

## The Fashion System's Environmental Impact: Theorizing the Market's Institutional Actors, Actions, Logics, and Norms

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### **Abstract:**

Drawing on institutional theory, we examined New York Times readers' views on fashion's environmental impact by analyzing and interpreting comments posted in response to a sustainability and fashion-focused opinion article. Based on our interpretations, we developed a model to think through new opportunities in the mechanics of the organizational field of fashion. Collectively, readers identified multiple actors responsible for fashion market's environmental footprint: consumers, industry, and governing institutions. Further, readers offered various approaches for addressing the fashion environmental footprint—from conscious consumption practices to industry shifts and governmental regulations. We discovered two fashion logics—the logic of dress codes and the logic of planned obsolescence—that extend our understanding of the fashion system. The two fashion logics operate within the larger, overriding logic of capitalism that defines the behaviors of and relationships between the actors in the fashion marketplace. Recognizing societal norms, or institutional logics, that serve as barriers to a sustainable future of the fashion market has profound implications for realizing this future. We demonstrate how the fashion logics are being challenged for their moral legitimacy as the logics' materialistic values are at odds with sustainability values and centering environmental justice.

**Keywords:** institutional theory | fashion logics | sustainability | capitalism | dress codes | planned obsolescence | fashion environmental impact

### **Article:**

Despite growing attention to fashion sustainability, little is known what people think about the industry's environmental impact and potential solutions (Cervellon and Wernerfelt Citation2012). While companies play important roles in minimizing fashion's ecological footprint, individuals also hold significant power in transforming lifestyle and consumption practices (Karpova and Marcketti Citation2020). Due to the value-laden nature of ethics and sustainability (Roxas and Lindsay Citation2012), people tend to overstate their environmental attitudes and intentions (Ceri et al. Citation2019). That is, when people know they are being studied, it might lead to social desirability bias, where people misrepresent themselves in a more positive light (Jann, Krumpal, and Wolter Citation2019). In contrast, unsolicited consumer opinions about fashion's

environmental impact collected via noninvasive formats might reduce the potential for social desirability bias, resulting in more authentic representations of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Cervellon and Wernerfelt Citation2012). Several authors examined online forums for unsolicited views on fashion sustainability. For example, Shen et al. (Citation2014) analyzed posts on green fashion forums between 2004 and 2012, and Cervellon and Wernerfelt studied two sustainability forums for the “layman’s view” on the green fashion supply chain (2012, 177). Also, Bly, Gwozdz, and Reisch drew upon “passive netnography” and blogger interviews to study the motives and behaviors of “sustainable fashion consumption pioneers” (Citation2015, 126). However, sustainability-focused forum participants and so-called sustainable pioneers potentially have more knowledge of and more favorable attitudes toward sustainable fashion in comparison to an average consumer.

In our work, we examine another unique online space where people shared perceptions of fashion’s environmental impact related to causes, solutions, and barriers: comments posted by New York Times (NYT) readers in response to Elizabeth Cline’s (Citation2019) sustainability and fashion-focused opinion article published in the paper on November 3, 2019. Cline, a journalist and author, has published frequently about sustainability, fast fashion, and labor issues for various media such as *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and *Vogue*. In her 2019 NYT article, she featured her book, *The Conscious Closet: A Revolutionary Guide to Looking Good While Doing Good*, and critically analyzed the ways clothing production and consumption contribute to environmental degradation. Understanding people’s perspectives about the negative effects of clothing production and consumption on the environment as well as their views on potential solutions and challenges is critical for developing informed business, regulatory, and educational strategies to transform the fashion market.

## **Consumer Perspectives on Fashion’s Environmental Impact**

Scholars have measured people’s knowledge concerning the fashion’s environmental impact using different approaches. For example, they have asked people to indicate their agreement levels with various statements about the use of hazardous chemicals, cleaning agent by-products, production water usage, and fiber recyclability (Brosdahl and Carpenter Citation2010; Connell and Kozar Citation2012; Sadachar et al. Citation2016). Most authors found positive links between environmental knowledge and green attitudes, purchase intentions, or consumption behaviors (e.g. Brosdahl and Carpenter Citation2010; Kang, Liu, and Kim Citation2013; Sadachar et al. Citation2016); however, others reported contradictory findings (e.g. Blazquez et al. Citation2020; Connell and Kozar Citation2012).

Consumers have revealed numerous influences on their fashion sustainability behaviors. For example, some women have indicated significant knowledge of fashion’s negative environmental impact, yet it had no impact on their consumption (McNeill and Moore Citation2015). These women related that they did not choose sustainable clothing, in part, because they viewed them as unsightly and expensive. They also felt that shopping at thrift stores was unpleasant and that they were overall influenced by consumer marketing and false advertising. Several of the women demanded strict fashion industry regulations and enforcement of international standards to increase sustainability throughout the industry (McNeill and Moore Citation2015).

In Yan et al.’s (Citation2020) work, individuals blamed the industry, government, and media for withholding sustainability-related information on microfiber pollution or purposefully

covering up the level of pollution. Buying less, minimalist consumption, and reducing waste were offered as potential solutions. Both McNeill and Moore (Citation2015) and Yan et al. (Citation2020) examined people's perceptions through "invasive" data collection methods where participants knew they were being studied, potentially resulting in social desirability bias.

Cervellon and Wernerfelt (Citation2012) examined online green forums between 2007 and 2011 and reported that most participants discussed industry initiatives to create a sustainable supply chain. In another study, utilizing both netnography (unsolicited) and interview (solicited) data, Bly et al. (Citation2015) explored sustainable fashion consumption pioneers' thoughts, motivations, and behaviors. Participants felt overconsumption was driven by fast fashion as a "sustainability antithesis" (Bly et al. Citation2015, 129). They identified the dispersed and fragmented nature of the fashion supply chain as a barrier to sustainable fashion, a system that makes it nearly impossible to know the actual conditions under which clothing is produced. These sustainable fashion pioneers also blamed the profit-driven market system for sustainability issues. One proposed solution was to create distance from the high-street market by consuming less, consuming quality, purchasing secondhand, repairing, and making clothing at home.

### **Institutional Logics, Actors, Actions, and Norms**

One way to engage in close readings of fashion sustainability perspectives is to draw upon and interpret multiple metaphors from various critical concepts related to markets, where markets contain institutions and actors that share common practices and understandings (Lawrence and Phillips Citation2004). Institutional theory and logics provide a lens to examine deeply rooted socially constructed assumptions, values, and norms around which social life is organized (Friedland and Alford Citation1991). People experience various logics in their everyday lives as "an objective set of norms" (Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury Citation2017, 512). Actors then, such as consumers and fashion companies, create, maintain, question, and transform logics. That is, the actors and institutions use logics to rationalize and organize principles guiding market activities, which shape "distinctive patterns of cultural beliefs and material practices" (Scott Citation2017, 859).

Bourdieu (Citation1993, Citation1996) conceptualized two fashion logics: commerce and art. The logic of art explained the haute couture phenomenon, where the focus is on artistic expression and creation of innovative and distinctive garments, often without regard for market demand, resource consumption, and value created. The logic of commerce described mass-market fashion production driven by capitalism, or the pressure to sell goods for a profit. Scaraboto and Fischer (Citation2013) utilized the logic of commerce to theorize how plus-size fashion bloggers, or fatshionistas, attempted to persuade the mainstream market to meet plus-size women's fashion needs. The fatshionistas relied on the logic of art to conform to the fashion market's esthetic ideals. Dolbec and Fischer (Citation2015) theorized amateur fashion bloggers using the logics of commerce and art. They explained that these amateur bloggers were able to compete with professional editors, photographers, and marketers, thereby redistributing institutional work and redefining the actor roles within the fashion marketplace. The authors proposed the logic of fashion accessibility, arguing that the bloggers' success and popularity relied on styling fashion trends to make them affordable and wearable for an average consumer.

We aim to disentangle ideologies present in the contemporary fashion market to understand assumptions and norms (i.e. institutional logics) influencing fashion consumption and perceptions of sustainability barriers. Therefore, we ask, which fashion market actors did NYT readers blame

for fashion's negative environmental impact?; what actions did the readers suggest for mitigating the negative impact?; and which assumptions and norms (i.e. institutional logics) drive the contemporary un-sustainable fashion market?

## **Method**

Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough Citation2013), we identified and disentangled ideologies and cultural discourses surrounding readers' perceptions of the fashion environmental impact. Through CDA, scholars examine normative ideologies and then unearth the associated assumptions. By using CDA, scholars engage in close readings of written or visual content for "the co-occurrence of contradictory or inconsistent elements" (Fairclough Citation2013, 64). Through this process in combination with descriptive coding as outlined by Saldaña (Citation2016), we identified and analyzed how discourses surrounding fashion sustainability and activism materialized in the online comments posted under a sustainability-focused opinion article published in New York Times (NYT) by Cline (Citation2019). Cline discusses the various ways she feels clothing is overlooked in the broader climate issues and offered different solutions for consumers, corporations, and governments to consider for climate activism.

The NYT is the third largest U.S. newspaper in circulation (Cision Citation2019) and has 5 million subscribers, 52 percent of whom are men and about 40 percent live abroad (Tracy Citation2020). The newspaper's audience is known for liberal viewpoints (Blake Citation2014). It is a highly visible and influential media outlet where cultural norms are produced and circulated, making it worthy of analysis. The NYT Opinion Section is editorially independent from the newspaper with goals "to be the voice of The Times and to challenge it" (Tumin Citation2017, para. 11). On average, about 14 opinion articles are published daily on various topics from politics and economics to food, travel, and fashion. Opinion articles are open to readers to post comments during a 24-hour period after the publication. A total of 1,003 comments were posted by NYT readers in response to Cline's (Citation2019) opinion article. The average number of comments for 111 NYT opinion articles published during the same week (between October 31 and November 6, 2019) was 425, indicating the readers' high interest in the topic of sustainable fashion.

We first engaged in descriptive coding (Saldaña Citation2016) by analyzing the content of these comments and identified codes related to actors responsible for the environmental impact of fashion, actions needed, and norms governing the fashion marketplace in the context of sustainability. Then, we conducted a close reading of the content and codes through the lens of institutional theory (Handelman and Arnold Citation1999). That is, we interpreted how the readers made sense of the social reality of the fashion market, its institutional actors, actions, and logics.

## **Fashion Market Actors Blamed for the Negative Environmental Impact: Consumers, Corporations, Bureaucracy**

### ***Obsessive Consumers***

According to readers, "unbridled"Footnote1 consumption practices were a major reason for the fashion environmental footprint. Jean louis LONNE from France explained, "We have met the enemy and he is us. The amount of clothing Americans buy, leading Europeans by a little is the problem." Readers noted that companies produce what people buy; thus, as long as there is demand, it will be satisfied: "Companies won't make things you won't buy" (Anonymous, NYC).

Therefore, it was argued that “[c]onsumers (the final customers) are destroying the planet, not the suppliers” (K, Hong Kong). Readers blamed the “disposable” consumer culture for the enormous amount of textile waste: “We are burying ourselves in trash” (Sue Heneris, New York City). Clovis from Florida related, “The problem is that most Americans don’t take care of their things. They just toss them and buy more trash... It’s a breakdown of fiber, and I’m not talking about the textiles.”

### ***Greedy Corporations***

Whereas most readers blamed consumers, some attributed the environmental crisis to “manufacturing problem” and blamed the industry for “wrecking the environment.” They argued the “everyday person” had nothing to do with the problem, and all responsibility should be put on “corporations and governments that not only refuse to acknowledge the problem but actively work to cause more damage to the planet” (T SB, Ohio). In fact, accusing consumers of the fashion footprint was referred to as a “corporatist claptrap.” Michelle from Chicago noted, “Put the responsibility where it belongs - in the hands of the producers, marketers, and corporations who are making the decisions about manufacturing and production in the first place.”

Readers explained how “greedy” corporations “transformed our society into one where everything is disposable and made trillions in the process” (Old Bat, Planet Earth). They blamed firms for producing low quality garments that did not last: “Manufacturers profit more from disposable or non-reparable clothing” (jacey, nyc). “Cheap” clothing produced overseas was contrasted with apparel that used to be made in the US: “clothing is now made not to last...If clothing was made as well as it used to be fifty plus years ago, then we would not have to buy it so frequently...reducing our carbon footprint” (Michele, NYC).

### ***Ineffective Bureaucracy***

Readers blamed various governing institutions for the looming environmental crisis: “Until America comes to grips with our dysfunctional political leadership issues, no progress will be made on environmental policy, climate change or any other issue requiring rational discussion, collaboration, policy analysis or sustainable legislative initiatives” (EJ, NJ). It was explained that regulatory institutions were incapable of curtailing and, in some cases, enabled the crisis. For example, readers critiqued homeowners’ associations (HOA) for their strict rules controlling neighborhood appearances such as prohibiting clotheslines for drying laundry because they “reduced the value” of properties: “Actually, in many communities here in the U.S. the homeowners association doesn’t allow a clothes line outside. ...Maybe if Americans weren’t so rushed and dominated by HOA crazies, we’d be able to more sustainably take care of our clothes” (newyorkerva, sterling).

### **Curbing Fashion’s Environmental Impact: The Role of Consumers and Industry**

Readers recognized the power of collective action in changing the dominant consumption paradigm. They believed people must act instead of waiting for governments or corporations to bring about a change. Cynthia from New Jersey wrote, “the clothing manufacturers and their supply chains need to change, but what will motivate them to change? We can’t wait for government regulations in the US, so a consumer movement is one avenue to create change.”

Consumer activism was promoted through the adoption of the four practices: buy less, buy quality, buy used, and conscious clothing care.

### ***Buy Less***

Readers suggested a “simple” sustainable practice—reducing consumption: “It really boils down to this: BUY LESS STUFF” (Alyssa, Los Angeles). Limiting quantities of purchased garments was dubbed as “an easy (and cheap) way to make a difference and to slowly bend the curve on the consumerism that helped get us into this mess in the first place” (Bill Kapra, Usa). Because “most of us have closets stuffed with things we hardly wear” (NH, Boston), most people do not need new clothes. Readers advocated for a streamlined wardrobe, “Stick with the simple stuff that will get you through life” (Anonymous, NYC). They argued that a minimalist approach would bring a less stressful and cluttered lifestyle. Some even went as far as suggesting wearing only one outfit for an entire month, “Somehow, No-Shave-November caught on. What about Just-one-January. One outfit for all of January. It should be comfortable and cozy, hold up well to spot cleaning and washing, dry quickly, and be able to be dressed up or down. ...It would make our mornings so much easier! I’ve read a couple of articles about women who have instituted uniforms that consist of one outfit on themselves. They said most people didn’t notice” (Deanna, NY).

### ***Buy Quality***

When purchasing new clothes is necessary, readers encouraged buying fewer high-quality garments instead of large quantities of “disposable” items. The reasoning was that “better clothes” last longer and should be replaced less often: “If we chose to purchase a few well made clothes that are timeless in style and last through many wearings we’d greatly reduce the impact of fashion on the environment” (Carole Grace, Menlo Park). Readers acknowledged that “quality long lasting clothes” (Karen, Newark) cost more; however, they argued “[i]ts likely cheaper to buy 1 \$50 shirt that will last a few years than 5 \$10 shirts that will fall apart after a few wears” (NH, Boston). Buying higher-priced garments would limit the quantity purchased and encourage taking better care of them and keeping them longer: “Buy more expensive clothes. This way you will buy less. You will also like your clothes more which will make you more likely to wear what you have and less likely to feel the need to buy more” (EL, Maryland).

### ***Buy Used***

Readers called for avoiding purchasing new clothes whenever possible and, instead, thrifting. Buying used clothing helps “to move beyond throw away culture” (Reader, New York). However, if everyone started thrifting, then the secondhand clothing industry would quickly run out of product due to high demand and low supply. Terry Lowman from Iowa stated, “Shopping at second hand stores sounds cool, but if no one buys new, there will be no inventory for second hand stores.” A drop in new clothes demand would also trigger mass job losses in apparel producing countries, as Patricia from Pasadena explained, “We can’t just all switch to secondhand without increasing poverty in places where textile work is done.”

### ***Conscious Clothing Care***

The topic of clothing care and laundry generated a passionate discourse. Readers encouraged to “wash your clothes less” (EL, Maryland), “always wash with cold water” (Cynthia, Planet Earth), and “use eco-friendly versions of detergent pods (check the Environmental Working Group’s website for best bets) to eliminate that big plastic bottle” (Deborah, California). They urged avoiding laundry whenever possible: “you don’t need to wash jeans. Certainly not every week. I have pairs of jeans I haven’t washed in years. Just google ‘do I have to wash jeans’ to educate yourself on the matter” (Baltomark, Baltimore). It was noted that the US is notorious for [over]using dryers, an “energy gobbler.” One reader wrote, “only in America people have forgotten what it’s like to air dry clothes!” (petey tonei, Ma).

### ***Regulating Industry Practices***

Readers argued that instead of “unattractive, low-grade, overpriced clothing” (Yeah Sure, USA) the industry should be mandated to produce high-quality long-lasting garments. This was evident when Shirley0401 said, “when clothes are essentially produced and marketed to last less than a year (H&M’s pretty explicit business model), shouldn’t we be demanding change?” Some readers argued the government must deal with the fashion sustainability crisis by instituting standards and policies to control manufacturing and distribution processes: “The real difference is going to come when governments regulate agricultural and industrial production to meet standards of conservation and environmental stewardship, and when there are mandated changes to supply and transit chains so we can purchase items without as huge a carbon footprint” (Michelle, Chicago). Examples of such regulations included imposing various taxes such as a carbon tax and tariffs on “clothing made thousands of miles away” (Sam, CA). It was even suggested that government should introduce strict policies regarding what type of apparel can be produced or imported and companies should follow these policies in terms of emissions, product quality, labeling, and waste: “There should be a strict state wide quality control standards that will require manufacturers to produce long lasting products. ...Such standards will force manufacturers to produce less and better quality products” (Zuzka, New York).

## **Institutional Logics Driving the Fashion Marketplace: Dress Codes, Planned Obsolescence, and Capitalism**

### ***The Logic of Dress Codes***

The logic of dress code reflects social norms and expectations for people to present their roles and status in society through their dress and appearance. It dictates what outfits are “appropriate” to wear for which occasions as well as prescribes to continuously rotate these outfits and avoid wearing the same ones repeatedly. Claude Vidal from Los Angeles commented, “The problem is not clothes per se, but the American custom of wearing a different outfit every day and keeping all these superfluous clothes clean at all times.” These socially constructed assumptions and cultural norms regarding appropriateness of one’s dress require maintaining a large and diverse wardrobe to ensure sufficient clothing variations, thus, driving up consumption and serving as a barrier to sustainable practices. Frances Grimble from San Francisco related, “most people don’t dress just

for themselves. They also dress for success at work, and depending on what you work at, a comparatively expensive and/or large wardrobe may be required.”

Readers highlighted societal expectations for women to look attractive by wearing beautiful clothing and using makeup: “from the time they’re very young, women’s and girls’ prestige rests on how she looks. And half of that depends on what clothes she has. Might as well face that, even though it’s a shame” (ginger wentworth, cal). Because “society judges women based on their appearance” (Smilodon, Missouri), advancing in one’s career requires following the logic of the dress codes. In the workplace, it might be not possible to “get a job if you don’t dress up and wear makeup” (Smilodon, Missouri) and women’s appearance and outfits often determine their promotion and compensation: “women...make more money if they wear beautiful clothing and makeup” (Mary, NC).

Readers recognized that the logic of dress codes placed a disproportionately higher financial burden on women who have to purchase more clothes: “The double standard where men can rotate several suits but women are expected to never wear the same thing twice is beyond ridiculous—and it needs to end” (Heather, San Diego). Because “[w]omen are judged on appearance much more than men are,” they have to consider complex socio-psychological implications of their daily outfit selection: “in the workplace, we walk a tightrope, trying to look sexy but not slutty, professional but not dowdy. Men’s sartorial decisions come down to whether or not to wear a tie or jacket” (Vera Waar, Minneapolis). Readers noted men’s roles in creating and maintaining this logic: “A huge part of the fashion industry is fueled by men—who want to admire well-dressed or under-dressed or sexily dressed women” (cheryl gaston, Oregon).

Readers questioned the logic’s legitimacy by recognizing its superficial nature: “The idea that you are expected to keep wearing different outfits seems like a massive scam to me anyway. Who started that?” (Anthony Flack, New Zealand). They advocated for resisting the pressure of the logic by not adhering to societal norms and expectations for continuously rotating outfits: “One thing we (especially women) can control is not buying into office and social pressure to not be seen in the same outfit too often” (Anita, Maine). Readers provided a few examples of how they resist the logic of dress codes: (a) reducing the number of garments to decrease the wardrobe size; (b) minimizing/simplifying the types of garments to de-diversify the wardrobe; and (c) repeatedly wearing the same outfits. Some pushed the boundaries further and called for changing “the paradigms of what is socially acceptable” and redefining cultural notions of “appropriate” appearance. Anne (New York) urged, “Are we allowed to look frumpy? Original? Patched? Or must everything always seem new, pressed, pristine, fresh-off-the-rack perfect?”

### ***The Logic of Planned Obsolescence***

A fundamental principle of fashion is based on constantly changing silhouettes, design elements, colors, prints, etc. The logic of planned obsolescence is at the core of the incessant introduction of new styles due to the transient nature of fashion, resulting in disposal of functionally usable garments due to the perpetual race for the latest trends. Readers recognized this logic as a key driver for the continuous consumer desire for new clothes, despite having overflowing closets:

- Trying to have the latest fashion and discarding perfectly good clothing is a major part of the problem. (Eric, Texas)



- One main goal of fashion is to create demand for different styles, so that we buy new clothes before our old ones have worn out. (sdavidc9, Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut)

Readers accused the industry of propagating the logic of planned obsolescence by designing clothes “to be outdated in a year or so” (Chris Wildman, Alaska) and then “brainwashing” people to “think they have to have new clothes” (Judith, NE), resulting in “fashion obsessions.” For example, AL from Ithaca posted, “An obsession with constantly buying new clothes in a world which trains us to judge each other on the basis of fashion is the problem.” The endless race for “the next new thing” was recognized as a major barrier to sustainable consumption practices, concluding that fashion is “the culprit.” Readers recognized that the fashion culture is in direct opposition to sustainability. According to Nan Socolow (West Palm Beach, FL), “Fashion has never been sustainable, never will be.”

Readers questioned and resisted the obsolescence logic by: (a) ignoring fashion trends; (b) investing in classic styles that never go out of fashion; and (c) buying secondhand clothing. To “change our fast fashion culture” (Little Black Dress, America) one reader suggested not to promote “a new fashion trend every week” (JCG, PA). On a deeper and more transformative level, there appears to be a call for a shift in societal values to redefine the meaning of fashion. Instead of the fashion phenomenon standing for the constant change of trends, readers suggested that the concept of “fashionable” could mean “sustainable,” “repaired,” or “re-used:”

- I have learned to buy better quality clothes that can be worn over and over. I think that this can catch on as a new way to be fashionable. (Christa, New Mexico)
- I’ve also started mending my clothes if there’s a tear. I’m not good at sewing (I’m a guy, not that it should explain it) and it often shows. I don’t care and even consider it a badge of honor. (Eric, NYC)

### *The Logic of Capitalism*

While the logic of capitalism governs overall societal rather than market-specific norms (Friedland and Alford Citation1991), some readers viewed the logic as a key driver of fashion consumption and its environmental footprint. An assumption of the logic is infinite expansion—to survive, any business or economy has to continuously grow: “The elephant in the Climate Change room is our economic model. We require growth in business volume, flow, and profits, combined with reduction in price” (cud, New York, NY). In the pursuit of continuous growth, companies must manufacture and sell more and more products, using renewable and nonrenewable resources, and generating waste: “It is about an excess of consumerism in just about everything. Capitalism seems to demand ever-increasing “growth,” meaning constant production and disposal of goods” (James Doohan, Montana).

Readers questioned the sustainability of the capitalist economic model, given the planet’s limited resources: “The economic system must shift away from mass consumption as it is not sustainable, period” (Sierra Morgan, Dallas). It was pointed out that a capitalist economy has clear winners and losers: “a system that wrecks Earth while enriching few and impoverishing most” (Yuri Asian, Bay Area). Some readers resisted the logic of capitalism by minimizing consumption (e.g. stop buying new clothes, keeping garments for as long as possible). Susan from Colorado explained, “I am one consumer who stopped buying fast fashion and many other things years ago.

...Nearly 70% of our economy is based on consumer spending. Part of what we need to figure out is how to develop a sustainable economic system that does not depend on constant growth or expansion.” It was acknowledged that if consumers stopped buying, “the economy would crash” (Allison, Off the road). Nevertheless, some readers asserted that “rethinking” the logic of capitalism was the only way to sustain the life on the planet, “The real problem is our consumer culture, which supports an economy based on inducing people to buy more and more stuff, then throwing it away and buying more. ...Build an economy, and a culture, that respects and preserves the natural world.” (Stevem, Boston)

## **Interpretations, Opportunities, and Call to Action**

Drawing on institutional theory, we examined NYT readers’ views on the fashion environmental impact by analyzing and interpreting comments posted to Cline’s (Citation2019) fashion sustainability article. Our work is unique in that we explored the general public’s unsolicited views, as opposed to previous research that only studied sustainable fashion pioneers in Bly et al. (Citation2015) or green forum participants in Cervellon and Wernerfelt (Citation2012). By using a noninvasive manner to collect the research data, we aimed to reduce social desirability bias surrounding sustainability attitudes and knowledge. We identified numerous and mixed assumptions in relation to who is to blame for the crisis, actions needed to address it, and the logics fueling the fashion marketplace.

### ***Theorizing the Fashion Marketplace and Sustainability***

Based on our interpretations, we developed a model to think through new opportunities in the mechanics of the fashion market (Figure 1). In the center of the model are actions, or daily fashion-related practices and discourses performed by the actors in the market—consumers and industry, or individual businesses, which are shown in the second circle from the center. Both the actions and the actors are tangible and observable elements of the fashion market: the actions being embodied by the actors. The invisible but powerful logics of fashion (norms, values, and assumptions) are shown in the next circle. The logics guide consumer and industry decisions and behaviors, which manifest as specific practices and discourses. At the same time, collectively, consumers and industry create, support/reject, and legitimize/dismantle the market’s logics through their actions, practices and discourses. Governing institutions (any regulatory bodies) attempt to control the actions (practices and discourses) of the actors (consumers and industry) through various policies and regulations. Governing institutions typically exert similar influence over other markets, such as auto, media, food, etc. (Figure 1). Finally, the entire economy, consisting of different markets, is guided by overarching societal and economic logics (higher-order values and norms), which, in the case of our study, was the logic of capitalism, or a capitalist free-market economy.



Figure 1 The mechanics of the fashion market—actions, actors, and logics—in the context of a capitalist economic system.

### ***The Role of Market Actors in the Fashion Environmental Crisis***

Collectively, NYT readers identified multiple fashion market actors responsible for the industry’s environmental footprint. By far, the key driver for the undue burden on the environment was obsessive consumers practicing fashion overconsumption, excessive clothing care, and premature garment disposal. Less frequently readers blamed the industry for the environmental impact of fashion or ineffective governing institutions that fail to legislate policies to protect the environment (Figure 1). Our findings support previous studies, where participants identified overconsumption and the profit-driven fashion business model as causes of the negative environmental impact (Bly et al. Citation2015; Yan et al. Citation2020). In another study, Gopaldas summarized ethical consumers’ sentiments as “anger at corporations, governments, and mainstream consumers” (2014, 998).

While readers most often blamed individual consumption practices, they could at the same time be ignoring the interconnected power dynamics related to capitalism and consumption. Certainly, consumers have agency in their purchase behavior, yet throughout this process, consumers are also exposed to highly influential, behavior-changing media-driven consumption. Entwistle (Citation2000) discussed this type of power dynamic in reference to the agency of the dressed body and the panoptic power encroached on individuals to appear a certain way. This push-pull dynamic can be used to entangle the complexity of consumer agency and the all-embracing power of the fashion system and capitalist logic. That is, the industry has a significant influence on the obsessive consumer and the obsessive consumer at the same time is experiencing and negotiating multiple messages leading to their various consumption practices; it is a slippery continual up and down slope.

Another opportunity to consider is the excessive clothing care stemming, at least in part, from the logic of dress codes and appearance norms. This notion of obsessive consumers has entanglements with processes related to desiring an “appropriate appearance.” Appropriate appearance norms vary widely across time and space, yet researchers have demonstrated these norms can disproportionately impact historically marginalized genders (e.g. heterosexual and queer women, trans people), causing increased appearance and emotional labor as compared to, for example, cisgender men (Reddy-Best Citation2018; Kaiser and Green Citation2021). We are not suggesting a binary interpretation of this entanglement (men’s fashion versus women’s fashion) as intersectionality would of course be extremely important to consider in this matrix. Additionally, cisgender men are certainly not free from these laborious engagements, despite “bourgeois white men” and their fashions being mostly “unmarked” since about the eighteenth century (Kaiser and Green Citation2021, 146). One example of the significant emphasis placed upon women, their bodies, and fashion, was the spotlight on Hillary Clinton’s fashions while a 2016 United States presidential candidate (Geismar Citation2016). Kaiser and Green (Citation2021) theorized this “marking, unmarking, and remarking” (146) through gender and dress, highlighting that while there is certainly nuance and complexity, masculinity is often viewed as changing slowly and femininity is marked with elaborate ornamentation, changing in fast and overt ways, and often scrutinized. Thus, while obsessive consumers could be an easy target, there are larger interconnections within social contexts and powers that impact these decision-making processes.

Notions of cleanliness, too, have shifted over time and across cultures. The act of laundering clothes can result from numerous pressures to appear in a particular esthetic from capitalist imagery driving a “look” in addition to an interest to “not” look like someone (Freitas et al. Citation1997), for example, from a lower socio-economic status, living in alternative housing, or a person unable to “care” for themselves. However, appearing “poor” or occupying a lower-class status has come in and out of fashion. Most recently, journalists criticized fashions on runways that appeared to fetishize so-called homeless people (Torgerson Citation2017). Tensions around social class are interwoven with cultural taste (Bourdieu Citation1984) and embody income in addition to habitus, thus fashioning the body. These continually shifting influences open new possibilities when considering which actors are to blame and when and why they are to blame within the larger web of society.

### ***Actions for a Sustainable Fashion Market***

Readers offered various approaches for addressing the fashion environmental footprint—from conscious consumption practices to industry shifts and government regulations. Some advocated for strict policies to regulate what, where, and how companies can produce and distribute, supporting McNeill and Moore’s (2015) findings. However, the discourse on sustainable consumption practices by far prevailed the discussion of the industry and government roles. In previous studies, participants of green fashion forums, blogs, and other social media (Bly et al. Citation2015; Cervellon and Wernerfelt Citation2012) viewed themselves as major forces in advancing the sustainability agenda. In our work, we support and extend these findings to the average NYT reader, who did not overtly identify with heightened attention to sustainability issues.

Numerous readers felt that people must assume responsibility for adopting sustainable practices in acquiring, caring for, and disposing of clothes. They viewed many daily practices (buy less, buy quality, buy used, and conscious care) as important and a new norm. Our results support Bly et al. (Citation2015) who reported that sustainable fashion pioneers resisted the fashion system

by adopting alternative consumption practices such as consuming less, consuming better, and shopping secondhand. NYT readers defended their sustainable consumption practices that they felt disengaged with the mainstream market norms, thereby engaging in a form of consumer activism. Sharing their sustainable strategies and sentiments was a way of gaining legitimacy for their everyday practices (Figure 1). Through posting their comments, the readers engaged in creating and legitimizing multiple and mixed sustainable clothing consumption discourses.

However, these consumer-activist processes are operating within unchecked capitalism, which is again, a powerful dynamic entangled within consumption practices and desired belief systems. There are potential imbalances at play here involving capitalist motivations. For example, the logic of planned obsolescence and its interconnectedness and dialectic processes with the logic of dress codes is quite apparent. The readers are calling on consuming less and consuming quality. However, how might considerations of no consumption be the next step? Mentions of repairing have similar sentiments, yet are we, or the readers of NYT, driven to consume due to these imposing logics (dress codes and planned obsolescence) that are entangled within the profit-driven market that is somehow no longer responsible for some consumers' perspectives? There are numerous and sometimes conflicting possible interpretations. If, from a Marxist perspective, businesses ultimately have the power over the workers, and by extension in part, the consumers, how can individuals collectively break from these logics imposed from these freight-train-like entities moving fast and furiously to regaining agency? These questions do not have clear answers due to the multiple and entangled logics embedded throughout society.

### ***Institutional Logics as Barriers to a Sustainable Fashion Market***

The logic of dress codes and the obsolescence logic actively support and perpetuate excessive fashion consumption, manifesting as a few of the many barriers to sustainable practices. We demonstrate how these logics are used to guide clothing-related routines and create meanings in people's daily experiences. The two fashion logics simultaneously enable (e.g. excessive consumption) and constrain (e.g. minimalist consumption) individual and collective consumer actions (Figure 1). In the industry, the logic of planned obsolescence justifies businesses' race to get ahead of the competition in delivering the latest fashions.

NYT readers sometimes questioned and resisted the two fashion logics by adopting alternative consumption practices and creating emergent discourses (Figure 1). They accused industry in perpetuating the ever faster changing fashion trends. That is, they questioned the legitimacy of the prevalent business model built on continuous obsolescence and pursuit of new fashions. We further demonstrate how the two fashion logics are being challenged for their moral legitimacy as the logics' materialistic values are at odds with sustainability values and centering environmental justice. Our findings support the tensions between the phenomena of fashion and sustainability (Bly et al. Citation2015; Niinimäki et al. Citation2020). The dissonance between the fashion logics and the consumer-driven sustainability movement puts the fashion market in a dangerous position as people are challenging the moral and cultural legitimacy of its dominant logics.

The fashion market is embedded within larger economic structures governed by overarching economic and societal logics (Figure 1). In our study, we highlighted the role of the logic of capitalism in excessive fashion consumption, supporting the argument that the capitalist economy encourages irrational consumption and accumulation of wealth (Gauthier Citation2016). The findings are in line with previous research where ethical consumption sentiments include

“disgust at capitalism” (Gopaldas Citation2014, 998). Similarly, sustainable fashion pioneers noted the profit-driven nature of the fashion market system as a major barrier to sustainability (Bly et al. Citation2015). We demonstrate how the logics of a market (fashion logics) are reinforced by, yet at the same time different from an overarching economic logic (the logic of capitalism). Because the logics of the mainstream fashion market are rooted in the logic of capitalism, a systemic transformation of the industry within the capitalist economic system poses a great challenge. Fashion scholars should be at the forefront to conceptualize and promote alternative business models for the fashion market by reimagining shared governance and profit distribution between all involved actors in the fashion production and consumption cycles.

The fashion logics discovered in our study extend beyond simple industry mechanics identified as sustainability barriers in extant research, such as high price or unattractive design of sustainable clothing, unpleasant smell in secondhand stores (McNeill and Moore Citation2015), or the complexity of the global apparel supply chain (Bly et al. Citation2015). Recognizing societal norms, or institutional logics, that serve as barriers to a sustainable fashion future has profound implications for realizing this future. To understand how these deeply rooted logics can be challenged and ultimately transformed requires new epistemological perspectives and research methods, including observation, experimentation, and ethnography with action-oriented results.

### ***Call to Action: Shifting the Fashion Market Paradigm***

Our findings indicate an increasing number of concerned community members and their demands for transforming mainstream fashion consumption practices and normative discourses and signal desires for an impending profound shift in the marketplace. Yet, growing consumer activism appears to be lacking leadership or an organized structure to guide and promote purposive collective actions aimed at market transformation, the goal beyond the power of individual community members. Despite clear and concerted individual efforts, there is not enough momentum to translate these actions into structural institutional changes through redefining prevailing social norms or the logics of fashion. Fashion scholars have an unprecedented opportunity and moral responsibility to lead this change. Specifically, academia should play a key role in guiding people’s actions to gradually transition from the disposal fashion culture to a sustainable one by explaining the operating principles behind the fashion logics and facilitating discourses about their normative elements. Through ongoing dialogues with industry constituencies, public, and government, scholars must partake in actively shaping cultural and paradigmatic shifts in the meaning of fashion.

It appears that fashion sustainability-focused logics are emerging as people are adopting and legitimizing sustainable practices that are supported by some businesses. The fashion marketplace appears to be entering a phase when the actors are governed by conflicting logics, leading to organizational heterogeneity and contestation of the existing principles and structures, as evident with the recent retail turmoil when century-old companies cease to exist, whereas new firms and business models are being created. The fashion market is beginning to slowly adapt to the changing societal priorities by reinventing its focus, relevance, and values. As new fashion logics governing sustainable design, manufacturing, and consumption practices will continue to emerge, it is critical to address their accessibility and prevent their exclusivity. Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury (Citation2017) contrasted institutional logic availability with its accessibility: while multiple logics might be available to individuals and organizations, only a limited number of logics might be accessible to them. Even though sustainability logic(s) might be available, their

accessibility will determine the degree to which they will get activated and adopted in the fashion market. It is an important future research direction to explore.

In our research, we focused on NYT readers' perspectives on the environmental impact of fashion, its underlying causes, and ways to move forward. Readers viewed the industry and regulatory institutions as ineffective and unwilling to take actions. Future research can examine these issues from the perspectives of the various fashion businesses and governing institutions. This research was based on the analysis of unsolicited comments posted by hundreds of people who were online subscribers of one newspaper; it is important to corroborate these findings.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Additional information**

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### **Notes**

1 Names for short quotes were not included to increase the readability and flow of the paper. After longer quotes we include the poster's handle then location.

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