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The Ways in Which Perceived Quality Influences Today's Fashion

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The Ways in Which Perceived Quality Influences Today's Fashion

Bachelor Thesis

Name of course-of-study:

Fashion Design

Fachbereich 5

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Date:

Berlin, 01.03.2023

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Table of Content

1. Introduction

1.1 _ Definitions

Oxford dictionary:

/quality/

1. The standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind; the degree of excellence of something.

2. A distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something.

/value/

1. How much something is worth in money or other goods for which it can be exchanged.

2. How much something is worth compared with its price.

1.2 _ Abstract

The search for high value and quality isn't a thing of modern time. In fact- since the industrial revolution, which transformed the development of products from domestic environments to manufacturing processes in factories, consumers have tried to objectively define or measure the worth of objects and services by giving certain attributes a more significant value in comparison to others.

The 20th century brought about the introduction of new technologies, automated manufacturing processes and a wide variety of new materials available to the public. Since then, the quality of products has been defined by the way a product was made, the materials used to make it, and the craftsmanship required to produce the product, or the technology it possesses.

Like in other industries, the quality in fashion is mostly subjected to the opinion of the customer. Unlike other industries, the way we as consumers perceive quality in fashion was, and still is, somewhat blurred in comparison to other products. This is mostly due to the lack of knowledge about the processing of a garment/product, pricing-points which are not coordinated across the industry or reflecting the product's making, and the view of fashion as a form of art. Value, however, is a different aspect to quality which influences they way we perceive fashion, and is influenced and distorted by our own attachments towards the materialistic object we posses. Those attachments can vary between nostalgia, generational values, social causes, economical/ ethical beliefs, or simply a stylistic choice. Those factors subconsciously influence our decision making and turning an objective matter as quality into the subjective matter that is value and perceived quality.

For example, a double-ribbed white tank top would usually sell in Italy anywhere between 10-50€ depends on the market. However, in their fall/winter 2022 collection, Prada released a similar tank top made in Italy where the only difference was a Prada logo in the front of the garment which sold for a retail price of 1000€. The same principle can also be applied for any simple branded pullover from the past 5 years - Balenciaga, Vetements, etc. [see next page i-1 and i-2]

How can this price point be rationalized?

Is there a profound difference in quality that can justify the price point?

Would the customers think so? Or is that what the companies would like them to think..?

Or in other words- *What are the ways in which perceived quality influences today's fashion.*

After many years involved in fashion, both in studies and practices, I have come to the conclusion that quality can be defined as both objective and subjective. Objectively, it requires some knowledge about how things are made in order to check the "guts" of a product to ensure its quality during all stages of processing. However, subjectively – as perceived quality – many products that are technically not of high level of quality can also be appreciated for their characteristics in a way that almost eliminates the aspects of the item's wearability and longevity. The two are so intertwined that our own perspective of the meaning of quality starts bending around beliefs, personal values and social standards or trend.

But how?

The problem with defining quality is that different people view different objects in many different ways, depending on the context they are in and on the significance of that item to the consumer. For example, whether fashion items are considered more wearable or more artistic, or if it is a matter of the item's longevity or the unique values it portrays.

It is difficult to measure absolute quality (objectively) on a scale because the determining factors on that scale are hard to define and involve many aspects for the consumer that are not necessarily calculated logically or consciously at the moment of choice. In an effort to make those assumptions somewhat less ambiguous and vague this paper will review how quality control measures came to be what they are today, how the industry is constantly trying to keep up with the demand, while capitalism skews brand consciousness and push marketing approaches to encourage more and more consumption, and attempt to decipher the consumers mind by researching different aspects influencing the consumer's decision.

i-1: highsnobiety.com

i-2: balenciaga.com

2. The History of Quality

2.1 _ The Industrial Revolution and the Birth of Quality

While the concept of quality control was developed separately in different parts of the world between the 13th and 17th centuries, the inspiration for that came from European traders. However, the American process would become the global standard of the industry due to the rise of the United States as power nation over the course of the years. Any factory who wished to negotiate with American companies for manufacturing deals or have products from their factory sold in the United States would have to comply with them.

The quality movement can trace its roots back to medieval Europe, where craftsmen began organizing into unions called ‘guilds’ in the late 13th century. These guilds were responsible for developing strict rules for product and service quality. Inspection committees enforced the rules by marking flawless goods with a special mark or symbol. Craftsmen themselves often placed a second mark on the goods they produced. At first this mark was used to track the origin of faulty items, but over time the mark came to represent a craftsman’s good reputation. Inspection marks and master craftsmen marks served as proof of quality for customers throughout medieval Europe, and became in time what we recognize today as a logo. This approach to manufacturing quality was dominant until the industrial revolution in the early 19th century.

Until the early 19th century, manufacturing in the industrialized world tended to follow this craftsmanship model. The factory system, with its emphasis on product inspection, started in Great Britain in the mid-1750s and grew into the Industrial Revolution in the early 1800s. American quality practices evolved in the 1800s as they were shaped by changes in predominant production methods.

In the early 19th century, manufacturing in the United States tended to follow the craftsmanship model used in the European countries. Since most craftsmen sold their goods locally, each had a tremendous personal stake in meeting customers’ needs for quality. If quality needs weren’t met, the craftsman ran the risk of losing their business. Therefore, masters maintained a form of quality control by inspecting goods before sale.

The factory system, a quality-control system of the industrial revolution in Europe, began to divide the craftsmen’s trades into specialized tasks. This meant different workers in the manufacturing process in the factory would oversee only a certain part of the production and lack an overall view of the product being made. This forced craftsmen to become factory workers and forced shop owners to become production supervisors. Defective products were either reworked or scrapped for future productions.

Late in the 19th century the United States broke further from European tradition and adopted a new management approach developed by Frederick W. Taylor. “The Taylor System’s” goal was to increase productivity without increasing the number of skilled craftsmen. This was achieved by assigning factory planning to specialized engineers and by using craftsmen and supervisors as inspectors and managers who executed the engineers’ plans.

Taylor’s approach led to remarkable rises in productivity, but the new emphasis on productivity had a negative effect on quality. To remedy the quality decline, factory managers created

inspection departments to keep defective products from reaching the end of the line and the customers.

2.2 _ Generational Concept of Value

The passage of knowledge down from one generation to another plays a crucial part in the development of human society and is a core element in setting one's values and beliefs. However, with the turn of last century the concept of acquired knowledge underwent significant changes slowly over the generations, as people became worldwide citizens with exposure to different sources of knowledge through media channels and their publicly available archives, education, and accessible traveling methods across the globe. The availability of this worldwide pool of information led to a situation where people could stop following blindly what they were taught "traditionally" and find their own set of values and beliefs to pass down to their lineage.

In the past, value was often determined by tangible factors such as the cost of production or the rarity of an object. In more recent times, however, the concept of value has come to be determined by a range of intangible factors such as brand prestige, design elements, and cultural or emotional appeal.

In the early 20th century, economist Thorstein Veblen introduced the concept of "conspicuous consumption", which refers to the idea that people often derive value from the consumption of goods and services that are seen as luxurious or prestigious, even if they do not necessarily serve a practical purpose or have significant characteristics/differences. This shift towards intangible factors in determining value can also be seen in the rise of brand loyalty and the increasing importance of brand image in marketing today.

The concept of value has also been influenced by cultural and social changes. For example, the environmental movement of the late 20th century led to a greater focus on the sustainability and ethical production of goods, resulting in the emergence of the "green" or eco-friendly consumer. In this case, value is determined not just by the tangible qualities of a product but by its impact on the environment and its alignment with the consumer's values. In recent years, there has also been a growing focus on the experiential value of goods and services. This includes the rise of "experience economies", in which businesses offer unique and memorable experiences rather than just products. In this case, value is determined by the emotional or psychological impact of the experience, rather than just the practical utility of the product.

Craftsmanship, the skill and care that goes into the creation of a product, is a measure of the attention to detail and dedication that a craftsman puts into their work and study of their craft. In many cases, the perceived value of a product is closely tied to the level of craftsmanship that goes into its creation because consumers often associate high levels of craftsmanship with quality and durability and are willing to pay a higher price for products that they perceive as being sturdy and "well-made".

In the past, many products that are highly common in every household have been made by a specialized craftsman, whereas today's world those products are mass-produced. While this change has positive aspects, such as product safety and accessibility to a wider public from different social tiers, a product that is expertly crafted is more likely to have a polished and refined appearance that is more appealing for the consumer. The change to a mass-production of some

items resulted in products that are more generic, whether in the dimensions of the product that are not custom made for the client or the lack of detailing in order to appeal to a wider audience. High quality craftsmanship can also influence the functional aspects of a product. A product that is well-made is likely to be more durable and long-lasting than one that is poorly crafted. This can be especially important for products that are intended to be used frequently or over a long period of time. Consumers are often willing to pay a higher price for products that they believe will hold up well over time, and the level of craftsmanship can be a key factor in this regard.

Craftsmanship can also affect the emotional appeal of a product. Many consumers are drawn to products that are made with care and attention to detail and the level of craftsmanship can be a key factor in this regard. For example, a hand-crafted piece of furniture may be perceived as being more special or unique than a mass-produced one and this can increase its perceived value, even though both products are crafted out of the same, or similar, materials.

2.3 _ Quality Control Establishment (Early 20th Century)

Quality management systems, as we now think of them, first started to be developed in the 1920s as statistical sampling techniques were introduced into quality control methodology. The movement was pioneered by Walter A. Shewhart and his work in statistical quality control. During this period, an ever-increasing demand for greater productivity saw a breakdown in quality control and it was clear there was a need to develop a more robust, structured and logical approach to quality. Crucially, this would involve a shift from simple end-product inspection to the development of quality practices aimed at actively preventing defects by implementing checks and controls earlier in the production process. Key to the development of “The Total Quality Management” techniques that industries still rely on today were experts such as Dr. Joseph Moses Juran and Dr. William Edwards Deming, who developed Shewhart’s studies into practical quality management methods that are still in use today.

After entering World War II, the United States enacted legislation to help utilize the civilian economy to fuel military production. During this period, quality became a critical component of the war effort and an important safety issue. Unsafe military equipment was clearly unacceptable, and the United States armed forces inspected virtually every unit produced to ensure that it was safe for operation. This practice required huge inspection forces and caused problems in recruiting and retaining competent inspection personnel.

To ease the problems without compromising product safety, the armed forces began to use sampling inspection to replace unit-by-unit inspection. With the aid of industry consultants, particularly from Bell-Laboratories[1] which was then lead by Walter A. Shewhart, they adapted sampling tables and published them in a military standard. Those standards became a staple for both factories and suppliers, which had a clear understanding of the level of quality required by them in order to produce the requested products.

The birth of “Total Quality” in the United States was in direct response to a quality revolution in Japan following World War II, as major Japanese manufacturers converted from producing military goods for internal use to producing civilian goods for trade.

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[1] also known for its operations across the U.S. and internationally, as: Nokia Bell-Labs, and AT&T Bell-Laboratories ; New-Jersey, USA

At first, Japan had a widely held reputation for lesser exports and their goods were treated accordingly by international markets. This led Japanese organizations to explore new ways of thinking about quality. As a result, the Japanese welcomed input from foreign companies and professionals in the field, including two American quality experts:

William Edwards Deming, who had become frustrated with American managers when most programs for statistical quality control were terminated once the war (and the government contracts it carried) came to an end. The importance of those practices were left aside for the purpose of healing the economy with an emphasis on productivity.

And Joseph Moses Juran, who predicted the quality of Japanese goods would overtake the quality of goods produced in the United States by the mid-1970s because of Japan's revolutionary rate of quality improvement, including the extensive governmental funds which were dedicated for that purpose.

Deming worked with the US Census Bureau from 1939 and his development of Shewhart's statistical process control innovations resulted in a six-fold increase in productivity. After World War II, Deming was posted in Japan as an adviser to the Japanese Census. In common with Dr. Juran, Deming became involved with the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers and his contributions directly led to the development of what we now recognize as "Total Quality Management" becoming widespread in Japanese industry. His work is believed to have contributed greatly to the reconstruction of Japan's post-war economy, and in 1960 he was awarded the Order of the Sacred Treasure for his services to the nation's economic resurgence. Edwards Deming died in 1993, but in the years before his death he continued consulting, and authored a number of seminal books, including Quality, Productivity, and Competitive Position – later retitled Out of the Crisis – which outlined his critical "14 Points for Management." Shortly before his death, Deming founded the W. Edwards Deming Institute, which continues to honor his legacies today.

The modern quality revolution began in the 1970s when the quality level of Japanese goods increased significantly to surpass those of the US and Europe, just as Juran predicted. Industry leaders took action and cooperated with experts in the field to combat the imbalance. As a result, the 1980s saw a big emphasis on quality improvement and the adoption of new practices. By the 1990s, quality improvement methodologies that had proved successful in manufacturing were being applied to the working practices of organizations.

On the definition of quality, and its importance in manufactured product, Dr. William Edwards Deming (also known as The Father of Quality) wrote in his work[2]:

> *"Quality is defined by the satisfaction of the customers. A product with good quality does not only satisfy the customers but also makes the customers patronize the product wherein they boast about the product and encourage their friends to try it. Quality is multidimensional. Depending on whose perspective, definition of quality varies. A worker's definition of quality, would depend if he could be proud of his work. While a manager, would see quality depending on how specifications and number of products produced are met. On the other hand, customers would assess quality by his/her needs and expectations"*

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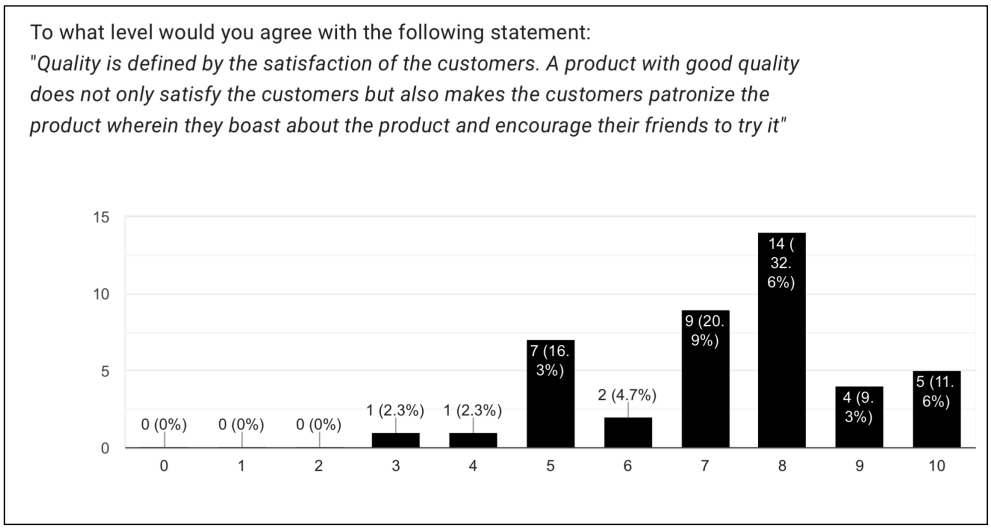
[2] System of Profound Knowledge (1992)



i-3: Survey results

Although many of Deming's assessments might be considered "old fashion" in today's digital world's industrial view, that same customer-focus approach he preached about became more relevant in past years with the global takeover of social-media on marketing approaches and brand-consciousness. In fact, in a survey made for this paper 3 out of 4 participants said they (at least somewhat) agree with the mentioned quote.

If quality is assumed to be mainly a consumer's point of view of the product, therefore it's not an objectively measurable constant. If so, is it then more of an abstract feeling? It is more about how a consumer feel about wearing the product, both physically (in means of comfort) and psychologically (desirable brand, sustainable product, relatable message or value)?

Perceived quality and value plays a very important role in general consumption today and therefore in the marketing approaches being designed to make us consume more.

3. Modern Quality

3.1 _ Digital Revolution

The instant availability of public knowledge has significantly impacted both the demand in the market and the lifecycle of products. With the advents of the internet and other digital technologies, consumers now have access to an instantaneous wealth of information that allows them to make more informed purchasing decisions from any merchant offering world-wide services and the ability to sift through a global catalog to find the product/service which fits best to their needs.

One of the main ways that the instant availability of public knowledge influences the demand in the market is by providing consumers with a greater understanding of the products and services available to them. For example, if a consumer is considering purchasing a new product, they can easily search online for reviews and comparisons of different models as well as pricing information. This level of transparency allows consumers to make more informed and confident purchasing decisions, potentially driving up demand for certain products.

In addition to influencing demand, the instant availability of public knowledge can also impact the lifecycle of products. For instance, if a company releases a new product that receives negative reviews or criticism online, this information can rapidly spread and impact the demand for the product. On the other hand, if a product receives positive feedback and coverage online, it can drive up demand and potentially extend the product's lifecycle.

Another aspect on that matter is in the way consumers chase the current trends with many merchants providing quick adaptations to the changing trends, making old product less appealing and by that shortening the product’s lifecycle, wherein the functionality of a products fades into the background, and focusing on aesthetics.

Digitized manufacturing, also known as “Industry 4.0”, refers to the use of digital technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), and data analytics in the manufacturing process. It aims to increase efficiency, reduce waste, and improve the overall quality of products. The way in which digitized manufacturing influences the quality of products is through data analytics. By collecting data from various sensors and sources throughout the manufacturing process, manufacturers can identify and address problems in real-time which helps prevent defects and improves the overall quality of the final product.

The use of AI and machine learning have also influenced the quality of products by optimizing the manufacturing process, reducing variability, and improving the precision of production. For example, AI can be used to analyze data from sensors and identify failure patterns that may indicate a potential issue in the blueprint of a product. It can then also recommend corrective actions to prevent the issue from becoming a problem, or handling the issue while production is ongoing.

The implications of improved product quality on a product's value are significant. Higher quality products are typically more valuable to consumers, as they are more likely to function as intended and have a longer lifespan. This can lead to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty, which can drive sales and revenue for a company. However, digital manufacturing is not yet at a fail-proof level in itself and consumers are still not completely satisfied and trusting of the process. An

example for that can be seen in an upcoming industry of lab-grown diamonds. The diamonds are almost identical to real mined diamonds on a structural level and eliminating the complicated and risky traditional way of mining diamonds, resulting in a final product that looks identical to the “real” product. Even though this solution is celebrated by investors as the sustainable solution of the future to the diamond mining problems, it is still problematic to market the lab-grown diamonds as *worthy* as their predecessors.

This might connect to a point that was previously discussed on the generational concept of value and the attachment existing between high value items and the craftsmanship regarding its making, which is being taught from one generation to another. Those generational teachings are part of human society and the exchange of knowledge that is rooted in our very existence and can be manifested in many values passing down from older generations.

3.2 _ The Problem With “Made in (…)”

The negative predetermined value of products manufactured in Asia is a long-standing issue that has attracted significant attention in recent years. This value is often associated with the perception that products made in Asia are of lower quality and not worth as much as those made in other regions of the world. This view is perpetuated by various factors, including the history of global trade and asian manufacturers, cultural biases, and media portrayals.

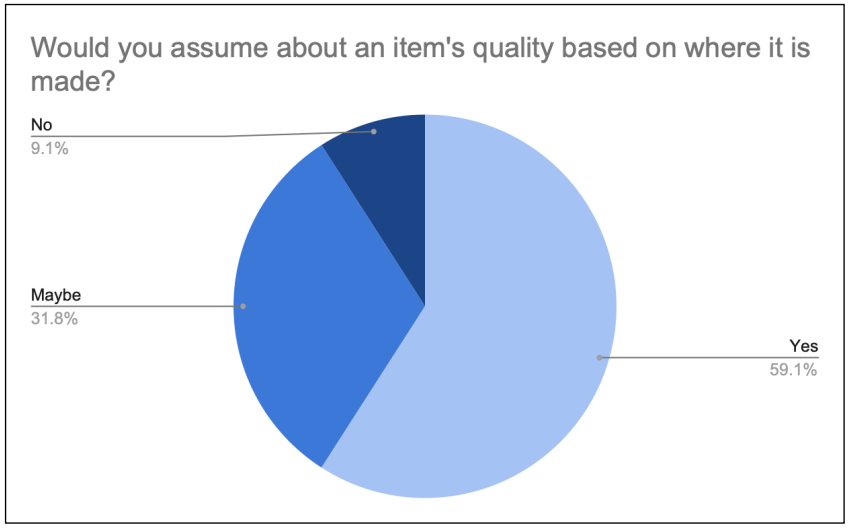
Along decades of history of global trade, countries in Asia have been seen as sources of cheap labor and raw materials. This led to the perception that the products they produce are inherently inferior. This view is reinforced by the fact that many Asian countries have lower wages and lower labor standards than those in the West, which leads to the assumption that their products are made using subpar materials and techniques by people who are less familiar with their craft as “a craft” and more by simple factory workers who are poorly paid.

Another contributing factor is cultural biases, a sensitive issue of 2020s, in which many Western consumers view products made in Asia as being less sophisticated or less advanced than those made in their own countries. This perception is often fueled by media portrayals that depict Asian products as being of lower quality or less reliable than those made in the West.

An example for that would be the everlasting battle between Apple and Samsung. The absurdity behind this “battle” is that most of the components of Apple products are manufactured in China (and some also directly by Samsung). Even so, they are still being seen as superior tech in comparison to the “inferior” Samsung products that are in many cases even more advanced and cutting-edge when it comes to tech innovation. While dissecting the entire tech industry and its politics is not the objective in this paper, reflecting on the causes behind the current situation raises questions about the mental gymnastics in play when it comes to genuine “neutral” decisions we all make on a daily basis – whether consciously or subconsciously. Furthermore on this example is the way malfunctions in Samsung products became viral and were reported in main news channels worldwide whereas similar issues occurred in Apple products and didn’t make it to a global viral phenomenon.

A completely separate issue with “made in” is on a technical aspect. “Made in” is an industry standard[3] which unfortunately allows limited disclosure around a product’s making and its origins. That is due to the normalized standards, which are sensical from a simplified point of view but being leveraged for their flaws. The ingredients of a products making can come from many different places which have substantial differences to their QC methods, techniques of acquiring and processing raw materials, and their ethical view of manufacturing in general. However, it’s the last assembly point in which a product is finalized that’s the determining factor of where it was, so-called, “made”.
For example, a printed t-shirt has on its label that it is “made in Germany”. The fabric is knitted/ woven in Taiwan, and shipped to China where the garment is sewn, and the heat-transfer-foil with the custom print is made in Pakistan. Those are then sent to the seller in Germany, which adheres the print onto the ready-made t-shirt and label it “made in Germany” before distributing it worldwide. This kind of complicated chain of manufacturing is standardized across the industry due to a productivity focused approach about reducing production costs by acquiring the “ingredients” from the most affordable source. By doing so, and regarding the cultural bias about the perceived quality of products made in Asian countries, many companies “mask” the true origin of the product in order to assure their customers a higher quality (perceivably), since the product was made in Europe, rather than in Asia.

The problem with this method stems deep into our customer psychology and our perceived knowledge of manufacturing products in Asian countries. In many cases quantity is put over quality in their production lines due to increasing demands for different products and many companies choosing to manufacture their products in Asia for its cheaper labor costs. It is a difficult problem to solve since it is rooted deeply in this cycle of over-consumption that leads to an influx in production to satisfy the growing demand, which leads to more consumption and so on.



i-4: Survey results

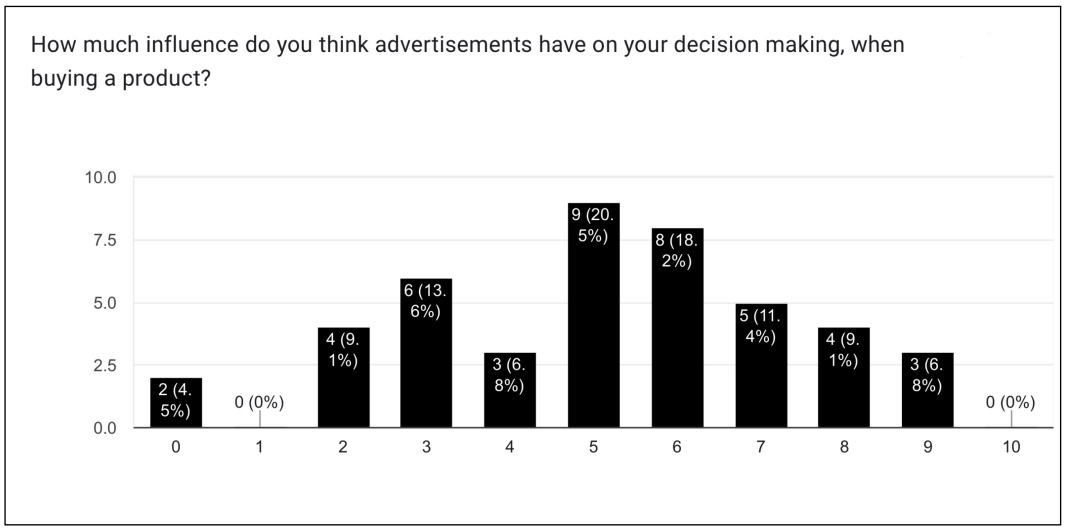
[3] There are several standards for "made in" labels, including:
- International Organization for Standardization (ISO) "Country of Origin" Standard: ISO has developed a standard for labeling products with their country of origin. This standard, ISO 3166, specifies that the country of origin must be clearly and legibly marked on the product or its packaging.
- European Union (EU) "Made in" Labeling Directive: The EU has a labeling directive that requires all products sold within the EU to clearly indicate their country of origin, regarding the last place of assembly.
- World Trade Organization (WTO) "Country of Origin" Labeling Requirements: The WTO has established rules for labeling products with their country of origin.

However, some companies chose a route that is less secretive and mysterious. One of the few big companies that fully discloses their products production line is Apple, who labels all of their products with “made in China, assembled in California, USA” in bold and visible on the package. Although this kind of transparency has proven itself for being beneficial for Apple consumer’s trust, it is still far from being adopted into the brand consciousness of worldwide brands.
In the survey made for this paper (see: previous page, i-4), the participants were asked if the country in which a product was made has an influence on the perceived quality of the product. Only 9.5% of them said ‘no’.
Despite these negative perceptions, it is important to recognize that many products manufactured in Asia are of high quality and are just as reliable as those made in other regions of the world. In fact, many major global brands rely on Asian manufacturers to produce their products and these manufacturers often adhere to strict quality standards and use new advanced technology to ensure that their products meet the highest standards.
Nonetheless, most of the highest innovation in manufacturing technologies are being developed and tested in Asia, to better the whole industry and create the new standards, and as mentioned before- to provide the building blocks for the products of many big brands in the industry.

3.3 _ Customer Manipulation Through Marketing

Perceived quality according to Deming is mostly disconnected from the QC measures followed by the manufacturer, as the perspective in which the customer view the product is not the same as for the manufacturer. The main reason is assumably that the average consumer doesn’t have the right skill-set or knowledge to analyze a garment to its ingredients (e.g. design, fabrics, rivets, buttons, zippers, etc.) and processing components (e.g. seams, hemming, maker’s skills and accuracy). Therefore, what the consumer would be attracted to upon first interaction with the garment/product would usually be more superficial attributes, such as- fit and comfortableness, conscious design, color, trend, price.

That on its own is not wrong, but the problem arrises when brands gained awareness to those aspects that the customer will be attracted to, and found ways to divert the customer attention towards certain products or attributes, and manipulate a customer’s opinion by using different marketing approaches.

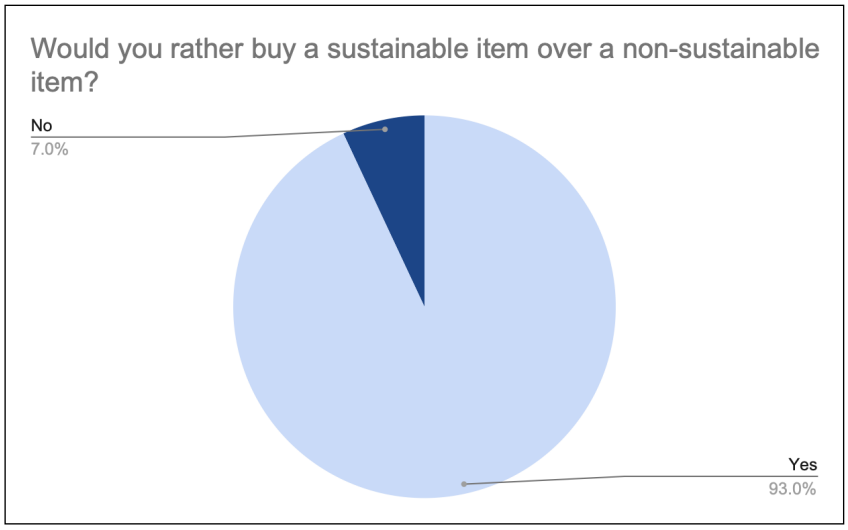


i-5: Survey results

Brands use marketing campaigns that appeal to emotions in order to increase the perceived value of their products. For example, they may use images or stories that evoke feelings of happiness, nostalgia, or aspiration in order to make their products more appealing to consumers and take advantage of certain social causes or use certain terminology to appeal to a certain target group and their supporters.

Pinkwashing, for example, refers to the practice of companies or organizations claiming to support LGBTQ community rights and issues as a marketing tactic while not actually taking concrete actions to support or advance those rights and can create a false sense of authenticity. When companies engage in pinkwashing, they often present themselves as allies for the community and it can lead customers to believe that the company is genuine in its support. This leads to the customers “investing” their money into the cause by purchasing items from that company, but in reality those investments are not going towards the support of the community. Pinkwashing often involves companies exploiting the goodwill of the community’s supporters for their own financial gain and can lead to a feeling of betrayal or cynicism among those who are genuinely supportive of LGBTQ rights and lead them to question the authenticity of other companies who claim to support these issues.

When it comes to sustainability and the ongoing eco/green trend, some companies that are notoriously known for their polluting manufacturing and disposal processes, like H&M, claim to have made significant changes to their chain of supply and production towards a sustainable manufacturing. But in reality this can only apply to some of the supply chain, if at all.



i-6: Survey results

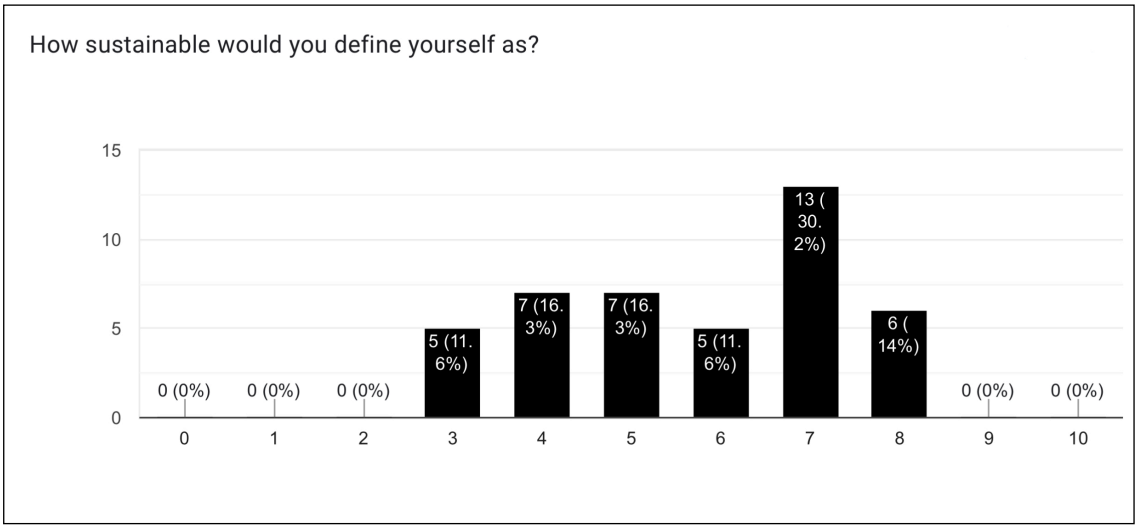
The act of brands understanding the customer desire to purchase more sustainable products, and finding ways to name their products as sustainable without making a difference to help climate change and their involvement in it, is called “Greenwashing”. This influences the perceived value of a product through the use of vague, or misleading, language.
Companies may use words such as “organic”, “natural”, “sustainable”, or “eco-friendly” without clearly defining what these terms mean internally or providing any evidence to support their claims. This can lead consumers to believe that a product is more environmentally friendly than it actually is and can increase its perceived value for the customers.

Another way in which companies greenwash their products is by focusing on a single, narrow aspect of its environmental impact, while ignoring other potentially negative impacts. For

example, a company may claim that its product is made from recycled materials which may lead consumers to believe that the product has a low environmental impact overall. However, if the company fails to mention other aspects of the product's environmental impact, such as its energy consumption, polluting processing methods or the impact of its production and transportation, the overall environmental benefits of the product may be significantly overstated. For instance, the use of organic cotton has become widespread in fast-fashion retailer, although all the other aspects of the production are still highly polluting, such as- chemical dyes and washes, the carbon footprint of the factory and shipping arrangements, etc. In other words- using sustainable materials does not necessarily mean having a sustainable final-product.

Under the same principle of greenwashing, companies may also “trick” the customer about their commitment to environmental and social causes by using logos and symbols that are associated with these causes. Some examples are using green colors and leaves in the logo, which symbolizes nature, or dying white products to have a more natural look in order to appeal to consumers who are concerned about these issues and will engage with products like this without background-checking the companies agenda. However, without proper transparency and accountability, it is difficult for consumers to know whether company's claims are genuine or if they are simply being used as a marketing tactic.

There are several ways that consumers can protect themselves from greenwashing and make more informed purchasing decisions. One important step is to educate oneself about the environmental impacts of different products and materials in general and the claims that companies make about them. This involves researching the products and their supply chains, as well as looking for third-party certifications or labels that indicate that a product meets certain environmental standards. However, it is not the consumer’s responsibility to sift through companies claims in order to find the ones that offer actually-sustainable products and services.



i-7: Survey results

In the survey made for this paper (see: i-6, i-7) it is clear that most consumers would like to contribute to the effort of fighting climate change, even if they define themselves as only somewhat sustainable, by prioritizing the purchase of sustainable items over their non-sustainable counterparts. When companies exploit that, it creates a long-term distrust between customers and companies.

In the past few years, H&M has made efforts to position itself as a leader in sustainability, and its practices have been criticized for not living up to its claims. One major criticism is that H&M has a history of disposing of unsold clothing through incineration. In 2019, it was reported that the company burned 60 tons of unsold clothing in Sweden alone. This is a major sustainability issue because burning clothing releases harmful greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change. Additionally, the process of incineration destroys valuable resources that could have been reused or recycled.

Another issue is H&M's reliance on cheap labor in countries with negligent labor laws and poor working conditions. The company has faced criticism for its labor practices in countries such as Bangladesh, where it was found to be using subcontractors who violated local labor laws. Furthermore, H&M's fast fashion business model is inherently unsustainable because it relies on producing large quantities of cheaply made products that are designed to be worn a few times before being discarded. This contributes to a culture of overconsumption and waste and it is not possible for the company to be truly sustainable while operating under this model because a big part of sustainability is connected to prolonging a product’s lifecycle.

According to H&M's own sustainability report, the company has made efforts to reduce its environmental impact and increase its use of sustainable materials by setting a goal (for example, to use only recycled or sustainably sourced materials in its products by 2030). The company has also implemented a closed loop system for its clothing, which aims to collect and reuse clothing and textiles that would otherwise be discarded. In addition, H&M has partnered with organizations such as the Better Cotton Initiative and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition to promote sustainable practices in the fashion industry. However, H&M has faced criticism for its labor practices and lack of transparency in its supply chain in 2018, as the company was accused of using forced labor in its organic cotton supply chain in Uzbekistan.

Overall, while H&M has made some efforts towards sustainability by using sustainable materials and setting the foundation towards “sustainable fast-fashion”, it is questionable whether the company is truly as sustainable as it is marketed to be. “Sustainable fast-fashion” is a fundamentally problematic idea on its own. There are still significant challenges that need to be addressed in order for the fashion industry to become truly sustainable, beyond the use of sustainable materials.

3.4 _ Availability of Things (Rarity and Value)

Rarity and accessibility are traits which have been influencing customer psychology and the perceived quality of products and services since the beginning of trading. The common belief is that when there is a scarcity of a certain item, those who can afford paying extra for it will do so, and by that increase the overall value of this item.

For example, back when the silk road was the main means of transportation for goods and global trade, it was the Chinese who discovered how to harvest the raw material from the cocoons of silkworms and have strategically hidden this discovery from the rest of the world. By doing so, they were able to monopolize on silk in general and capitalize on its trading. The value of silk along those trade routes was therefore very high and it was considered as a high quality item for the European customers. In the case of Rome and its near-obsession for silk, the remarkable demand for the product within the empire would eventually put Rome in a position of an unfavorable balance-of-trade. The Romans would then send “secret agents” to spy on the

Chinese and steal their invention to create their own silk fabrics, something that resembles the fake products trade we know today. However, the Chinese silk was still the favorable fabric by the European royals, and even today it is considered as the highest-value, highest-quality silk. This example shows how the rarity of certain items can influence their perceived value and quality, and how its generation impact can be carried out for centuries.

The availability of goods and services today has increased dramatically in the past few generations, due in large part to advances in transportation, communication, and technology. These advances have made it easier for people to access a wider variety of products and services and have also contributed to a global increase in trade and commerce. In the past, access to goods and services was often limited by geography. People living in rural areas for example, might have had difficulty obtaining certain types of goods due to the lack of nearby stores or markets. Transportation infrastructure was also limited, making it difficult to bring goods to distant locations. In recent decades however, the availability of goods and services has been greatly expanded by improvements in transportation. The development of automobiles, planes, and other forms of transportation have made it easier for people to travel long distances and for goods to be shipped around the world. Furthermore, the proliferation of e-commerce platforms like Amazon and Alibaba have also made it possible for people to purchase goods from almost anywhere in the world and have them delivered to their doorstep. Communication technology has also played a role in increasing the availability of goods and services. The internet has made it possible for people to access information and resources from around the world and has enabled businesses to reach a global customer base.

In addition to transportation and communication technology, advances in manufacturing and production processes have also contributed to the increase in availability of goods and services. For example, the development of mass production techniques and automation has made it possible to produce goods more efficiently and at a lower cost, making them more accessible to a wider range of people. Unfortunately today's mass production technology is still subpar in many cases to the work of craftsmen who create the product by hand and in small quantities, and the common equation in mass production will usually result in "the more you produce, the less it costs per item". This equation creates a situation where merchants would prefer to produce more, creating an influx in the market, but able to sell each unit for less money. This results in the product being more financially accessible for the consumers which can now afford buying more, and more often, which in turn drives the demand up and creates a consumption cycle with implications down the line that are harmful for both the consumer (in terms of the item's quality and value) and the merchant (in terms of prestige and the ability to keep up with the demand). However, when the merchant chooses not to overproduce and keep the availability limited, it makes the product somewhat rare which increases its perceived value, and by that also its perceived quality. The result of that would be the ability to use higher quality raw materials, which will lead to an increase of the overall quality of the product.

3.5 _ Celebrity Status and Added Value

Social media influencers have the power to distort the perceived value of products through their endorsements and recommendations. These endorsements can create a false sense of popularity or demand for a product, leading consumers to overestimate its value. Influencers are often paid by companies to promote their products, which can affect the authenticity of the endorsement just like fake reviews that were discussed before. In some cases, influencers may be more interested in the financial gain from the promotion rather than the actual quality of the product,

and the fact they get the products for free from the retailer means that their perspective of value-for-money for the product is not as realistic as it is for the general consumer. This can lead to biased or misleading recommendations, which can then mislead consumers into thinking a product is more valuable or high-quality than it actually is. Furthermore, influencers often present a highly curated and idealized version of their lives on social media, which can make it difficult for consumers to accurately gauge the value of the products they recommend.

Social media influencers have become an ubiquitous presence in modern society, with many people watching them for lifestyle inspiration and getting subconsciously fed with product placement and stimulated towards spending their money to become more like their idealized inspiration. While many influencers may seem like a valuable resource for consumers, the reality is that they often distort the perceived value of products, leading to overhyped and misleading advertising. While some influencers disclose these partnerships, many do not, leading to a lack of transparency and a false sense of authenticity and value for the products being promoted as followers may believe that the influencer genuinely likes and uses the product when in reality they are being paid to advertise it.

Moreover, influencers usually use some sort of undisclosed digital enhancements to their content which distorts the viewer's perspective even further by thinking that the use of those promoted products will result in the "flawless" outcome. It is a play on both mental and physical state of the consumer that is done purposefully in order to promote sales and revenue.

Up until a few years ago, that job was part of a not-so-widely-known position in retail stores called Visual Merchandising. The stores would put certain statistics in place to study and follow the sales based on their subconscious appeal for the customers and adapt the visual presentation of items in the store to promote sales. For example, if a certain wall in the store produced better revenue due to its geographic location in the store, it would be assumed that this part of the store is subconsciously more appealing to the customers, and therefor would be used to promote items which might have been less successful in sales so far.

Visual merchandising would also use sales tactics, such as the placement of generic items near where the customer would wait in line to check out in order to drive up sales and increase the customer engagement with products they have not necessarily planned to buy upon arrival to the store. However, placing certain items in area of the store that customers are more likely to be interested in is not a deceiving action but more of a strategy. On the contrary, paid influencers who are paid for their positive reviews and give product recommendations for product they may or may not have even used is a quite a clear form of deception.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The overall idea of companies capitalizing on profits by pushing more products and services to consumers, which drives up the demand, is assumably a short-term capitalistic view that in many cases results with the companies having to modify their products and supply chain to comply with the increasing demand. This has a substantial influence on the product's quality, lifespan and reputation, whereas the more conscious approach allows the adaptation to new materials, trends and technology to be less damaging overall. It is increasingly difficult for us to keep comparing newly-made products to their older versions before technological advancements have changed the way people consume on a daily basis, as increasing population and increasing demand won't seem to slow down, and consumption in general seems to be ever-growing, as more products are being treated as temporary, or of a shorter lifespan.

Assumably, the most reasonable way in terms of quality and value preservation is the sustainable way of consuming and producing less, and by that also making each product to last longer, and providing repairing services. Many products which were made in the past using metal and screw are made today using plastic and glue, which renders them unrepairable for most part. Of course, some products would still be more valuable than others, and some would have better quality than others, but today, instead of having a clear definition of high-end products, tradition, craftsmanship, and the cheaper alternatives, what we experience as the difference is mainly the price of a product, which is based in many cases on the reputation a company gained in times when their production of products used to be smaller, more careful and detailed, and used premium materials and techniques all throughout.

The main issue with quality today is the change in production techniques and raw materials to fit the demand. As the population keeps growing it becomes clearer that the right solution is not to point the blaming finger towards the companies alone, but also at the consumers, as the main thing that has to be changed is the way we consume. The reason why every product today has significantly lower quality than its predecessors is due of over-consumption and our chase for the newest and trendiest, meaning the feasibility of what we already own in favor of its newer version.

A secondary issue is the deception. Customers should have some indication that would clearly signify a product's making. As shown in this paper, companies have already had many cases in which the message to the customer was far more positive than the reality, and it seems like the resources today go more toward marketing instead of being invested towards quality-build of products. That applies also to paid fake-reviews online, Influencers marketing approach, and the company's claims.

Both of those have no direct solution, it is a process of generations to come and the teaching of better consumption culture, with the spread of sustainability rituals across industries which would bring the improvement on the matters. The assumption that high priced items would be made out of premium materials and have a higher quality, which would provide a more durable product, is unfortunately not a general rule that can be applied to every item, and it is up to the consumer to observe, assess, and make their own judgment weather the item worths its price.

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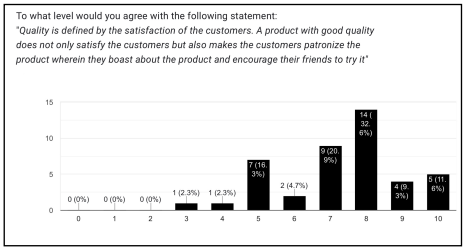
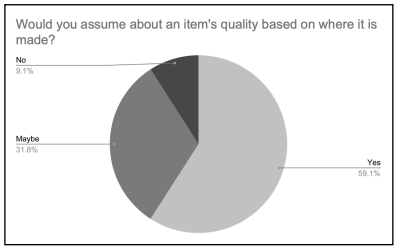
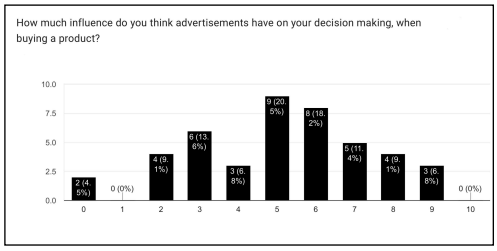
Images Index:

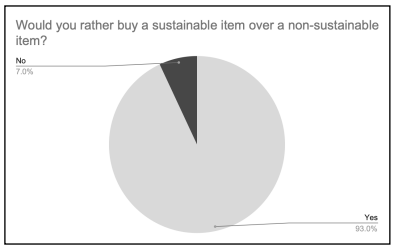
By order of appearance:







Page 16: *3.3 _ Customer Manipulation Through Marketing*
i-6: Survey results.



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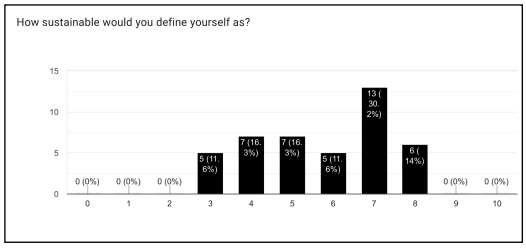
i-7: Survey results.



Complete Survey Results:

Timestamp	Would you rather shop exclusively online or in-store?	Do you check for the quality of an item before buying it?	Do you think you have acquired in your life enough knowledge to determine an item's quality? (quality of the design, materials, processing, etc.)	When you buy a new/ used item - how important is the quality of the item for your decision?	Will you buy an item that has low quality in some circumstances?	How much influence do you think advertisements have on your decision making, when buying a product?	Do you feel, generally, that the price of an item reflects on its quality?	Would you rather buy a sustainable item over a non-sustainable item?	How sustainable would you define yourself as?	Do you follow trends?	To what level would you agree with the following statement: [“DEMING’S QUOTE”]	Would you assume about an item's quality based on where it is made? e.g. "made in China" vs. "made in Italy"	Your age:
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Dedications.

To my loving chosen family
who have supported me
through this process -

Mama
An
Yasmin
Alex
Steph
Matti
Ethan
Dasia
& Frankie

I wouldn't have made it without you.