

The Role of Impulse Buying on Fast Fashion Consumers' Emotions and Behaviours

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Abstract

Background scientific research: The popularity of fast-fashion has not diminished, despite allegations of exploiting workers and the environment (Environmental Audit Committee, 2021; Zhang, Zhang & Zhou, 2021). The model enables rapid mimicking of popular styles at low prices and has enabled consumers the opportunity to replace their wardrobe frequently (Watson & Yan, 2013). Coupled with online marketing tactics of limited sales incentives and product scarcity that provoke hedonism (Niinimäki et al., 2020), fast-fashion retailers encourage frequent impulsive consumption (Bick et al., 2018), which Lim et al. (2017) believes challenges consumers ability to resist making purchases. This situates low involvement with 'throwaway fashion', in which consumers continually buy new clothing, only to wear the items a handful of times before disposing of them (Zhang, Zhang & Zhou, 2021). Denisova (2021) suggests 'throwaway fashion' has stemmed from social media culture of never being photographed wearing an outfit more than once. While consumers have been found to purchase fashion more impulsively than from other product categories (Joung, 2014), Son & Lee (2019) found this was a means to improve negative emotions by triggering positive emotions. However, little is known about how consumers experience post-purchase impulsive fashion consumption, and whether they experience post-consumption regret. Chen, Chen & Lin (2020) characterise this as post-purchase cognitive dissonance in which consumers experience regret and disappointment from their behaviour. Previous research has found that fast-fashion consumers experience cognitive dissonance from not applying the same sustainable principles to their fashion practice that they do in other consumption and behavioural contexts (Cairns, Ritch & Bereziat, 2021; Stringer, Payne & Mortimer, 2021); however, those studies explored intention to purchase fashion rather than reflecting upon fashion consumption behaviours. Caught up in the excitement of marketing tactics and social media culture inspiring consumption, it may be upon reflection that discomfort emerges.

Research issue to be addressed: Following from studies examining fast-fashion impulse consumption and the role of hedonism, there has been limited attention paid to the role of post-consumption emotions, especially when reflecting upon environmental and social impact concerns. It is well established that

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Generation-Z are highly climate aware and concerned for sustainability (Hurrelmann and Albrecht, 2021), as well as predominantly purchasing fast-fashion and engaging with social media culture (Kale, 2021). As digital natives, Generation-Z engage on social media platforms to entrain themselves, socialise, learn, play and consume (Adgate, 2021); while this contradiction in behaviours exhibits cognitive dissonance (Cairns et al., 2021), understanding how to disrupt current practice offers insight into how to develop more sustainable fashion acquisition models and how best to position marketing activities to encourage sustainable fashion consumption. However, retailing and consumption have been significantly disrupted over the last two years to manage the global pandemic of COVID-19, as have social occasions; this has impacted on fast-fashion sales, with marketing tactics accelerating and process falling as low as eight Pence (UK Sterling)(Blackhall, 2020). Therefore, this exploratory study investigates fast fashion consumers' reflections of impulse buying, amid concern for environmental and social practices, during a time when lockdown measures are decreasing, ensuring a novel approach. Learnings from this experience are paramount to developing a sustainable fashion industry, especially in understanding the role of emotion in both fashion and sustainability contexts.

Methodology used: Adopting an interpretive approach to enable a rich understanding of the emotions and reflections experienced after post-purchase fast-fashion impulse consumption (Ragab & Arisha, 2018), ten semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with Scottish generation-Z women (aged 19-25 years). Participants were recruited purposively, having experience of frequent impulsive fast-fashion consumption behaviours, and interviews were held early 2022 over a video platform, each lasting approximately an hour. Participants were asked to recall their recent experiences of purchasing online fast fashion and how they felt during each stage of the buying process. Questions included their knowledge of the environmental and social impacts of fast fashion and whether this was reflected in their buying behaviours. The interview data was transcribed, verbatim and thematic analysis was applied to the data.

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: Analysis identified that emotion played a role in both the pre and post purchase experience. In particular, marketing ignited emotions pre-purchase and this was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, where the lockdown had increased a sense of isolation and boredom, and fashion consumption offered a "dopamine rush". Marketing appeared to induce selective amnesia at the point of purchase, but when reflecting back to "the clothes still sitting in my wardrobe with the tags on" there were expressions of regret. Yet, despite feeling regret post-purchase, impulse buying was reported as a constant cycle that the participants found hard to break. The data illustrates that fashion consumption is awash with emotions, some stimulated by marketing, but other components of conformity, belonging and a sense of self – all of which were challenged during the pandemic. While the data revealed much evidence of cognitive dissonance when reflecting on the social and environmental impact of fast-fashion, there was also evidence of post-purchase cognitive dissonance (Chen,

Chen & Lin, 2020), and the participants deviated between accepting responsibility for their contribution to unsustainability and prioritising their consumer selves.

Understanding the role of self, identity, belonging and conformity contributes to developing the sustainable fashion literature, that often focuses on actual behaviours and the well-established attitude behaviour gap. While this gap is acknowledged in the cognitive dissonance experienced by the participants, it is also evident that much can be learned from post-purchase cognitive dissonance and how behaviours and attitudes are impacted by emotions, particularly isolation and boredom. Consequently, this research advances theory including the role of hedonism, especially as emotions were heightened over the COVID years. For example, the participants were not shopping for actual social occasions, rather, they were hedonistically buying for hypothetical occasions, where pleasure was gained from the consumption act itself rather than owning the garment. Understanding this provides relevance for fashion and marketing practice on how to provide hedonistic fashion experiences from alternative fashion acquisition. The findings provide insight into how marketing campaigns for sustainable fashion models can be developed to appeal to Generation-Z consumers.

Keywords: fast fashion; hedonism; impulse buying; cognitive dissonance; post-purchase regret.

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