



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



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Lindy Boerman
2021



“

*Shame – the feeling that will save mankind.*¹

”

1
Solyaris (1972)
Directed by Andrei
Tarkovsky. [Film]
02:26:47. Moscow.
Mosfilm. Available
here:



[Accessed: 12
April 2021]

Dear reader,

As an MA fashion student and starting practitioner, I couldn't enjoy fashion for a long time. Every time I saw a garment hanging in the stores, or even my wardrobe, the horrors of fashion haunted me: the inhumane working conditions, the pollution and the injustice many people inside the fashion industry face. It was only when I came across a skirt made by



2
Still from video.
Minute 19:20. VPRO
(2018) *Future
Fashion*. [Online
video] Available from:



[Accessed: 20
April 2020]

HACKED by_² that I immediately fell in love with a garment, because it reflected on the fashion system with its design. This revelation made me realize how fashion presented both misery and joy to me, resulting in conflicting inner feelings, and this was something I had been struggling with for a while. At that moment I couldn't completely grasp this experience and the reason for it. But as I was researching the relationship between fashion and shame it all made sense: I felt morally ashamed as a consumer.

Shame has always been a part of my life as it plays a significant role in the day to day life, and I can recall many moments where I felt genuinely ashamed. Whether it was something where my emotions got the better of me resulting in a sensitive and difficult situation, when I entered a room full of people and noticing my outfit was way too much

overdressed with it shimmers, or when I told a group of people how many items of clothing are hanging in my closet (111!). It's a feeling that can occur at any moment, and at any time. Shame is an uncomfortable feeling for me, and I am sure I am not the only one, because it creates constant friction between emotions experienced. However, I see beauty in shame too, because it is such a personal as well as a collective feeling with different ways of expression. Despite this, it is also a feeling we don't openly discuss, that also includes myself as I'm still embarrassed telling others I own 111 garments.

Also within the realms of fashion, it almost seems as if shame doesn't exist. Professor in Design, Mathilda Tham (2012, p.33) describes this beautifully: 'Yet shame is often lonely in fashion, as the industry is constituted of strong individuals instead of a cohesive collective.' However, while Tham is talking about fashion designers, I think it's quite relevant for consumers as well, because consumers behave and are approached as individuals instead of being part of a collective. This is also visible in my personal memories, I saw myself as an individual and related myself to others. This is exactly what shame does. 'Shame allows us to see ourselves through the eyes of others, and here the link to dress is at its most potent' according to Anja Aronowsky Cronberg, founder and editor-in-chief of Vestoj (2012, p.6).

Another relationship between fashion and shame is how clothes have been used as a marker of

shame throughout time. An example are the orange jumpsuits in the series *When Orange is the New Black*, and as a viewer you immediately know that they've done something immoral. However, not solely clothes that specifically shames the wearer can include a feeling of shame, but as my memory shows also 'the clothes we wear in our daily lives are full of shaming potential'.³

3
Aronowsky Cronberg, A. (2012) Letter from the editor. *Vestoj*. 3. p. 6-8 Available here:



The importance of the collective is also something that relates to the sustainability debate. The environmental challenges is something we cannot solve

as individuals alone, but requires a collective action to create changes, according to Jennifer Jacquet, associate professor in the Department of Environmental Studies at NYU (2015). However, looking at the sustainability debate through the gaze of shame provides us with such various insights. It does not focus on the environmental aspects such as new technologies and materials as is the centre of attention now, but rather concentrates on the social and ethical component. But shame can also procrastinate engagement with the sustainability imperative in fashion as this feeling is able to slow down our reactions and solution to the environmental issues, according to Tham (2012) in her interesting text 'The Green Shades of Shame'. She argues that shame constitutes an important barrier to more pervasive changes. Other people highlight the importance of talking about shame too, such as

Rutger Bregman, writer for the *Correspondent*. He sees shame as a changemaker as opposed to how it is currently framed as an awful, non-productive and paralysing emotion (2019). An example of shame as changemaker is the shame of flying. This is currently increasing in Sweden, which led to a demand for a flying tax due to the negative environmental

4
Irfan, U. (2019) *Air travel is a huge contributor to climate change. A new global movement wants you to be ashamed to fly.* [Online] Available from:



[Accessed: 2 March 2021]

*consequences.*⁴ Additionally, Brené Brown, professor social studies, discusses in her Ted Talk (2012) how she believes talking about shame open up other important conversations. She highlights her feeling 'that there is a global demand for a conversation about race, but we cannot have this dialogue without shame. You cannot talk about race, when not talking about privilege. And when people talk about privilege they get paralyzed by shame.' This shows how important it is to speak about shame, even though it's uncomfortable for us, and it's also the approach of this project called *Moral shame talks tells and tales*; moral shame not as negative and paralyzing emotion but as changemaker.

Moral shame talks tells and tales explores consumers' moral shame in their unsustainable consumer behaviour in the context of the fashion industry. In doing so, stories are told about the complex matter of the fashion industry and the sustainable discourse in it. This project has three components: (1) Moral

shame talks, (2) Moral shame tells and (3) Moral shame tales.

Moral shame talks is a podcast series in collaboration with Radio ArtEZ. In the podcast different voices, perspectives and experiences are brought together by including consumers' perspectives on moral shame from 'Shame Talks' (appendix 1), and together with professionals from the fields of sociology, psychology, behavioural science and critical fashion practices we reflect on these experiences of moral shame, place it in context and gather new insights. Throughout this publication there will be references to the podcast series and the QR codes on the bookmarkers will lead you to different episodes.

This publication Moral shame tells is the theoretical backbone of the podcast series and grasps the context of consumers' moral shame in the fashion industry by means of seven themes. These themes focus on (1) explaining shame, (2) placing shame in a societal context, (3) explaining consumers' moral shame, (4) discussing moral shame's friction, (5) reflecting on consumers' knowledge, (6) reviewing brand communication regarding sustainability and (7) reflecting on personal responsibility. Other voices are included by involving a survey on consumers' moral shame and a research method called 'Shame Talks'. Participants in these talks will be referred to as 'participants' or by their first names: Anouk, Frank, Ilene, Sara, Thomas and Willemijn. More information on these methods are visible in appendix 1. These

seven themes consist out of theoretical parts followed by reflective questions for you to consider what role that specific subject plays in your personal life. These questions and assignments together create your own unique (moral) shame tale which we can share on a joined Instagram account called Moral shame tales (with the login details below). Everyone can place their perspectives, thoughts or ideas on moral shame on this account to open up the discourse around moral shame. You can experiment with what you would like to add to the account; it can be a word, a sentence, a photograph, a garment, an experience, a drawing, or anything else you prefer. In doing so we all come together, provide context, open up the discourse and create awareness around moral shame. Together we make sure Moral shame talks tells and tales.

*Warm wishes,
Lindy*



MORAL_SHAME_TALES

Username
Moral_shame_tales

Password
CommunityMSTTT



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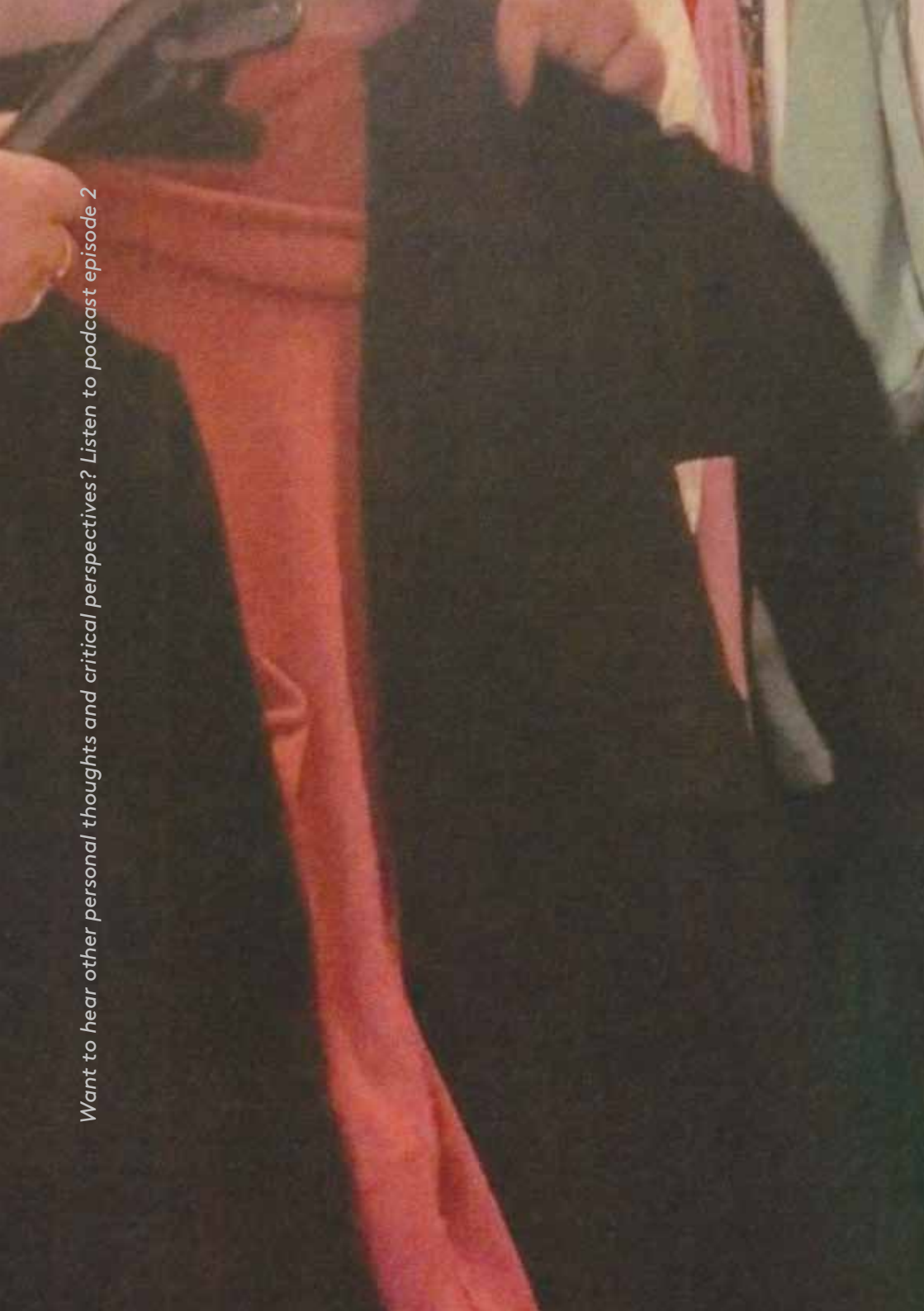
70

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74

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Theme 1 Unravelling shame

“

Shame [sheym] is a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behaviour.⁵

”

5

Lexico. (n.d.)
Definition Shame.
Available from:



[Accessed: 7
April]

6
Jacquet, J. (2015)
*Is SHAME really
necessary? New
uses for an old
tool.* New York:
Pantheon Books. More
information:



7
Aronowsky Cronberg,
A. (2012) Letter from
the editor. *Vestoj*. 3. p.
6-8 Available here:



8
Idem.

to hold individuals to the group standards, according to Jacquet (2015, p.12).

An often-associated concept with shame is guilt, even though they are highly related, they are actually opposites. Where shame holds the individual selves against the group standards, guilt's role is to hold individuals to their own standards.⁹ The focus of guilt is 'I did something bad' whereas shame concentrates on 'I am bad'.¹⁰

The inner experience of shame, as an emotion, can lead to physical and social expressions: increased stress, withdrawal from society, but it can also hurt so badly that it is physically hard on the heart.¹¹ Other ways to deal with the feelings of shame can be through depression, anger, hiding, or using it as a smokescreen

The definition of shame is described above and finds its origin in the Goth word 'scham' which refers to covering the face. The crucial element that turns 'scham' into shame is the level of interest and desire involved, according to academic Elspeth Probyn (2010, p.2). Also, exposure and judgement play a significant role which intimately links shame to reputation⁶, because it allows us to see ourselves through the gaze of others.⁷ No experience of shame is absolutely identical nor utterly unique according to sociologist Johan Goudsblom, and that is what makes shame beautiful, but there is one aspect key in all these different encounters, something I also described in the letter: shame is

considered as a negative feeling (1995). We associate shame with blushing, casting down the eyes, lowering the heads and seek to

hide from prying eyes.⁸ All these different characteristics of shame shows how it aims

9
Jacquet, J. (2015)
*Is SHAME really
necessary? New
uses for an old
tool.* New York:
Pantheon Books. More
information:



10
Foundation for
change. (2020)
MAKING SENSE OF...
Episode 12 shame.
[Online]. Sunday
November 1st.
Available from:



[Accessed:
17 December
2020]

11
Idem.

12
Idem.

understand why I felt ashamed by wearing overdressed clothes, because I compared myself to the other persons in the room.

What is important in comparison are the norms crucial in society, and those norms are often changing, as Jacquet argues (2015). To be more specific on how shame relates to current norms in our society, it's interesting to look at the division between gender according to Brown (2012). She describes how shame is like a tv-commercial for women: do it all, do it perfectly and never let them see you sweat. It's this web of unachievable, conflicting, competing expectations about who we are supposed to be. For men, shame is not a bunch of competing, conflicting expectations, but one: do not be perceived as weak. This example substantiates how shame revolves around comparing our individual selves to the group standards.

by using guilt to absorb shame.¹² This shows how shame is a powerful tool, but sometimes dangerous too (Jacquet, 2015).

Besides this important role in our internal and subjective experience, shame is also crucial in society. Shame only arises in the face of others, so in the hypothetical situation that we would all be alone on this globe, the feeling of shame would not exist. Even though everyone experiences it one of multiple times throughout life, we're not comfortable speaking about this feeling, continuously reinstating that we live in a shame-based society. Brown sees it as an unspoken epidemic in our current culture (2012), in which we constantly compare ourselves with others. This also helped to

Reflections

How do you and your body cope with shame? Draw/write down this feeling

Think about shameful moments, what role did other people and the group standard play in this?





Theme 2
Society's mirror
called shame

“

Shame is inextricably linked to norms, and norms are often changing – Jennifer Jacquet¹³

”

13
Jacquet, J. (2015)
*Is SHAME really
necessary? New
uses for an old
tool.* New York:
Pantheon Books. More
information:



The quote above illustrates that shame can be seen as a mirror of contemporary society because it's linked to the norms crucial to our society, and those norms often change, as Jacquet argues (2015). When we take a look at the reasons why people felt ashamed 74 years ago, it differs from today due to the dissimilar norms in society. This demonstrates not only the importance of shame in our society, but more specifically it illustrates *what* is crucial and plays an important role in the current culture and society.

To give an historical example, Christian Dior's New Look celebrated ultra-femininity and opulence in women's fashion and featured rounded shoulders, a cinched waist and very full skirts (74 years ago). After years of military and civilian uniforms, sartorial restrictions and shortages his approach was quite scandalous.¹⁴ This also is visible in the short story written

14
The Metropolitan Museum of Art (n.d.) *Christian Dior: The New Look*. Available from:

 [Accessed: 25 March 2021]

by writer Erin Byrne called Red Petals that depicts a scene that occurred in March 1947, shortly after the second world war (2012). The story's character is Caroline, who is able to model for Dior's 'New Look'. A little passage out this story highlights one of the reactions Dior's 'New Look' caused:

*"I'm pleased for you, Caroline." [says her Maman] Her mouth tightened, "But, Mon Dieu, Dior! Those dresses take a lot of fabric, a wasteful crime after such scarcity during the war; people are furious."*¹⁵

15
Byrne, E. (2018) *Red Petals*. Available from:

 [Accessed: 28 March 2021]

Later in the story Caroline starts walking the streets of Paris in an outfit of the 'New Look', to show what this city and Dior's looks offers post-war, when she is suddenly attacked by angry women.

*Her body was slapped and spun by calloused hands, her hair snatched and twisted by the angry women of Montmartre. A rag doll ripped apart, she heard one word hissed above curses and exertions: "Waste!"*¹⁶

16
Idem.

17
Foundation for change. (2020) *MAKING SENSE OF... Episode 12 shame*. [Online]. Sunday November 1st. Available from:  [Accessed: 17 December 2020]

The act of aggression towards Caroline comes from shame of the Montmartre women, as I would argue, because it's one of the multiple forms of expressions shame can provoke.¹⁷ This short story based on the incident showed how at that moment in time the rich use of fabric was not accepted as Dior did with his design for a specific group of people, while the majority of citizens still had to deal with scarcity and shortages, i.e. the aftermath of the second world-war.

Currently, we're facing completely other issues. It almost seems as a reversal, because we are confronted with everything but scarcity as we live in times of overproduction and overconsumption which damages the environment. This relates to how our times are being characterized by challenges related to sustainability. Magdalena Petersson McIntyre, who holds a PhD in Ethnology, highlights this by saying that 'sustainability is one of the major challenges of our age' (2019, p.2). Many aspects of our lives are influenced by the need for sustainability, for example, the way we eat in replacing meat for meat substitutes¹⁸, the way we use our energy sources¹⁹ and how we travel.

18
NOS. (2019) *Vleesvervangers bezig met snelle opmars, verkoop vlees daalt*. Available from:

 [Accessed: 28 March 2021]


Also, on a societal level the influence of sustainability becomes evident. An example is the sustainable minded country, and according to researcher and lecturer on

19
Klimaataakkoord
(2020) *Kwart meer
duurzame energie in
2020*. Available from:
 [Accessed: 28
March 2021]

20
Moynihan, Q. &
Ortega, E. (2019)
'Köpskam', a new
Swedish 'shame of
buying' trend, could
spread to threaten
the world's fashion
market. Available
from:
 [Accessed:
1 February
2021]

21
Potjer, W. (2019)
*Heb jij al last van
koopschaamte op
deze Black Friday?*
Available from:
 [Accessed:
21 February
2021]

Social Sciences Maria Månsson, it's the world's most sustainable country (2016). The climate crisis completely reshaped consumer behaviour and Sweden saw a huge increase in the purchase of second-hand clothing in this country.²⁰ This demonstrates that the Swedish consumer is occupied with who is responsible for the 'real' price of fashion: the social and ecological costs.²¹ Another example is Greta Thunberg, who started marches called *skolstrejk för klimatet* in which students called on governments to take measures against global warming in August 2018. The international attention was high, and it grew into massive protests. These climate marches indicate that there is an increasing call to approach life in a different way.²² Another signal that shows how sustainability is influencing our lives, is the invention of new words such as *köpskam*. This word means that consumers feel ashamed of consuming products that aren't necessary or when they buy more than one of specific items. This term is introduced along with *flygskam* (flight-shaming) and *smygflyga* (to fly without revealing it to others).²³ These terms are part of the recent shame-driven techniques to incite change.²⁴ This verifies that shame mirrors what norms are crucial in society in contemporary times.

22
Studium Generale.
(n.d.) *Sustainable
Future*. Available
from:
 [Accessed: 28
March 2021]

23
Moynihan, Q. &
Ortega, E. (2019)
'Köpskam', a new
Swedish 'shame of
buying' trend, could
spread to threaten
the world's fashion
market. Available
from:
 [Accessed:
1 February
2021]

24
Ahram, Y., & Slow
Factory Foundation
(2020) *Fast Fashion
Is a Feminist Issue*.
Available from:
 [Accessed:
25 February
2021]

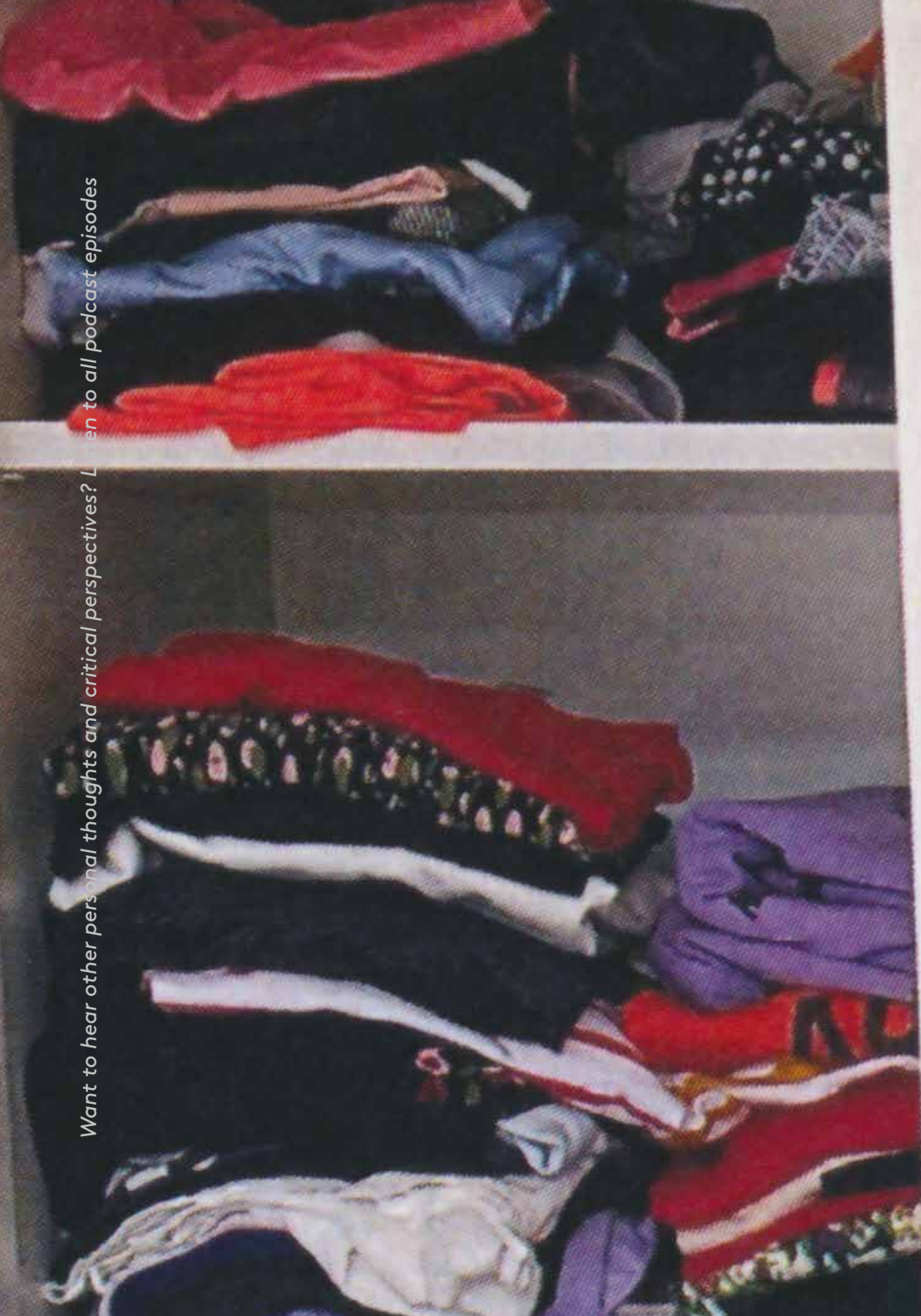
Reflections

(How) does sustainability influence your life?

Besides *köpskam* or *flygskam*, can you come up with new words that represents what you personally feel ashamed about?



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Theme 3

Consumers' moral shame

“

Moral shame is a type of shame consumers experience while buying, owning or consuming clothes and knowing you are not making sustainable choices.

”

The description above defines moral shame and it revolves around a disconnection between the consumers' sustainability values and their consumer behaviour in relation to the group standards. Moral shame is just like köpskam and flygskam, a word I defined and created myself to incite change with the help of shame-driven techniques. By creating this definition, by giving this experience and feeling a name, language is used to express the world; highlighting the things that matter.

In the same vein as shame, which can be seen as a mirror of contemporary society, moral shame gives us a better understanding and look at what we value as an individual. It indicates what's important in a person's consumer behaviour (towards buying, owning and consuming clothes) and the related sustainability values. Moral shame can thus be seen as a mirror of contemporary society, as well as a personal mirror. Just like the norms of a society are key in shame, the person's values are important in moral shame. These (sustainability) values differ per person, which makes sure the expressions of moral shame is diverse and different for everyone.

The different expressions of moral shame are influenced by several aspects. Moral shame has to do with how the fashion industry operates in relation to our consumer behaviour and our personal (social and environmental) sustainability values. An example of how the fashion industry operates is the pricing strategy, which seduces consumers into quick buying over and over again. A lot of consumers answered in an open question in the survey that they 'couldn't handle temptation'. Due to this the closets are huge and full of unworn clothes, an amount we don't definitely need at all, and are embarrassed to tell others. Some of them even have the price tags still attached; creating moral shame as well according to Ilene. As a result we give away clothes or throw them away in a clothing bin or sell them at a second-hand platform such as Vinted. This makes sure clothes are seen as something temporary, or even a throw-away

product, and leads to moral shame as well. Thomas's moral shame shows another expression as he experiences moral shame with his leather shoes due to his personal values as a vegan. While wearing these shoes he doesn't feel himself. For Sara moral shame relates to expressing how many garments she has in her closet compared to others, but also, she isn't comfortable with buying and owning specific brands that are involved in the Uighur issues in China. These people have to work under rough circumstances for fashion brands and weren't allowed to hold their Muslim faith, something that goes against her own values. Just like these different expressions, the feeling of moral shame can occur at any moment and time. It can happen in front of your closet, in the shopping street, seeing something on the news, or having a conversation with others about your new purchase and their opinions about it; but it always relates to the group standards.

Even though there are multiple factors influencing a person's experience of moral shame, we perceive it as a personal problem, but it's actually a social construct. A social construct ensures that we only learn to feel inadequate and exposed because our particular culture sends us messages about what

25
Werber, C. (2018)
Psychologists who studied shame around the world say it's an essential part of being human.
Available from:



[Accessed: 5
March 2021]

falls outside the realm of acceptability.²⁵ Because sustainability is a marker of our times, consumers experience nudges and pressure from voices in- and outside the fashion industry to behave and purchase sustainable, and when consumers cannot manage, they enter a state of moral shame. To be more specific, the example of Sara where she feels morally ashamed of her closet full of clothes, is influenced by the

trend Minimalism that argues to cut back the number of things you own in order to live more sustainable.²⁶ This shows how moral shame is constructed and shaped through society.

Harveston, K. (2018)
*Can the Rising Trend
of Minimalism Help
the Environment?*

Available from:



[Accessed: 20
May 2021]

Reflections

Are you experiencing moral shame, or have you ever experienced this type of shame? Why or why not?

Do you experience any type of pressure to live and purchase sustainable? If yes, where is this pressure coming from?

Draw or write down your experience of moral shame. You can think about garments, social situations, or other elements which are important for you.





Theme 4 Moral shame's friction

“

*The desire for the things we know that are bad
for us – Magdalena Petersson McIntyre²⁷*

”

27
Petersson McIntyre,
M. (2019) Shame,
Blame, and
Passion: Affects of
(Un)sustainable
Wardrobes. *Fashion
Theory*. [Online] 23.
(11). Available from:

 [Accessed:
2 December
2020]

The quote above reveals what lies at the core of moral shame: an inner conflict. Consumers want to be more sustainable but cannot manage due to different reasons. This shows a disconnection between their consumer behaviour in relation to their (sustainability) values. You know you should do one thing, but actually do the other. This friction can be described as ‘affective dissonance’ and can be understood as the conflicting emotions that surround taking pleasure in fashion, according to Petersson McIntyre (2019, p.6). In her research on sustainable consumers behaviour she notices that satisfying a lust for consumers goods has a direct affect and effect, which simultaneously creates a feeling of shame and guilt (2019).


Affective dissonance fuses two theories: the affect theory and cognitive dissonance. Affect theory sees our world as shaped not simply by narrative and arguments but also by non-linguistic effects – by mood, atmosphere and feeling according to writer and academic Hua Hsu (2019). More specifically, Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies, Patricia Clough describes affect as being as much about body as thought, about materiality as much as reason, about the discursive as much as feeling, about affecting the world around us as much as being affected by it, and the relationship in between (2007). Even though it sounds a bit abstract, affect actually describes basic facets of everyday life according to Hsu (2019). An example is a stage play which affects the viewer, it revolves around what the viewer feels and experiences while watching the play. Another example is the tv-series *The American*

28
Rewired Podcast.
(2019) *The Wire, The False Protagonist, And Affect Theory*. 28. [Online]. Thursday 5 December 2019. Available from:  [Accessed: 3 December 2020]

Wire, which creates a raw and different view on crime and society in the American city Baltimore. As a viewer, we grieve over fictional events, but at the same time we enjoy experiencing this grieve.²⁸


In the mid-nineteen-nineties, the affective

turn became public by scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who had become fascinated by the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins (Hsu, 2019). Tomkins had identified nine primary affects, where affect refers to the underlying experience of feeling, emotion or

29
Wikipedia. (n.d.)
Affect (psychology). Available from:  [Accessed: 8 April 2021]

mood.²⁹ Shame is one of the nine primary affects, framed as negative together with fear, anger and disgust. Interest and enjoyment are positive affects and surprise is the only neutral one. Tomkins believed that people acted toward one another according to social scripts, because of his background in theatre. He argued that we could achieve inner peace or happiness by understanding how these scripts work and to avoid situations that triggers negative affects (Hsu, 2019).

This relates to the other theory: cognitive dissonance. This theory is introduced by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1957. His theory proposes that we have an inner drive to be in a state of harmony which we strive to achieve and maintain by aligning our


30
Foundation for change. (2020) *MAKING SENSE OF... Episode 3 cognitive dissonance*. [Online]. Sunday 21st June. Available from:  [Accessed: 11 December 2020]

attitudes, values, thoughts and behaviours.³⁰ When we experience this feeling of cognitive dissonance, we encounter two or more conflicting feelings. As human beings we constantly seek for consonant, things that fit together to achieve and experience inner peace. When a person experiences cognitive dissonance internally it means they did something that goes against their believes, ideas or values.³¹ But as we are seeking for consonant, we will tell ourselves any kind of story to justify our behaviour. Journalist Evelien Van Veen (2021, p.41) writes about

this in an article on second-hand clothing and refers to consumer psychologist Patrick Wessels who calls this moral self-license

mechanism. Consumers tell themselves they can do something 'bad' only when they do something 'good' as well. In the case of second-hand clothing, consumers will justify their behaviour by telling themselves: 'it's good to give clothes a second life after only wearing it for a couple of times.'

Even though cognitive dissonance is mostly focused on an internal experience, we can experience this externally as well.³²

32
Foundation for
change. (2020)
MAKING SENSE OF...
*Episode 3 cognitive
dissonance.* [Online].
Sunday 21st June.
Available from:
 [Accessed:
11 December
2020]

This means seeing something happening in society, on the news, or in your group of friends and having an internal sense of this is wrong. It's a conflict between what you internally feel with what's happening externally, and this can be really broad. This makes sense on why Sara feels morally ashamed buying and owning fashion companies who are involved in the Uighur issue in China. When she heard about this

matter it gave her a feeling of immorality and has to do with how these human beings are used by the fashion industry to work under rough circumstances to produce clothes and are withhold from having their faith. This substantiates that conflicting feelings and emotions lies at the core consumers' moral shame.

Reflections

In what situations do you experience affective dissonance personally? You can think of fashion related situations, but also other circumstances as well.

Visualise how, or with what, you experience affective dissonance by drawing, writing, photographing etc.



Theme 5 Knowledge shapes

“

I bought this shirt for €3.99 in Milan at Bershka, some eight years ago. At that time, I was really happy with this bargain, not knowing what the consequences could be, but now my view is totally different... – Lindy

”



As discussed before, moral shame revolves around a disconnection between the consumers' sustainability values and their consumer behaviour in the fashion industry. As is visible in the quote, knowledge plays an important role within this type of shame. More specifically, knowledge about how the fashion industry functions or about social and environmental problems. Due to my background in fashion production, I know that a shirt cannot be sold for €3.99 and pay everyone and everything involved fairly. Also in the 'Shame Talks', Thomas highlights how knowledge plays a crucial role in his experience of moral shame. He feels morally ashamed about his leather shoes, due to his personal values as a vegan and his knowledge on how animals are treated in the fashion and food industry.

The examples show that the feeling of moral shame is related to one's knowledge that relates to the person's view on the world. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote about this concept called 'habitus' and is related to the resource of knowledge (1990). Habitus is defined as 'a concept that expresses, on the one hand, the way in which individuals 'become themselves' – develop attitudes and dispositions – and, on the other hand, the ways in which those individuals engage in practices.' Knowledge (the way we understand the world, our beliefs and values) is always constructed through the habitus, rather than being passively recorded, according to Webb, Schirato and Danaher (as cited in Xiaowei Huang, 2020, p.47). This definition shows that knowledge is gained from a specific culture an individual lives in and influences their world view and personal values. By way of example, a working-class person will have a particular, class-based understandings of the world; this will be different to the world view of people from the middle class. These understandings are reflected in the person's behaviour, such as the ways in which they talk, the usage of vocabulary, attitudes and values (Xiaowei Huang, 2020, p.48). These values also has its influence a person's view on sustainability.³³ In other words, the values regarding sustainability are also diverse

33
The Open
University (n.d.)
*Systems thinking:
Understanding
sustainability.*
Available from:
 [Accessed: 6
May 2021]

and different for every person and is constructed through the 'habitus', which results in different expressions of moral shame.

Besides 'habitus' and knowledge, another related concept Bourdieu wrote about is called 'cultural capital'. 'Cultural capital' is the motive of a new type of elite called the aspirational class according to scholar Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, as cited in Kooyman (2020). Until the previous millennium the elite was defined by material possessions, but luxury democratized, and it made sure that almost every part in the Western world had access to luxury. This gave rise to a new sort of elite, one that uses the principles of 'cultural capital'. Bourdieu's idea of 'cultural capital' is 'the accumulation and knowledge, behaviours, and skills that one can tap into demonstrate one's cultural competences, and thus one's social status or standing in society' (Xiaowei Huang, 2020, p.47). Members of this group are connected with each other through collective cultural capital with common values and taste. They show that elitism manifests itself with the ownership of 'cultural capital' and focuses on immaterial expressions of status: having knowledge and erudition about social and environmental matters. The aspirational class therefore includes moral issues in their consumer behaviour to consume consciously (Kooyman, 2020).

But with this conscious consuming, the inequality problems become more visible. The aspirational class reproduce their privilege because they have the awareness and the resources for conscious consuming according to Currid-Halkett as cited in Kooyman (2020). This is supported by Xiaowei Huang who describes that cultural capital is related to different classes with different ways of behaving and is gained mainly through an

individual's initial learning and is unconsciously influenced by their surroundings (2020, p.45). Also, Jacquet (2015) highlights the differentiation between the classes once more. She points out that the free-market logic makes sure that guilt-free products are more expensive, which makes sure it's not accessible for everyone. This is because the costs of this product are internalized rather than externalized to the environment. Internalizing costs means that the negative external effects of the product and process, notably environmental depletion and degradation, are included in the price, making the price more expensive. While externalizing costs means that these negative external effects

34
Glossary of Statistical
Terms (n.d.) Cost
internalisation.
Available from:



[Accessed: 12
May 2020]

are not incorporated in the price.³⁴ The rich can presume to buy their way out of environmental destruction and associated guilt again with their privileged position. Additionally, Xiaowei Huang describes how a woman who is born in a wealthy and well-educated family may have a different perspective from a lower-class woman in consuming a product, specifically in terms of its value and function (2020, p.47). To her, a fashionable and attractive appearance is absolutely necessary for a handbag; however, those who come from a lower class may consider the functionality of a handbag to be more important, this highlights that different classes have different priorities in their consumer behaviour. This supports the belief that moral shame is feeling for certain (privileged) groups only based on the diverse sustainability values consumers have, which in turn is constructed through their background.

Reflections

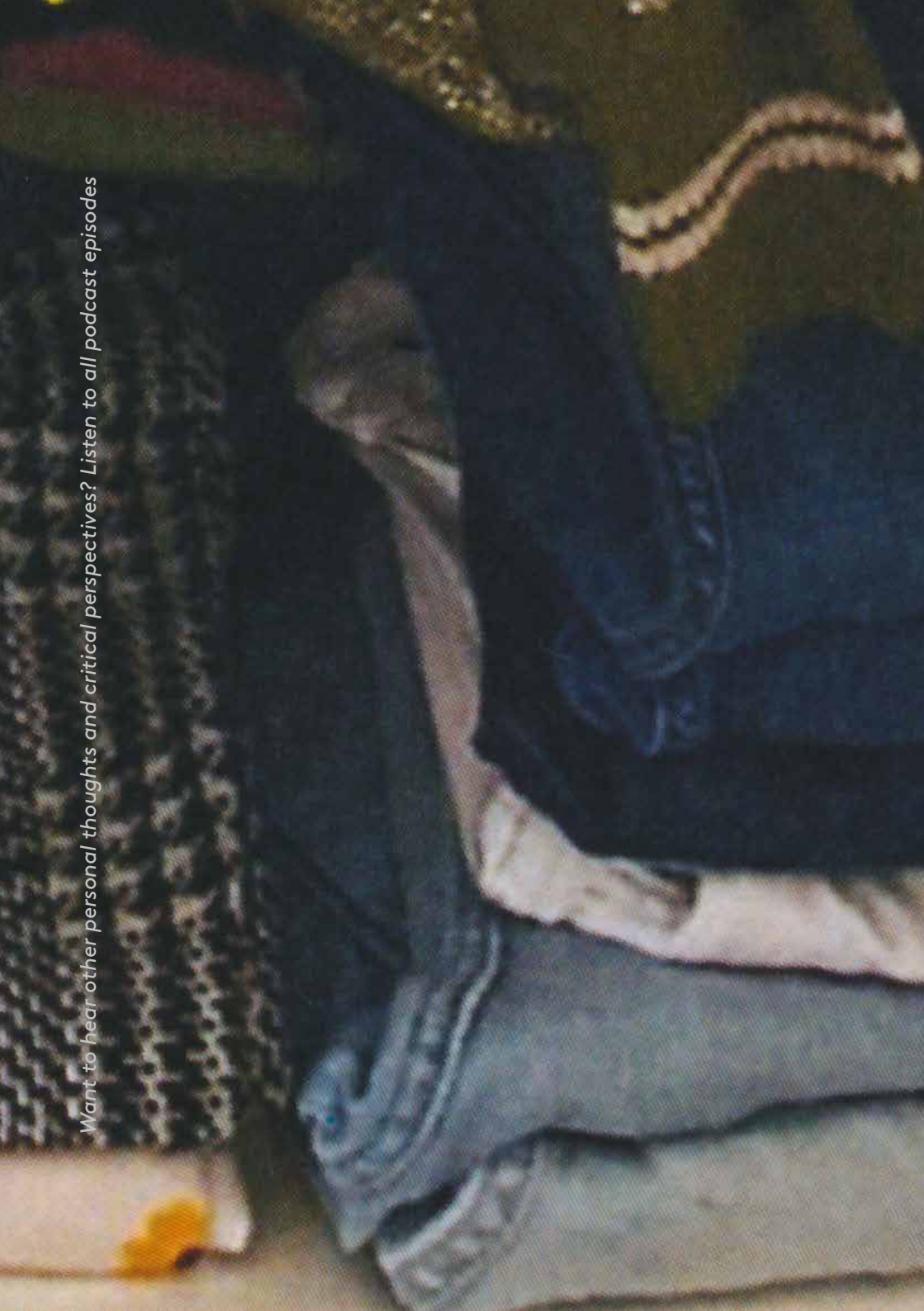
Do you include your personal knowledge – gathered over the years on the fashion system or environmental issues – also in your consumer behaviour?

What are your personal values regarding sustainability?

Do you notice you have different values regarding sustainability compared to others? If yes, how do they differ from others?



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Theme 6 Multiple sustainabilities

“

*I think there is greenwashing as well, because nowadays everything gets the label 'sustainable'.
– participant 'Shame Talks'*

”

Another influence on consumers' moral shame is the information provided by (fast fashion) brands, as is visible in the quote above. Consumers aren't schooled in regular education for example on how to buy, what sustainability means and how a garment is produced. Another way that consumers receive knowledge on sustainability is via information that brands provide. In the 'Shame Talks' this was a much-discussed topic as the reliability of this information is questioned in the context of fast fashion brands. If fast fashion brands communicate about sustainability, the participants are hesitant in believing this information. They believe that the information that these brands provide the consumers, is the information that the brand wants to get out in the open, i.e. only positive and beneficial information. Some even highlight this specific issue by framing it as a 'trust issue'.

What lies at the core of this situation, is the phenomenon called 'post-truth politics' according to Katherine Viner, editor-in-chief of *The Guardian* (2016). In the 'post-truth politics' certain aspects were offered as 'facts' but later were to be untrue. An example is the leave campaign of Britain, which was full of promises that had been false all along. More specifically, the Brexiteers claimed in their campaign to spend the £350m which they originally sent to the European Union, to now spend on the National Health System (NHS) instead. It became public that post-Brexit UK would not in fact have £350m a week spare to spend on the NHS. This example illustrates the core of our current 'post-truth politics', a battle between the truth and falsehood, fact and rumour, the connected and the alienated (Viner, 2016).

The 'post-truth politics' results in how we currently cannot agree on what truths are, and when there is no consensus about the truth and the way to achieve it, chaos soon follows. What counts as a fact is merely a view that someone feels to be true – and technology has made it very easy for these 'facts' to circulate with a speed. This shows how someone's perspective is considered as their truth.

This approach creates a consumerist shift, instead of creating an informed public, strengthening social bonds or seeing the news as a civic good, it creates gangs. These gangs spread instant falsehoods that fit their views, reinforcing each other's beliefs, driving each other deeper into shared opinions, rather than established facts (Viner, 2016).

This stands in relation to how information without context is meaningless, and when context disappears as it does in the social media universe, so does truth according to Viner (2016). This is also something the (fast fashion) companies make use of called greenwashing. Greenwashing refers to fashion companies that claim their products to be environmentally friendly, when often they are not. The true story of the product is kept and sometimes deliberately hidden behind a glitzy façade. Another important aspect of how greenwashing can occur, and perhaps encourages this, is that words such as 'sustainable', 'green', or 'environmentally-friendly' don't have legal definitions. Much 'green' marking is based on loose definitions and allows for an

35

Vogt, H. (2020)
*Fashion companies
use greenwashing
to lie to consumers.*

Available from:



[Accessed: 21
April 2020]

interpretation of what the company actually means.³⁵ This makes sure the company act upon its own 'truth' and definition of sustainability. Similar to the diverse values of sustainability of the consumers, brands also have their own view on what sustainability means. What sustainability in the eyes of one company means, isn't necessarily the definition of another company, making it a complex and obscure matter.

This, in turn, plays a role in the experience of consumers' moral shame. Especially in the context of the fast fashion industry, because of the loose definitions of sustainability, consumers are left to determine on their own what company stands for their

values. In the case of the 'Shame Talks', once the participants found out that the provided information was not correct, it encouraged their experience of moral shame as they saw it as their own responsibility. However, during these talks, also more environmental focused brands were discussed such as Mud jeans or TWOTWIRDS, and the participants didn't experience moral shame as they believe this information is true and genuine. This shows that the current vague communication regarding sustainability influences consumers' moral shame and leads to a personal accusation for unsustainable behaviour.

Reflections

Did you encounter the truth-issues as well? In what situations do you experience this?

What is your perspective on the use of greenwashing in the fashion industry?

Are you searching yourself for brands that fit your values?
How do you experience this search?

What would be your ideal way of communication
that brands provide to get rid of vague and obscure
information?



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Theme 7 Personal responsibility

“

“I fail at making sustainable choices. I make the choices, not the brand or the store.” – survey participant

”

The quote above argues how consumers believe moral shame is a problem to which they are personally responsible, as consumers hold themselves accountable for unsustainable consumer behaviour. In the survey, almost two thirds of the participants blamed themselves for not making sustainable fashion choices, because they believe they are solely responsible for their behaviour. Also Petersson McIntyre (2019, p.18) notices that ‘rather than asking for systemic change, questioning economic models that are based on constant growth, or the role of affective seduction techniques in fashion stores, the authors blamed themselves.’ She highlights that consumers see unsustainable consumption as a problem that lies within themselves, based on their (wrong) choices and attitudes by being too fat, too uninterested, too old, too lazy, or too impatient.

That consumers experience unsustainable consumption as a problem to which they are personally responsible comes from a shift in the 1980s. ‘Freedom to choose’ was the battle cry from Milton Friedman, a libertarian economist and free-market populariser, who became popular in Western countries. His ideas made sure that the focus shifted from supply to demand, guaranteeing that around the 1980s the laissez-fair economy was crucial with the slogan: if demand changes, supply should respond (Jacquet, 2015). Friedman and his beliefs are seen as the founder of neoliberalism, which means the role of the government is

36
 Woltring, N. (2019)
*Wat we kunnen leren
 van de neoliberalen.*
 Available from:



[Accessed: 18
 May 2021]

to stimulate market forces and therefore promote competition.³⁶

This shift also had a huge influence on where responsibility lies. Before this shift, responsibility laid with the corporations, and those companies were often publicly

shamed for their behaviour. But with this shift, ‘shame on the part of corporations began to be overshadowed by guilt on the part of

consumers—as the vehicle for solving social and environmental problems’ (Jacquet, 2015, p.9). In this period of time, the 1980s and 1990s, certification became more and more popular due to the introduction of Ecolabels and standards for Organic food

37
 Wikipedia. (n.d.)
*Sustainability
 standards and
 certification.*

Available from:



[Accessed: 30
 March 2021]

and other products.³⁷ This rise suggested that responsibility should fall more with the individual consumers rather than political society, as Jacquet argues (2015).

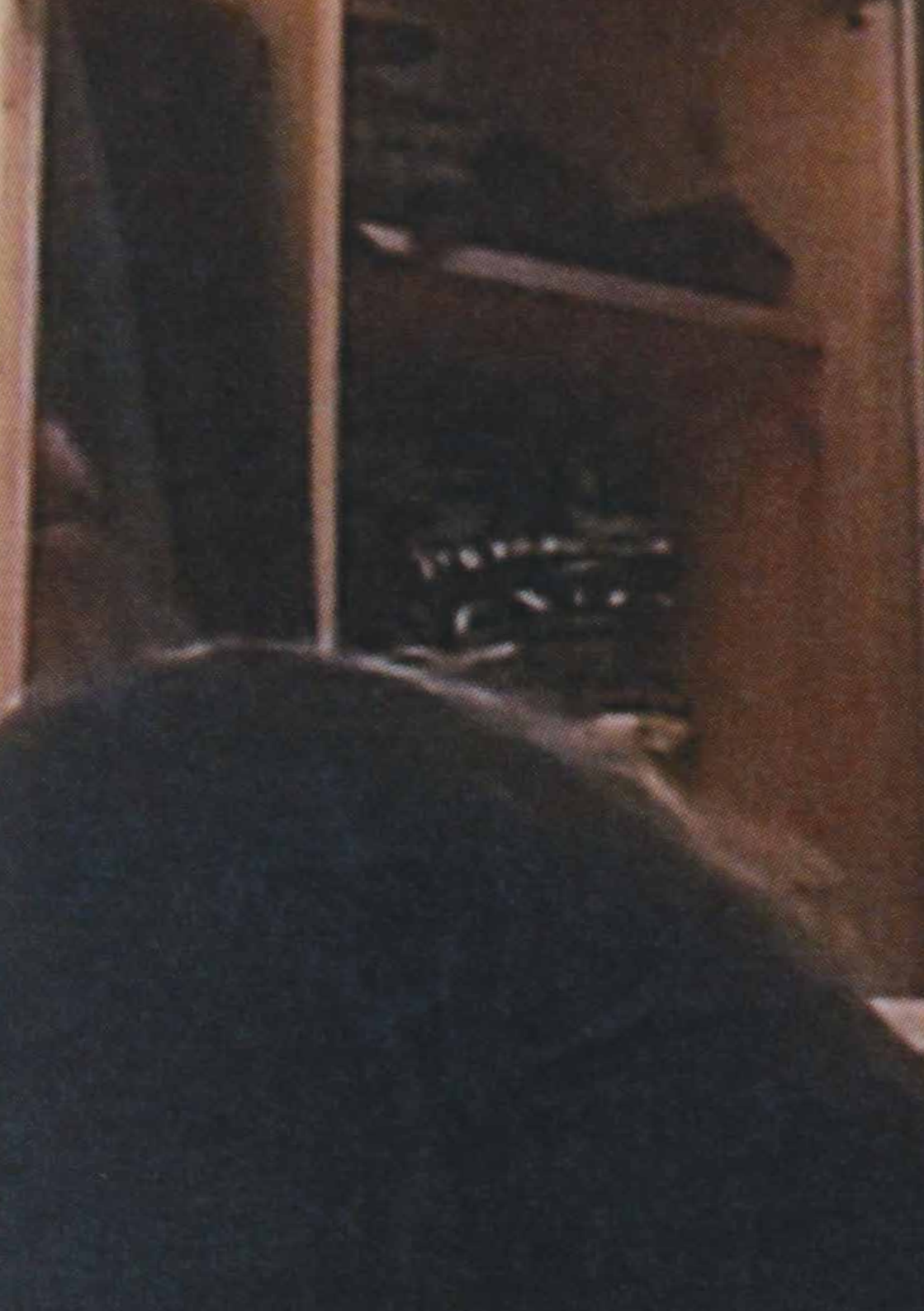
This development approaches the individual and the system as two separates, focusing on the consumer as the one responsible for systemic issues. But as the slogan ‘if demand changes, supply should respond’ shows, we cannot set them apart from each other. Also, Bregman highlights this matter by arguing that the consumer and the system are intertwined (2019). Yasmin Ahram and Slow Factory Foundation make another argument that blaming personal choices for a systemic problem shifts the focus from the real stakeholders who should be held accountable: the fashion companies (2020).

Reflections

Do you feel responsible yourself for unsustainable consumer behaviour?

Now that you've read this publication, who do you believe is the one who should be held responsible?





Concluding Conversation

“

*From one to two - reshaping a monologue into a
dialogue.*

”

The Concluding Conversation is a dialogue between Niek van der Schaaf and Lindy Boerman discussing the most important findings of the research.

[11:14, 06-05-2021] Niek van der Schaaf

Hello Lindy, I've filled in your survey and now that it's been a couple of months I was wondering about your project. I'm really interested in the progress of your research and whether or not you have some interesting findings. Can you elaborate on this?

[11:59, 06-05-2021] Lindy Boerman

Hi Niek! Thank you for your interest in my research, of course I want to tell you more about my project and share the most important findings. The project is called Moral shame talks tells and tales and it explores the complexity of consumers' moral shame. Instead of seeing shame as a negative emotion, I see it as something relevant for current times as it mirrors the pivotal norms of our contemporary society and culture. The current experience of moral shame illustrates that our times are influenced by environmental issues. However, consumers perceive moral shame as a personal problem and emotion, but I discovered that it's actually much more complex.

To start with that moral shame is actually

socially constructed. Currently there are a lot of voices and a shared understanding that we need to approach life in a different and more conscious way for the sake of our planet. This ensures that consumers feel they need to approach their behaviour more consciously, and when they cannot manage they feel morally ashamed.

The social construct of moral shame is something that prevails in certain groups of people, groups that have the resources to be occupied with, and understand, the social and environmental matters. This originates in the knowledge a consumer has which is shaped by their background, surroundings and social group they grew up in and belong to. This knowledge influences a consumer's world view and its values regarding sustainability, ensuring that it differs for everyone. Nowadays, this knowledge functions as a principle of the aspirational class which is framed as a new type of elite. In this group conscious consumption and having knowledge about social and environmental matters is important. This results in the fact that conscious consumption behaviour and moral shame functions as a distributor between different groups of people.

What stimulates consumers' moral shame is the vague communication regarding sustainability by fashion brands. These brands use loose definitions and own interpretations of what sustainability

means. This is initiated by the ‘post-truth politics’ where someone’s perspective functions as the truth. This ensures that communication loses its context, and when there is no context, information will become meaningless. This is exactly what happens in sustainable communication in the fashion industry and this results in the fact that consumers have to decide for themselves which brands fit their values. When consumers find out this doesn’t fit, consumers blame themselves for their choices instead of questioning the systemics of the fashion industry.

These elements together show exactly the complexity of consumers’ moral shame: the privileged feeling of moral shame prevails in specific social groups with different expressions for everyone based on diverse sustainable values, but this type of shame ensures consumers approach systemic problems as an individual’s responsibility, framing consumers as the ones who should solve social and environmental problems.

[12:29, 06-05-2021] Niek van der Schaaf

Interesting! I can relate to these diverse definitions of sustainability in my work in the financial sector. Normally every step has guidelines except for sustainable matters. For example, the requirements companies must disclose in their annual reports have multiple

guidelines. However, for reports focused on sustainability this is not the case. The lack of regulation makes it difficult to assess whether companies are sustainable in their core operations or not. But I’m curious about your personal opinion on moral shame now that you know the complexity?

[12:49, 06-05-2021] Lindy Boerman

Fascinating, I believe that even strengthens the fact that sustainability is not only obscure in the fashion industry, but other sectors as well. My perspective on moral shame has two faces. On the one hand I find it hopeful that we experience this type of shame because it shows that certain groups in society are occupied with social and environmental matters. I believe we can use it as an incentive for change just like flygskam which demands for a flying tax. Moral shame can be used to put focus on the ones who should be really held accountable, and it can also function as a method for consumers to be more in line with sustainable desires.

But on the other hand, I find it quite problematic that a personal emotion like shame places responsibility on the consumer instead of political society for systemic issues such as sustainability and the operations of the fashion industry. I don’t agree on the fact that consumers are solely responsible for unsustainable consumer

behaviour, as it keeps away the focus on who should be really held accountable: the fashion industry. In this construct, I have the feeling that the fashion industry uses this feeling to keep operating as they currently do: harmful for its workers, excluding for lots of people and pollutive for the environment. That is why I will address this type of shame with my project in order to show the complexity of the systemics of the fashion industry and the sustainable debate in it, with the aim to use moral shame as an incentive for change by placing the responsibility on the right stakeholders.

[12:51, 06-05-2021]

Niek van der Schaaf

Nice, I think it's a valuable conclusion and findings which you can use for your further practice. I'm really curious about the rest of the project, keep me updated when this all comes online.

[12:58, 06-05-2021]

Lindy Boerman

Thanks, and will do!

Reflections

Look back at all your answers, ideas and reflections and create your own unique *Moral shame tale* to share with others on our joined Instagram account to collectively open up and activate others. Be as creative as you want to be and use whatever form suits you.

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Appendix 1 Methods

Because moral shame is a personal feeling, it was important to include different voices, ideas and experiences. This is done by including multiple research methods throughout the process:

1. A survey on consumers' moral shame

In this research, a quantitative analysis is done by means of a survey. This survey is conducted to gather knowledge on consumers' thoughts, opinions and feelings about moral shame. The focus was on moral shame related to the fashion industry. The structure was as follows: first, an introduction and explanation of the research and subject, after which questions are asked. There are 26 questions in total asked, with a division of 14 multiple choice questions and 10 open questions to give specific explanations. The first couple of questions were used to identify what kind of person the participant was. After this, questions were asked specified on moral shame, and what aspects are important for this subject. The structure of these subjects was as follows: (1) moral shame, why and where? (2) moral shame and garments (3) moral shame and responsibility (4) moral shame, the sustainability debate and consumer behaviour and (5) moral shame and the need of communication. The participant could follow different paths based on their multiple-choice questions answers, to cluster the findings and participants. An example of a questions that provided this division was: 'now that you know the definition of moral shame, have you ever experienced this?' The participant could answer this with yes or no, each leading to different questions to get more information on why/why not the person experienced this type of shame. The answers were collected in an Excel file, where the multiple-choice questions were summarized and analysed into charts. The open questions were analysed and

categorised into a top 3 most given answers. Based on this way of clustering, the most important findings were gathered.

It was an online survey, and it was distributed through my own Instagram and the Master Fashion Strategy's Instagram to speak as much to the 'fashion users', the people I want to reach with this project. They already have some knowledge about the horrors of the fashion industry and are seeking for another approach to fashion. In total 64 participants engaged in the survey, which took around 10 minutes per person on average and by distributing it this way, I have collected the data of the people I wanted to reach with this survey. The last question was an open question to ask if the participants wanted to be part of in-depth interviews. The participants remained anonymous, but some of the answers are used throughout this publication referred to as 'participant survey'.

2. An auto ethnographical 'Wardrobe studies'

In this second research method, I conducted an auto ethnographical 'Wardrobe Studies', inspired by Opening Up the Wardrobe by fashion and sustainability pioneer Kate Fletcher and research professor Ingun Grimstad Klepp (2017). I created my own type of studies and method, where I analysed every garment in my closet to see if I feel morally ashamed about a garment and the reason for it. This way my aim was to discover what role clothes play in experiencing moral shame. The way of working was as follows: I pulled out a garment, photographed it, and asked constantly the same question: 'do I feel morally ashamed about this item?' followed by: 'why do I have this feeling?' This made sure I could make it analytical, but it also meant the answer was yes or no, and nothing in between. The questions were documented into an Excel file, and the findings were analysed and categorised into a top 3 reasons on why I felt morally ashamed by looking for recurrent patterns in the answers. Pictures of my closet

are visible throughout the publication.

3. 'Shame Talks'

This third research method 'Shame Talks' fuses the survey (method 1) and the auto ethnographical 'Wardrobe Studies' research (method 2). The 'Shame Talks' are interviews with six participants who agreed in the survey to have one-to-one conversations. The first two 'Shame Talks' were more open conversations, where the participant was leading to see what they came up with, with follow-up questions from myself. However, I adjusted the approach with the last four participants to get a specific focus on how consumers experience moral shame. From the first two I abstracted the most important themes and used these for semi-structured in-depth interviews. This is approached by asking questions on the specific theme of consumers' behaviour in relation moral shame in front of the participant's personal closet. We focused in this conversation on the categorisation of the participant's closet, consuming, buying, owning clothes, and the feeling of moral shame. This conversation took place according to the 'Shame Talks Cards', a tool I created myself to structure these interviews. Due to the Covid-19 situation, four 'Shame Talks' were online, and two were offline. Pictures of the closets were made and sent to me and are visible throughout this publication. Because I wanted to include diverse people out of the survey, I had a hard time choosing participants. The choice is based on two definitions of diversity: intersectionality³⁶ and diversity in the broadest sense of its word.³⁷ The following participants out of the survey are included in these in-depth interviews (only wanted to be named by their first names): Frank (gender & background in sustainability), Ilene (gender & Western professional in the fashion industry), Anouk (gender & example of 'fashion user'), Sara (origin & religion) and Willemijn (income/ social class).

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Intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Examples of these aspects include gender, caste, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and height.

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ArtEZ studium generale's Diversity Stories is a podcast about diversity in its broadest sense. It can be about different identities, cultural diversity, different perspectives and methodologies of thinking and creating, but also about sustainable production, trade and climate issues: the importance of diversity of economic systems, biodiversity, etc.





Appendix 2

Acknowledgements

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Graduation project 2020-2021

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Moral shame talks tells and tales is an exploration of the complexity of consumers' moral shame in their consuming behaviour in the context of the sustainability debate in the fashion industry. By addressing this type of shame, critical stories about the systemics of the sustainable discourse in the fashion industry can be revealed.

Moral shame talks – is a podcast series (consisting out of 3 episodes) in collaboration with Radio ArtEZ. 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 place moral shame and its expressions into contemporary context and gather new insights.

Moral shame tells – is this publication and functions as the theoretical backbone of *Moral shame talks*. It grasps the context and complexity of consumers' moral shame in the fashion industry. The publication includes theoretical components as well as reflective questions to activate the reader and create their own unique *Moral shame tale*.

Moral shame tales – is a joined Instagram account where consumers can share their tales out of *Moral shame tells*. This is a way to activate consumers and bring them together and open up, share their views, perspectives, ideas and images to address the feeling of moral shame and its complexity.