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Feminist Perspectives on Digitally Enabled Sustainable Fashion Consumerism

Cheng Fan

School of Design, Northumbria University, cheng.fan@northumbria.ac.uk

Jo Briggs

School of Design, Northumbria University, jo.briggs@northumbria.ac.uk

Based on the ethical requirements of feminism and the rise of fintech, 'sustainable fashion' should displace fast fashion as the principal trend.

CCS CONCEPTS • **Human-centered computing**—Collaborative and social computing ~Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms

Additional Keywords and Phrases: Feminism HCI, Sustainable Fashion, Fintech

1 INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion is not only an issue apropos of environmental pollution and feminism (Maynard, 2021), but also an area where HCI can make a difference. Fashion – comprising garment or apparel design, its supply chains and retail, and associated cultural ecosystem of fashion-related digital communications (see Harris et al., 2021) – has supported the position of women, as a powerful visual tool and by promoting their innovation, self-expression and social change (McRobbie, 2020). However, the relationship between fashion and feminism has recently become strained, due to ambiguity of claims that fashion promotes women's empowerment, when fashion is also responsible for mass consumerism, further enabled by the rise of fintech¹.

Based on an intersectional feminist stance, fast fashion – a fashion business model that focuses on the rapid production of large quantities of clothing that mimic high street trends – has been criticized as unethical (Oort, 2018), environmentally unfriendly (Niinimäki et al., 2020), and points towards the urgent need for alternative, slower and sustainable forms of fashion for the future. Sustainable fashion advocates ethical values and eco-friendliness, although these need to be better understood by society, including through awareness-raising and a call for action.

This position paper primarily asks:

- (1) Can popular consumerism avoid, and if so, to what extent reproducing gender inequities such as unequal pay for equal work over e.g., digitally-enabled modes of fashion consumption and expression?
- (2) Can Human Computer Interaction (HCI) researchers help, and again, if so to what extent and in what specific ways, e.g., by revealing ways to dismantle patriarchal oppression?

1.1 Incomplete empowerment: feminism in fast fashion

When shopping for fashion garments online:

(1) Brands often claim that their designs not only empower women (freedom to dress individually) but will also afford them a positive *experience* that sustains well beyond the commercial transaction and acquisition of the product.

(2) Crucially, marketing makes claims that garments' affordability is an empowerment, often although not exclusively focusing on women's financial freedom and expression. Imagery-rich social media platforms such as Instagram allow

¹ We use the fintech portmanteau for 'financial technology' referring to digital technologies that have been designed and deployed "to augment, streamline, digitize or disrupt traditional financial services" (Walden, 2020; np).

young people, and others, to focus on their outfits and visual expressions of self-identity more than ever, making fast fashion an appealing, easy and quick solution (Maynard, 2021) – or the manifestation of timely satisfaction of desires (Rojek, 2004).

Two urgent problems appear to be in the fashion-related industrial supply chain and asymmetric power relations. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign about 80% of garment worker are women and mostly working in developing countries like Cambodia, Bangladesh, Sri Lank, China, and India, etc. Behind the fashion brands' glossy interface clients/online consumers – usually wealthy women in the West – are seemingly empowered, whereas garment workers – usually poor women in the global East and South – are heavily exploited (Roussel, 2021).

HCI is always implicated in ensuring responsible design in this fashion and fintech context, whether by e.g., promoting or otherwise including those whose image appears on the platform interface, and in avoiding crude female stereotypes – skin colour, body weight, apparent temperament and health, aesthetic freedom etc., (e.g., as became the trope in modesl selected for Victoria's Secret campaigns).

The visual changes we have seen influenced by feminism are only the first step in social change. It cannot be overlooked that the COVID-19 epidemic was an important catalyst for change in the fashion industry (Brydges, Retamal and Hanlon, 2020), and a time that encouraged companies to self-reflect on consumer structures and brand upgrades, accompanied by changes in consumer motivations (Kim and Kim, 2022). During this period, conditions of Lockdown drove a strong global focus on social egalitarianism (Khan and Richards, 2021); for example Black Live Matter (BLM) was actually present for a long time, but became a focus for shared expression of global inequality. Similarly the Metoo movement drove a female-friendlier social structure.

1.2 Fintech: Improvement or Disruption?

Fintech, especially aspects that help to drive 'FashionTech', reinforces and arguably extends the fashion industry's focus on speed, ease of use/access and transparency of industrial processes (Alexander, 2022). Consumers however are starting to pay more attention to every step of the supply chain, and brands are being asked to disclose and held to account for the poor working conditions of their suppliers when these can be meaningfully traced, as well as the source of production and whether associated processes are causing environmental pollution. Fashion brands such as LVMH and Kering are apparently using blockchain technology to support openness of production practices, increase transparency and track their supply chains (DeAcetis, 2021).

Fintech is a powerfully decentralized force that is not yet fully prevalent but which is enabling fast fashion consumption at even greater speeds. However, amongst seven identified pitfalls (Das, 2019) are a potential crisis of trust and user experience. Furthermore, fintech requires ethical algorithms and data flows to help build trust (Thakor and Merton, 2018) and User Experience design requires human-centred design thinking interventions in these processes.

1.3 Slow Fashion: Sustainability in a Circular Economy

Slow fashion is an offshoot of sustainable fashion and an emerging movement to oppose fast fashion (Trejo, Smith, Trejo, and Lewis, 2019). With the UK already committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 68% by 2030 (Harrabin, 2021), the retail industry must accelerate their sustainability roadmap and engage with new and existing consumers to drive behavioural change. One potential positive is that informed consumers are increasingly looking for products and services that reflect their sustainable values (Michaels, 2021). A McKinsey & Company survey 'Consumer Sentiment on Sustainability in Fashion' (2020), 88% of respondents reported that consumers should be paid to reduce pollution. The fashion industry's long-used 'push model' is no longer working, indeed it is out of fashion and must update to enable the more sustainable design and supply of what consumers want to buy (FinTech Futures, 2019).

Corresponding business model changes under industry 4.0, “can play a relevant role in the transition of SMEs toward a more sustainable business model leading to better integration of circular economy practices” (Pizzi et.al, 2020; 1). For example, Made to order fashion can reduce that of textile related waste through overproduction by responding to individual user needs. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates that the fashion industry loses over \$400 billion a year in unsold stock and waste, representing 15% of all products (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019).

2 REFUTE

- (1) The fast fashion industry provides job opportunities for third world countries.
- (2) To provide convenience and accessibility for low-income people and those who cannot find the right size.

3 DISCUSSION/PROVOCATION

- (1) This so-called fashion production work is yet a modern form of slavery that reinforces postcolonial power structures that exploit workers through insufficient pay, unsafe working environments, an absence of health guarantees, and also an environment with sexual harassment, gender pay gaps and discrimination. Despite the ‘jobs’ that occupy all their time, women are still economically unable to become independent and thus fall into a vicious circle of being unable to invest in their careers, education and family; they still rely on men, as before while being the source fo social (re)production.
- (2) Sustainable fashion can be better designed for minorities by making these injustices more evident, and changing, this damaging and regressive business model. We are hopeful that the continued deprecation of the ‘push-model’ of design and supply will enable more ethical and sustainable consumption behaviours. HCI can play an important role in promoting awareness, discussion and more responsible fashion-related production and consumption.

Conclusion

Ecofeminism, a term coined (1974) by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne, has shown how feminists have been eco-friendly in recent years (Adams, 2014), and calling for an egalitarian, collaborative society (Carolyn, 2005). The timely feedback of HCI in the new consumer environment demonstrates similar altruism rooted in HCI’s adoption of ethical studies that maintaining and improving the overall level of public welfare by helping minority disadvantaged groups(Lee et al, 2019). To reiterate, more altruistic HCI can serve to help resist patriarchal oppression, by critically examining every aspect of online fashion, and in turn driving the moral development of HCI (Mah and Hespanhol, 2017). These systemic, intersecting ways of thinking will more powerfully promote actionable social change in and through HCI that will benefit both women and the environment.

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