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2022

## From Oceanography to Critical Marketing by way of Dismantling Fast Fashion: The Purposeful Research Trajectory of Deniz Atik

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### Recommended Citation

Navarro, Beatriz de Quero and Joy, Annamma (2022) "From Oceanography to Critical Marketing by way of Dismantling Fast Fashion: The Purposeful Research Trajectory of Deniz Atik," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*: Vol. 7: No. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/mgdr/vol7/iss2/3>

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## Markets, Globalization & Development Review



## **From Oceanography to Critical Marketing by Way of Dismantling Fast Fashion: The Purposeful Research Trajectory of Deniz Atik**

Born and raised in Izmir, a city on the Turkish coast, Deniz Atik was from a young age fascinated by the sea; her dream was to study oceanography. Coming from a family led by a successful businessman, she however found herself fulfilling the projections of her father by studying business, first in France and later in the U.S. While a few early attempts to boycott her father's plans came to naught, over time she found a way to transfer her devotion to the sea and nature to her research interests on fashion consumption. This passion of hers has accompanied her work over the years, and has made her naturally aware of and sensitive to the environmental impacts of consumer behavior. Furthermore, it is undeniable that a mind seduced by the complexity of the oceans will possess a vision of the roles of systems, in commerce as in nature; that vision has undoubtedly benefited Atik in her analysis of globalized markets and marketing systems, as well as in the colorful but dangerously exploitative fashion consumption system. Through her personal and professional story, you can hear a deeply caring yet rebellious voice willing to be critical of all actors involved in the fashion system, and in a globalized world that is harming consumer welfare and entire ecosystems.

“Fast fashion is, oh my God, I read and I wrote about it, listened about it, and it's the second biggest industry after oil polluting the world and damaging the environment” (*Deniz Atik, interviewed By Annamma Joy, September 2021*).

Her journey to scrutinize the fashion industry started with her Ph.D. thesis conducted in Milan, the fashion center of Italy, which was then published as a book (Atik 2009). Through her dissertation, Atik had the opportunity to examine consumer desires from critical lenses and the institutional forces that have shaped the marketplace and the consumer as a social category. Later, the study of the various actors within the fashion industry and how they can contribute to the sustainability shift needed in the fashion system has become the cornerstone of Atik's research focus and resulting publications over the years (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2015, 2020).

She has not solely challenged 'fashion business as usual' regarding unsustainable or unethical practices; she has also maintained an openly

critical perspective of the dominant economic and social paradigm (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997), and has widely investigated ways in which the fashion industry is a paradigmatic system of the damaging forces of globalization, in service to a goal of uninterrupted economic growth. Throughout her articles, Atik shows a notable concern about the environmental sensitivities of all actors within the fashion industry, addressing the harmful environmental consequences of production, marketization, and consumption of fashion products. Through qualitative analysis, she has unraveled the roles of designers, major fashion brands and retailers, educational organizations, ethical foundations, and activist associations (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2020). Moreover, she has felt compelled to denounce the unfair and pervasive social impact that the fashion industry has had and continues to have on the precarious conditions of fashion workers (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2015).

*“When I think about fast fashion, I think is sad because it is also taking away from our soul. This is also on the consumer side because we are used to buy and dispose products, we find happiness in buying and disposing. (...) Also, we are only human beings. I mean, those cheap prices are so seductive.”*  
(Deniz Atik, interviewed by Annamma Joy, September 2021).

Even further, she has addressed the philosophy of new forms of fashion, such as slow fashion and its connection to sustainability principles, and the attitude-behavior gap of the “sustainability-sensitive consumer” (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2015), as well as examining consumer contradictions, identity needs, and auto-image issues related to ubiquitous ethnocentric western beauty ideals (Cavusoglu and Atik 2021, 2022). Recently, she investigated how to align consumers’ restless desire for the new with sustainability goals (Atik and Ozdamar Ertekin 2022). She also critically examined the degree of democratization of the fashion market and showed that diffusion of fashion to larger consumer segments across history does not automatically imply democratization and empowerment of consumers (Atik et al. 2022).

This macro perspective on environmental and social pressures that the fashion industry elevates over quality-of-life issues for consumers, fashion workers, and society in general is essential in performing a critical analysis of the stances and ideologies behind the damaging practices carried out by actors in fashion markets (Dholakia 2012).

*“Transformative research and vulnerable consumers inspired my research” (Deniz Atik, interviewed By Annamma Joy September 2021).*

The representation of vulnerable consumers has been another notable stream of research in Atik’s career. *Markets, Globalization and Development Review* (MGDR), of which she is the founding co-editor, has included in its issues voices expressing the increasing interest in the misrepresentation of consumers for reasons of race and scarcity (Dholakia and Atik 2021). Atik has personally shown a sustained interest in researching how the underrepresentation of vulnerable consumers has a negative impact on these populations. She has addressed how marketing actions are necessary towards the inclusion and wellbeing of individuals labeled as disabled (Canbulut and Atik 2015). Some of her papers have discussed the reasons behind why low-income consumers engage in conspicuous consumption practices as a way to cope (Atik and Yurdakul Sahin 2011), and how religion may be at the root of another coping mechanism for poverty (Yurdakul and Atik 2016). She has a deep interest in the reasons underlying why consumers become trapped in poverty, and how they experience consumption and precarity in their daily lives (Yurdakul, Atik, and Dholakia 2016). Most importantly, she is deeply investing in discovering how marketing is either contributing to or invisibilizing this vulnerability, and in how to solve these issues. Overall, Atik actively acknowledges the challenges that exist in the quest to protect consumers from non-transparent or vicious market dynamics (Atik and Dholakia 2020).

Additionally, a good number of Atik’s publications have been devoted to the role that women of different cultures play in the fashion industry as targeted populations. Racialized women are especially affected by fashion rules that impose omnipresent westernized standards of beauty through media. Fashion brands have failed to represent and work toward improving the consumption experiences of racially diverse women, because very often these brands are unaware that such underrepresentation causes a devaluation of self for non-Caucasian consumers (Cavusoglu and Atik 2022). In this sense, female fashion consumers have found ways of empowerment through social media communities of support to compensate for the underrepresentation of minorities and overall lack of diversity in the mainstream fashion industry (Cavusoglu and Atik 2021).

Atik has also repeatedly and directly denounced the cruel employment situations of fashion workers in de-localized factories, where major brands get their merchandise sewn by exploited employees

(Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik 2015, 2020). Whether researching consumers or workers, she has aimed to reveal the intricately interwoven social variables that intersect with the allegedly innocuous pursuit of fashion consumption, which can severely impact the well-being of vulnerable populations.

## **Dynamic Theoretical Openness: Classic Theories Applied to Practical Research on Fashion**

As pointed out by Dholakia (2012), theoretical openness is a basic element for effective critical marketing studies. Atik, in her efforts to reveal the philosophy behind logics of fashion at different levels of the industry and at different levels of abstraction, provides throughout her articles references to classic theorists from sociology and anthropology, as well as the applied use of their theories to actual contemporary fashion challenges and realities. She refers not only to these theories as part of the literature on which her studies are based, but also extracts from them key insights relevant to her analysis of the fashion industry.

*“Fashion designers’ creations are limited by (...) the cost, and the mass acceptance by consumers, so that makes so many dynamics between logic of art and logic of commerce. When you’re trying to grow sustainability, it becomes even more challenging, because sustainability increases costs (...), which companies don’t want, so they pollute usually less developed countries. Also taking care of your workers [by] enabling better factory conditions increases costs. The commercial side of sustainability is conflicting with logical commerce, but also logical sustainability is conflicting with logical art.” (Deniz Atik, interviewed by Annamma Joy, September 2021).*

Bourdieu is central for the proposition of the logic of sustainability beyond the two other dominant logics, large scale production (the logic of commerce), and restricted production (the logic of art). Following Bourdieu's theoretical style of structuring macrosocial reality in layers of abstraction from tangible and abstract forms of capital to symbolic powers, this theoretical approach becomes useful in introducing a new logical layer to the analysis and projection of the future of the fashion industry. By introducing a new structural logic that permeates all processes and actors crossed with the two other existing logics, Atik aims for a fashion industry in

which sustainability is neither a commercial argument nor a marketing trick, but rather an intersectional value of all marketing actions and strategic decisions towards real protection of the environment (Ozdamar Ertekin, Atik, and Murray 2020). Additionally, Bourdieu's social capital theory is used in her literature to address the collaborative and cooperative forms of online association for underrepresented ethnicities or diverse groups of fashion consumers (Cavusoglu and Atik 2021).

Guided by the concept of the institution from the sociological perspective of Berger and Luckmann, Atik and Firat (2013) conceptually discuss how marketing goes beyond practices, organizations, and actors to be established as a social institution. This applies to the fashion industry as it has allowed through the marketing institution the democratization of appearances linked to social classes, now accessible to all types of consumers who can build their identities on fashion trends with an agency that transcends the social category to which they belong. Hence, Atik proposes that consumers are seduced by fashion in this post-structuralist exercise of choosing their sociocultural identities through clothing pieces, among the many identifications to which a postmodern globalized media has exposed those consumers. For this purpose, Atik rescues Baudrillard's propositions of fashion having the same effect as art in the process of seduction of the consumer, in the relationship of the consumer with the fashion *object of desire* that will bestow on the consumer the symbolic properties of a given article of fashion.

Atik's crucial theoretical openness goes hand in hand with an open-minded approach that fuels critical studies and, further, is reflected in her work, such as in her exploration of vanguard ideologies and alternative ways of life off the beaten paths of consumption (Atik, Firat, and Uzunoğlu 2018; Atik et al. 2020). Her openness also comes into play in her analysis of unconventional forms of leisure such as fortune telling (Atik, Aktan, and Çam 2021), or methods of body transformation, including the motivations of consumers acquiring tattoos and their later related regrets (Atik and Yıldırım 2014).

### **Passion, Meaningful Drive, and Global Collaborations**

*"I was almost going to quit the Ph.D. program (...) And then, I met all these colleagues in Denmark, I realized that there is a niche in academia in business, in marketing (...) [where] I can do something good for humanity, for the environment, then it makes sense to me, then I am happy to write about it. (...) What I like about the things that I found meaningful is that I*

*am passionate.” (Deniz Atik, interviewed by Annamma Joy, September 2021).<sup>1</sup>*

As Atik states in her own words, she has found a source of intellectual challenge and growth in collaborations with colleagues of the critical marketing school, including Nikhilesh Dholakia, Fuat Firat, and Aras Ozgun with whom she has explored new theoretical horizons – from the social implications of fashioning marketing (Atik and Firat 2013) to the intersections between the broadening of marketing and the neoliberal ideology (Dholakia, Ozgun, and Atik 2020) and the role of media in the creation and sustenance of misinformation (Dholakia, Ozgun, and Atik 2022). When her passion for finding the roots of globalized issues and meaningful looks at how market dynamics come together, critical theoretical advances are possible. Over the course of their collaborative editorials as co-editors for the MGDR journal, Atik and Dholakia have often addressed key aspects of globalization to highlight the fact that contemporary mobility and technologies have completely changed the supposedly stable boundaries that delimited both the object of study in the social sciences and the target populations in research. In this journal, prospective authors find an academic debate space that welcomes radical proposals and reconsiderations. Contributions can thus be untethered from the rather frequent assumption in other agoras that markets equal capitalism (Dholakia and Atik 2016).

The two major paths of the debate about whether globalization is leading us towards cultural homogeneity, or whether on the contrary the reaction to such a homogenizing force leads us to reinforce and highlight our own and local cultural attributes, continue to capture the attention of scholars from various disciplines in the social sciences. Within the marketing field, and thanks to its co-editors, MGDR has become a critical space for the analysis of globalization, markets, and development with a critical spirit that opens readers’ perspectives and draws from other fields of knowledge such as sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, welcoming truly interdisciplinary collaboration (Dholakia 2012).

*“Sometimes, as academics, we can learn what is going wrong, but it's very hard to find solutions. And it's valid, because the solution is not only in one person's hands, or one actor's hands, it's in the hands of multiple constituents.” (Deniz Atik interviewed by Annamma Joy, September 2021)*

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<sup>1</sup> At this point in the interview, Atik referenced an article that served as a turning point for her professional direction and search for meaning in her career: Holbrook, M. B., and Elizabeth C. Hirschman (1982), “The Experiential Aspects of Consumption: Consumer Fantasies, Feelings, and Fun,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9 (2), 132–140. <https://doi.org/10.1086/20890>



The many answers to issues in this debate will have practical implications in the field of marketing, markets, and development, since they lead to questioning the practices and ideologies at the root of brands' strategies, public policies, transnational organizational agendas, and all sort of agents of the markets. Also, the search for meaningful answers to these radical questions leads to understanding the internal debates of many consumers along the spectrum of cultural identities available to them in a globalized environment. In terms of consumer behavior studies, and particularly in relation to identity issues, globalization has been shown to have a wide range of consequences on psychological processes, and on consumer responses to market offerings. Globalization often requires both institutions and consumers to make difficult commercial decisions and to hold potentially contradictory beliefs regarding many issues and numerous contexts, which are all mediated by the prevalence of Anglo-Saxon cultures in western-dominated global media. All these central concerns on the consequences of globalization have been present in the career and life of Deniz Atik and have served to drive her passionate devotion to research.

*“At MGDR, “We just care about what matters in life such as people, such as animals, plants, and future next generations, a livable planet for the next generations” (Deniz Atik, interviewed by Annamma Joy, September 2021).*

As co-editor in chief of the MGDR journal, Atik has hope in new generations and their willingness to reduce their environmental impact through conscious consumption, whether through the authentic implementation of new market logics of sustainability, or via embracing degrowth positions that will directly challenge the underlying ethos of capitalist markets. At the same time, Atik demonstrates a fundamental pragmatism in her predictive opinions on these consumption changes, that, as she has pointed out, may be required in confronting tragic events in low-wage clothing manufacturing – events whose ripple effects can rupture, however temporarily, the social constructs of consumption (Ozdamar-Ertekin and Atik 2020).

*“This journal is giving voice to the unheard voices; it is not only the dominant American white, or dominant (...) western perspective. So, this journal is giving a chance to other cultures (...) in expressing themselves freely” (Deniz Atik, interviewed by Annamma Joy, September 2021).*

As evidenced above, Atik has presented a clear future direction for MGDR. She feels especially passionate about the inclusion of non-western voices that bring to research agoras new topics, fresh perspectives, and respect for conducting slow research. She herself is personally invested in facilitating the discovery of ideas and philosophies in markets and globalization at the forefront of research from scholars representing Japan and other eastern cultures.

Through the focus of her work on the critical analysis of the fashion industry in collaboration with colleagues, Atik has built a bibliography that proposes new, out-of-the-box theoretical constructs to be analyzed in the context of post-modern markets. Atik's literature makes sense of some of the many pro-diversity, sustainable, and feminist movements and ideologies that have (re)emerged in globalized postmodernity, which are symptomatic of the unequal distribution of power in a global system. In contrast to the idea of a homogenized globalization, these reifications of such diverse identities draw attention to heterogeneous realities that coexist under the same postmodern umbrella of globalization. Her mission to investigate environmental sensitivities leading to a new sustainable paradigm in the fashion industry, coupled with elevating precisely those voices that live in the margins of the mainstream media and academia paths, are the driving forces behind Atik's research inspiration and dedication as co-editor of the MGDR journal. The long-ago dreams of a child who once wanted to save the oceans may have faded over time, but the altruistic passion that fueled those dreams most assuredly has not, as Atik showcases and celebrates diverse voices in pursuit of a more sustainable future.

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