Who Is Part of the Problem?: Critical Analysis of *New York Times* Readers' Comments on the Environmental Cost of Fashion Consumption

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Given the growing negative impact of the fashion industry on the environment and the related mounting citizens' concern, the importance of research examining beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to sustainable consumption is undeniable. Scholars have used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand consumer views and actions towards sustainability (e.g., Joy et al., 2012; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Sadachar et al., 2016; Watson & Yan, 2013). Limitations of extant research are: (1) participants answered predetermined questions that may or may not be related to their perspectives and practices; and (2) participants knew they were studied, which could result in social desirability bias. Unsolicited consumer opinions about the environmental impact of fashion consumption might provide more realistic accounts. To address this gap, we analyzed voluntary online comments posted by *New York Times* (NYT) readers in response to the article titled *Wear Clothing? Then You're Part of the Problem* (Cline, 2019).

Theoretical background. We utilized institutional theory to inform our work (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The theory has been applied by scholars across disciplines, including fashion (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Scarabano et al., 2013). According to the theory, market is an organizational field consisting of a set of institutions and actors with common practices and shared understandings in a society (Lawrence & Phillips, 2004). The institutions and actors in the field are “governed by institutional logics, supported by institutional work, and characterized by institutional boundaries” (Dolbec & Fisher, 2015, p. 1449). Examples of *actors* in the fashion field include designers, retailers, and consumers. *Institutional logics* are “socially constructed assumptions, values, and beliefs by which people in particular contexts provide meaning to their social reality” (Scarabano et al., 2013, p. 1237). *Institutional work* is informed by institutional logics and encompasses actions “aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting practices,

understandings, and rules shared by actors in an organizational field” (Dolbec & Fisher, 2015, p. 1449).

Research purpose. Drawing on institutional theory, we examined how consumers (or institutional actors) view “conscious” fashion consumption and whether they attempted to reshape the fashion field by questioning dominant institutional logics. We aimed to explore: Which institutions or institutional actors do NYT readers view as responsible for the sustainability fashion crisis? What actions do the readers advocate for to reshape and disrupt existing institutional practices in the field?

Method. NYT readers posted a total of 1,000+ comments over a 24-hour open period in response to Cline’s (2019) article. We used these comments, including original posts and replies to the original posts, for data analysis. Using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013), we identified and disentangled ideologies and cultural discourses surrounding consumer perceptions of sustainability issues in the organizational field of fashion. Through this process, we observed and identified how discourses surrounding fashion sustainability and activism materialized in online comments.

We first engaged in descriptive coding by analyzing the content of the NYT readers’ comments and identified codes and categories related to perceived causes, responsibilities, and activism in the context of fashion (un)sustainability. Then, we conducted a close reading of the content through the lens of institutional theory. That is, we examined how the readers made sense of the social reality of the fashion field, its institutional actors, practices, and logics and then questioned or challenged this system to address the sustainability crisis in the market. First, the authors reviewed the data and agreed on initial codes and emergent categories and themes. After the first author analyzed 30 percent of the data using the initial codes, the second author checked their interpretations, and differences were reconciled to complete the coding. Three topical areas, each consisting of two to three themes were identified from the analysis and interpretation of the comments.

Results. In the first topical area, *who is part of the problem*, we identified institutions and actors in the fashion field that NYT readers believed were responsible for the damage caused by apparel consumption. Readers discussed why “unbridled” consumption practices are major reasons for the sustainability crisis. Others explained how “greedy” corporations “transformed our society into one where everything is disposable and made trillions in the process.” Some readers argued how regulatory institutions—from all levels of government—were insufficient to curtail and in some cases even enabled the sustainability issues in fashion.

In the second topical area, *focus for change*, we explored actions and practices viewed by readers as necessary to minimize fashion's negative environmental impact in order to save the planet. Readers suggested various activities that ordinary people can incorporate in their daily practices related to apparel consumption. They also noted how industry and government must be held accountable, as both had important roles in transforming current institutional rules and regulations in the field.

In the third topical area, *fashion is the culprit*, we discovered that NYT readers questioned the legitimacy of two consumer-centered institutional logics, which govern the contemporary fashion marketplace. The fundamental *logic of fashion as constant change* is at the core of the incessant introduction of new trends, resulting in quick obsolescence and disposal of functionally usable garments. *The logic of dress code* reflects societal norms and expectations of wearing different outfits every day, in addition to encouraging individuals to own large wardrobes for continuous clothes rotation.

Conclusions and implications. This is the first research to apply institutional theory to understand fashion market dynamics related to sustainability from the consumer perspective. Our research fills the gap in the literature by analyzing unsolicited consumer opinions on the topic. Collectively, readers discussed a plethora of environmental issues caused by fashion consumption, beyond those discussed in Cline's (2019) article. Shared social values were overwhelmingly in support of various actions, big and small, aimed at reducing environmental impact of fashion. Through the discourse of identifying common enemies, articulating directions for change, and questioning the legitimacy of the prevalent institutional logics, readers displayed consumer activism that aims to bring about change in the mainstream fashion marketplace. We identified two new consumer-focused institutional logics that help better understand the fashion field dynamics, which opens opportunities for future research.

While the research findings illustrate the readers' expectations for the fashion industry and various regulatory institutions to step up in dealing with the sustainability crisis, the greater focus of the comments was on the individual consumer responsibility to modify their daily practices in acquiring, caring for, and disposing of clothes. The results point to the critical role of consumers in transforming institutional arrangements, social traditions, and normative narratives for a more sustainable future. It should be noted that NYT readers are likely to be at the forefront of sustainability movement as they tend to be more liberal than average American consumer. Yet, increasing numbers of concerned citizens and their demands for sustainable consumption signal profound impending shifts in the organizational field of fashion. Textile and apparel scholars have an opportunity and responsibility to lead this change.

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