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When Women Owe Women: Framing Consumer Responsibility in the Context of Fast Fashion

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Abstract

The consumer is an important political subject in addressing global social issues, especially in the fashion industry. Due to the complex, multi-jurisdictional nature of the problems created through global capitalism, a significant overhaul of the fashion industry is not easy to achieve; nor is it easy for consumers to choose to withdraw from these markets. Further, framing individual consumer responsibility is difficult, especially when considering how questions of obligation intersect with geographical hierarchies as well as questions of privilege.

In this paper, we critique how responsibility is framed in contemporary fashion activism in relation to questions of gender. Using the organisation Fashion Revolution as a site of normative consumer activism, we highlight how two hashtag campaigns, *#WhoMadeMyClothes* and *#LovedClothesLast*, instrumentalise gender to engage consumers to act against injustice. Through our analysis, we question how calls to take up responsibility for fashion injustice intersect with profound questions about what women owe other women.

Keywords

Gender; responsibility; structural injustice; political consumerism; feminism; sustainability.

Introduction

The consumer is an important political subject in addressing global social issues. She is relied upon to serve as either an incentivising or penalising force for corporations in relation to a range of behaviours that can cause harm. This is especially the case in the fashion industry, where civil society organisations have sought to mobilise consumers against labour exploitation, animal abuse, environmental degradation and waste. Activist campaigns have invited individual consumers to recognise how their purchasing behaviour may come with 'moral responsibilities' (Barry and Macdonald 2016: 92) and have also instructed them on how they might acquit these responsibilities. Due to the complex, multi-jurisdictional nature of the problems created through global capitalism, a significant overhaul of the fashion industry is not easy to achieve; nor is it easy for consumers to choose to withdraw from these markets. In fact, following Young (1990a), injustices in the fashion industry are 'structural', meaning they are a part of the normalised background conditions of the fashion supply chain. Given that this normalised background is a complex web of social and economic relations between geographically dispersed actors, individual consumers can easily become overwhelmed and struggle to understand their role—either in perpetuating injustice or in ameliorating it. Therefore, activist campaigns play a significant role in both drawing attention to injustices that occur in fashion and providing moral and practical guidance on consumption practices.

We contend that activist campaigns in the fashion industry present a special case of political consumerism in relation to questions of gender. Women have traditionally played a 'leading role … in consumer movements and in political consumerism' (Balsiger 2016: 37), and this is reflected in the context of 21st-century fashion that sees prominent consumer organisations, including Clean Clothes Campaign and Fashion Revolution, led by women. The prevalence of women in the production and consumption of fashion heightens the already gendered context of political consumerism. Eighty per cent of the world's garment workers are women working in local economies of the Global South that offer limited employment options and bargaining power (Clean Clothes Campaign 2019: 3). Further, as women of the Global North buy more clothing than men and are understood to care more about fashion (Southwell 2015), many activist campaigns either explicitly or implicitly target female consumers. Seen to exploit some women while benefiting others, the fashion system can be conceptualised as a commercial, cultural and industrial complex that connects women over vast geographies and draws them into relations of reciprocity with one another.

These relations of reciprocity are complex. Women of the Global North are often understood as contributing to the economic emancipation of those in the Global South via their purchases while benefiting from the cheap clothing that arrives on their doorstep. However, this economic reciprocity is quickly undermined by the moral obligation incurred by the fact that consuming in the Global North also means participating in the oppression of workers in the Global South (Khader 2017). This is one of the reasons that transnational feminists have warned against the risks of framing the relations engendered by global capitalism as one of 'global sisterhood' (Khader 2017; Mohanty 1988; Siddiqi 2009;). Questions of responsibility are complicated further by the fact that while residents of the Global North (including its corporations and citizens) are 'beneficiaries' of the fashion system, not all citizens share equally in the flow of capital. Following Mohanty (2003: 266), the Global South is more accurately a metaphor that represents 'the marginalised poor'. And, while the expansive 'retail presence' of the fast fashion complex is such that all consumers are potentially affected, not all consumers are the same (Hatcher 2019: 212). Finally, we propose that these relations of reciprocity are compounded by the urgency of addressing environmental harms caused by the industry. While labour exploitation and environmental harm are often conceived as two separate moral issues arising from the global fashion industry, they are both part of the one fast fashion system that maximises profit and extracts knowledge, labour and resources 'from the people and places of the Global South' (Pham in press).

In this paper, we examine the role that gender plays in framing consumer responsibility for fashion injustice in the 21st century. Using the fashion activist organisation Fashion Revolution (FR) as a site of normative inquiry, we explore how its hashtag campaigns—'Who Made My Clothes?'

#WhoMadeMyClothes? and 'Loved Clothes Last' *#LovedClothesLast*—frame consumer responsibility for labour exploitation and environmental harm, respectively. With over half a million followers on Instagram, FR has been credited with capturing the public's attention in ways that fashion activism has 'failed to do until now' (Hastings 2016). We follow Young (1990a: 5) in arguing that calls to take up responsibility do not arise outside the fashion system but are situated within its 'concrete social and political practices' and, consequently, take hashtag activism as indicative of the kinds of political consumerism that 21st-century fashion generates (Horton and Street 2021). We suggest that each of these campaigns instrumentalise gender to frame the obligation between consumers in the Global North and producers in the Global South and implicitly target the consumption habits and practices of younger female consumers. We argue that the gendering of responsibility can be critiqued for failing to address the responsibility of all consumers and risking underplaying the role of corporate players, as well as failing to register the complexity of the relationship between gender and fashion in the 21st century.

The paper also has a more speculative dimension that seeks to move beyond the critique of the 'feminisation of responsibility' (Horton 2018) in fashion activism. Our philosophical position is grounded in the foundational work of Iris Marion Young (1990a), who developed the social connection model (SCM) of responsibility in the 1990s and early 2000s. As a feminist philosopher, much of Young's work addressed 'injustice experienced on the basis of gender' (Parekh 2017: 621). In this paper, we look to Young to both conceptualise the connections between structural injustice and responsibility and help us think through the gendered politics of fashion 'in the context of patriarchal consumer capitalism' (Young 1990b: 186). We also draw on Robin Zheng's (2018) Role-Ideal Model (RIM) as an extension of the SCM to highlight the responsibilities of individuals in different societal roles to address structural injustice through pushing the boundaries of their role. As Zheng has argued, social roles are where 'structure meets agency' (2018: 870). From this position, we think through how our roles as women, consumers and researchers might drive change in the fashion industry.

Structural Injustice, Responsibility and Gender

Political consumerism has long been considered an act undertaken primarily by women, engaging in everyday responsibility-taking for the harms associated with consumption (Marien, Hooghe and Quintelier 2010). Many activist campaigns about the fashion industry also reflect this assumption, framing women as primarily responsible. Philosophical conceptualisations of responsibility do not attribute or delineate responsibility along gendered lines. Rather, they ascribe responsibility according to membership of communities, attribution of blame, capacity to address the problem, benefit derived from the problem and our individual roles within communities.

Responsibility to address a problem is often divided between 'cause' and 'treatment' responsibility (Iyengar 1996). Responsibility can be ascribed to those who may be seen as the 'cause' of the problem, reflecting a liability approach to responsibility. Other actors may possess 'treatment responsibility' derived from their capacity to help solve the problem or prevent the harm. A limitation of this approach is that it suggests a false dichotomy where actors are either a cause or a solution to a problem. In many instances, they may be both. A similar dichotomy exists in the conceptualisation of responsibility as attributable or accountable (Scanlon 1998; Watson 2004), where individuals are understood to be moral agents who are responsible for unethical acts and, thus, attributably responsible, as distinct to those who are 'held responsible' for addressing problems and, thus, accountably responsible. Being attributably and accountably responsible are not necessarily mutually exclusive; indeed, both are understood in greater complexity in Young's conceptualisation of responsibility for structural injustice.

The concept of 'structural injustice' was popularised by Young in the early 2000s (2003). While structural injustice is a 'moral wrong', it 'occurs as a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting to pursue their particular goals and interests, for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms' (Young 2011: 52). This is distinct to Rawls' more limiting conceptualisation of responsibility, which is constrained to a closed community and relies more heavily on a liability approach to ascribing responsibility (1999). An activist herself, what is of specific interest to us is that Young initially developed

the SCM in response to the anti-sweatshop movement of the 1990s (Young 2003). Young not only considered the global fashion industry a 'perspicuous example' (2022: 184) of structural injustice but also was inspired by the forms of responsibility generated by this system. As Young effectively argued, because the 'structure of the global apparel industry *diffuses* responsibility for sweatshop conditions' (2022: 188), it requires a model of responsibility that moves beyond attributing blame.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Young developed the SCM (Young 2011). While liability assigns responsibility according to what particular agents have done, in the SCM, our obligations of justice are based on our *connection* (Young 2003: 40). Arguably, our connections are strained and broken in transnational supply chains that create both geographical and cultural distance between the producer and the consumer. However, this very complexity also works to draw producers and consumers into connection with one another, with everyone bearing some responsibility for addressing the injustices that occur along this supply chain. Our connectedness to the injustice is not the only factor that remains relevant in apportioning responsibility—the SCM model also distributes responsibility based on the benefit someone accrues from the injustice, the extent to which someone has caused the injustice and the degree of power they have to address the injustice.

Young's work remains central to conceptualising injustice in the fashion supply chain in the 21st century, especially among feminist thinkers who seek to explain how 'global gender inequalities' arise from 'transnational arrangements' (Parekh 2017: 624) as well as the persistence of oppression 'despite changes in laws and policies' (Parekh 2017: 620). Khader (2017, 609) noted that Young is only one of several feminist scholars who have argued that 'Northerners incur special obligations to women in the Global South because of existing institutional relationships' and that they 'bear forward-looking responsibilities to engage in collective action' (2017: 610). Scholars have also acknowledged that Young's work presents challenges around responsibility (Parekh 2017: 620). McKeown (2021) suggested that Young did not place enough emphasis on powerful players, citing multinational corporations (MNCs) as bearing a moral (as opposed to a political) responsibility. These are valid concerns especially considering the monopsonistic corporate capital at the centre of the fashion industry in the 21st century (Kumar 2020). However, Young was specifically interested in highlighting the relation between the role 'ordinary citizens' played in constituting structural injustice and taking up responsibility. This focus is essential, especially in the context of fashion. Clothing is not a consumer good that people can easily opt out of. It is a 'repeat' purchase across the course of our lifetime, and the intimate nature of our relationship with clothing is central to many consumer campaigns.

Zheng (2016, 2018) sought to extend Young's SCM, arguing that we are 'accountably responsible' (as opposed to attributively responsible) due to our roles in our community. In Zheng's RIM, our roles help to distribute the 'moral division of labour' (2016: 66) and, in the performance of these roles, individuals are responsible for pushing the boundaries of their roles to address structural injustice. These roles exist within a set of relationships, and the performance of these social roles helps to enact structure, demonstrating the linkages between Zheng's conceptualisation and Young's SCM. However, as distinct from the RIM, the SCM still maintains a causal element of responsibility. The causality is not strictly liability as there is still causality in benefit and privilege. In Zheng's RIM model, individuals are responsible not due to their causal contributions to or privileges derived from structural processes but because our role performances are what *constitute* unjust structures (Zheng 2018: 874). Thus, these roles do not constrain our responsibility; rather, they are powerful avenues through which to extend our responsibility and reconstitute societal structures to be more just. To achieve this, Zheng proposed the utilisation of our roles to push boundaries in the pursuit of progressive goals.

In the RIM of responsibility, our social roles are defined through 'a set of expectations' that are predictive and normative (Zheng 2018: 873). These roles are enforced through a 'variety of sanctions' that are predictive in the sense that they imply how a person *will* act and normative in the sense that they imply how a person *should* act (Zheng 2018: 873). Campaigns against labour exploitation, waste and other harms associated with the fashion industry serve as an example of a sanction against those who are not meeting their predictive role and a normative declaration of how an ethical person *should* act.

The shaping of responsibility through expectations and sanctions is clear when ascribing responsibility due to liability—when our position in the supply chain links us clearly to the exploitation occurring or highlights our own contributions to the problem of waste. It is also clear when ascribing responsibility based on the privileges we derive through the low cost and easy accessibility of fast fashion. We are responsible in our connectedness to the cause of the problem and our capacity, or power, to exert influence back up the supply chain. Our role-based responsibility is less clearly articulated. As consumers, what is the ideal performance of our role? How might our normative role be shaped through expectations and social sanctions on our wider consumer group via the messaging of fashion activist campaigns? How might our gender affect that set of expectations? We can speculate on answers to these questions by considering the messages we receive as consumers and how these may shape our role expectations. The assumption that women are the predominant political consumers and the primary consumers of fast fashion notionally ascribes a clear element of responsibility. Yet, while our roles as members of communities (or as beneficiaries of harm) contribute to conceptualisations of responsibility, what remains unclear is how our gender may, or may not, shape our responsibilities. In the following section, we start to address these questions through the prism of two contemporary consumer campaigns. We begin by providing an overview of fast fashion.

Framing Consumer Responsibility in the Context of Fast Fashion

The 21st-century fashion industry, including its moral character, is defined by the term 'fast fashion'. As a market term, fast fashion refers to low cost, on-trend clothing that is marketed predominantly to young women. The term initially referred to major global retailers such as the Swedish Hennes & Mauritz (H&M) and the Spanish label Zara, who were celebrated for selling trend-driven clothing at a low price point, making global style more democratic. The 'fast' aspect of fast fashion ostensibly refers to the 'time' it takes brands to bring their product to market; however, this is misleading. Fast fashion companies have benefited from digital technologies to develop more sophisticated and responsive logistics, but they really deliver the 'illusion of speed' through updating their product lines rapidly. This is especially the case with 'second generation' fast fashion retailers such as the Chinese brand SHEIN and the British-based Boohoo, who operate exclusively online and release hundreds of 'algorithm-determined styles daily' (Baskin 2021). As these brands have a global reach and are explicitly marketed to young women (and girls), fast fashion is primarily understood as a distinct market segment that caters to the whims of fashion-conscious young women. Set in opposition to 'sustainable' or 'ethical fashion', the term fast fashion attracts an implicitly classist critique on the basis of its relative cost and perceived inferior quality. However, the system of production that supports fast fashion extends well beyond this market—to include luxury fashion as well as less fashionable forms of low cost clothing (Pham 2017). This means that while fast fashion and its consumers may attract the most sustained critique, all consumers of industrially produced clothing are implicated in the harms associated with this industry and, thus, bear some responsibility.

Exploring responsibility for what is considered 'normal' can be difficult; therefore, it is useful to turn attention to the moments of crisis that expose the ordinary structures of everyday life that produce injustice (Schiff 2014). These moments are reflexive and 'make us pay careful attention to questions of identity', choice and agency (Mohanty 2003: 132). Two events of the last decade have been central to shaping consumer responsibility: the Rana Plaza (RP) factory collapse of 2013 and the cancelling of orders during COVID-19. RP, located in Dhaka, Bangladesh, was a building that housed multiple clothing factories producing clothing for over 29 European and American fashion labels (Clean Clothes Campaign n. d.). Roughly 80% of the Bangladeshi economy is fashion related (Reinecke and Donaghey 2015: 724), and over 80% of the workforce are women (International Labour Organisation 2020: 3). In April 2013, the building collapsed due to structural damage, resulting in the death of over 1,100 garment workers and the injury of thousands more. The scale of the event ensured its attention in global media, where confronting images of the scene and interviews with distressed garment workers rendered the disaster intelligible to an international audience. The interviews revealed that the garment workers were coerced to go to work to meet deadlines even when it was clear that the building was unsafe. The fact that garments being produced at RP could be traced directly to commonplace multinational brands (through the spectre of labels among the rubble) facilitated an even more sobering message to consumers of the Global North.

In a similar vein, the event of COVID-19 is also understood as crucial to raising 'public awareness of social injustice in the supply chain' (McKinsey & Company and Business of Fashion Team 2021: 45). From as early as January 2020, retail sales saw a downturn, leading to a slowing of production. As the pandemic spread globally, 'brands and retailers exercised their contractual rights to cancel existing orders' (Pham 2020: 318). This meant that factories were not paid for work that was often already complete, and millions of workers lost or were at risk of losing their jobs (Kaine, Payne and Coneybeer 2020). Some garment-manufacturing facilities began to produce personalised protective equipment to meet global demand created by the pandemic, despite many of the workers in these factories not being afforded appropriate equipment and social distancing protocols themselves (Mezzadri and Ruwanpura 2020). This was treated as an 'ironic revelation' about the global fashion supply chain (Pham in press) and simultaneously described as a swift and strategic move to create jobs (Mezzadri and Ruwanpura 2020).

If RP exposed the highly dangerous workplaces that garment workers are subject to, the cancelling of orders during COVID-19 highlighted the economic dependency that underpins the legal risks that producers in the Global South are willing to take to meet their obligations. Taken together, these two events illuminate the precarious relationships of economic reciprocity between producers and consumers. Following Young, we see these injustices as structural because they result from systemic constraints that place pressure on agents down the supply chain (2011: 132). When factory owners act in unjust ways, they often do so to meet the deadlines imposed by the strict contracts of global corporations, working to meet the profit-driven expectations of shareholders. Framed as a 'crisis' (Khan and Richards 2021), the contexts that led to RP and the cancelling of orders at the behest of MNCs are, in fact, part of the normalised 'background structure' of the fashion industry (Young 2003: 41). They also begin to lay the grounds for the moral obligations that may arise from consuming fashion in the 21st century.

A final key factor, sustainability, is crucial to shaping consumer responsibility in the 21st century. Critiques of the damaging, polluting and extracting processes involved in the production of fashion vie for attention alongside the renewed outrage about sweatshop conditions and the procurement practices of MNCs. Two points are relevant here. First, increasing urgency associated with issues of environmental justice adds an important temporal dimension that asks individuals to take responsibility for 'future generations' (Johnson 2013). This extends Young's SCM to consider our connections not only across transnational borders but also into the future. Growing concern for sustainability has also displaced the site of consumer responsibility from spaces of public protest to more domestic settings and everyday practices. In fashion, this has ignited attention to the 'use phase' of a garment's lifecycle—that is, the environmental concerns associated with wearing, laundering and repairing clothing (Fletcher 2014). At the same time, the decrease in the cost of fashion in real terms over the last 15 years has led to what many call the over-consumption of fashion moralising *post*-consumer waste. The context of fast fashion, which sees consumers of the Global North routinely discard their clothing, has also resulted in mountains of post-consumer waste that ends up in landfill sites in the Global South (Besser 2021).

In the next section of our paper, we explore how consumer responsibility is framed in efforts to address the harms associated with the fast fashion industry. Specifically, we examine two high-profile hashtag campaigns led by FR: 'Who Made My Clothes?' *#WhoMadeMyClothes?* and 'Loved Clothes Last' *#LovedClothesLast*. These two campaigns represent two central moral issues associated with fashion consumption: labour exploitation and textile waste. As we show, these campaigns are representative of new forms of political consumerism that have arisen in the context of fast fashion. Both instrumentalise gender to frame responsibility and provide moral and practical guidance on consumption practices through an explicitly feminised address.

Framing Consumer Responsibility: Fashion Revolution

FR is an activist organisation focused on mobilising consumers to respond to the injustices in the fast fashion system. FR was founded in 2013 by British fashion industry insiders Orsola de Castro and Carry Somers and cites the RP factory collapse as the catalyst for its formation (FR 2021a). In line with

contemporary practices of political consumerism, FR uses the internet as its 'infrastructure … for individualised responsibility-taking' (Stolle and Micheletti 2013: 39). The organisation harnesses the borderless media environment of Instagram to instigate its educational and stylised campaigns. Using its 'digital reach' as evidence, FR claims to be the 'world's largest fashion activism movement' (FR 2021a). Its two most popular campaigns, 'Who Made My Clothes?' and 'Loved Clothes Last', serve to mobilise consumers to address labour and environmental injustices in fashion, respectively. Further, they do so in a distinctly fashionable way.

Our decision to choose hashtag campaigns to illuminate our discussion of the intersection of gender and responsibility in 21st-century activism is twofold. First, in the 2020s, digital media campaigns are a popular form of activism and social mobilisation; therefore, they can be understood as sites where normative sanctions are communicated. Second, public digital platforms provide 'direct access to the research phenomena' (Alenezi 2020: 41). This paper extends research conducted by Street (2022) that analysed FR's Instagram messaging in 2016–2019 in relation to questions of responsibility. We draw on the methodologies developed in Street's research project to highlight how gender is instrumentalised in two campaigns on the @fash_rev Instagram account 2020–2021. The posts on the FR account comprise stylised infographics, memes and photographs with descriptive captions serving to educate or inspire behaviour change; either the *#WhoMadeMyClothes* or the *#LovedClothesLast* hashtags are used on most posts, meaning that these campaigns form most of the communication strategy. We performed a textual analysis of the posts from 2020–2021, as observed in October 2021. We examined the gendering of bodies represented through the posts and the use of 'girlie' aesthetics (Genz and Brabon 2009: 78) in relation to the graphic design of the posts and how fashion as a feminised field is explicitly and implicitly referenced in posts that include written communication. In the following section, we synthesise our findings to provide a brief analysis of both campaigns, with specific reference to four posts that are illustrative of our broader findings.

Who Made My Clothes?

The 'Who Made My Clothes?' campaign invites consumers to share photos of themselves and their outfits on Instagram and tag the brands they are wearing to ask the question: 'who made my clothes?' Asking corporations about their supply chains has its roots in 'anti-consumption' movements (Cherrier 2009); however, FR instructs consumers to address 'their favourite brands' or 'the brands they love'. Posting selfies and tagging brands is a regular practice of fashion digital communication, tied to 'influencers' and *#OOTD* ('outfit of the day') style posts (Abidin 2016). Therefore, rather than extending the combative activist/corporation relationship where ideas of political consumerism originate (Klein 1999; Micheletti and Stolle 2008), this form of communication complies with everyday forms of corporate marketing. For their part, brands 'answer' via the same platform, posting reassuring portraits of single people (usually women from the Global South, but occasionally men also from the Global South) staring straight at the camera holding posters that read 'I made your clothes'. These images gloss over the often-brutal industrial context of garment production, which is predicated on dispersed labour and tight deadlines (meaning that *many* people made your clothes under pressured contexts); in addition, the image of the satisfied garment worker stands in for the corporation itself. Proffered up as the answer to the question 'who made my clothes?', the corporation is effectively framed as a 'moral and political subject' that is capable not only of achieving FR's version of transparency but also of being 'good' (Arnesson 2018: 6). By aligning with already popular practices, the campaign fits in a transitional space between a critique of, and a contribution to, fashionable Instagram cultures. This digital fashion culture defaults to addressing young female consumers of the Global North, highlighting their agency in the fashion system (FR 2021b).

The 'Who Made My Clothes?' campaign echoes Young's SCM to conceive accurately of the supply chain as a social structure and identify consumers as bearing some responsibility because they participate in and benefit from the same fashion system that produces injustice. However, the terms of this connection are often drawn along gendered lines and frame taking action as a form of 'global sisterhood' (Siddiqi 2009). This messaging connects the labour rights of women workers to strict moral claims about individual choice in the sphere of consumption, which is also often explicitly gendered female. The Instagram campaign

evokes aphorisms drawn from popular feminism, including discourses of girl power constructing a young female consumer as the assumed audience through the representation of young women's bodies. The idea that 'girls support girls' is used to frame responsibility in fashion as a (young) women's issue (FR 2020a). The answer to the question of 'who made my clothes' rests on the plight of the abstract and idealised woman worker who is rejuvenated in this context as a site of responsiveness for consumers (Siddiqi 2009).

Loved Clothes Last

FR's 'Loved Clothes Last' campaign offers a different example of consumer responsibility by attempting to respond to environmental issues along the supply chain. These include spectacular examples of environmental injustice, such as the dumping of waste in landfill sites in the Global South or the harms associated with the second-hand garment trade (Besser 2021), as well as the everyday practices of washing and wearing, which are often the most 'energy-demanding' period of a garment's lifecycle (Laitala and Boks 2012: 122). The campaign blurs the material and symbolic meanings of garment care to call upon consumers to 'love' clothes for longer (FR 2020b). This framing incites a 'new shopping happiness', which attempts to sanction consumers from the 'short-sighted' and frivolous act of buying new clothes (Arnesson 2018: 125). This logic is validated only in the assumption that 'the longer active use of that specific product would prevent another product from being manufactured' (Laitala and Boks 2012: 124). This assumption is highly problematic given that garment production continues to increase by 2.7% annually (McKinsey and Company & Business of Fashion Team 2021: 62) even throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and more than 70% of the fashion industry's greenhouse gas emissions come from the sphere of production (McKinsey & Company and Global Fashion Agenda 2020: 3). Thus, despite the increasing push for consumers to reduce the environmental impacts of their everyday life, the fashion supply chain and its resulting harms are still commanded by large corporations and their production schedules.

In focusing on contemporary theories about the 'use phase' of garments, which attend to the environmental impacts of using and disposing of clothes (Fletcher 2016), the 'Loved Clothes Last' campaign evidences a new form and expectations of political consumerism in fashion that is framed through sustainability. The campaign places expectations on consumers to change their lifestyles and daily habits, asking them to engage in more sustainable washing practices, mending and making clothes and adopting a 'personal style' so as to not fall victim to fashion trends that are commonly pathologised (FR 2020c). This relates theoretically to models of 'lifestyle activism' (Stolle and Micheletti 2013: 164) and pragmatically to traditional feminine labours of care, 'domesticity and the management of everyday life' (Craik 1994: 43). This messaging instrumentalises gender by embedding responsibility-taking in traditionally gendered aspects of domestic labour and garment care. The imperative to 'be fashionable and caring at the same time' (Maksimova 2021: 160) can be read as feminine because it calls upon a language of nurturance and discipline where women are expected to adopt the 'right feelings' and engage in personal transformations as part of larger projects of social transformation (Pham 2015: 226).

These campaigns represent two moral issues associated with fashion and two ways that gender is instrumentalised in contemporary discourses of responsibility. The campaigns are normative examples of the way the context of fast fashion has generated new forms of political consumerism. The way that these campaigns instrumentalise gender is reflective of a specific neoliberal discourse that draws together notions of girl power and citizenship 'to make fashion consumerism coextensive with feminism and self-responsibility' (Pham 2013: 153). FR sanctions against consumers who engage in practices of over-consumption and follow trends closely and declare expectations of modified consumption, personal style and domestic skills. How well this responsibility is carried out depends, to a large degree, on the relative privileges and individual dispositions of young women. In this sense, FR's campaigns follow a strict 'moral methodological individualism' that overemphasises the role of individual consumers in addressing harm (Parekh 2017: 609) and serves to conceal the role of corporations, governments and other actors along the supply chain. When thinking through the kinds of responsibilities generated from our *connection* via social systems, it is vital that we also address the institutional contexts that comprise that system (Parekh 2017: 609). This means extending beyond the relations among individual women around the world and identifying the powers of capital and politics that engender those women too.

Do Women Owe Women?

There are valid pragmatic justifications for framing consumer responsibility in fashion along gendered lines. Fashion and style interest many women, both young and old, globally; harnessing the sense of connection arising from this interest is logical. Digital activism aimed at transforming the fashion industry is a legitimate, accessible and free way for young women to engage in global politics. While theories of responsibility rarely take gender into account, there is a long history of women both driving and participating in political consumerism. As Micheletti (2004) explains, the home—understood as a place of economic transaction controlled by women—has long been a site where the personal meets the political. In this sense, campaigns such as 'Who Made My Clothes?' and 'Loved Clothes Last' sit in the context of an established tradition where women's roles as wives and mothers allotted them a special responsibility to act politically. However, we argue that in the context of fast fashion, the 'already gendered' context of consumption is intensifying and settling unproblematically on young women as the agents most responsible for addressing the harms associated with the fashion industry.

Through these campaigns, which are specifically addressed at fast fashion, labour exploitation is framed as a problem best understood via universalised concepts of gendered oppression, addressed via an appeal to global sisterhood—and a feminised ethic of care is cultivated as the appropriate measure for a monumental post-consumer waste trade, facilitated by the policies of democratic nation-states of the Global North. Through these campaigns, consumers are guided through the ethical complexities of fast fashion by emphasising what they are expected to 'do' to perform their role not only as consumers but also specifically as female consumers. This gendered framing is problematic because fashion activist campaigns' efforts to cultivate consumer responsibility contribute to the establishment of the set of norms or expectations that shapes the role consumers are to play in addressing structural injustice. The assumption that fast fashion consumers are young, white and privileged also obscures more inclusive and nuanced rubrics for understanding this form of consumption and the responsibility it generates (Hatcher 2019: 213). While we acknowledge that devising models and communication strategies for raising the consciousness of structural injustice must default to intelligible messages capable of speaking to the 'ordinary citizen', collapsing the global supply chain to a dependent relationship between two types of women flattens the gendered politics of the supply chain and the diverse gendered subjectivities of the 'ordinary citizen'.

We can also speculate on the value of a rigorous application of gender-based analysis to framing responsibility in consumer activism. In place of assuming the gendered context of fashion, a more critical questioning of the intersection between structural injustice and gender would create more informed frameworks of responsibility. This might include forums and conversations that alerted consumers to the pervasive structural dimensions of patriarchal capitalism. As men are rendered almost invisible in many contemporary activist campaigns, they are also effectively absolved of responsibility. For a start, highlighting that several of the 21st century's wealthiest individuals are male CEOs of fashion companies reconfigures the question of who exactly is benefiting from fast fashion. These questions lead into broader discussions about how the flow of capital in fashion supports persistent power imbalances within the fashion industry. A crucial and overlooked aspect of fashion consumption in these campaigns is that the market for men's fashion has outpaced that of women's for many years (Rabkin 2019). If campaigns were to acknowledge this, they might also allow space to attend to the ways the global impact of fashion has come to affect 'the social and cultural behaviour of men and boys' (Ross 1997: 18). Acknowledging that young men like and buy fashion and that, regardless of how much one likes fashion, everyone is charged with dressing themselves over the course of their lifetime would immediately invite more voices to the conversation. Most critically, questioning the role of gender in place of assuming it allows for diverse perspectives beyond the gender binary—and forms of responsibility that might dovetail with less moralising approaches to navigating our many social roles.

Yet, beyond these critiques, we are still inspired by the political power of thinking about women as a collective. Fashion as a cultural practice brings women into connection with one another, and theorising women as a group gives feminism a distinct axis from which to meaningfully understand gendered

experiences and oppressions (Young 1994: 719). In line with the objectives of Young (1994) and Mohanty (2003), we have faith in how women can work together to push for change, especially against patriarchal forces. We conceive of the way that women are drawn into relation to one another through the fashion system as an important part of understanding 'the sexual politics of global capitalism' (Mohanty 2003: 141). We contend that this relation must not be addressed as a form of universal sisterhood; nor can it divide women's experience in capitalism as either 'victim' or 'beneficiary'. The connection that women bear gestures towards 'a serial structure that conditions her own position', which can be politicised (Young 1994: 736). This more radical conceptualisation of women's connection and solidarity can inform a position that allows us 'to see the complexities, singularities, and interconnections between communities of women' (Mohanty 2003: 243), which generate power and agency. These more radical conceptions of connection animate more radical visions of how change might occur in the fashion industry. These include Minh-Ha Pham's (in press) calls for an abolition model to address sweatshops and J. K. Gibson Graham's calls to move beyond the need to centre the 'rights or wrongs' of those in the Global North and instead focus on the women-led initiatives that are coming out of the Global South, as well as those that link workers across the Global South (Cameron 2015: 319).

Asking what women owe other women might well be the wrong question. A better one might be: 'how can women (and others) divided by deep racial and economic disparities as well as spatial distance find the grounds on which to work together in addressing injustice?' Leaning into this question, we can build on Zheng's proposition that we should use our roles to reconstitute structure. The RIM reflects on both the capacity and limitations of individuals and individual roles. It charges us with the task of identifying our sphere of influence in the multitude of roles we occupy in society. This means addressing and moving beyond the implicit neoliberal assumptions about 'the consumer as "the" citizen under advanced capitalism' (Mohanty 2003: 141). We are inspired by such thinking because we are precisely aware of the gendered contexts we experience via our roles as teachers, researchers, students, parents, sisters and friends. These roles have less to do with what we buy and more with how we relate to Others and, still, to the social structures of fashion. How we fashion our many 'selves'—through dress, discourse, and society—serves to ignite our potential to push the boundaries of our roles.

In our role as educators, we ask how the classroom can become a place of activism. We can question how our curriculum and learning resources re-inscribe or challenge the power structures of the fashion system, invite our students to understand their own set of limitations and capacities and develop projects where we join with them in addressing injustices in the fashion industry. We propose that clothing and fashion provide a rich context in which to explore the space in which 'structure meets agency' (Zheng 2018: 870), precisely because all people the world over get dressed every day—most people have autonomy over what they wear and exercise some economic agency in relation to dress.

Conclusion

Fashion supply chains present us with an intense model of what structural injustice looks like in the 21st century. They are just one of many economic and cultural structures that bring otherwise distant 'Others' into connection with one another. Young's theory that this connection is the basis of our responsibility for harms along these supply chains has both philosophical and intuitive appeal (McKeown 2018: 484). It has philosophical appeal because it allows us to think beyond a deterministic and imperial logic that puts producers of the Global South in perpetual economic dependency with consumers of the Global North, as well as providing a framework for thinking beyond questions of blame. It is intuitive because who does not want to feel 'connected' to Others? However, as researchers, consumers and colleagues committed to bettering the fashion industry, we acknowledge the intractability of structural injustice. The fashion industry continues to remake itself and its injustices daily, and there is little empirical evidence that the system of fast fashion is about to give way to a more ethical or sustainable model anytime soon.

To turn to our own roles, we are attuned to the fact that this special issue is written and edited predominantly by women academics, that the research fields of both fashion and justice are feminised and that our classrooms are filled with mostly young women who are equally attentive to their roles in

patriarchy and addressing harms. We see that we have been drawn into a gendered context that moves beyond individual inscriptions as the locus of responsibility and puts us in affinity with other women (Young 1994: 713). The calls to act on injustice are tasked to the collective (Young 2011: 174), and we remain committed to addressing how we can collaborate among different roles and identities both inside fashion and outside of it.

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