



Thesis recap

Moral shame tells

An exploration of the complexity of consumers' moral shame in their consuming behaviour in the context of the sustainability debate in the fashion industry

Moral shame tells explores the complexity of consumers' moral shame – a type of shame consumers experience while buying, owning or consuming clothes and knowing they are not making sustainable choices – regarding their consuming behaviour in the context of the fashion industry and the sustainable discourse in it. Activated by a personal experience of how fashion generated conflicting feelings within myself as a consumer, leading to a disconnection between my behaviour and sustainable desires, which resulted in a feeling of moral shame, lies at the core of this publication. The aim is to identify where moral shame's complexity exactly lies based on seven themes by using different research methods: a critical literature study, a survey on consumers' moral shame in their behaviour as well as an auto ethnographic 'Wardrobe Studies' research on the role of clothes in moral shame and in-depth interviews with consumers about their experience of moral shame.

Shame allows individuals to see themselves through the eyes of others, constantly comparing the individual self to the group standard. This leads to a painful feeling caused by the consciousness of incorrect behaviour. Shame plays a significant role in everyday life on an internal and subjective level, but it is also crucial in society. It functions as a mirror

as shame exposes what norms are essential in contemporary culture and society. This shows the relevance of consumers' moral shame as our times are represented by environmental challenges.

Moral shame's expression are diverse for everyone, but a disconnection between the consumer's social and environmental sustainability values and their behaviour is key and leads to conflicting emotions and feelings. Reflecting on moral shame gives a better understanding of what values are important on an individual level which differs per person. Even though this personal aspect, moral shame is influenced by a couple of factors. Moral shame is socially constructed, as consumers feel pressure to behave more sustainable which is framed by voices in our culture and society. When they cannot manage, consumers see it as incorrect behaviour and feel morally ashamed. The social construct of moral shame prevails in specific, privileged groups because knowledge regarding social and environmental issues as well as the systemics of fashion play an important role. The aspirational class, who manifests itself as the new elite, have the resources, opportunities and awareness for this type of knowledge and conscious consuming. This originates in one's initial learnings and background that influences a





person's world view and values regarding sustainability. This ensures that moral shame is a feeling within certain social groups only and functions as a divider between different groups of people.

Within this group, communication regarding sustainability by (fast fashion) brands also influences consumers' moral shame. This communication is vague and obscure as companies use diverse interpretations of what sustainability actually means. This originates in the 'post-truth politics' era, which results in how someone's perspective is offered as the truth. This creates a gap between the actual and received information and consumers have to decide upon their selves which company fit their sustainable values. Once they discover a disconnection between their aspirations and concrete behaviour, consumers blame themselves for unsustainable consumer behaviour, which is exactly where moral shame's complexity lies. The privileged feeling of moral shame, with different expressions for everyone, positions the pressure on consumers as problem solvers for social and environmental issues. This way systemic issues are framed as an individual's responsibility. This ensures that responsibility is placed on the wrong stakeholders and leaves the opportunity for the fashion industry to exploit this feeling and 'keep operating as

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Gent Fair Trade
(2021) *Talks met
Aurélie & Daniëlle.*
[Online Video]. 26
January. Available
from:



[Accessed: 21
April 2021]

a big ego constantly feeding
itself.’¹

This publication is part of the
research project *Moral shame
talks tells and tales* and consist
out of three components (1)
Moral shame talks, (2) *Moral
shame tells* and (3) *Moral shame*

tales. This project aims to create critical
narratives to create awareness around moral
shame’s complexity. This publication, *Moral
shame tells*, is the theoretical backbone of
the podcast named *Moral shame talks* and
consist out of theoretical parts and reflective
questions. These questions aim to activate
the reader and create its own unique *Moral
shame tale*, to collectively open up the
discourse around moral shame on a joined
Instagram account. The podcast series is
in collaboration with Radio ArtEZ and is
approached as a research tool. Different
ideas, critical perspectives and personal
thoughts are brought together by including
consumers’ experiences of moral shame with
reflections from professionals with various
backgrounds and perspectives to provide
context and gather new insights. By reflecting
on moral shame, critical narratives about the
complexity of the sustainability debate and the
fashion industry are told in order to use moral
shame as an incentive for change.

