



Is 'Fast-Fashion Feminism' an oxymoron?

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In the recent decade, feminism has become increasingly mainstream, with a higher percentage of girls and women than ever before claiming to support the feminist movement in the UK (Gallagher, 2019). Feminism is starting to be seen less as a 'dirty' word. To a large extent this is a positive thing, as the fight for inequality becomes stronger as more individuals in society recognise that there is a problem. The issue at hand is when an idea becomes mainstream in a late-capitalist globalised society like ours, capitalists seize the perfect opportunity to turn it into a commodity.

Karl Marx described a commodity as something that is a "...external object, a thing which satisfies through its qualities human needs of one kind or another. The nature of these needs is irrelevant, e.g., whether their origin is in the stomach or in the fancy" (Dragstedt, 1976: 7). Basically, once people recognise they have a need to promote their version of the feminist message, some will be willing to purchase products which seemingly satisfy this need. People often use their consumerism to showcase their political identity.

This is where the element of fast-fashion comes into consideration. In essence, fast-fashion is the quick paced, mass production of cheap clothing that mimics designer, and other trends (such as feminism). This method of production keeps costs down for producer and consumer. A lot of the clothing manufactured

this way often only stays in fashion for a limited period of time, and is usually disposed after a limited amount of wears by the consumer. Fast-fashion outlets have jumped on the 'feminist bandwagon' and have begun selling t-shirts with feminist phrases, as well as using empowered feminist rhetoric and imagery in their marketing campaign to sell their products.

Fast-fashion is all but without its flaws. There is evidence that the quick-paced nature of this industry contributes to climate change and the mistreatment of overseas workers from lower-middle income countries, especially women of colour (Siegle, 2011). This piece will highlight how possible it is for Fast-Fashion Feminism to be a positive force for the overall feminist movement, or if it is actually disempowering for women from all around the world.



Anyone who has regularly shopped online or on the High Street recently in stores such as *Forever 21*, *PrettyLittleThing* or *Nasty Gal* will have seen an array of products that have promoted a feminist message. For example, *Forever 21* sold a T-shirt which had the slogan 'FEMINIST' sequined

across the chest, and *Nasty Gal* had a line of T-shirts from a collection called 'I am Woman, hear me roar' which had similar printed slogans (Farmilo, 2018). These appear to be empowering and showing that feminism can be 'cool' to young women and girls because their favourite clothing store is promoting the message. Although, behind these positive

slogans there is a dark side that can be considered anything but feminist. Fast-fashion companies like the ones listed above and countless others, manufacture their clothing overseas in low income countries such as Bangladesh (Murphy, 2019). There, labour is cheap and worker rights are even less developed as ones in higher income countries like the United Kingdom, creating longer working hours under worse conditions whilst yielding more products for more profit.

80% of textile garment workers are women (Labour Behind the Label, 2018). Siegle (2011) outlines a conversation they had with a female garment worker from Cambodia. She describes the targets as being unreachable and faces verbal abuse as a result. On the day of the phone call, her hours consisted of starting work at 7am until 6pm, with an hour break then another shift of 7pm until 6am the following day. To make matters worse, she only receives the equivalent of 92 US dollars a month. This woman, and many other women in Cambodia, have no choice but to work these hours as there are no alternatives and they usually have a family to provide for (which they are often discriminated against for having). The pure desperation of this garment worker does not equate with the feminism that these fast-fashion outlets preach.

As early as the 1980s, fast-fashion corporations such as Nike have used feminist/empowering advertising techniques to sell their products to women. Nike encouraged women to take part in sport and exercise through their 'Just Do It' campaign. According to Cheryl L Cole and Amy Hribar (1995), the campaign 'seduced' women through imagery of female models with 'hard, tight bodies', while instilling the notion that they could do anything they set their mind to, not necessarily just their exercise goals. Its feminist agenda, however, is weakened by the use of models who fit the Western standards of beauty.



Furthermore, this seemingly positive message which has been termed as 'commodity fetishism', is one that makes a consumer believe that if they buy product, or in this sense buy into a slogan, their lives will be changed forever (Stillerman, 2015). This type of empowerment advertising hides the secret of fast-fashion effects on those working in the sweatshops because those who are consuming will be preoccupied with the emotional weight of wanting to change their life with a single product.

This is similar to the current marketing strategies used by fast-fashion outlets targeted at young women (ages 18-25) such as *PrettyLittleThing*, *Missguided* and *Nasty Gal* (Wood, 2016). *PrettyLittleThing* use young celebrities and social influencers to promote their brand. They recently collaborated with the popular music band *Little Mix* who brand themselves as feminists and use mainstream feminism as a theme for their concerts. The regular collaboration of *PrettyLittleThing* with feminist media personalities suggests this is where their principles are also aligned.

However, it may be that these companies are using commodified feminism to draw in customers who hold similar beliefs and want to see themselves like the seemingly powerful women in these advertisements; all whilst exploiting garment factory workers and upholding beauty Western beauty standards through sexualisation of their 'collaborators'.

Rosalind Gill (2007) explains that objectification of women is no longer apparent in advertising and has been replaced with the 'subjectification'. Women are now presented as empowered and have choice over their careers and relationships, but they are shown doing these things with little clothing and still being held to same beauty standards as in the objectifying past. Women have choice to wear what they want, but they are still pressured to

look a certain way through fast-fashion advertisements, which cannot signal empowerment.

Fast-fashion gives vast clothing options to women from high-income countries, and allows women on lower incomes to buy clothes that look like those on designer runways. They are able to create their personality and an ideal look through this choice. According to Zygmunt Bauman (Palese, 2013), to be a consumer in liquid modernity (his alternative term to postmodernity) is to have an identity. To exist, we need to consume. We are only free individuals when we have the choice to consume whatever we want.



Fast-fashion allows those in a capitalist society to have a large choice of items for relatively small prices. Although this choice can be seen as empowering to women from Western countries, the women who manufacture these products overseas and the people of colour who have to live with the damaging effects to their environment have little or no choice. Fast-fashion certainly is not empowering for them. The novelty of fast-fashion and choice is rooted in the throwaway behaviour, as people are choosing their short-lived infatuation of a trendy product over durability that was once valued in a production society (Wijetunga, 2019). This has led to the average American throwing away 80 pounds of clothing every year (Bick et al, 2018). The USA exports over 700 million dollars worth of used clothing to lower income countries, which if unsold in overseas markets, the clothing becomes solid waste, polluting their environments and creating further potential waste hazards.

Fast-fashion is undoubtedly proof of the detrimental effects of globalisation and the feminism that the fast-fashion clothing market appears to hold does not ring true to its actions. Journalist Harriet Hall (2019) tried to defend feminism's place in fast-fashion, claiming that women are less bitter at wearing the same thing as another woman because

everything is now mass produced that it is like being in a sisterhood to own the same pieces of clothing, as seen by a polka dot dress sold by *Zara* in their summer 2019 collection. However, this disregards all the mistreatment of women of colour and garment workers overseas, and is the epitome of white feminism.

In conclusion, this piece critically examining fast-fashion suggests that 'Fast-Fashion

Feminism' is an oxymoron. The concepts explored here highlight the contradictory nature of fast-fashion's faux feminism. Those who buy fast-

fashion cannot be blamed, and consumers are merely a cog in the system. Although they do have limited power, as explained in Manuel Castells' *Network Theory of Power* (2011), consumer power can stop fast-fashion if they simply stop purchasing. But consumption is how we build our identities, and is ingrained into the psyche of society, so the more products that are created, the more consumers will purchase. A conscious effort needs to be seen from retailers to promote sustainable, ethical fashion, but this is unlikely as that would mean a cut to their profits.

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