. Motives include buying organic food, be more careful of their belongings, investing in solar panels and isolating their homes (Milieu Centraal, 2020). However, while many companies and governments advocate for a more sustainable outcome, the sustainable outcomes have mostly been ineffective. It seems as if the companies do not understand the rational and ethical sense of sustainability and instead incorporate misleading information to their consumers (Brightman & Lewis, 2017). In contemporary days companies are increasingly more aware of the need to incorporate sustainability into their business models. A research showed that 62% of executives think that incorporating a sustainability strategy is essential to nowadays be competitive (Haanaes, 2016). Because of the increasingly amount of people that are seeking sustainable products, the process of greenwashing has increased as well (European Commission, 2021). Greenwashing is a combination of ‘green’, often related to the environment, and brainwashing. It is an act whereby companies purposely mask information that could be harmful or deliver this information in ways that falsely portray the environmental aspects of their company or production (Mitchell & Ramey, 2011). A research by the European Commission found out that 42% of the websites they used for their research claimed exaggerated, misleading and false commercial practices. These claims were vague and general, did not provide extra information or did not include evidence (European Commission, 2021). Commodity fetishism, as I argue in this thesis, has a similar description as greenwashing. It refers to the “ignoring or denial of the background of objects” (Carrier, 2010, 674).

This research focusses on the ethical consumer within the clothing industry. An ethical consumer can be defined as someone who depends their consumption on the moral nature of an object (Carrier, 2012). A way of doing this is through the consumption of sustainable clothing. Sustainable clothing has many definitions but can broadly be defined as clothing that incorporates environmental and social principles within their production (Goworek et al, 2012). The above mentioned issues are reasons for consumers to rethink their purchases on clothing. When buying sustainable clothing they start to look at the moral aspect of the clothing. The focus of this research is on Dutch women who (sometimes) buy sustainable clothing, in which the sustainability is their own perception of the word. As will be clear throughout this research, the concept of sustainability is very broad and has many definitions (Brightman & Lewis, 2017). For that reason I did not want to limit the research participants by defining sustainability for them.

The upcoming trend of sustainability and thereby the use of greenwashing can be a great issue for the ethical consumer, as they seek the purchase of sustainable clothing. This research therefor focusses on the influence of commodity fetishism on Dutch women in their moral

consumption of 'sustainable' clothing. It looks at the moral decisions of the women, the different aspects and values of ethical consumption, the trend of sustainability, the influence of commodity fetishism and the possible solutions.

I see this research as an extension to Carrier's arguments about ethical consumption and commodity fetishism (Carrier, 2010). I add a more modern look by adding the use of social media to his theories, looking at other forms of ethical consumption (Kosnik, 2018) (Isenhour, 2012) and focus the theories explicitly on the clothing industry. As an addition to the ethical consumption debate I have focused on intertwining the literature of moralities and literature on ethical consumption, to get a better understanding of the moral values of the ethical consumer by using, among others, Mattingly (2012) and (Wilk, 2001). I combine the issue of commodity fetishism with the trend of sustainability to get a better understanding of the influence of greenwashing on the ethical consumer. Lastly, I look into the solutions that were mentioned throughout my fieldwork. I thereby use theories mostly used for the certification of food and drinks to understand the help of certification (Luetchford, 2012) (Hudson & Hudson, 2003) (Fisher, 2007) and look into the help of social media communities for the trust of the ethical consumer.

With the issue of greenwashing ethical consumers who want to buy sustainable clothing, this research will educate consumers about greenwashing and help how to indicate greenwashing. It also gives an, as you could have already read, overview of the unsustainable issues that the clothing industry contains. It will help educate consumers about these unethical issues and the consequences of the purchase of 'regular' clothing, clothing that is not produced sustainably. Overall I hope this research inspires people to be more aware of the issues that the clothing industry has and become an ethical consumer.

Before continuing this introduction, I find it is necessary to give a bit more clarity about a few words that will be used in this thesis a lot. Just like the word 'sustainability', there are a few words that can be interpreted differently by different people. This is why sometimes, just like the word 'sustainability' I will add a single quotation mark to these words. If you see the word 'sustainability' including the quotation marks, this means that, although you might not think this is considered sustainable, others might do or just describe it as sustainable. Secondly, I sometimes refer to clothing that is not sustainable as 'regular' clothing. With this I mean that it is clothing that is not specifically sustainably made. I do not mean to indicate anything about the appearance of the clothing or about the consistency of the process of the clothing. Lastly, I also use quotation marks to sometimes describe something as 'new'. With this I mean that someone has not bought something yet but is going to buy it. The 'new' has nothing to do with when the product is made and if it is already used by others. When someone buys a 'new' t-shirt, it is new for them, but it could be second hand clothing.

Throughout this thesis the words 'morality' and 'ethics' will often be used. As there has been little distinction between ethics and morality and the words are often used to describe the same thing by different authors, I have decided to stick to term that is used by the author or authors that I am referencing (Zigon, 2008).

Methodology & operationalization

This research has been conducted throughout the first half of 2021, the year in which COVID-19 regulations were in full effect. During the fieldwork of this research there were several regulations wherefore online communication was encouraged and public arrangements were strongly discouraged. Almost throughout the whole fieldwork period people were only allowed into a (clothing) store if you had made an appointment beforehand (Schelfaut, 2021). Because of these regulations this research is for the most part been conducted online.

During the field work I have used multiple different methods to get the information I needed. First of all, I have used semi-structured interviews. This type of interview was flexible, while also giving me structure throughout all interviews, as there was still space for my informants to add new concepts into the interviews (Galetta, 2013). I had written an interview schedule beforehand with questions that would guide me throughout the interview, giving me the structure of a semi-structure interview (Kottak, 2019). This schedule had targeted answers about, among others, the values and issues of ethical consumption. This interview schedule changed throughout the fieldwork, as I added more questions that came from other interviews I had conducted before with different informants that felt necessary to also ask others. The interview questions were mostly used for one-on-one interviews, but also helped with structuring the focus group I did with multiple informants. Besides one, all 17 interviews were conducted online via Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Skype. The offline interview was an interview with one of my informants in which she showed me her closet and told me more about her values in clothes.²

During the interviews and focus group I used a method of photo-elicitation to invoke the memory and comments of my informants (Banks, 2007). I had two different documents that were used for photo-elicitation: one about greenwashing and one about certifications. The first one was filled with words used by (fast) fashion brands to illustrate that they were sustainable or had a sustainable brand. I screenshotted pictures of the images or words they used to describe these practices and put them together with the images and words of other brands to get an overview of 16 different words and images. The names and logos of the brands were not mentioned. In the second document I showed the logos of thirteen certification and rating websites. With these documents I asked my informants to what kind of emotions and information comes to mind when seeing these words, images and certifications and if they recognized the certifications. By showing them these images, words and logos memories and emotions came to mind that I do not think would have happened if I just said the words or mentioned the names of the certifications. With this method I got a better overview of the knowledge that my informants had on these topics and their opinions on them (Banks, 2007).

The last method I used was (online) participant observation. As mentioned before, due to the COVID-19 regulations it was hard to do participant observations in stores, as you had to make an appointment to get in and thereby almost always was online in the store or with only one other person. Because you had to make appointments, there was a time frame in which you could be in the store. These time frames were often not used by people, people did not show up or people did not want to make an appointment (Schelfaut, 2021). Instead, I participated in Facebook groups and on Instagram to interact with people in their everyday life and take part in the community of ethical consumption and sustainable clothing (Jorgensen, 2015). I was a member of multiple groups in which people wrote about sustainable living and clothing. I mostly looked at the questions and articles people (had) posted. On Instagram I made a new account called [@duurzame_kleding_](#),³ at which I asked questions to my followers about sustainable clothing. I posted polls, pictures and reposted news about the sustainable clothing industry. I followed 184 people, which included sustainable clothing brands, activist accounts and people who posted about sustainable living and sustainable clothing. The Instagram account and the Facebook groups were a great way to get more information about what people were thinking, what their values were and how they radiated these values (Hine, 2015). Beside this I also participated in two online museum tours about the clothing industry, listened to different podcasts, followed over a hundred people on Instagram, bought sustainable clothing, read multiple different blogs and listened to and commented on Instagram Lives of Dutch women

² Interview, Melissa, 05-05-21

³ [@Duurzame_kleding_](#) is Dutch for Sustainable_clothing_

talking about sustainable clothing. And, at the end of my fieldwork, once the stores were open again, I went to a few stores where they sell sustainable and second hand clothing.

To come in contact with Dutch ethical consumers within the clothing industry I mostly contacted people via social media. I've send private messages to women who use hashtags on social media such as #duurzamekleding⁴, #duurzaamwinkelen⁵ or anything similar to these hashtags, indicating that they are both into sustainable clothing and are Dutch. Because I started posting about the research and using hashtags myself, people started to follow my account and come to me as well. And after I become a member of several Facebook groups concerning sustainability, sustainable consumption and sustainable fashion, I posted about my research and came in contact with people who wanted to be an informant. Lastly, I have asked my own family and friends if they knew someone or knew of someone who shops sustainably. This also helped me find a few informants that were also consuming sustainable clothing and were willing to help me. Eventually, I also came in contact with people who were recommended to me by my other informants.

Ethics and role of researcher

According to Fassin (2012) we as anthropologists are never a neutral agent when it comes to social problems. Eventually, whether we realize it or not, there is always a moral positioning we chose. This is seen in the way we write about the information we conduct and we way we interpret the meaning of others (Fassin, 2012). After reading this, I realized that it is important to give you an indication of who I am. I am a Dutch twenty-five year old, living with middle class parents in a little town just outside of Amsterdam. Before I started this research I knew about some of the issues that are an effect of the contemporary clothing industry. I started to look into these issues and the world of sustainable clothing about two years before I started this research. I therefore experienced some of the issues that my informants also talk about. While knowing about some of the issues that the ethical consumer is facing today, I always tried to treat every informant the same. I did not assume their knowledge of sustainable clothing and was open to all the information that was given to me. I do not see myself as an experienced ethical consumer and therefor tried to only contribute with information if other informants had told me them.

Before every interview I had, I made sure to inform my informants about the purpose of the research and any possible impacts. I made sure that they always knew that they were being recorded and asked their permission first, before recording the conversations (Kottak, 2019). I also made sure to inform them that their information is strictly anonymous (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010). All my informants are unrecognizable. I have used pseudonyms for every name that is used in this research, except when talking about public information on public social media accounts and blogs.

To make sure that people on Instagram knew I was doing a research, my Instagram profile noted that I was an anthropologist doing research. I also made several posts in which I explained the research, what I was doing and what kind of information I would take from the information I found on Instagram. It stated that everyone who would take part in the research would stay anonymous. Comments were public, so people would know that these comments could be seen by others. Private messages were kept only for research purposes, but the messenger would always stay anonymous if any of the information would be used in this research. When I posted in the Facebook groups I also noted that the information used was for a research and referred them to my Instagram page for a more complete explanation of the research.

⁴ #duurzamekleding is Dutch for #sustainableclothing

⁵ #duurzaamwinkelen is Dutch for #sustainableshopping

I have contemplated a lot about using the names of fast fashion brands that I talk about throughout this document. Sometimes these brands would be named in interviews, other times they would be mentioned in blog, posts and articles I would read. Ultimately, I have decided to not name the brands. Because they are names negatively, while often probably deserved, I would give readers a negative assumption about these brands. While I could not always fact-check these assumptions, I do not think it is fair to name the brands that were mentioned. If you are ever curious if a brand you shop at is a fast fashion brand or not, please do not hesitate to do your own research about this. After reading this thesis you will hopefully have a better idea of how to do this and where to look for.

Structure of the thesis

As an end to this introduction I will now give you an overview of what you will be reading throughout this document. After this overview you will find the first chapter, which gives an overview of ethical consumption. The chapter begins with an overview of morality and an introduction into why ethical consumers become morally interested in ethical consumption. Thereafter the chapter will continue with an overview of ethical consumption and the important values of ethical consumers. The chapter will end with an overview of moral dilemmas that ethical consumers face when buying sustainable clothing. The second chapter gives an overview of the struggles and problems of ethical consumers within the clothing industry. It will first give an introduction into the sustainability buzzword and the trend of sustainability. Following after that is the problem of commodity fetishism for the ethical consumer. The chapter ends with the problem of greenwashing and a description of the commodification of sustainability. Chapter 3 will illustrate a few solutions to the problems of the ethical consumer. It considers the 'help' of certification and the role of social media. At the beginning of every chapter there is a quote from one of my informants, which gives an introduction of the subject(s) that will be mentioned in the chapter. Afterward the three chapters a conclusion will be given about all three chapters, which will summarize the key points mentioned in the chapters and give an overview of the ethical consumer and how they are trying to make sense of the buzzword sustainability.

CHAPTER 1:

MORALITIES AND THE ETHICAL CONSUMER

“My why, as they say, is for my children. Because I hope that they will grow up in a world that is better than it is now. Maybe that’s wishful thinking, but I think we can do better and that we have the possibilities, we just must utilize them (...) I also saw the documentary ‘genaaid’ and [heard about] the fire in Bangladesh. These are things that you actually know already. I also had that with my children, (...) when we were walking past [popular fast fashion brand] here in the city center and they would ask me “why do we never buy here?” (...) I said: “Because those clothes are made by children who are the same age as you are. You know?” So yes, I can’t wrap my head around that. (...) I mean, a mom in Bangladesh really would like to have the same things for her children as I do. And eventually that made a big impact, I think, because I became a mom. (...) I think that all moms around the world would like the same for their children, however not everyone has the possibilities. And when you think about it, it’s insane that you can think it’s ok that a sweater is made by a child. Yeah, it’s very weird.”*

Simone⁶

⁶ Interview Simone, 17-03-21

To better understand Simone and other ethical consumers, this chapter will give an overview of the ethical consumer and their values about sustainable clothing. The first part of this chapter will describe moral balancing and the varieties of morality. The chapter is continued by a description of the motives that ethical consumers have and gives an explanation of what ethical consumption is. It shows how people can interpret ethical consumption differently and thereby ethically consume differently. Lastly, I will describe how ethical consumption and moralities are linked and intertwined with each other, but not necessarily the same and explain the moral dilemmas that ethical consumers face.

Moralities

At the beginning of my fieldwork, one of the first interviews I have is with Lily. During a conversation with Lily she immediately tells me that she is still in the starting phase of buying sustainable clothing instead of ‘regular’ clothing. She stopped shopping at a few different fast fashion stores, is choosing quality over quantity and is transitioning into buying more clothes that are branded as sustainable. The topic of the conversation quickly changes to the struggles she has had during this transition. She explains to me that she will first focus more on ethically consuming basic clothing. “But on the other hand I also find it very difficult to go all the way, because of course you often also have a higher price tag and sometimes you also have a few trends [...] which are nice for now, but I know I will not wear it that much next year. And I find things like that difficult”, Lily says. Another struggle she has is that she does not know which brands are considered to be [morally] good. She just heard from her sister that a brand she normally shops at uses Uyghurs to make their clothes, who are forced to work there. “And then [...] you pay 100 euros for a pair of jeans or something, and you think that that would be good or something, but of course that does not always say everything”, she says.⁷

Ethical consumers look at the moral aspects of objects and therewith make the decision whether or not they want to purchase that object (Carrier, 2012). Lily is considering whether or not some of the clothing brands she knows are morally good or not. Considering the right and wrong of a product or action is prevalent for all humans (Laidlaw, 2010, 143). For humans, morality is what forms our sociality, it helps us relate to others (Howell, 1996, 9). The word ‘moral’ itself is often recognized as something that is good or right. Morality then is used to understand what people tend to consider as good or right (Fassin, 2012). What makes morality difficult, is that one person’s morals are not necessarily the same as what others consider to be moral. There is no universal law or procedure that tells you which action is moral and which is not (Mattingly, 2012). Instead, Mattingly (2012) argues that morality is shaped by social context. Moral decisions thus are always based upon a person’s body, emotion and daily life (Mattingly, 2012). There are different moments in which a person can reflect on morality; these moments could be short, emotionally powerful and limited, but also less intense or barely emotional (Throop, 2014, 71).

Moral decisions are shaped by historical and social context. How morally someone acts is therefore dependent on the development of virtues through social practices. Big historical moments, experiences and movements shape new moral possibilities and critiques (Mattingly, 2012). For Kelly⁸ and Emy the news of the Rana Plaza building collapsing was the cause to look more into the clothing industry and do more research about the social and political aspect of the clothing industry (Demkes, 2019). Danielle mentioned the documentary ‘The True Cost’

⁷ Interview, Lily, 10-03-21

⁸ Field notes, Instagram Live, Kelly, 30-04-21

as an eyeopener to become more aware of what types of clothing she would buy. In both the documentary and the news about Rana Plaza, shocking videos are shown of working conditions within the clothing industry and its effects.⁹ For Simone, as you could have seen in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, becoming a mom has made a shift to become more aware of moral decisions regarding sustainable clothing.¹⁰ The emotional nature of these events and situations are all part of their moral decision to become an ethical consumer. They have shaped new morals and critiques for these ethical consumers.

While it could be viewed that every society has some shared moral values, Zigon (2007) argues that there is a difference between everyday morality and the conscious decisions made in an ethical moment. One of my informants, Nicole, received second hand clothing throughout her whole life. Her aunt had a huge closet filled with clothes and every year Nicole received five garbage bags full of clothes from her. Later in life, she and her family started doing the same, they started giving away clothing that did not fit anymore to other family members and friends. Her morality to not throw away her clothes and to wear second hand clothing was something she learnt from her family, it shaped her to be more conscious about clothing. However, it did not automatically mean that she never bought any other clothing from (fast) fashion brands. This changed later on in her life, after she started to look more into sustainable living and started to focus on herself. After her divorce she started buying sustainable shampoo and cleaning supplies and buying food at ecological shops. Buying ethical and sustainable clothing was the next logical step for her. She started following zero waste guides and other accounts on social media that inspired her. While her morality was thought to her by family members, she changed her outlook on moral clothes even more later in life. And when her daily life changed after her divorce, so did her moral decisions¹¹. While Nicole had made moral decisions in the past based on her upbringing and what she considered to be normal, she later in life changed her moral outlook on the clothing industry and started to consciously decide whether or not certain clothing brand or piece of clothing is morally good or bad. Giving away her clothing to other family members after she did not wear them anymore, is part of her daily life, it is something she was always thought to do.

Morals are shaped and used in everyday life. As Simone said in the quote above, knowing about the ethical issues in the clothing industry has made her compare herself and her life to mothers who work in the clothing industry. The information has helped her relate (Howell, 1996). Sometimes you are not even aware that you have these morals, as they are shaped in your everyday life (Zigon, 2007). I argue that all the informants that are mentioned above have explicitly used certain morals. The informants already looked at the morals of other consumption, but were unaware or did not want to know about the moral issues that are part of the clothing industry. Once they became aware of it, they used the started to look at the moral aspects of clothes as well.

Ethical consumption

Within consumption, morality is always there (Wilk, 2001). People use consumption, in this case the consumption of clothing, to say something about who they are. Consumption makes categories of culture visible and stable, as its nature is to make sense of things. It ensures a process in which different social categories are examined and redefined by every person

⁹ Interview, Danielle, 06-05-21

¹⁰ Interview Simone, 17-03-21

¹¹ Interview, Nicole, 29-03-21

involved. While clothing is there, sense, rationality and meaning are what makes the clothing reality. It is what makes it meaningful. Goods therefore are used to send a message or to set limitations, as they make certain parts of culture visible (Douglas, 1992).

If we translate this to ethical consumption, Dombos (2012) argues that the ethical consumer acknowledges the social and environmental impact of their consumption and leaves behind their previous consumer behavior and instead starts consuming more consciously. As said above, ethical consumers take the moral nature of objects into account when deciding to purchase the object or not. They consume ethical objects that are produced in a way that is environmentally and socially good, or better in comparison to other objects on offer (Carrier, 2012). Ethical consumption is a social phenomenon (Carrier, 2012). In order to understand this social phenomenon, we have to understand the relationship between the economic and social realm. Economy and society, as Carrier (2012) calls it, places ethical consumption into a social practice and gives it social values. One way to achieve the goal of an ethical consumer is to signal their preferences to the economic realm. This can be done by buying certain clothes that are labelled as sustainable. Thereby, the consumers signal the profit to companies and show them that they should invest more in sustainable clothing. The ethical consumer hereby is the agent that can achieve their own goal, as they are the ones signaling their preferences (Carrier, 2012).

When buying clothes, the ethical consumer has certain aspects they want their clothes to have. Simone told me that sustainable materials and a sustainable production process are very important to her. She prefers natural materials over plastics and tries to buy clothes that consist of tencel, lyocell or organic cotton, which she perceives as sustainable materials. When she buys clothing she mostly buys it second hand as she prefers her clothes to last as long as possible. It is also important to her that the garment workers who make her clothes have good working conditions.¹² While, as Mattingly (2012) stated, morals differ per person, social and environmental aspects were values that were always mentioned when I talked to my informants about their values. All these examples relate back to the social and environmental context that Carrier (2012) and Dombos (2012) write about. By buying clothes that mirror these values, Simone signals her values and preferences to the economic realm.

Consuming what others produce, although sometimes done on an ethical and sustainable way, is not enough for some consumers. They become their own producer of their consumption (Kosnik, 2018). Necessary to notice is that, although a prosumer indeed produces their own goods and services, the important aspect is that they prefer to produce it themselves instead of buying it (Kotler, 1986). They transfer “production away from the market realm and reintroduces production back into the social sphere of home and household (Kosnik, 2018, 128). Motivations to become a prosumer for food are the enjoyment of gardening and connecting with their sources of food, sometimes necessity because of the rural areas they live in, and to save money (Kosnik, 2018). Laura buys materials online or buys second hand clothing and adjust it to her own liking, transforming the pieces into whole new clothing for herself to wear. However, producing your own clothes however can be very hard¹³. Many people do not have the time or skills for that¹⁴. Instead, the prosumption of clothing seems to look a bit different. Caitlin only buys second hand clothing. She goes to vintage and secondhand shops and buys clothes online via Vinted. With these clothes she sometimes makes the style of the clothes more her own by adjusting the clothes to her own preferences. She adjust jeans to her size or pimps a black t-shirt by embroidering things on it¹⁵.

¹² Interview, Simone, 17-03-21

¹³ Interview, Laura, 20-04-21

¹⁴ Focus group, Mary and Amber, 03-05-21

¹⁵ Interview, Caitlin, 21-04-21

Another form of ethical consumption is not consuming anything at all. With anti-consumption, people purposely do not consume because certain brands or products are not conform their values (Lee, Motion & Conroy, 2007). These people, while concerned with the same values as are described for ethical consumers, also deliberately consume significantly less (Isenhour, 2012). Wilk (2004) explains that it is important to understand that it is not just about consuming less, but about consuming less resources. For them ethical consumption is not only buying ethical products, but also consuming less resources (Wilk, 2004). Many of the people I spoke with have had this exact reason for not buying new clothing at all. Some only buy second hand clothing, while others only buy new clothes when they really need it. Overconsumption is something that is really tied with their values. Laura for instance said to me: “I never buy new clothes, ever, because there already is enough”. If she really needs a new type of clothing, she buys it second hand or makes her own.

The problem with not buying any new clothes, is that it does not give a clear signal to the economic realm. While buying second hand clothes or buying new sustainable clothes only when necessary helps with both reducing your consumption and signaling the economic realm (Isenhour, 2012), Carrier (2012) argues that another way to deal with this is to become conspicuous. Ethical consumers thereby explicitly announce their morality by proclaiming it in big letters on their products (Carrier, 2012). With clothing, this is harder to do. People will probably not only buy sustainable clothes that have “I am ethically made” printed on it in big letters. Instead, I argue that the ethical consumers signal their morals elsewhere. They show their clothes on social media and tag the brands. Or they post about tips to go second hand shopping in a certain city. They blog about ethical brands or post questions about sustainable clothing in a Facebook group about fair fashion. These signals are still social signals and still conspicuous and a way for them to express their morals and values of ethical consumption.

Overall I argue that people who recognize themselves in any of the ethical consumption practices explained above all are ethical consumers. They all look at the moral aspects of commodities and try to signal that to others (Carrier, 2012). Within the clothing industry ethical consumption varies per person. Some only buy second hand clothing, others buy clothing from sustainable brands. Some value materials such as lyocell or organic cotton, others buy second hand clothing and adjust their clothes by adding their own creativity to it. And some do all of the above.

Moral dilemmas

So, while Wilk (2001) explains that consumption is always associated with morals, Carrier (2012) explains a certain specific consumer that takes the moral nature of objects into account when deciding to purchase the object or not. This does not mean that everyone is an ethical consumer. “Ethical consumption is not just buying morally”, Carrier (2012, 32) writes. The ethical consumer consciously looks at the moral aspect of clothing, they want to signal that they are ethical (Carrier, 2012).

Within moral consumption there is no description of what is good consumption or what is bad. Moral consumption depends on different classes and critics and is often based on the social and economic position of the consumer. What is necessary and good for someone, can be bad or a luxury for someone else (Wilk, 2001). Ethical consumers still have moral dilemmas, even though they always think about the moral nature of the objects they purchase. Sometimes the moral of the consumption is less important than other morals and values. Caitlin still buys her underwear from a fast fashion brand, even though she buys everything else second hand. But even then, she thinks about the moral nature of the underwear and buys the underwear that

is made from organic cotton. “I thought well, if I do buy them somewhere, I will buy them there [at the brand that sells organic cotton], as it is better than nothing”, she told me¹⁶. Sanitary values are here more important to her than the moral aspect of clothing. However, she still keeps the moral in mind and looks for the next best moral thing. She still ethically consumes.

Zigon (2007) describes an occasion of ethical dilemmas or difficult times as a breakdown. This breakdown occurs when something occasionally changes in your everyday life, for instance a disagreement or question arises. The individual who experiences this breakdown most of the time has none or little to do with the occurring of the breakdown. This moral breakdown is the moment “in which ethics must be performed” (Zigon, 2007, 137). Sometimes moral breakdowns occur where though the ethical consumer has to make a decision that is not a decision they normally have to make. Here moral dilemmas can occur.

Another moral dilemma that often occurs when buying sustainable clothing is the price of the clothing. Ethical consumption for instance is often characterized as pricier than others (Carrier, 2012). This does not mean however that you cannot still be an ethical consumer. Being a prosumer or anti-consumer also demonstrates the values that ethical consumers have, while it does not mean that you have to use economic resources to purchase commodities that are put on the market (Kosnik, 2018). Not everyone can afford this. Laura explained to me that during her study in fashion and clothing she learnt about the issues regarding the processes of the clothing industry and the environmental consequences some materials have. As a result she ended up becoming an ethical consumer and began looking at the moral aspects of the clothes she bought. Because she normally bought her clothes at cheap fast fashion brands, the price of sustainable clothing shocked her. It was not in her price range at all. Instead of going back to the fast fashion brands, she started to buy second hand and started to make her own clothes. This way she could still be an ethical consumer, while also affording the clothes she bought¹⁷.

Wilk (2001) argues that, although morals differ per person, there is almost always a temptation that a consumer has to deal with, something that the consumer has to resist (Wilk, 2001). For Lily, who I talked about at the beginning of this chapter, this could be the price of ‘regular’ clothing, which she finds a lot cheaper than sustainable clothing. The temptation of ‘regular’ cheap clothing is always there, because there is a lot of access to get cheap clothes in The Netherlands. Another temptation could be trendy clothes which Lily is repelled to. Although she does recognize that she will not wear these clothes a lot next year, she still considers buying them. Lily then has to consider which temptations are worth it for her, which are good enough to buy. For her, the impact on the Uyghurs are not worth it, and therefore she won’t buy any jeans from that brand. The jeans are thus seen as morally ‘bad’ by Lily¹⁸.

Purchasing morally does not mean that you are an ethical consumer. You can accidentally buy a sustainable t-shirt, but this does not make you an ethical consumer. Ethical consumers are aware of the moral objects of clothing on the morality of the product, and base their choice to buy the clothing on the morality of the product (Carrier, 2012). This does not mean that the ethical consumer does not experience moral dilemmas. As mentioned above, ethical consumers could face moral dilemmas when something occurs that is not planned, or when a bigger value is faced in comparison to the moral value of the clothing, or just when experiencing temptations. There are other problems as well for the ethical consumers, which will be mentioned in the next two chapters. The next chapters will examine the buzzword of sustainability and give an explanation of the experience of commodity fetishism and greenwashing.

¹⁶ Interview, Caitlin, 21-04-21

¹⁷ Interview, Laura, 20-04-21

¹⁸ Interview, Lily, 10-03-21

INTERLUDE

Look, there is still a whole world to improve upon, for me, let's say in the field of sustainability. But you still try to think a little more about the things you do and that does not mean that you only make the right choices. But you are aware of it all, so to speak. And, maybe it is also partly due to age, but I think, if I compare myself to my parents, they are really different from, for example, our generation (...). I think that is really, really a positive development”

Lily¹⁹

¹⁹ Interview, Lily, 10-03-21

CHAPTER 2:

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE PROCESS OF COMMODITY FETISHISM

“Well, for example with [clothing brand], they shout out that they are Fairwear. So, I assumed they were associated with Fairwear [a certification]. And then I checked it and it turns out they weren't, so I was kind of mad about that. (...) Like, that you think, damn people. And of course yes, I sometimes fall for something, for instance the sustainable cotton (...) of the [warehouse brand]. I am not always checking my phone when I am in a store to see how much of it is true, so then I buy it already and later ask [the warehouse brand] like, how sustainable is your sustainable cotton actually? So of course I fall, I am just a consumer, (...) sometimes I naturally fall for it, yes”.

Simone²⁰

²⁰ Interview 2, Simone, 05-05-21

The previous chapter showed an overview of the meaning of ethical consumption and the associations with moral balancing. One of the biggest challenge the ethical consumer has is the usage of greenwashing by brands to stimulate a purchase that is not always as sustainable as one might think. Chapter two explores the experience of greenwashing of the ethical consumer and gives an understanding of commodity fetishism. It will showcase the struggles the ethical consumer experiences due to the commodification of sustainability and give an overview of the popularity of the word ‘sustainability’.

The sustainability buzzword

During the interviews with my informants the first question I usually asked was “how would you describe sustainability”? I did this to get a better overview of what the person sees as sustainability and how this affects the way they consume ethically. After asking every person I talked to, I realized that not one answer was the same. Of course there were many aspects that were reoccurring, but everyone used different words to describe what they see as sustainability and some aspects are mentioned more than others. Laura for instance mentioned quality over quantity and fair production²¹, while Nicole mentioned that sustainability for her is that we should be more frugal with the planet and get rid of the throwaway society we are in at the moment by using reusable materials²². Jennifer mentioned a good work environment with a safe and hygienic work space during production and how the production of things or actions should not ruin the world²³, while Melissa said “when I think of sustainability, I think of all aspects that make something good, what makes something responsible”. A few of these aspects for her are good working conditions, no toxic chemicals and aspects that are good for the environment and good for all people involved²⁴. That they all have different definitions is not that strange, considering that there actually are dozens of different definitions of sustainability, making it a well-known fact that the concept of sustainability is fuzzy (Brightman & Lewis, 2017). Sustainability is not holistic and can be defined as many different things (Johnston et al, 2007). Ryan & Wood (2020) even state that one person’s sustainability could differ from someone else’s sustainability, referring both to individuals and corporations. That my informants thus all have a different definition of sustainability relates to the above mentioned anthropologists literature.

Within anthropology, as Brightman & Lewis (2017) argue, contradictions of sustainability are often revealed. They suggest that, if we want to understand sustainability, we have to understand what the future aspect of sustainability is: not what we need to do to maintain what we have, but how we can maintain a livable earth in the future (Brightman & Lewis, 2017). Anna Tsing has a similar approach when defining sustainability and describes it as “the dream of passing a livable earth to future generations, human and nonhuman” (Tsing, 2017, 51). She argues that sustainability is not only a human affair, but concerns multispecies. Globally, it seems like sustainability is epitomized by the Development Goals of the UN, which show three key dimensions of sustainability by focusing on economic, social and environmental goals (Homewood, 2017). However, governments and big international corporations are ineffective in trying to achieve sustainability as they themselves do not entirely know what sustainability really is, despite the popularity of sustainability. They use a confusing definition of sustainability which does not look at the rational and ethical aspects of sustainability (Brightman & Lewis, 2017, 10).

²¹ Interview, Laura, 20-04-21

²² Interview, Nicole, 29-03-21

²³ Interview, Jennifer, 04-03-21

²⁴ Interview, Melissa, 10-03-21

The popularity of sustainability has not been unnoticed by the ethical consumers I interviewed. Sustainability has become a theme you hear more and more every day. It is something that people are becoming more aware of something that an increasingly amount of people are incorporating into their daily lives²⁵. ‘Sustainability’ has become a buzzword²⁶. The overly use of sustainability and the broad and empty meaning of the word, has made the word become associated with numerous different meaning. So much so, that it now lacks clarity (Ryan & Wood, 2020). And during interviews with my informants I notice that it is not just the word ‘sustainability’ that feels empty and broad for the ethical consumers. When showing them words used by (fast) fashion brands to identify a ‘sustainable’ clothing line like ‘conscious’, ‘earthwise’ and ‘aware’, of course ‘sustainable’ and slogans like “wear the change”, Emily notices: “they are all fluffy words, you know? They do not really say anything. [...] What does it really mean?”²⁷. The words, although used so much, have become buzzwords that lack direct meaning.

The popularity of the word sustainability however is a direct influence of the ethical consumer. Following Carrier’s (2012) argument from the previous chapter, the ethical consumer signals their preference of sustainable clothes by buying clothes that are labelled as sustainable. When lots of people send this signal, it becomes a trend, it becomes something that brands want to offer in order to receive profit. These values and morals are shaped in the social realm, and they are signaled to the economic realm (Carrier, 2012). The popularity of the word sustainability within the clothing industry is thus a consequence of the buying behavior of the ethical consumer.

Commodity fetishism

When I was a few weeks into my fieldwork I thought I would google the word ‘clothing’ in combination with some of the words mentioned by my informants when they described what sustainable clothing is for them or words that they said they search for when looking for new clothes to buy. Besides mundane photos of clothing with a white background and stock images of t-shirts and skirts, I immediately saw a pattern within the images. Lots of pictures were taken outside, as you could see lots of models standing in front of a tree, flowers, under a blue sky, dancing in the sun. But it was not just the background of the clothes that had nature incorporated in them. Besides white and black, most clothes had a brown, green, orange or any other nature-tone color. It was as if the clothes were representing nature by their tones. When I typed the search word “clothing good for nature”, I saw words as organic, sustainable, green, eco-friendly, sustainable fabrics, natural clothes, ethical clothing, natural fibers and more. All buzzwords I recognized not only because of my informants, but also because I saw them repeatedly on websites, communicated by brands and written in blogs. The websites I could click on were mostly blogs that would show me which brands or materials are sustainable. These blogs would reveal 11 eco-friendly clothing brands or would teach me 7 alternative materials for clothes. There were also a few websites of (fast) fashion brands I could click on, which showed a ‘sustainable’ collection of clothes. One of the first brands I saw on the google webpage was a brand that advertised as ethical clothing for men and women. On the website the first photos I saw were pictures of models outside in the sun modelling the clothes of the brand. On the background of the pictures I saw water and mountains, and the clothes themselves were white, brown, black and green. Underneath a few of the photos, but definitely not all,

²⁵ Interview, Lily, 10-03-21

²⁶ Interview, Simone, 17-03-21

²⁷ Interview, Emily, 16-03-21

organic cotton was mentioned. After clicking on the t-shirt, a description said the t-shirt was sustainably crafted and that the organic cotton was grown without chemical fertilizers or pesticides²⁸. A few weeks later I went to a popular street in Amsterdam that, as a blog about sustainable clothing told me, had a few different stores of sustainable clothing brands and second hand clothing shops. As the stores were finally open again and no reservation was needed, I thought I would check out a few of the stores where ethical consumers might shop for their clothes. One of the first stores I came across was a store with an all-white entrance and indoor interior. In the window of the store a white tree was painted and in the front of the store two large brown branches were growing²⁹.

I would argue now, that lots of the branding of the webpages, brands, blogs and stores I came across were actually a direct result of commodity fetishism. In order to understand the commodification fetishism, we first have to understand what a commodity is. Marx (2000 [1887]) describes a commodity as an object that satisfies the want of a person, whereby it does not matter why they want this object or how this want is satisfied. He argues that the value of a commodity can be examined by exchange-value or use-value. The exchange-value determines the worth of a commodity in relation to another commodity, while the use-value determines the worth of the commodity by the utility of a thing. Use-value only becomes related to commodities once the commodities are being used or consumed (Marx, 2000 [1887]). While Marx' theory has given the most attention (Castree, 2003), many people defined commodities differently. Appadurai suggest that commodities are "objects of economic value" (Appadurai, 1998, 3). He argues that, as a critique to Marx' understanding, commodities are not just goods or products, commodities have a type of social potential, they have social lives. The social life of a certain thing, he argues, is relevant to become a commodity. That is how the exchangeability becomes relevant and of value. So, this social life is what gives value to commodity, not the labor of the people (Appadurai, 1988). Tsing (2013) mentions that commodities define the value system within capitalism. Commodities, she argues, "gain value through conversations from non-capitalist transactions" (Tsing, 2013, 21). The capitalist commodities will always roam in and out of status, because the labor and natural resources that are built into commodities are never 100 percent successful. Non-capitalist relations then, are always needed to fulfill the goal of the commodity (Tsing, 2013).

When looking at the value of a commodity, Marx (2000 [1887]) points out that the labor of people adds a social character that characterizes the commodity. He thereby explains the notion of fetishism of commodities, in which a certain social character is attached to commodities due to the labor of the people who made the product or action. That labor, however, is being objectified as the outcome of the process of the commodity (Marx 2000 [1887]). Carrier (2010) extends this definition of commodity fetishism by referring to commodity fetishism as the "ignoring or denial of the background of objects" and adds not only material commodities but also fictitious commodities to the description (Carrier, 2010, 674-675). These fictitious commodities are described by Polany (1944) as something, like land, money or labor, that is not produced for sale, but is seen as a (crucial) market within the economic system. The fictional aspect of the commodity is crucial to organize markets for the commodities.

Carrier (2010) argues that there are three different types of commodity fetishism within ethical consumption: the fetishism of the product they is being sold, the fetishism of the actual purchase of the commodity and therefor the consumption and lastly the fetishism of the environment. If we translate Carrier's (2010) arguments to the sustainable clothing industry, I suggest the following. With the fetishism of the product, Carrier tries to show that when a brand

²⁸ Field notes, Google Search, 22-03-21

²⁹ Field notes, Amsterdam white store, 01-05-21

wants to attract an ethical consumer to purchase clothing, they will attract them by “appealing images that fetishize what they are selling” (2010, 679). I argue that it is not just appealing images, but also appealing words. These words represent what could be seen as sustainable or ethical, something the ethical consumer attracts. As seen at the beginning of this subchapter, when adding a few words of value or, for ethical consumers, important aspects of ethical consumption to the google search words to find ‘new’ clothing to buy, you will immediately find many different words and photos that are fetishized by brands. The nature-tones and words similar to sustainability fetishize the clothing by showcasing important values to the ethical consumer, such as nature and the environment, while not (immediately) showing the impacts the production has on the environment³⁰. The clothing brand that sells some organic t-shirt, similar to the marine parks or Fairtrade coffee companies that Carrier (2010) mentions, tries to attract customers by presenting words and images that fetishize their products. What is not mentioned or shown, is the process of the clothing being made and the environmental damage of shipping the clothes and maybe even materials. This relates to Carrier’s (2010) argument and how Crewe (2017) explains commodity fetishism within the clothing industry; as “the ways in which consumers are persuaded not to reflect on the hands of the makers of their clothes” (Crewe, 2017, 39).

I am not suggesting that the clothing brand I found online or the brand with the tree in front of their store are not selling sustainable items. I simply have not done enough research to insinuate this. What I am implying is that, just like Carrier’s (2010) examples, appealing pictures, words and even nature itself are being used to attract an ethical consumer to buy their clothes.

Greenwashing within the clothing industry

Greenwashing was a term I came across a lot during my fieldwork. This was mostly due to the posts I saw on social media³¹ and in blogs³². Social media influencers who advocate on sustainable fashion frequently shared or posted about the process of greenwashing. They would post about how you could avoid greenwashing, how you could spot it and which brands were actively greenwashing their customers. One social media post defined greenwashing within fashion as a process whereby misleading or false information is spread by the company about the environmental sound of their products. The post emphasized that while environmental aspects of a product are often communicated, there is almost none consideration for the garment workers and other people involved in the making of the clothing. But, as they state, without ethical aspects, no racism and fair salary for the workers, there is no sustainable fashion.

As a combination of the trend of sustainability and the fetishism of commodities, the ethical consumer within the clothing industry can experience lots of greenwashing. Greenwashing, which I would argue has a similar description to commodify fetishism, has made ethical consumption a lot harder for the ethical consumers. Besides a few informants who just started to look into ethical consumption³³, most ethical consumers knew about the term

³⁰ Field notes, Google Search, 22-03-21

³¹ Field notes, Instagram 02-03-21; field notes, Instagram 05-03-21; field notes, Instagram 06-03-21; fieldnotes, Instagram 16-03-21; field notes, Instagram 17-03-21; fieldnotes, Instagram 22-03-21; fieldnotes, Instagram 31-03-21; field notes Instagram 04-04-21; field notes Instagram 12-04-21; field notes Instagram16-04-21; field notes Instagram19-04-21 ; field notes Instagram 21-04-21; field notes Instagram 22-04-21; field notes Instagram 26-04-21 ; field notes Instagram 30-04-21 ; field notes Instagram 12-05-21

³² Field notes, blogs 02-03-21; field notes blogs 17-03-21; fieldnotes blogs 22-03-21

³³ Interview, Jennifer, 04-03-21; Interview, Nicole, 29-03-21 ; Interview, Lily, 10-03-21 ; Interview, Melissa, 10-03-21 ; Focus group, Mary and Amber, 03-05-21

greenwashing and knew how to describe the phenomenon. Emily explains greenwashing to me as a process in which a sustainable label is put upon a product while the product might not be, or just for one aspect is, sustainable, and the product still has lots of negative impact on the environment and or social circumstances. She learnt about the term of greenwashing after talking to an experienced sustainable clothing blogger³⁴. I argue that her description, and those of the other informants, correlates to the description of commodity fetishism. They both refer to a certain product or commodity that fetishize a certain aspect of the product or commodity and thereby also ignores certain other aspects. The fetish is the sustainability or ethical aspects that are being promoted for the clothing and the less sustainable or ethical parts of the (products of) the clothing is deliberately not been emphasized or told upon.

Being misled by companies who use greenwashing is something not all informants were realizing could happen easily. For some, only after I asked about the phenomenon of greenwashing, it made them realize that they have to be more careful of trusting the sustainability of a brand³⁵. As was seen in the quote at the beginning of the chapter, Simone as experience greenwashing, even though she is very careful with what she buys. If she is unsure of the sustainability of a brand, she emails them questions about their production process. How far are you to your goal to only sell 100% biological cotton? And how do you check if your garment workers are really safe and have good working conditions? What do you do with overstock? These are some of the questions she asked a brand when she was not sure of the realness of their sustainability claim. But even then she sometimes experiences greenwashing³⁶.

I argue that one of the reasons greenwashing has become so apparent is the result of the commodification of sustainability. When focusing on the Marxism methodology of commodities, commodification can be defined as a process in which a use-value is been transformed into exchange-values. It thus transfers things that are made to meet the needs of a human (or non-human) into a product that is exchangeable and can be put on the marketplace (Mosco, 1996, 141-144). Castree (2003) argues that many researchers have tried to give different perspectives upon what commodification is, both using Marx' (2000 [1887]) theory on commodities and explicitly using other theories, such as that of Appadurai (1988). And while Marxian theories have been given the most attention within contemporary commodity analysis, it does not mean that the definition of capitalist commodification should be strictly associated with Marx' theories or that all theories of commodification involving Marxism are the same (Castree, 2003). Castree (2003) argues that the process of the commodification of nature has six principal elements: privatization, alienability, individuation, abstraction, valuation and displacement. All six elements of commodification help show us what is so specific about the "money-mediated exchange of things in capitalist societies" (Castree, 2003, 283). Richardson (2013) argues that 'sustainability' is just like Polany's (1994) fictitious commodity, it can be commodified. He states that sustainability is, just like labor or land, not created for sale, however it is still treated as a commodity (Richardson, 2013). If we translate this to the clothing industry, sustainability is promoted as a process that is used so ethical consumers will buy the clothing.

The commodification of sustainability, the sustainability buzzword and the use of commodity fetishism together could serve as a real threat for the ethical consumer who buys their clothing because of moral values. The commodification of sustainability produced certain clothing that became attractive to the informants, it becomes something that they value. Due to the popularity of sustainability and thereby the usage of the buzzword sustainability, it has

³⁴ Interview, Emily, 16-03-21

³⁵ Interview, Kimberly, 09-03-21 ; Interview, Melissa, 10-03-21 ; Interview, Jennifer, 04-03-21 ; Interview, Lily, 10-03-21

³⁶ Interview, Simone, 17-03-21 ; Interview 2, Simone, 05-05-21

become apparent that sustainability sells. For brands to keep up, they started using commodity fetishism as a process to sell (more) clothes. The use of commodity fetishism created an attraction for the ethical consumer, whereby certain other aspects that are less sustainability become ignored or denied. This all together has not only made sustainability popular, but unfortunately greenwashing as well. As Tsing mentioned, sustainability has become something that has commonly been used to hide harmful actions (Tsing, 2017, 51).

INTERLUDE

*“With the climate talks, I think a lot of people don’t want to know [about the issues of the clothing industry]. Because that is the easiest, you know? And I think that in a lot of cases, (...) especially now in the running up of the elections, there is of course a kind of polarization going on, isn’t there? You are either very much on one end of the spectrum, or you are very much on the other end of the spectrum. But really wanting to listen and letting it all sink in is really, really hard. As a climate coach as well, (...) that is one night every two weeks. And then, we have people who are dropping out already and say, ‘I’m not participating tonight, because it just touches me so much’. And I’ve had that myself too. I understand very well that people don’t let it go to the point where they laugh at people who are climate depressed hahaha *sarcastic laugh*. While I think, if you really know how far it is all going, half of the world would be depressed. It is very easy to not interfere and say, yeah, ‘that problem lies in China’ or, ‘that problem is everywhere but mine’”.*

Simone³⁷

³⁷ Interview, Simone, 17-03-21

CHAPTER 3:

TRUST AND THE ‘HELP’ OF CERTIFICATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

“And I also have the idea that that is a bit more unknown anyway, like where it’s from. With a shirt for instance you can always look at the inside of what it’s made of for example. But when looking at the people aspect, you can’t really see that. And then you have to sort of trust that, yeah, that what they say is um, true”

Lily³⁸

³⁸ Interview, Lily, 10-03-21

The previous chapter gave an overview of the struggle of greenwashing for the ethical consumer and gave an explanation of the commodification of sustainability. This last chapter will focus on a few suggested solutions to the problems allocated in chapter two. As a result of greenwashing and the commodity fetishism, it appeared that ethical consumers have lost a lot of trust for many different brands and organizations. My informants talked about a lot of complications from when they are buying new or second hand clothes. The people who just started to become an ethical consumer especially have the issue where they do not know who to trust or where to buy clothes from. This chapter will explore the trust of certifications within the sustainable clothing industry and the influence of social media on the buying decisions of ethical consumers.

Vagueness and trust

So we can now conclude that ethical consumption is based upon the decision of a person to (not) buy a certain product because of the moral aspects of the product (Carrier, 2010). An ethical consumer can thereby instead buy sustainable clothing, politely not buy any or certain clothing or make their own clothing. When buying sustainably advertised clothing however, could be less sustainable than it is advertised to be. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Danielle wanted to buy a new pair of joggers. Her previous joggers were too old and very loose, due to her pregnancy. Because she knew she was going to spend a lot of time in her joggers, she wanted a specific type of jogger which she knew would be comfortable. However, after browsing and browsing on the internet, she just could not find the type of joggers she wanted from the places she normally buys her clothes. So she browsed some more, at other websites from brands she did not know before. As a result she eventually bought a pair of jeans from a brand that had a sustainable line next to their normal line. She bought the joggers and was very happy with them. But afterwards, after doing some more research, she found out that the brand she bought her joggers from, was actually a fast fashion brand. The brand had, next to their 'regular' clothing lines, a second sustainable line in which some materials were environmentally friendly or recycled. This experience has made her trust clothing brands less. She now does even more research beforehand and goes back to that website that mentioned that the clothing brand was not completely sustainable to check on other brands before she buys something from it.³⁹

Carrier (2010) concludes his article about ethical consumption and commodity fetishism with the assumption that the ethical consumer is not aware of the fetishization of the commodities. He argues that ethical consumers are focusing more on the choice to buy ethically rather than the context that actually perform the values the ethical consumer seeks (Carrier, 2010). I argue that, while that is true sometimes, some ethical consumers are also aware of the effect of commodity fetishism and greenwashing. Mostly due to experiences such as the one that is explained above, but sometimes also just due to the information that is spread online.

Without a clear definition of sustainability, greenwashing throughout the industry and the moral dilemmas that can be experienced, ethical consumption can get overwhelming (Richard & Lusty, 2020). As a result there is a lot of vagueness and not a lot of trust when brands say they are sustainable. And if the consumer does not trust the sustainable aspects of the commodity, they will less likely buy the product (Andorfer & Liebe, 2013).

Part of the vagueness and a symptom of greenwashing is the lack of transparency that is experienced by the ethical consumers. Anna tells during an Instagram Live with Kelly that her number one suspicion of greenwashing is when vagueness. They are both actively focal on the issues of greenwashing and both often post on Instagram about sustainable clothing

³⁹ Interview, Danielle, 06-05-21

industry. Kelly immediately agrees with her that vagueness is definitely a red flag when it comes to greenwashing and sustainable clothing. In order to trust a brand they would like to have as much information as possible. And of course they understand that sometimes a brand does not have all the information they need, for instance when a brand works with so many different suppliers that they do not know if a specific supplier works with Uyghurs or not. But as long as they are open about it and as transparent as possible, this helps a lot in trusting the brand.⁴⁰

Trust concerns the future states of something that does or does not meet your expectation. It shapes how we look into the future (Pedersen & Liisberg, 2015). Gaining trust can thus be done by predicting the future in a way that you are sure you can trust it. It helps then, as explained above, to have as much information as needed to trust a brand. With as little information as possible, ethical consumers will most likely not trust the brand. Or they will not trust it after experiencing greenwashing. Following the conversation of trust, the following text is based on the help of certification.

The 'help' of certification

During my conversation with Lily we quickly got into the difficulties she faces as someone who just started looking at the moral aspects of the clothing industry. As you could have noticed in chapter 1, Lily finds it hard to know when a brand is considered ethically good and when it is not. When I asked her how a brand can make it easier for her to show that she can trust them, she answered me that clothing brands could maybe, just like is done with food, make different sorts of certifications so consumers could know which brands fulfill which requirements. With a certification, she continues, it is independently proven that something is good and they could all be focused on different focus points. I tell her that it is funny that she says this and show her a few different logos of certifications that are being used within the clothing industry. After asking her if she recognizes any of the certifications, she honestly answers that she only recognizes Fairtrade, which she mostly links to food. She tells me later that, if a certification radiates sustainability and it thereby is recognizable that the certificate has a positive impact on the clothing industry, she will trust it without doing any further research⁴¹.

Hudson & Hudson (2003) argue that the initiative of fair trade movement, a movement that focusses on making the environmental and social conditions of commodities more visible, can be a solution to the threat of commodity fetishism. The aim of fair trade, also known as alternative trade, is to improve the livelihoods of the producers by improving social conditions and increasing their income. They also aim to distinguish themselves from other commodities by advertising these above mentioned conditions on their products (Hudson & Hudson, 2003). Most researches on fair trade or alternative trade is focused on products such as coffee and tea (Luetchford, 2012) (Hudson & Hudson, 2003) (Fridell, 2007). Fairtrade is arguably one of the most popular organizations that certifies objects using ethical criteria (Carrier, 2010). These Fairtrade products have a certain packaging, in which messages of conditions are portrayed, people are showed that grow the coffee and landscapes of the growing of the coffee is illustrated. While the specialist Fairtrade brands give lots of information about their producers, the production and quality of the coffee, some more conventional brands only show the certification mark and the focus on human interest by adding a specific image to the package (Luetchford, 2012). The fair trade movement seeks to educate their costumers about the problems within certain production processes and offer commodities that have a visibly improved production process. With this process they attempt to include the production process

⁴⁰ Field notes, Instagram Live Kelly & Anna, 29-04-21

⁴¹ Interview, Lily, 10-03-21

into the characteristics of their product, acting against the process of commodity fetishism (Hudson & Hudson, 2003).

Fairtrade certification is also used within the clothing industry, focusing on cotton farmers. The organization helps strengthen the cooperation, organize community projects and give service to the cotton farmers (Fairtrade Nederland, 2021). And there are also several other certifications in the clothing industry that try to act against commodity fetishism. These certifications try to simplify the process of ethical consumption within the clothing industry and propose a more secure way to evaluate the sustainability of a brand (Eluxe Magazine, 2021). As a way to get a better understanding of the knowledge and trust of certifications within the clothing industry, I showed my informants a document of fourteen different certifications and other websites that could be recognized as labels that are used to show the important conditions to their production. I argue that, just like the alternative trade movement, the certificates mentioned below are made to focus on environmental and social aspects of the clothing and advertise these conditions onto the productions they certify. Certifications such as Fashion Revolution, Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), the Fairwear foundation, Oeko-Tex, Cradle to Cradle, Ethical Trading Initiative, Certified B Corporation, Fairtrade certified, PETA Approved Vegan and Bluesign were among the certifications that I showed the informants (Fashion Revolution, 2021) (Global Standard, 2021) (Groupe Ecocert, 2021) (Global Standard, 2021) (OEKO-TEX Service, 2021) (Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation, 2021) (Ethical Trading Initiative, 2021) (Bluesign Technologies AG, 2021) (B Lab, 2021) (PETA, 2021).

The most common reaction to these certifications was the unfamiliarity of the logos. Besides Sophie, Danielle and Nicole⁴², all three experience ethical consumers, the informants knew none or only a few of the certifications shown in the document. The logo of Fairtrade was recognized by all, but more because of the link to the certification of food than to the link with the clothing industry.⁴³

As a result of the trend of sustainability within the coffee movement, certifications not only made by non-profit organizations and similar sustainability programs of Fairtrade, but also self-made certifications by brands that sell coffee have become popular among coffee brands (Fischer, 2007). The same seems to happen in the clothing industry. Warehouses and brands seem to not only greenwash by using fetishized words and images to attract ethical consumers, but also come up with their own certifications.⁴⁴ This, and the fact that some certifications have been more trustworthy than others⁴⁵ rise similar questions as Fisher (2007) asks in her article about fair trade coffee. Have these certifications just become another marketing plan to attract customers? And do these certifications help with de-fetishizing commodities, or does it actually add to the commodity fetishism? (Fisher, 2007).

Sophie, who recognized all the certifications I showed her, educated me in her opinion about the different certifications:

GOTS, if that's what you have hanging on your clothes, that really means that everything from the seed to the end product is all good. BCI um, although it had some commotion lately, I still think it is just a good certification, however it really only concerns cotton cultivation. [...] PETA is just a form you have to fill out that promises you to produce vegan. [...] I mean, I don't think a lot of brands are going to fill it in if they are not really [vegan], but [...] no one is checking it or something. [...] Oeko-tex is always so typical, you know. It does not mean it is sustainable at all, it just means that

⁴² Interview, Sophie, 19-03-21 ; Interview, Danielle, 06-05-21; Interview, Nicole, 29-03-21

⁴³ Interview, Nicole, 29-03-21 ; Interview, Lily, 10-03-21

⁴⁴ Interview 2, Simone, 05-05-21

⁴⁵ Interview, Sophie, 19-03-21

it does not contain any toxic substances. [...] Fairwear Foundation is really cool, but you always have to watch out with well, how far along they are in the whole process, because Fairwear basically means that they are going to, well, check everything and that they are writing a very very transparent report, but the brand is not always completely sustainable from the start. [...] Ethical Trading Initiative is just about ethical trading, so the production is done in a fair way. The same applies for Fairtrade, which are actually only focused on the farmers. [...] Bluesign focusses a little bit on durability and a little bit on fair production, but it is not kind of, they all have gradations. Ecocert focusses just a lot on sustainability. Cradle to Cradle is simply that you handle your raw materials well. [...] Fashion Revolution are just activists. And B-corp uh, yeah I kind of struggle with B-Corp a little, because I like them, yeah, they do really nice things, but because they are so wide, and you kind of have a points system, if you have how many points you need to get the certificate, you can sort of make considerations about whether we do this and this and not this or whether we score well on this, but not there. And not every brand is very transparent about how they received a B-corp certificate⁴⁶.

Sophie is mostly pleased with the GOTS certificate, as the certificate looks at every step of the production process of the clothing and does not only focus on fair trade, but also looks at environmental aspects⁴⁷. Her description of the certifications made me realize that, mostly due to the lack of knowledge about the certificates, they sometimes still fetishize the clothing that they label according to their regulations. This relates to Fisher's (2007) argument on the fair trade movement of coffee. She argues that we could possibly see fair trade as the commodification of morality, or even as the commodification of activism. Hereby we have to understand that, especially after all the commodity fetishism that is going on in the clothing industry, it can be hard to assume that a genuine form of sustainability and fair trade could occur in relation to consumption. We therefore have to have a positive or neutral attitude against seeing fair trade as a commodification of activism (Fisher, 2007). As Hudson & Hudson (2003) also argue, the alternative trade movement, which as I have argued before also include the certifications mentioned above, have to become as clear as possible by providing as much information as they can when a person wants to purchase a commodity that they certified or labelled. By providing as much reliable information as possible, they can link the consumer to the economic, social and environmental aspects of the producers of the commodities (Hudson & Hudson, 2003). Only then will they overcome the commodity fetishism that is currently incorporated into the clothing industry.

The need of information is therefore very important for the ethical consumers to gain trust into certifications and thereby the sustainable clothing that they want to buy. The need for transparency and immediate recognizable elements are crucial for brands and certificates in order to gain trust by the ethical consumers.

⁴⁶ Interview, Sophie, 19-03-21

⁴⁷ Interview, Sophie, 19-03-21

The ‘help’ of social media and the internet

During my fieldwork I often looked at Instagram and blogs to get a better understanding of what the ethical consumers were thinking. As a result, these sources gave me a lot of information about certain brands, how to tackle certain issues and where to look for when looking at the trustworthiness of a brand. My informants also often referred to different social media accounts and websites that were useful for them. Simone, who herself is very active on Instagram and has her own blog about sustainable living, often looks at Instagram to see news about the clothing industry. Due to her Instagram and the people she follows, she comes in contact with other influencers and people interested in sustainability. With her blog and her social media, she can ask questions about issues to others and also voice her opinion about certain topics. Others also benefit from it, as they receive free information from someone who also is an ethical consumer.⁴⁸

Social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram are great platforms for the forming of virtual communities. Virtual communities, although difficult to define, are mostly based upon a few common themes. A group of online people could be seen as a virtual community if they are “engaged in collective action, shared in rituals, had a variety of relational linkages, and were emotionally bonded to others in a way that conferred a sense of belonging and group identification” (Parks, 2011, 117-118). Because of the lack of transparency of brands and the sometimes complicated and overwhelming amount of research needed in order to know if a brand is or is not sustainable, ethical consumers get the help of others to make their decisions a little easier. As they share rituals and are engaged in the same action, that of ethical consumption, they could become virtual communities if they wanted to. I argue that Simone is already part of it, as she has shares her rituals and actions with others and engages with them.

Another part that is helpful about the internet is the possibility to be activist about certain topics. During my fieldwork I came across lots of activists who talked about and advocated for sustainable clothing. Besides everyday posts about general topics of ethical consumptions, there were also specific dates in which social media had lots of activist posts. During earth day, statistics about the environmental consequences that the clothing industry is causing. But also posts to warn others about the greenwashing that will happen on that day. Many (fast) fashion brands often post about earth day with information that is not always correct or is misleading⁴⁹. These virtual communities are then being used to perform “hashtag activism” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, 8). They are used to spread awareness through the usage of hashtags and social media. While some could argue that hashtags are just a few words and thereby very limited, hashtags are also an entry point to find and inform more people, globally, over the internet (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

With the use of social media Fashion Revolution started the hashtag #whomademyclothes. Every year on the day that Rana Plaza collapsed, they organize Fashion Revolution Week, whereby they ask for aware on certain issues within the clothing industry. They ask their followers to question brands about who made their clothes and post it on social media. They spread awareness of the issue of the clothing industry that we are still facing today (Fashion Revolution, 2021).

⁴⁸ Interview 2, Simone, 05-05-21

⁴⁹ Field notes, Instagram, 22-04-21

CONCLUSION

“I do not really believe that something is not sustainable or something is. Something is just more sustainable, it is a spectrum”.

Sophie⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Interview, Sophie, 19-03-21

To conclude this research I would like to start by addressing the quote used at the beginning of this conclusion. As Sophie mentions, she believes that sustainability is a spectrum and that something is not just sustainable or not, but only more sustainable than something else. I would argue that this quote perfectly summarizes the research I have conducted. When we start at the beginning and look at the values and moral dilemmas of the ethical consumer, we can see that it indeed is a spectrum and it depends on your own morals and values what to you is ethical consumption and what to you more important features than others. As long as you look at the morality of the product, it does not matter how sustainable a product is. As long as it is sustainable to you.

Looking then at the second chapter of this research, the same can be said. Seeing that there are so many definitions of sustainability and sustainability being used for so many different aspects might be the most obvious argument that sustainability indeed is a spectrum. Seeing the different aspects that my informants used to describe what sustainability is to them, is a great example as to how sustainability is interpreted differently by different people. This might also be why it is easy for brands to fetishize and commodify their clothes and brands. Because sustainability is a spectrum and therefore subjective, it is easy for brands to label a product sustainable and get away with it. What is seen as greenwashing for some, might actually be seen as sustainable by others.

That sustainability is a spectrum can also be seen in the last chapter, looking mostly at the certifications. As was beautifully explained by Sophie, the certification themselves see sustainability differently in comparison to each other. Their specific focus makes the sustainability spectrum measurable. It gives an indication of what they see as the spectrum. The vagueness of the consumer thereby also shows how sustainability is not fixed. Because it is a spectrum, it can be vague.

At the end of the day, it is apparent that sustainability is a spectrum. This means that, eventually only the ethical consumer themselves know what feels morally good and what does not feel good. We can help each other by exchanging information and opinions through social media and via conversations with family and friends, but eventually it is up to yourself to decide whether or not you should buy that piece of 'new' clothing or not. Certificates might help, but eventually only conducting as much information as you feel is necessary will help you make the decision of purchasing sustainable clothing. Transparency seems to be the best option for all actors involved in the industry to give the ethical consumer as much of a consideration as possible.

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