

The Consumption Crisis

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Sustainability requires a long-term outlook that encourages responsible consumption. Fashion, it seems, is fundamentally at odds with this goal. Perhaps apparel can be made sustainably, but fashion? Fashion is more than a product; fashion is a mode of thought. It affects everything from design to purchasing to obsolescence, and is usually distinguished by a fast-paced and ever-replenishing chain of supply and demand. The inevitable consequence of quick and constant change is ravenous resource consumption and a vast accumulation of waste. Better production methods can slow resource use and recycling can

reduce waste, but buying (and therefore making) fewer products will address both problems.

Stemming consumption in America will be hard. The United States represents only five percent of the world's population, while its consumers use up approximately 25 percent of the world's natural resources. Our motivations for buying (sometimes more than we can afford or need) are complex and deeply rooted in our culture. Whether it's ordering a supersized McDonald's fries or purchasing yet another pair of Manolo Blahniks to add to the 100 pairs of shoes already in a closet bursting at the seams, clearly, sheer quantity is seductive. In addition, a basic human need is looking as though you belong to a place, a culture, a moment in time. It seems that Americans not only need to belong, we need to be better. We demonstrate our superiority through conspicuous consumption, and fashion lets us wear our aspirations on our sleeves.

Apparel long since ceased to simply protect us from the elements, and as soon as it did, it took on connotations of fashion. Probably since the last Ice Age, anything worn has communicated the wearer's sense of self and position in society. This is true whether the clothes in question are full-on Goth, a Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress and kitten heels, or a blue suit, white shirt and red tie. Specifically "fashionable" clothes (i.e., clothing promoted by the fashion industry) can enhance the consumer's status by communicating a person's ability to purchase products without

regard to price (higher prices for new products are not necessarily related to higher quality), and a person's knowledge of what is "in." For many fashion leaders, fashion is addictive because it advertises how "with it" someone is with the newest and most cutting-edge ensembles.

Americans buy and buy and buy clothes. As a comparison between American and European spending habits demonstrates, our appetite for fashion is not simply an inevitable consequence of affluence and available choice. Let's look at Americans first. The most recent Bureau of Labor figures on consumer spending habits show that the average American family of three has approximately \$44,400 (after taxes) to spend on everything it needs to sustain living. Of this, it spends approximately 11 percent on apparel and apparel services (laundry, dry cleaning, etc.). This works out to approximately \$4,884 or \$1,628 per person in a family per year—an increase over apparel spending for the several previous years. Now, let's look at the Europeans. On average, Europeans (of the 12 EU countries tallied) spend only seven percent of their disposable income on apparel and apparel services (according to www.eustatistics.gov.uk). Not only do Europeans spend less of their income on clothing, they: 1) don't focus on price as the first feature they look for when buying, 2) are willing to pay more for their clothing because they fully expect their clothes to be worn longer than do Americans, and 3) demand high-quality products. Could

Americans become more like Europeans in our apparel-buying habits? Should we?

Given the statistics related to ravenous apparel consumption and its attendant waste, I'm going to answer the second question with a "yes." For the sake of the environment (as well as their individual credit ratings!), Americans should buy fewer clothes. (They should buy less stuff, period, but that is beyond the scope of this article.) The answer to the first question is more elusive. I believe we can become more like Europeans in our buying habits, but realizing that possibility is complicated.

In the old adage "quality vs. quantity," quality is contrasted with quantity as if it's only possible to have one of these characteristics. Yet quality-loving Europeans do indeed buy less per year, and they still end up with closets full of clothing. This is possible because their higher quality-based purchases last longer than clothing designed solely with low price in mind.

However, the word "quality" invites interpretation. Indeed, noted quality assurance author, educator and researcher, Dr. Sara Kadolph of Iowa State University has concluded that when a person describes a product as "quality," she could be ascribing to it any number of positive attributes, among them: performance, features, reliability, conformance between design and function, durability, serviceability, aesthetics and other perceived quality issues, such as those related to brand name. Given the abundance of types of quality, do Americans value the right kind

of quality, the kind of quality that would persuade them to be happy with less?

Before we can evaluate that question, we should first be explicit about what the right kind of quality would be. With an eye to reducing resource use and landfill, I propose that reliability (both in wear and care) and durability are necessary for a piece of apparel to escape being replaced after a season. In other words, the knit pullover can't sag and pill, the white shirt can't turn dingy grey and the coat placket can't have buttons hanging by a mere thread. Of course, sustainable fashion (not just apparel) is our challenge; I would be cheating if I didn't acknowledge that the piece has to stay genuinely fashionable, or at least attractive and wearable, for several seasons. I don't see this as an impossibility. While fashions come and go, surely we all have a few items that we have kept for years. The goal would be to keep most of our items for many years and only acquire very few new pieces a year.

So, do Americans appreciate this kind of quality? There's some evidence that they do. Relatively recently, my research revealed that even teenagers respect quality. After conducting several studies related to apparel shopping behavior in 12- to 18-year-olds, it came to light that the kids interviewed were aware that quality is supposed to be an important consideration when shopping for clothing. When pressed for an answer about what quality meant to them, the children said that the clothes they

bought should be long-lasting. They were probably repeating what they'd heard from their parents.

While it's nice to know that a reverence for quality is still being passed down from generation to generation in America, actions speak louder than words. Widespread American devotion to stores like Old Navy and H&M suggests that our working definition of quality has more to do with achieving the highest quantity to dollar ratio. According to this understanding, the consumer "wins" by being able to acquire a lot with practically no money, leaving her with a lot of money left over, which represents a lot of new opportunities to buy more. Obviously, this kind of quality holds no promise for curing shopaholism and overconsumption, and results in a cycle of demanding more and more for less and less. This buying philosophy is not good for society, consumers or the apparel industry.

The European meaning of quality conjures an image of the artisan hunched over his bench, painstakingly stitching away. Europeans tend to assess quality by how an object measures up to the ideal (defined in part by traditions of craftsmanship). The European consumer "wins" by buying the most "perfect" object. Having achieved her aim, she takes pride in the object for its own sake, an attitude which reduces the chance that she will want to replace it quickly. Quality à la Europe seems like a concept that can quell consumption.

Although Americans give a lot of lip service (and mostly just lip service) to quality in their apparel, the mere fact that the adolescents did identify quality as a good thing suggests to me that quality is not so foreign to Americans that we cannot learn to appreciate it fully. Like taste, an eye for quality can be developed.

Ideally, industry professionals would educate consumers about quality. They are in a prime position to do so. Wouldn't it be great if retail brands used their marketing materials to convince customers that improved quality (and increased price) is, in fact, a good thing, because in the long run they will pay less per wear with a longer-lasting item? Or what if industry leaders let consumers know that by paying more for something they'll never want to throw away, they will not only have something they'll love, but they will also be contributing to a cleaner planet?

Would such ground-breaking tactics cause companies to lose sales and, therefore, income? Not necessarily. A calculated price increase could offset lower sales volume. Better yet, if companies demonstrate how higher prices fund higher wages, more U.S. jobs and responsible environmental stewardship, that could create a devoted customer base. If the same amount of money currently spent on advertising low prices were spent instead on advertising the advantages of purchasing longer-lasting and higher-quality apparel, perhaps consumers would change their purchasing habits.

Reality check: Very, very few brands even try to make these claims. Retailers rarely focus on the quality

characteristics mentioned previously, especially features such as reliability and durability. As the monumental success of Wal-Mart demonstrates, cheap makes money! For at least several decades, purchases have increasingly been driven by lower prices. And inexpensive mass production makes money because consumers support it. Well, no wonder. In a marketplace characterized by indifferent quality and buy-one-get-one-free retail gimmicks, who can blame Americans for basing their purchasing decisions on the lowest price? The unfortunate upshot of this is that Americans have been desensitized to quality. (Possibly most of us couldn't even recognize its hallmarks if we tried). Ironically, the race for low prices has also resulted in companies' losing profitability and being forced to move overseas, where they can produce more cheaply and thus give consumers the price they demand—for now. It seems inevitable that, unless we completely ignore worker equity, the price of goods must bottom out. When it does, companies will look for a way to differentiate themselves and justify raising their prices. A return to quality is one way they might do that.

I hope consumers will call for industry change before that. As Thomas Friedman pointed out in his best-seller, *The World is Flat*, every buying decision a consumer makes is a vote indicating their support or lack of support for how companies conduct business. Consumer power was decisively proven in the apparel industry during the great "midi" disaster of

the 1970s. After several seasons of selling miniskirts, the fashion industry deemed it time for the "mini" to cycle into obsolescence and attempted to introduce a new, longer style called the "midiskirt." In a proud statement of rebellion, women refused to give up their short skirts to embrace the new style. Firms in the fashion industry were left with millions of unsold midis, as well as the realization that consumer demand was the true industry driver.

But who else can get consumers excited about quality? The answer is simple: Teachers. Being a professor myself, I strongly believe in the power of curriculum to catalyze societal change. Teachers can impart skills and concepts that will help students identify quality in apparel, and understand the effect of their buying habits on their own lifestyle as well as on the environment and on other human beings. In part, I blame a lack of educational resources for the ongoing surge in overconsumption, and the average person's general ignorance about how products are made. In recent years, the programs that have traditionally exposed kids to important issues related to clothing purchasing have been wiped out by slashed budgets for public education and the Department of Agriculture.

Home economics programs (now known under various pseudonyms such as Human Environmental Sciences, etc.) and 4-H programs had their heyday in the 1950s, through the 1970s. Started in the 1800s as a way for young women to be self-sufficient (by sewing their own clothes, for instance), home eco-

nomics evolved in the latter 1900s as a program to shape young men and women into resourceful and knowledgeable consumers. Similarly, one goal of today's 4-H programs is to teach kids not only how to make clothing, but also how to manage an apparel budget and to determine if apparel is well made. It is within the scope of such programs to include information on how clothing is manufactured, and to emphasize the consumer's responsibility to seek out companies that pay their employees living wages and use organic fibers or nontoxic dyes. As home economics and 4-H programs have declined in number and importance, issues such as sustainability have become more problematic and widespread. I don't think that this is a coincidence.

Can apparel and fashion be sustainable? The answer is yes, but only if Americans change their way of thinking. To do this, apparel industry leaders, home economics teachers and 4-H leaders (to name just a few) can join forces and help convince the next generation of consumers that buying better and fewer clothes will not only benefit them, but also the planet.