

**The Role of Social Media-Led Environmental Activism: An Exploration of Environmental
Activism Targeting Fast Fashion on TikTok**

Dina Finjan

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Department of Sociological and Anthropological Studies
Faculty of Social Science
University of Ottawa

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Abstract

This research explores the role of environmental activism on social media that directly targets the fast fashion industry and consumerism by raising awareness and promoting sustainability. Previous research highlights the significance of environmental activism through social media that focuses on raising awareness regarding fashion (Nucci & Hibberd, 2021; Scully, 2021). This research aims to fill empirical gaps to better understand the strategies of environmental activism that circulate on social media to demote fast fashion consumerism and promote the sustainable changes in light of this recent platform for and subject of activism. By adopting a digital ethnography, it analyzes over 120 TikTok videos from 2020 to 2023 that discuss fast fashion and the environment by examining actors' discussions of fast fashion's effect. The analysis specifically focuses on content and methods of content delivery. Findings reveal the educational orientation to motivating the audience, including calls for boycotts. The discussion considers how digital activism may support future environmental activism efforts.

Cette étude explore le rôle de l'activisme environnemental sur les médias sociaux qui cible directement l'industrie de la mode rapide et le consumérisme en sensibilisant et en promouvant la durabilité. Des recherches antérieures ont mis en évidence l'importance de l'activisme environnemental sur les médias sociaux, qui se concentre sur la sensibilisation à la mode (Nucci & Hibberd, 2021 ; Scully, 2021). Cette recherche vise à combler les lacunes empiriques afin de mieux comprendre les stratégies d'activisme environnemental qui circulent sur les médias sociaux pour démolir le consumérisme de la fast fashion et promouvoir les changements durables à la lumière de cette récente plateforme et de ce sujet d'activisme. En adoptant une ethnographie numérique, il analyse plus de 120 vidéos TikTok de 2020 à 2023 qui discutent de la fast fashion et de l'environnement en examinant les discussions des acteurs sur l'effet de la fast fashion. L'analyse se concentre spécifiquement sur le contenu et les méthodes de diffusion du contenu. Les résultats révèlent l'orientation éducative de la motivation du public, y compris les appels au boycott. La discussion porte sur la façon dont l'activisme numérique peut soutenir les futurs efforts d'activisme environnemental.

Keywords: Fast fashion, social media, digital activism, environment, education, boycotting, TikTok

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Introduction

While political groups... argue for collective legislative changes to ensure environmental sustainability in the industry, consumers are also finding their own individual ways of ameliorating their rage against fast fashion. (Hackett, 2019)

The social desire to follow the crowd and to be on trend, evident in behaviours such as changing the way one talks, walks, thinks, and the way one dresses, has been of interests to sociologists for over 120 years (Veblen, 1899). The social desire to be ‘on trend’ through fashion, alongside the emphasis on overconsumption across Global North consumers¹, has created a new area of interest where so much of society wants to be in-fashion, own the latest style, live in this week’s trend and obtain or maintain the highest level of social capital that aligns with constantly looking the best. Through the consumers demand for new styles and quick-changing trends, the concept of ‘fast fashion’ is born within the fashion industry to dominate all other forms of fashion consumerism. However, through the rise of fast fashion, negative environmental implications have also quickly come to light. Environmental destruction and acceleration of the climate change crisis thus implicates clothing manufacturers. Actors and activists across social media have taken the stage to demote fast fashion and begin a newfound social movement against fast fashion for the sake of the environment and to promote environmental protections.

Statement of Problem

“Fast fashion” is a term coined within the fashion industry that refers to clothing that is manufactured inexpensively at a high pace, to be available for immediate purchase as fashion trends quickly appear and disappear from retail and online stores, ensuring something new is

¹ In this thesis, I use the terms "Global North" and "Global South" to differentiate between economically developed and developing regions, recognizing the socio-economic and political disparities they represent (Islam & Hossain, 2015)

constantly for sale, catering to the fast-paced fashion market (Editorial Board of Nature Climate Change, 2018). This mass production of apparel has led to a normalization of overconsumption in the Global North. Fast fashion inherently is an unsustainable practice; by abusing water sources, it is the second-largest consumer and polluter of water, and by heavily relying on synthetic materials to maintain production. Fast fashion production has led to a mass accumulation of waste caused from both the materials used throughout the production of fast fashion pieces and the disposing of fast fashion pieces after they have been purchased and spread across the mass markets, finding their way into landfills, quickly polluting the earth (Rabolt & Miler, 2018). It is evident that fast fashion is a major contributor to current environmental issues.

Furthermore, as the fashion industry has grown in recent years, fast fashion has begun to dominate most physical and online clothing stores, making up a majority of the apparel market (Rabolt & Miler, 2018). Due to the allure of being able to constantly remain “on-trend”, and accessibility to fashion pieces that are most sought after are both easily obtained and financially feasible, it is no question as to why fast fashion has become the most dominant sub-industry within the fashion world, alongside the effects of social media’s role in broadcasting and circulating images to implement new trends. However, as the fast fashion industry has expanded to become a significant contributor to environmental degradation and the climate change crisis, the effects of fast fashion on the environment have led to significant pollution in the Global South and further resource depletion due to the extensive materials and substances needed to maintain the overflow of demand and produce each apparel piece, placing a remarkable amount of stress on the environment (Bick et al., 2018).

In turn, the effects of fast fashion on the environment have not entirely gone unnoticed, leading to the rise of environmental activism, including on social media. Both traditional

environmental activists (including notable activists like Greta Thunberg), and regular social media influencers who do not particularly direct their digital content towards sustainability and social movements, have begun to spread awareness regarding fast fashion and the negative implications it has on the environment through social media platforms (Knupfer et al., 2023). In effect demonstrating that social media has become a powerful tool in raising awareness and instigating social movements that directly oppose and fight against the rising effects of the fast fashion industry and slowly decimate fast fashion consumerism by initiating a collective awareness across the most popular social media platforms widely used in the Global North.

In recent years, the emergence of environmental sustainability within the fashion industry, and the understanding of the global and long-term effects of fast fashion on the environment have led to the rise of environmental activism on social media. In this research, I will explore how social media has become a powerful tool for raising awareness and instigating social movements in opposition to the rising effects of the fast fashion industry by examining the methods by which activists and social media influencers use to discuss environmental activism on social media. By examining the specific methods and tactics that activists and social media influencers use to discuss environmental activism on TikTok, through the examination of actors usage of TikTok to mobilize the social movement against fast fashion, it is greatly understood what power social media holds in developing, framing, and mobilizing a social movement. This study assesses the effectiveness of these methods in mobilizing public opinion and encouraging sustainable consumption practices. Furthermore, this research explores how it has raised collective awareness on social media to motivate a social movement against fast fashion and to gain further insight on the trends, themes, and related discourse on social media that are used to redirect fast fashion consumerism and discuss sustainability. This research attempts to answer the following research

question; How is TikTok as a social media platform being utilized within environmental activism to influence consumer behaviours regarding fast fashion and address its associated environmental damages?

Thesis Outline

In chapter one, I provide a background on the current understandings of fast fashion and environmental activism. I discuss what fast fashion is defined to be, how it has greatly risen in popularity amongst Global North consumers, and the relationship between social media and fast fashion. Going over the advancements of fashion, the historical, global, and cultural significance of fashion, and the transition from slow, traditional fashion production methods to the world dominating fast fashion production methods, these understandings provide us with a preliminary background of the research to follow and the significance of fast fashion on the Global North economy. To follow, I discuss the relationship between fast fashion and social media, how mainstream and underground culture have played significant roles in determining trends and fads, and discussing how social media has begun to play a significant role in the development of trends and newfound ‘micro-trends’. I highlight examples of actors and celebrities utilizing their platforms to both promote and demote fast fashion consumption and the methods of which highlighted by previous authors that are used to endorse various fast fashion products or corporations. Next, I present current understandings of fast fashion and social media and its relationship to the environment. I review the cyclical movements of fast fashion pieces between society and the environment, through production, consumption, and waste, in order to provide background on the environmental devastations caused by fast fashion and its current relationship to climate change. I discuss the previous literature highlighting the effects of using social media in environmental activism and its significance on social movements. To conclude, I emphasize the

importance of social media on environmental activism and social movements related to overconsumption mitigation.

Chapter two reviews the theoretical frameworks that guide this research. It begins with a discussion and overview of the preliminary accounts of Goffman (1959; 1974) and Bateson (1972) on frames and framing theory and the relevant usage of framing theory within this research due to its significant role in media, politics, social movements, and communications. Next, I provide an overview of Benford and Snow's (2000) framing model, identifying the three fundamental framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing, and their significant roles in future framing tasks. I highlight debates and criticisms of framing theory in order to expose some of the issues of generalizability that have been highlighted by previous authors. Next, I discuss the significance and previous usage of framing theory on the related topics of framing social problems, new social movements, and new media to provide an explanation of the relevant usage of framing theory within this research. Finally, I present an overview of the intended usage of framing theory within this thesis and how it will examine and analyze the future qualitative results.

In chapter three, I present my methodological approach, guided by a definition and outline of Silverman's (2021) digital ethnography method. I provide a background on my choice of social media platform, research timeline, data collection amount, and other research choices to ensure a rigorous analysis of data. Highlighting the data analysis method to be utilized and the insurance of maintaining the contextual understandings of the found data, this research employs a thematic analysis to systematically identify and interpret the observed patterns throughout the analyzed TikTok videos. The research question is presented, as are the key search terms used to locate videos for analysis. I present my thematic framework, personal reflexivity, acknowledgements for

limitations, and explain how this research aims to contribute to the critical literature on social media-led activism.

The data collection results are presented in chapter four. I begin with an overview of the data collection and coding process, highlighting the methods of collection and analysis through NVivo. I explain the extrapolation of empirical data from videos, including my process for identifying significant characteristics in the videos. Next, I define the coding process used to analyze my findings, the development of all codes, and the definition and explanation of each major code and categorization. I highlight the coding scheme and analysis, drawing on the application of my systemic process for viewing, recording, and identifying elements of significance to be analyzed. To follow, I present the definition and organization of themes, where the videographic material of the discourse analysis is organized first in alphabetical order and then in 'clusters' of subjective characteristic titles by theme: Alternatives, Boycotting, Boycotting, Comedically Pointed, Commentary on Fast Fashion, Guilt and Shaming, and Educating. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a presentation of my thematic analysis, where I identify the major themes found throughout the data, discuss them, and provide a deeper explanation with examples to highlight their significance within the findings.

A critical analysis of the findings are conducted in chapter five, which builds on the previous chapter's results where I continue the thematic analysis of the analyzed videos within their respective codes and categorizations. I tie links and analyze the findings through Benford and Snow's (2000) framing theory model to deepen the understanding between framing theory and the results of this research. Furthermore, throughout this chapter I re-identify the presented research question and the possible answers to it. I analyze the findings of this research in relation to the dominant research themes and provide a deeper discussion of how these findings relate to the

central themes of this research; activism and politics on social media, and fast fashion on TikTok, highlighting the usage and importance of educating and knowledge presentation on social movement advancement.

In chapter six, the concluding chapter, I touch on the limitations of the current research and the hindrances that occurred that may present an effect on the analyzed results. Through the acknowledgement of the limitations I observed, I offer suggestions for future research, highlighting the significance and responsibility of conducting research on social media and the importance of being careful and mindful towards your research, and alternatively, highlighting the vast opportunity for future research within social movements on social media and fast fashion on TikTok, being an ever-growing research subject that is boundless. Finally, I conclude with my closing remarks, presenting the major findings and key takeaways of this thesis and the wider implications towards the future of activism through the utilization of social media, and the many great changes to come within society through education, knowledge expansion, and social movements that are presented on social media in which the whole world can access and partake.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

What is Fast Fashion?

Fast-fashion brands produce roughly 52 fashion micro-seasons, 48 seasons more than the average autumn, winter, summer, and spring. Every week a new style or trend rotates in and out of social media feeds and current wants and desires, making way for the brand new. The social need to fit in and consume to be a part of each micro-seasonal trend fuels the current rising issue of fast fashion that leads to a mass amount of waste, in turn becoming a significant contributor to climate change (Reilly & Hawley, 2019; Good on You, 2022). Fast fashion not only produces an alarming volume of waste but also forms a direct link to the current climate change crisis. The environmental impact extends beyond the immediate issue of waste, as the production, transportation, and disposal of fast fashion items contribute significantly to the carbon footprint, intensifying the broader challenges associated with climate change. Within the year 2022 alone, the fast fashion industry experienced a serious boom in consumption rates. As clothing production has increased, the lifespan of garments has decreased. Emphasizing that product quality has strikingly deteriorated, leading to overall usage/wear of product to also decrease. Due to the little time it takes, and the low-cost materials used, clothing items made in fast fashion are more likely to damage quickly by prioritizing a quantity over quality mindset (Mulhern, 2022).

Fast fashion has had detrimental impacts on the environment. Nature Climate Change (2018) investigated this demographic shift in apparel consumerism and estimates that current resource consumption levels will triple by 2050. It was found that textile production produces roughly 1.2 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent per year, about 60% of these textiles are exclusively used by the fashion industry. According to Nature Climate Change (2018), in 2015 polyester production summated 706 billion kilograms of CO₂, alternative materials such as cotton also come

at a natural cost, requiring large spaces of land and freshwater for efficient production. Estimating that roughly 60% of fast fashion clothing produced is disposed of within a year of production, ending up in landfills or being incinerated due to limitations in recycling options. Fast fashion produced half a million tonnes of microplastics in 2022, and garments have become a home for microplastics as most fast fashion pieces are solely made from nylon or polyester. Microplastics are spread through each wash and dry cycle where microfilaments are then shed and moved through municipal sewage systems and ending up in local waterways, ending up in food and drinking water. It is estimated that half a million tonnes of micro-plastics reach the ocean each year and will presumably increase with the inevitable global expansion of the fast fashion industry (Mulhern, 2022).

The Rise of Fast Fashion

Throughout history, fashion has been culturally and economically significant across many different social worlds, being an important marker for status and culture (Aspers & Godart, 2013). Fashion has been used to convey social status, cultural, ethnic and/or religious backgrounds, artistic interests, gender expressions, etc. Fashion goes beyond clothing, fashion is a dynamic system of cultural expressions and social identities, that shape individual and collective behaviours, beliefs, and perceptions through the creation, dissemination, and adoption of clothing styles, trends, and aesthetics within many different societies (Baek et al., 2013; Serdari, 2020). As patterns in fashion trends evolve, the immense need and social desirability to integrate into popular culture is focused onto fashion (Aspers & Godart, 2013).

With the current Western economic climate being characterized by a blend of post-pandemic recovery efforts, persistent inflation concerns, evolving labour market dynamics, and ongoing supply chain disruptions, the fashion industry and coinciding markets have become

greatly affected by the economic declinations. This presents both challenges and opportunities for the fast fashion industry. Initially, the downturn resulted in reduced consumer spending and disrupted supply chains, disturbing its typical high-turnover rates. However, as economic uncertainties lingered, fast fashion capitalized on consumers' desire for affordability, offering budget-friendly clothing options during financially challenging times. The economic decline led many fast fashion brands to reassess their marketing strategies, leading to innovations such as online sales, digital marketing, and rapid supply chain management, allowing them to quickly adapt to changing consumer behaviours and preferences and begin to dominate the fashion industry (Busch, 2022; Sagapova et al., 2022). Fast fashion is then seen as a simple solution to the issue of constant changes in desirability and the volatility of fashion in the 21st century.

Fast fashion allows one to fit into any social trend at any time, conveying oneself however they desire without the financial constraints that traditional slow fashion has; the alternative form of fashion production to fast fashion that emphasizes a comprehensive approach to clothing production and consumption, by prioritizing ethical sourcing, craftsmanship, and longevity over micro-trends and disposable fashion (Hall, 2018). The transition from traditional fashion (slow fashion) into the current phenomena of fast fashion is a significant driver to understanding the implications of fast fashion globally. Slow fashion is defined as the antithesis of fast fashion, where products are created more sustainably by using higher quality materials that result in less of an environmental footprint, furthermore by using materials that are sustainably sourced (oftentimes by using recycled materials like cotton), are made in the Global North with stricter employee protection standards (ex. minimum wages, unions, workers' rights, and protection laws, safe work environment and tools, etc.), and are made to have a longer lifespan being more durable and

upholding greater cost per wear, however slow fashion commodities do not come at an equal cost to fast fashion products and are generally more costly (Hall, 2018).

Through an investigation of the future of global fashion, Jang et al., (2012) conducted in-depth interviews among individuals who have extensive knowledge of the fashion industry and ethical fashion by steering society away from fast fashion to lessen the impacts on the environment. Finding that uses of; (1) Eco-friendly design sourcing, (2) reform style contests (working side by side with consumers attempting to negate the traditional “trickle down” and current “trickle up” fashion business models), (3) redesign consulting, (4) one-on-one sponsorship (enabling brand storytelling about fair-trade processes and removing the disconnect between producer and consumer), and (5) eco-friendly galleries. All of these are social contents within sustainable fashion that can be implemented in this shift away from fast fashion, a model widely used by slow fashion brands such as Patagonia, Reformation, and Levi’s (Jang et al., 2012; Rodríguez et al., 2021). With these social contents, Jang et al., (2012) highlight that ethical fashion consumption is possible when a positive relationship between producer and consumer is established and accessibility to sustainable fashion is increased, in turn, this effort could provide mitigation in environmental damages caused by fast fashion to be established.

The great allure of fast fashion products is its affordability. While slow fashion pieces oftentimes come at a high price point, the average consumer may not see as practical to spend a lot of money on an apparel piece, nor be in a socio-economic position to spend a significant amount of money on slow fashion. With the dominance of ‘micro-trends’, it may not feel useful to spend large amounts of money on a piece of clothing that will no longer be desirable in a short amount of time. However, a high cost of goods does not automatically equate to sustainable fashion, as many higher-end fashion companies have come to take on fast fashion practices like decreasing

overhead costs by implementing unethical work standards and by using materials that are damaging to the environment but continue to maintain significantly higher pricing to ensure consumers are paying for the luxury of the brand, rather than the quality. These fast fashion pieces are then sold at sufficiently high rates while being produced within short periods of time- fulfilling the criteria for fast fashion apparel but price-gouging to imply that the products are of slow fashion status (Rodríguez et al., 2021).

The ever-changing nature of the fashion industry is important, as fashion influences how people think about, produce, and consume apparel. Especially in the Global North where there is an increased demand for fast fashion production, as opposed to other nations that actively attempt to combat fast fashion through different methods. For example, the kimono, an attire that is central to Japanese fashion and culture, demonstrates the usage of slow fashion in its production phases by its long-term re-wearability and high-quality fabrics that are maintained for long periods of time (Hall, 2018). Fast fashion is designed for a “trickle-up effect” from consumers to designers, where consumer ideas and preferences are quickly incorporated into a design concept for marketability, taking notes from social media to develop new trends and pieces (Hall, 2018). Opposite from the traditional fashion market, where trends and styles are determined by designers, trends then slowly trickle down from high-end fashion runways and magazines into common retail stores. Fast fashion is about quickly responding to micro-trends and meeting demands with low-quality clothing. In the traditional fashion system, a designer may debut a fashion line or apparel piece on a runway, and it would become accessible to the general public over time. With fast fashion and the high turn-over rates it produces, this availability shortens, a concept may be debuted and soon after a fast fashion brand may copy/replicate the pieces and within a week to be available for sale (Derek Guy [@dieworkwear], 2023; Guy, 2022).

This rapidity in production allows companies to release more clothing lines in a year. Where high-end designers may typically release two to five collections per year, companies like Zara and H&M will release 16 to 24 yearly, while Shein releases new pieces hourly. Fast fashion speeds up the overall fashion trend cycle, leading to fashion trends quickly becoming overused and “burnt” out and the sudden ubiquity of various trends leads most consumers to no longer desire these pieces, soon becoming landfill waste due to low purchase rates from the factories or being thrown out by consumers. Much of this rapid movement within the fashion industry may be attributed to online content and social media. Fast fashion functions within an ecosystem that utilizes consumers with limited budgets that are trying to keep up with breakneck cycles, by purchasing new pieces that they may wear once or never at all before throwing them away, resulting in the current environmental issues to which fast fashion is contributing (Guy, 2022).

Throughout the transition from slow fashion to fast fashion, perceptions towards clothing and fashion themselves have also greatly evolved. Ideologies towards fashion and beauty have shifted from a privilege to a right in the Global North, where there is a social entitlement to fulfilling fashion trends, this attitude towards commodities and consumption drives the fast fashion industry. The perception of fashion and beauty has undergone a significant transformation, where previously, access to the latest trends and fashionable clothes were oftentimes considered a privilege that was reserved for the affluent and elite classes (Bourdieu, 1985; Huggard et al., 2023; K. Smith, 2018). Clothing and fashion concepts that debuted on the runways would be accessible to individuals of higher social class sooner than it would appear in general retail stores- at a significant price. However, societal shifts and cultural changes have redefined these ideologies extensively, positioning beauty and fashion as perceived rights rather than exclusive privileges once reserved for the affluent.

This shift stems from a broader change in social mindsets where consumers feel entitled to access and participating in every fashion trend, which is driven by a belief that experiencing a participation in trends is a fundamental aspect of contemporary living. The social entitlement to fashion becomes evident through widespread consumer expectations, where consumers anticipate easily accessible, affordable, and original clothing options that stay aligned with current trends. The social entitlement of beauty and fashion ideals contributes significantly to the proliferation of the fast fashion industry as consumers increasingly perceive access to affordable, trendy clothing as a societal expectation rather than a luxury (Huggard et al., 2023; Meek, 2016; Wilson, 1985; Wolf, 2002).

Low retail prices for fast fashion apparel have led consumers to view clothing pieces as disposable, to the extent that many have dubbed fast fashion as “McFashion”, due to the speed at which the gratification is provided, and the globalized nature of the fast fashion industry in the Global North (Hall, 2018). The comical term “McFashion” used to equate fast fashion to fast food does not fall far away from sociologist Dr. George Ritzer’s framework of “McDonaldization”. McDonaldization describes the increase of rationalization, efficiency, and standardization in a modern capitalist society, using the fast-food industry as a metaphor for this proposed framework.

Dr. Ritzer identifies four key dimensions of McDonaldization: (1) Efficiency, an emphasis on maximizing output with minimal input. Tasks are streamlined, and processes are designed to be as efficient as possible, usually through automation and division of labour. (2) Calculability; focuses on quantifiable aspects, like speed of service and cost. Quantity is prioritized over quality, emphasizing measurable outcomes. (3) Predictability, a standardization and predictability of products and services. Consumers may expect the same quality of consumption regardless of location, providing a sense of familiarity and reassurance. And (4) Control, an exertion of control

over employees and consumers through standardized procedures, surveillance, and regulations. Ensuring that tasks are performed uniformly, overall leading to predictability and efficiency of the system (Ritzer, 2014). The McDonaldization of society includes the phenomena of fast fashion where ideally, the best fast fashion brand emphasizes and excels in overall company efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Hall, 2018; Ritzer, 2014). Fast fashion has dominated all other fashion industries by simply adhering to the social preferences of meeting the economic concept of “supply and demand” and utilizing the four key dimensions of McDonaldization, where demand is ever-growing and constructed by social trends and desirability, and companies meet these demands as quickly as possible through means that meet the criteria of fast fashion, paying no mind to the consequences they hold on the environment, speeding up the treadmill of production (Curran, 2017; Hall, 2018).

Fast Fashion and Social Media

As social media becomes the backbone of the fashion industry, revolving around current styles and trends, relying solely on consumer wants and demands has become the ultimate standard. Fast fashion is designed for a trickle-up effect from consumers to designers, where consumer ideas and preferences are quickly incorporated into a design concept for marketability, taking heavy influence from social media to develop new trends (Haenlein et al., 2020; Hall, 2018). In the digital era, Clay Shirky (2010) highlights that individual’s time and attention have become valuable commodities, Shirky suggests that individuals, as consumers of digital content and platforms, inadvertently become a part of a larger economic system where their attention and data are the products. Social media platforms benefit from their user engagement and data, using it to tailor advertisements and services, creating a cycle where users contribute to their own

commodification through their consumption patterns, actively contributing to the production and consumption of content in the digital landscape (Shirky, 2010).

Though the development of fashion and apparel finds its way onto the runway before becoming an everyday wardrobe for many, fashion goes far beyond the minds of luxury brand designer's creative processes. The development of different fashion concepts and trends have historically intertwined deeply with music, art, cultural appropriation, and countercultural movements, embodying societal shifts and expressive forms. Music genres such as punk, hip-hop, and rock have not only influenced clothing styles but also conveyed distinct attitudes and values and defined many fashion eras throughout history. Artistic movements such as surrealism and avant-garde have inspired many unconventional fashion designs, blurring the lines between art and attire. The phenomena of cultural appropriation in fashion, while rightfully controversial and deeply rooted in racial injustice, have seen elements from marginalized cultures integrated into mainstream fashion, sparking dialogues about respect, representation, and a general 'whitewashing' of culturally traditional fashion pieces. Countercultures like hippie and grunge movements have defied norms and traditional standards for fashion, forging unique fashion identities and challenging established standards, reflecting the complex relationship between fashion, gender, culture, and societal narratives (I. L. Davis, 2021; Jardim, 2023).

Throughout many social media platforms, online engagements towards media trends have become a significant driver for what is or is not fashionable, attractive, and marketable at any given time. This mode of communication has held a great influence on fashion preferences through strategies such as hashtags, haul videos, viral videos/images, and influencer marketing (Haenlein et al., 2020; Quijada et al., 2021). The dynamics of taste and marketability are largely influenced by the rapid circulation of micro-trends across the majority of social media platforms, where

influencers, content creators, and celebrities all wield a significant influence on their followers' interest and consumer habits. The visual/video nature of some social media platforms further the speed at which trends change, determining what is deemed trendy at any given moment. Celebrity endorsements further these trends as collaborations with well-known media figures contribute to the marketability of specific styles and what is most desired at the moment. Fast fashion brands are able to closely monitor high-end fashion shows and quickly replicate runway trends and stay attuned to seasonal and cultural shifts in response to consumer demands (Cline, 2012; Crane, 2001; Quijada et al., 2021). Fast fashion has become a foundation for these preferences through the promotion of overconsumption on social media. Obsessive consumer culture shapes the system of social value, within the fashion industry, a fetishization of commodities is then enhanced further, where social worth is determined by the level of consumption (Ghosh, 2013; Marx, 1867), ushering in the new era of fashion.

Amidst the sleeplessness of social media, the relentless push for overconsumption, especially within the context of fast fashion, looms as an incessant pressure to consume and to obtain more than ever before. This societal pressure to over-consume can be attributed to a combination of western-cultural values that link material possessions to success along with media promotions and depictions of consumerist lifestyles, economic systems that rely on continuous growth, and various emotional factors like social comparisons and fear of missing out, furthering the societal pressure to over-consume, creating a cycle where individuals are driven to acquire more than they need (Kasser, 2002; Raworth, 2017; Weber, 1905). Planned obsolescence and the pursuit of instant gratification that is highlighted on social media platforms that instigate and promote fast fashion further fuel the cycle, lead individuals to acquire more than necessary.

The aforementioned social media platforms, powered by visually enticing content and influential figures, persisting a culture that glorifies overconsumption and the rapid disposal of trends alongside their apparel pieces, significantly distorting consumer mindsets and behaviours, and speeding up a cycle of unsustainable consumption. Social media has created a new frame of thinking regarding consumption, which is that *more* is always better. The more you have, the better you are thriving. The concept of overconsumption is not reserved for fast fashion, nor is it one that was invented by social media, rather it is elevated due to the effects of social media and conspicuous consumption demonstrations. Conspicuous consumption refers to the socio-economic phenomenon characterized by the acquisition and display of luxury goods and services, often to showcase one's wealth and status to others and elicit admiration (Shanthi et al., 2019). Within the context of fast fashion and social media, conspicuous consumption occurs when influencers excessively showcase and consume trendy, often inexpensive, and rapidly changing fashion items to project an image of affluence. Social media platforms serve as a stage for influencers to display their possessions and trendy lifestyles, where the desire to project an aspirational image encourages a constant acquisition. The emphasis on showcasing a lavish, trendsetting lifestyle through frequent displays of new clothing aligns with the phenomena of conspicuous consumption, where the value lies in the display and visibility of consumption rather than the inherent utility or quality of the products itself leading to the desirability for overconsumption, promoting a "more is better" mentality (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2010; L. Huang & Shi, 2015; Qattan & Al Khasawneh, 2020; Short, 2022; Soron, 2010).

Throughout the rise of social media and the ability to advertise through social media content creators, the promotion of overconsumption is highly perpetuated and implicitly and explicitly in effect, significantly dominating, especially within the context of fast fashion where

influencer marketing is the most dominant form of fast fashion advertisements. Influencer marketing consists of different types of videos including sponsored videos from various brands where a social media influencer is showing off various pieces, they have received from particular fast fashion brands (oftentimes providing their viewers a discount/coupon code too). “Haul videos” feature influencers displaying and reviewing their recent shopping purchases, creating engaging content centered around overconsumption, fashion, and product reviews. These marketing videos often showcase various items acquired throughout the shopping haul, offering insights, opinions, and sometimes styling suggestions to their audiences. Research exploring loyalty towards fast fashion stores reveals the complex interplay of store attributes and socio-environmental responsibility. These elements, while critical in framing consumer deviation, often intertwine with social media's significant influence over trends and desirability, which often glorifies and normalizes fast fashion consumption and overall overconsumption (Dabija et al., 2022). The appeal of social media influencers is amplified by trends and micro-trends, where influential figures often prioritize and glamorize fast fashion choices over sustainable alternatives.

In June of 2023 fast fashion brand, Shein flew a group of social media content creators on a trip to some of their manufacturing facilities in Guangzhou, China. The intention of this trip was to show the influencers’ followers that contrary to the ongoing scandals surrounding forced labour and potentially hazardous material, the company’s operations are all above board. As planned, the influencers’ showed off to their fans how impressed they are with the high-tech facility. These influencers and Shein ambassadors faced significant backlash for participating in a propaganda stunt that was intended to mislead customers and promote/glamourize fast fashion (Michie, 2023; Romo, 2023; The Washington Post, 2023).

With recognizable YouTube content creators (YouTubers) who have subscribed audiences ranging from one million to 24 million users including James Charles, Kerina Wang, Naomi Jon, and Roxxasaurus who all curate and produce fashion and beauty related content and have created videos that promote, discuss, or highlight fast fashion brands predominantly through haul videos. Each video gained millions of views and impressions. Beyond just social media influencers, celebrities have also promoted fast fashion brands to their followers through brand deals, collaboration lines, modeling photoshoots, etc. American rapper Cardi B collaborated with Fashion Nova in 2018 generating for the brand over \$1 million USD in sales within 24-hours of its initial launch. Through this collaboration, and openly being a fan of the company, Cardi B greatly promoted Fashion Nova to her large audience. Model and actress Cara Delevingne released a collection with Nasty Gal, alongside other notable celebrities such as Megan Fox with Boohoo, and Ashley Graham with Pretty Little Thing. Celebrities have significant influence over the general public, beyond their own fans, which makes them incredibly strong marketing tools (Moiseieva, 2021). Consequently, the promotion of fast fashion on social platforms promotes a cycle of overconsumption, overshadowing the discourse regarding more fulfilling relationships with clothing (slow fashion, capsule wardrobes, degrowth consumption, etc.), as highlighted by design interventions aimed at nurturing mindful consumption practices (Short, 2022; Whitty, 2018).

Fast fashion is designed to fuel overconsumption within its business model by focusing on rapid production cycles and low-cost clothing. By constantly producing new collections that cater to any current micro-trend, fast fashion brands are able to create a sense of urgency and disposability around clothing. This encourages consumers to perceive clothing as ephemeral and easily replaceable, triggering frequent purchases to stay in line with the sudden fashion trends. The

prevalence of sales, discounts, and promotions furthers this consumption behaviour and an emphasis on limited editions, exclusivity, and seasonal releases fuels the desire for quick purchases, driving a mindset that prioritizes acquisition and consumption over longevity or mindful consumption ultimately leading to overconsumption. Social media influencer culture amplifies this cycle by constantly showcasing new trends/styles and creating a culture of comparison and imitation. The constant influx of visually appealing content on social media creates a pressure to keep up with the ever-changing fashion trends.

The popularity of social media continues to uphold the rapid cycle of consumption, often steering consumers away from sustainable choices, emphasizing the allure of fast fashion and inadvertently endorsing overconsumption behaviours (Ghosh, 2013; Szmydke-Cacciapalle, 2018). Social media fuels overconsumption by creating an environment where constant exposure to trends, influencer endorsements, and personalized product suggestions generates a culture of overconsumption through impulsive and frequent purchasing habits. The visual and aesthetic focus of social media, coinciding with the efficiency of online shopping, inadvertently encourages audiences to consistently update their attire to align with current trends and maintain an aesthetically pleasing online persona. The consequences of these dynamics contribute to a cycle of continuous consumption on social media (M. del R. Bonilla et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2023; Short, 2022).

Social media has become the most influential platform in driving the extensive promotion of fast fashion consumption, through many tactics such as collaborations/promoted content (advertisements), discount codes and promotions, styled looks and outfit inspiration, engaging content formats (showcase fast fashion pieces dynamically), fashion hauls and reviews, trend spotting/predicting and styling challenges, and user-generated content campaigns (reposting

customers' photos wearing their clothing). These tactics leverage the creators' influence, engagement, and creativity to effectively promote fast fashion brands, contributing to their visibility and sales through social media platforms. Influencers promote fast fashion by showcasing these apparel pieces as stylish, trendy, and accessible through various endorsement tactics like, hauls, affiliate marketing, discount codes, and micro-trendsetting. Audiences are influenced by the aspirational lifestyle that is being portrayed by the influencers, leading them to perceive fast fashion items as “must haves” to emulate their favourite personalities or stay current with evolving trends. The credibility and authority of these influencers prompt audiences/consumers to make impulsive purchases, driven by the desire to align with the perceived glamorous lifestyle depicted on social media and to secure the current trending fashion pieces, contributing to the continuation of fast fashion consumption patterns. The interconnectedness between social media and fast fashion is marked by instances of imitation and replication, where fast fashion websites, propelled by social media, gain traction by emulating trends and designs (Sawczyn, 2020).

Each social media platform contributes to the promotion of fast fashion in its own way that is specific to its own platform stylization (videos, text posts, images) and its overall demographic interests. The interaction dynamics of Instagram followers within fast fashion, emphasizes how brands like H&M leverage platforms like Instagram to cultivate extensive engagement and promotion. Social media, particularly X (previously known as Twitter), are spaces where both support and backlash toward fast fashion unfold. Though fashion is not the centre of the ongoing debate, it more-less acts as a specific situation to demonstrate the excessively damaging consumer habits of the Global North. Backlash towards fast fashion may not necessarily be about the fashion itself, whether or not the apparel pieces are or are not appealing, rather the fact that as a concept it

does more harm than good and environmental awareness should supersede micro-trends fast fashion. The focus of this backlash is on the detrimental impacts the fast fashion industry has on the environmental crisis. Here, the amplification of fast fashion websites occur through varied interactions, ranging from endorsements to critical discussions, ultimately contributing to their visibility and reach (Balabanova et al., 2023; M. del R. Bonilla et al., 2019).

Furthermore, previous literature highlights that age is a significant moderating factor for social media marketing activities, as certain platforms like Instagram target specific demographics in order to efficiently promote certain brands. The engagement tactics that are employed by fast fashion brands on social media further amplify their reach, particularly among younger audiences, enhancing the visibility and promotion of their websites. Influencer marketing unveils the strategic use of social media creators/actors in promoting fast fashion consumption, underscoring how these collaborations intensify the promotion and visibility of these websites (Hazzam, 2021; Landreth Grau, 2022; Van & Fah, 2022). Broadly speaking, influencers, social media influencer, content creator, e-celebrity, may all be terms used interchangeably to define an online persona, (whether that be as a group of individuals or an individual) who leverages their social media platform's reach and engagement to influence audience behaviours, opinions, or purchasing decisions through creating and sharing content specifically tailored to their own niche or expertise. In the context of fast fashion and social media the content may be more tailored towards fashion and styling for audiences who have more interest in trends within fashion. By emphasizing the multi-faceted role of social media in extensively promoting fast fashion websites, from leveraging engagement to debates, leveraging influencers, and even blurring the lines between originality and replication, ultimately amplifying the visibility and allure of these brands online.

The Vicious Cycle

Production

Fashion is a global industry, one in which most of the world's fashion industry apparel production is located in developing countries. China was previously the leading producer of most textiles and apparel pieces; however recently, production and labour costs have begun to rise, and as a result, production has begun to shift to other countries within the Global South such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Pakistan where production costs are significantly lower (Rabolt & Miler, 2018). As the demand for cheaper clothes rapidly increases, fast fashion production amplifies. Many notable fashion-based companies such as H&M and Zara have become world leaders within the fashion industry. In the rise of fast fashion, Zara became a leader in the fast fashion industry, advertising the fact that they have new pieces for sale every two weeks (Sweeny, 2015). Zara and H&M capitalize on fast fashion by quickly turning micro-trends into mass-produced, affordable clothing. By closely tracking fashion shifts, swiftly creating designs, and rapidly stocking their markets, these two companies are able to meet the ever-changing consumer demands for trendy apparel. This rapid cycle encourages frequent purchases, setting the stage for their dominance in the fast fashion industry.

Online-only shopping begins to compete and dominate and fast fashion websites such as SHEIN and AliExpress begin to take over the apparel market. Online retailers like Shein, Boohoo, and Temu have revolutionized fast fashion by utilizing the power of social media to expedite trend transformation into readily available, budget-friendly clothing. Designers and brands are pushed to create and produce new styles quickly in order to stay ahead of micro-trends, often copying runway trends at affordable prices. The pressure to innovate on a tight schedule, alongside focusing on cost-effectiveness, encourages the use of inexpensive materials and streamlined production processes, influencing design choices. The availability of attractive and low-cost items, combined

with aggressive marketing strategies, pulls consumers towards overconsumption habits. Social media and their influencers are powerful pull factors, by showcasing and endorsing fast fashion apparel, curating a culture of instant gratification, and encouraging audiences to quickly buy and throw out trends (Reilly & Hawley, 2019).

Shein, in particular, maximizes the speed of trend adaptation, by using data analytics to swiftly identify emerging styles. Online-only retailers like Shein, Temu, Cider, etc., operate on a fast-fashion business model that emphasizes speed, and data-driven decision-making. Streamlining their operations by closely tracking consumer trends through data analytics and social media monitoring, allowing them to quickly produce and release new clothing lines based on current fashion trends. These companies maintain minimal physical inventory, and often utilize a "just-in-time" production strategy, that reduces overhead costs associated with storing large quantities of merchandise. They leverage economies of scale by partnering with manufacturers that are capable of rapid production and low-cost manufacturing (oftentimes in the Global South) facilitating quick turnovers rates at low prices.

The online platform's user-friendly interface, personalized recommendations, and targeted marketing strategies contribute to high customer engagement and frequent purchases, fostering a continuous cycle of fast turnovers and re-inventories. The design of most fast fashion websites utilizes this big, bold, high-pressure sales tactic of sale countdowns and flashing lights to make consumers feel like they need to buy it **now**. It is intended to convince consumers to purchase something that they did not need, only because it is a great deal, it is made to feel like a game of treasure hunting where the reward is a lot of products for a minimal price, playing on the psychology of a consumer's reward and gratification system (Future Proof, 2023). Whereas traditional in-person stores often operate on a different model compared to online-only retailers.

Physical stores carry a set inventory that is usually determined in advance and displayed for customers to browse and purchase in-person. Unlike online retailers that rely on data analytics and rapid production, traditional stores may have longer lead times for restocking or introducing new inventory due to the necessity of physical production, distribution, and stocking logistics. They also result in higher overhead costs, including expenses related to maintaining physical retail spaces, staffing, utilities, and inventory storage. This streamlined online-only model allows for rapid design, production, and global distribution, ensuring that the latest trends reach consumers with tremendous speed. By offering a large array of trendy and affordable clothing options, Shein has capitalized on the digital landscape, appealing to younger demographics and further fueling the culture of quick, disposable fashion (Carr, 2022; Muthu, 2019)

Rabolt & Miler (2018) contend that economic success in the production of fast fashion is dependent on a strategy of planned obsolescence (the deliberate design of products to have a limited lifespan, encouraging frequent replacements and generating recurring consumer demand), with its intentions for the trends and the pieces to never truly last long and maintain the revolving door of fashion and beauty trends within society. Highlighting that fast fashion could provide a substantial supply chain reform during concerns that the US fashion industry was too niche and unable to compete with the global market (Doeringer & Crean, 2006). This overall indicated to corporations that consumers overall prefer “basic” fashion products that come at a lower cost over intricate fashion products that come at a high price point. Thus, shifting focus away from creativity within the fashion industry to providing what is marketable as easily and quickly as possible in order to save the declining apparel market in the United States. The fast fashion industry soon began to rely on the Global South for the importation and development of fashion pieces in order to sustain the apparel industry and maintain the US market, feigning ignorance to any and all

consequences this may hold on to the environment. Fast fashion, in its production, is created to encourage excessive consumption through a promotion of the “more for less” thought process, though the cost of fast fashion is monetarily low, it is expensive in its damage to the environment, health hazards, and social injustices (Bick et al., 2018; Tabishat, 2022).

In its roots, fast fashion is designed to be unsustainable, its business model is constructed with unsustainability in mind. Therefore, any proposed concept of “sustainable fast fashion” is paradoxical - as fast fashion is intended to be unsustainable and can only ever be unsustainable for it to exist. It is created to cater to the growing supply and demand economic model, that is so heavily favoured in the Global North. While some traditionally fast fashion companies have made attempts at sustainability, for example, H&M claiming to use organic and recycled cotton in their ‘*Conscious*’ fashion line, these sustainable attempts are viewed as forms of performative environmentalism. Performative environmentalism involves public displays or gestures of concern for the environment that prioritize appearances and symbolic actions over substantial, influential efforts toward sustainability. Oftentimes it focuses on superficial acts to amass social approval and/or align with trends without implementing a meaningful change. This is also known as “greening” and “greenwashing” (Dahl, 2010; Sweeny, 2015) as they ultimately do not hold any ground at truly mitigating fast fashion production and consumption, nor provide a valuable alternative for consumers that is more sustainable. Rather, it is used as an attempt to perform activism or and create awareness to the detrimental impact of fast fashion, acknowledging it and attempting to distance their brand from the negative labels. Many brands utilize this marketing strategy just enough to increase sales and pose as an environmentally sustainable fashion company, without needing to completely rewrite their business models and cease utilizing fast fashion

practices, assuming that an acknowledgment of fast fashion and its negative impacts on the environment will be enough to maintain their clientele base (Lowrey, 2020).

Consumption

Fast fashion exists solely within the commodity centralized space it develops for consumers. It can only exist when consumers continue to consume, and it will continue to prevail regardless of environmental impacts, as its inherent design pays no mind to any consequences that are not financial. In the social implications of fast fashion, Neumann et al. (2021) highlight that there is a noticeable concern among consumers, but oftentimes this does not translate into action. There is a disconnect between fast fashion consumer's ethics and actions, which could be partly due to fears of disinformation from companies and conflicting feelings that regardless of committing a change of purchasing habits, the effects of performative environmentalism will create a barrier between truth and marketing, being overall useless (Lowrey, 2020).

Green marketing refers to the strategic promotion of environmentally sustainable products and practices within the context of consumer culture. It involves leveraging ecological consciousness and ethical considerations to influence consumers into feeling as though their consumption fosters an environmentally responsible marketplace. Toby Smith argues that green marketing has not made any significant/positive environmental impacts, and this can be attributed to the lack of political, economic, and social will to change that society embodies. Furthermore, arguing that corporate expertise through advertisement manipulation is the secondary factor towards the failure of green marketing. "Consumers are lulled into complacency by the mistaken belief that they are actually doing something." (T. Smith, 1998, p. 107).

Oftentimes, individuals are aware of the environmental implications of fast fashion, however, begin to experience a cognitive dissonance, and shift the social responsibility onto

companies, whilst continuing to consume – ultimately changing nothing. Cognitive dissonance refers to a psychological discomfort that is experienced when an individual holds conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours, especially when they conflict with their actions or values within a certain social or activist context. This dissonance often triggers an emotional or mental tension that may prompt individuals to rationalize or modify their beliefs to reduce the perceived inconsistency between their actions and their ideals (Voisin et al., 2020). Presuming oneself to be the ‘other’, outside of the issue, the cognitive dissonance regarding fast fashion grows as the industry strengthens in the Global North and promotes overconsumption habits.

The desire for trendy and low-cost clothing often conflicts with the recognition of the negative impacts on the environment. Individuals may rationalize their overconsumption by downplaying the consequences by convincing themselves that their purchases have minimal environmental impact or that they are supporting the economy. This conflict between knowing the negative impacts and still engaging in fast fashion consumption reflects a complex interplay between personal values, social influences, and the allure of convenience. “There is no ethical consumption under capitalism” (Lewis, 2021), this popularized phrase has been circling social media for a very long time in opposition to various social movements that criticize the overconsumption habits of the Global North. This phrase is used to justify fast fashion actions by shifting the blame from consumer and producer to society as a whole, by implying that regardless of how you consume (sustainably or unsustainably) capitalism prevents any ethical consumption from occurring. Therefore, the damage will be done regardless so it is no longer on the shoulders of the consumer to care about their consumption habits, but rather the producer and society for creating this system of exploitation. Although there may be an understanding that the fast fashion industry is built within a meticulously designed business model that greatly benefits those who

may not be able to shop sustainably due to low income or lack of free time to shop with ethics in mind.

The dynamics of shopping in the fast fashion industry are intricately shaped by consumers' financial limitations, time constraints, and accessibility issues. The industry's meticulously designed business model that emphasizes affordability, caters to individuals with limited disposable income, by seemingly providing an accessible avenue for fashion consumption. The fast-paced nature of modern life, (like high working hours), contributes to time limitations, prompting consumers to prefer the convenience of micro-trends and readily available online shopping, often at the expense of a sustainable approach that demands time for research and conscientious decision-making. Additionally, the regular market's lack of inclusivity in sizing restricts options for diverse body types, pressuring consumers to compromise preferences and values for the sake of availability. In the context of shopping deserts, where residents face limited access to retail outlets and essential services, the challenges in finding diverse and affordable fashion choices are heightened. Fast fashion, while potentially offering a quick and cost-effective solution for residents with limited options, contributes to the emphasized issues of overconsumption and environmental degradation, particularly in communities lacking access to sustainable alternatives. The accessibility and impact of fast fashion vary across different socio-economic contexts, with the situational framing of "there is no ethical consumption under capitalism" being more commonly practiced by those of privileged socio-economic status in the Global North, where resources to accessing sustainable alternatives are more readily available (Dennis et al., 2007; Lewis, 2021; Schuetz et al., 2012).

Jang et al. (2012) highlight the consumerist implications of fast fashion on the environment and move in the direction of sustainable development within the fashion industry, exploring the

implications of fast fashion on a consumer level and its relationship with the environment to better configure redirections into sustainable fashion. Specifically underlining the desirability for “cheap and trendy” fashion, particularly in South Korea, a nation currently renowned in the global media for fashion and trendsetting (Nittle, 2018), it is noted that this sentiment is shared across many different cultures around the world, especially in those where fashion and beauty are highly valued and intended to reach wider audiences across the globe.

Waste

The waste that has been produced by fast fashion has grown to become a significant contributor to climate change, greatly adding to the advancement of the environmental crisis. This includes discarded clothes that are not biodegradable and release microplastics and the excessive packaging they are globally shipped in. This has significantly added onto the long list of global polluters that end up in landfills all over the Global South, and the increased carbon emissions during production and disposal, that further harming the environment by trapping heat in the Earth's atmosphere, leading to climate change, in-turn disrupts ecosystems, causes sea levels to rise, and intensifies extreme weather events, harming the environment. Although fast fashion may not be the catalyst in the climate change crisis, it is a significant contributor that greatly worsens climate change as fast fashion continues to dominate the economy.

The environmental toll of fast fashion is evident in many different ways that encompass both the production and disposal stages. The cultivation of cotton involves intensive pesticide and water use, contributing to soil degradation and water pollution. Dyes that are used in fabric colouring often contain toxic chemicals, leading to water contamination and harming aquatic ecosystems. Synthetic fabrics, derived from plastics, are common in fast fashion items, further exacerbating the plastic pollution crisis as these materials shed microplastics during washing. The

transportation of goods from international countries relies heavily on fossil fuel-powered shipping, which releases substantial emissions, contributing to air pollution and climate change. Micro-trend apparel results in staggering amounts of textile waste, with garments made from non-biodegradable materials ending up in landfills and releasing harmful substances throughout the decomposition process (Bick et al., 2018).

Bick et al. (2018) emphasize the environmental impacts of fast fashion while investigating the consumption patterns of the fast fashion supply chain in the global environmental justice dilemma. Although fast fashion provides consumers with the opportunity to purchase more clothing for less, allowing more people to socially “fit in” with various ongoing trends, the consequences fall directly on those who work in or live near the textile manufacturing facilities. Due to the millions of tons of textile waste accumulating in landfills and water in the Global South, it has become palpable that those living within close proximity are now more susceptible to the health hazards directly caused by the fashion industry and textile factories. Oftentimes these low- and middle-income countries do not have the resources to enforce organizational and environmental safeguards from these hazards, putting human health at risk due to the pollution and waste. Due to the chemical runoff from production and the disposal of textiles, fast fashion waste poses health risks by contaminating water sources, soil, and air, potentially exposing individuals to harmful substances, affecting respiratory health, and contributing to long-term environmental health hazards. Fast fashion's contribution to landfills exacerbates environmental and health risks. The disposal of non-biodegradable clothing and textile waste fills up landfills, limiting space for essential waste disposal and in-turn releasing toxins and microplastics into the soil and groundwater. Evidently, these materials take a long time to decompose, they contribute to the emission of greenhouse gases like methane, further impacting air quality and the environment.

Furthermore, the presence of non-biodegradable materials in landfills poses challenges for effective waste management and perpetuates the cycle of environmental degradation (Bick et al., 2018). Most of the waste that is produced by fast fashion is not one that can be seen so readily in the Global North, but it is a living reality for the Global South.

The production of different textiles and materials that are predominantly used in fast fashion apparel places significant stress on the environment in many ways. Cotton accounts for one-third of the fibres used in all textiles, and it is found that a single cotton shirt would need 2700 litres of water to be produced (equivalent to the average amount of water one adult would consume in two and a half years) (Drew & Yehounme, 2017; Hackett, 2019). Alternatively, due to this high cost to produce cotton, many fast fashion brands have begun to steer away from cotton use and utilize synthetic materials instead. However, synthetic materials do not present to be an environmentally friendly alternative, though they require less water, synthetic materials are more carbon-intensive and use twice the amount of carbon footprint than cotton, furthermore, textile dyeing has become the second largest polluter of clean water (Drew & Yehounme, 2017; Hackett, 2019). The production of fast fashion pieces is extremely wasteful, causing a lot of damage to clean water, land, and air, becoming a dominant factor in pollution.

The waste caused by fast fashion does not end in its production. Due to the planned obsolescence of fast fashion, apparel pieces are not meant to remain in people's closets for an extended period of time, nevertheless, to be in stores or thrift stores for very long. Planned obsolescence, represents a deliberate business strategy where products are designed to have limited lifespans and become outdated quickly. Planned obsolescence intends for apparel pieces to lose its appeal quickly and to be no longer desirable, or the textile materials used are not intended to have a significant lifespan and will begin to deteriorate quickly through regular wear and washing

cycles. This approach aims to stimulate continuous consumption by fostering a societal mindset that values novelty and constant upgrades, therefore driving consumer demand for newer goods. Planned obsolescence influences consumer behaviour greatly by lowering expectations of product longevity, encouraging repetitive purchasing, and creating a culture that prioritizes the pursuit of the latest trends over long-term product use, ultimately contributing to a cycle of consumption and waste within society (Bisschop et al., 2022; Demirdjian, 1975).

So where do all of these clothes go? Due to the buildup of synthetic materials, they are not easily disposed of properly or able to be viably recycled and reused for future purposes the way that other materials such as various metals and cotton are. Apparel pieces are transported to the Global South to be forgotten about by the Global North. Many parts of the Global South have become landfills and graveyards for fast fashion pieces, especially in South America and East African countries. Countries in the Global South like Kenya have attempted to ban second-hand apparel from their markets due to the influx of cheap clothing causing decreases in their own textile industries (M. F. B. F. Costa & Zaneti, 2022; Yamaguchi, 2022). These clothes sent from the Global North to the Global South are sent under the sentiment that cheap clothes will be better used and appreciated in poorer nations. However cheap and unusable clothes are the same regardless of where on the map they are placed, all it leads to is destroy to the nation's own textile industries or end up in landfills that directly damage the land and the health local residents (M. F. B. F. Costa & Zaneti, 2022; LX News, 2020; Yamaguchi, 2022).

The Atacama Desert in Chile is best known for its humid and extreme weather conditions, it may seem like a very unlikely setting to discuss fast fashion landfills. Despite the Atacama Desert being a remote, but heavily populated area with over one million residents including three large coastal cities in Chile: Arica, Iquique, and Antofagasta, the global impact of fast fashion

reaches far beyond into such distant locations. In the case of the Atacama Desert, a mountain of discarded clothing has recently developed. The Atacama Desert and those who live in it now experience extreme suffering due to the pollution caused by fast fashion. Roughly 60,000 tonnes of clothing arrive each year in northern Chile, at least 39,000 tonnes of these clothing cannot be sold and end up in the landfills (only about 15% of the received clothes are actually resold). As fast fashion pieces are predominantly made from synthetic materials that are non-biodegradable and use chemical products that cannot be accepted by municipal landfills (Al Jazeera, 2021; Costa & Zaneti, 2022), resulting in it ending up in the landfill that has completely taken over the city.

These landfills are filled with clothing discarded by the Global North. Discarded textiles from fast fashion contribute significantly to landfill overflow and pollution worldwide. These materials, may potentially leach chemicals into the soil and groundwater, posing health risks to nearby populations and ecosystems. These garments may take roughly 200 years to fully disintegrate on their own and the prospective effects that may have on the surrounding biodiversity and land would be unknown, placing a significant risk on the health of those living nearby. The breakdown of synthetic fibres results in a significant release of microplastics, which pose threats to ecosystems and wildlife, compounding the environmental impact. The slow decomposition of many fast fashion items further exacerbates the strain on already overwhelmed waste management systems, leading to improper disposal practices and increasing the risk of waste runoff and soil contamination. Due to the lack of legal provisions in Chile, the only solution is an attempt to burn the waste, creating an issue of smoke pollution as burning synthetics and plastics can severely risk the health of individuals and the surrounding biodiversity. Smoke pollution resulting from burning microplastics creates a release of toxic gases and particulate matter into the air due to the combustion of minor plastic fragments. This form of pollution poses severe health risks, as the

emitted substances can negatively impact respiratory health and contribute to environmental degradation. (BBC News, 2022; Yamaguchi, 2022).

This waste that is created and imposed on the Global South is a significant contributor to the climate change crises and the pollution that is directly caused by fast fashion, and unfortunately, it is not only Chile that carries the burden of fast fashion waste (Lundberg & DeVoy, 2022). This is a direct result of the actions caused by the Global North and the normalized consumption habits of Northern societies. However, the burden of fast fashion waste is directly placed onto the shoulders of the Global South, with the expectation that they will presumably fix these issues and rectify the damages the fast fashion waste causes. Out of sight, out of mind.

Environmental Activism Using Social Media

In the emergence of environmental sustainability within the fashion industry and understanding of the global and long-term effects of fast fashion on the environment, social media has become powerful in raising this awareness and instigating social movements in opposition to the rising effects of the fast fashion industry. Recently, the trend of “green influencers” (environmental activists) has begun to emerge on social media platforms, raising awareness of various environmental crises around the world (Knupfer et al., 2023; Scherman et al., 2022; Scully, 2021). Many of these green influencers have gained much notoriety and fame for their activism and the awareness raised using social media, including Antonio Ripoll, Jack Harries, and Aliana Wood (*Earthrise*, 2023) alongside traditional environmental activists like Greta Thunberg (Sabherwal et al., 2021). The impact of environmental activism on social media has attempted to raise a collective awareness across social media platforms to reduce climate change and make way for youth activism within political spheres and in the new rising environmental conversations in politics, utilizing social media as their metaphorical soap box. With an increase of social media

platforms being used for the purpose of raising awareness towards environmental activism and the climate change crisis, many environmental issues including fast fashion have come up in discussion for an evaluation of their role in the current climate change crisis, and the new and old practices of the fashion industry are not exempt from scrutiny and in-depth analysis from the greater public.

The usage of social media for environmental activism creates and provides space for internal discussions, event planning, and protesting that can take place offline, but furthermore, online strategies of environmental activism have become prominent too, further integrating the internet and youth cultures into activism. Raising awareness for environmental issues using social media can take many forms including, but not limited to; videos, photographs, social media posts, conversational discourse, info-graphs, trendsetting, hashtags, etc. (Knupfer et al., 2023; Pop et al., 2020; Scully, 2021). Utilizing social media as a method to develop participation in activism, creates a stronger foundation for democratic engagement across youths within politics. Furthermore, the rise of social movements related to environmental issues has been significantly linked to the role of social media, encouraging users to become more politically aware and involved than ever (Scherman et al., 2022; Scully, 2021). Social media usage within social movements has allowed for activism to become more widespread and global, allowing individuals to develop a large number of supporters whilst significantly decreasing the possible economic costs and time required to organize if it were to be done offline.

One of the most popular social media platforms at the moment, and one that is the current research platform, TikTok has sparked widespread discussions regarding its approach to content censorship and its impact on freedom of expression. Given that TikTok is an application developed in China, where media censorship is present, the issue of China's influence on social media

censorship has become a significant global topic of concern, with growing discussions focusing on the country's extensive control over digital platforms and its potential to impact on global freedom of speech and access to information. Issues of account deletion, video removal, and de-platforming through preventing algorithms from presenting videos on audiences' main social media feeds *'for you page'* (algorithmic invisibility) are all issues TikTok has faced questioning for in terms of censorship (Are, 2023; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Though official TikTok guidelines highlight that their content moderation is only implemented through the removal of videos that break community guidelines and rules (such as videos that depict violence, nudity, swearing, cyberbullying, etc.), and by age-restricting mature content (*Community Guidelines, TikTok*). Debates and discussions regarding the accuracy and honesty of claims have been widely debated since the prominent rise of TikTok globally and are currently being discussed without any finality (as of 2024), however, discussions of the permanent banning or restriction of TikTok in certain states within the United States of America have risen but have not yet been implemented. Censorship of social media platforms may significantly impact the ability for activism, storytelling, and the spread of information to truly reach and impact audiences, and be replaced by the dominance of misinformation/disinformation, thus being something to keep in mind as media research on TikTok progresses further (Henneman, 2020).

Social media-led activism has demonstrated a power to pressure governments, organizations, and institutions that play a significant role in the future of a given issue/situation, by generating an awareness towards the cause and directing online attention towards these groups that are greatly influencing the cause. Specifically, social media-led environmental activism has the power to direct global audiences towards the governments, organizations, and institutions that may be ignoring environmental protections, working, and producing products unsustainably, etc.,

and generating mass dislike/hatred towards them that can have detrimental consequences towards business, stocks/profits, and voter ratings. Hand in hand with the notorious phenomena of '*cancel-culture*', the threat of losing social capital, being disliked, and being boycotted by a large portion of society, provides a powerful tool for environmental activists on social media (Hindmarsh & Calibeo, 2017; SC, 2022; Scherman et al., 2022). 'Cancel culture' refers to a phenomenon predominantly exemplified on social media platforms where individuals or groups publicly withdraw support or approval from public figures (such as celebrities), organizations, or entities, due to behaviour, scandals, or statements that may be perceived as offensive, unethical, or contrary to social norms and values. It involves a widespread condemnation that is often facilitated through social media or online platforms, leading to boycotts, public shaming, and/or the withdrawal of support, aiming to hold individuals or entities accountable for their actions and to prompt societal change or accountability within a particular social context (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020).

In the environmental activism fight against fast fashion led by social media, two major types of actions can be identified within political based consumption research; (1) boycotting and (2) buycotting (Copeland, 2014; Kyroglou & Henn, 2022; Scherman et al., 2022). (1) Boycotting is best understood as an overall refrain from purchasing products from environmentally unsustainable companies/brands in order to prevent adverse environmental effects, whereas (2) buycotting is the alternative purchasing of products that do not cause environmental damage, being more sustainable and progressive for the environment (Copeland, 2014; Kyroglou & Henn, 2022).

Boycotting as a form of environmental activism has been traditionally the most popular form of fighting against fast fashion consumption. Through social media, messages regarding the environmental impacts of fast fashion brands such as Forever 21, Zara, SHEIN, etc. gain traction online, urging people to entirely stop supporting said companies in order to decrease popularity

and fast fashion sales and overall stop the industry from growing bigger (Dalakas et al., 2022; Hindmarsh & Calibeo, 2017). This method of boycotting eventually attempts to fall in line with degrowth theory. The degrowth movement is defined as an economic shrinkage, rather than its current expansion (Fournier, 2020). Fournier (2020) highlights that the degrowth movement can provide better sustainable practices by utilizing less of the world's energy and resources and putting human (and non-human) well-being above commodity and consumption. Social media activism for boycotting demonstrates an attempt at a full stop against fast fashion consumerism and overconsumption by highlighting the environmental impacts of fast fashion and using the process of cancelling within cancel-culture to stigmatize and shame the purchasing and support of unsustainable fast fashion companies (Rodríguez et al., 2021; SC, 2022).

Buycotting goes hand in hand with boycotting, being more popularized and strongly associated with typical ideals of engaged citizenship (Copeland, 2014). Buycotting provides an alternative to the previously boycotted brands, promoting companies that are assumed to be better for the environment by being entirely sustainable. Environmental activism on social media against fast fashion promotes consumption in favour of "green" brands that follow the definition of "slow fashion" (Hindmarsh & Calibeo, 2017; Nucci & Hibberd, 2021). Slow fashion is defined as the antithesis of fast fashion, where products are created more sustainably using higher quality materials that cause less of an environmental footprint, by using materials that are sustainably obtained (recycling materials such as cotton), are made in the Global North under strict employee protection standards (ex. minimum wages, unionized workers, safe work environment and tools, etc.), and are made to have a longer lifespan being more durable and upholding greater cost per wear, however slow fashion commodities do not come at an equal cost to fast fashion products (Hall, 2018). Alternative to the degrowth movement, as it may be perceived as too stark or radical,

researchers suggest a significant shift to slow fashion. Ensuring sustainable practices and providing safer work environments, thus lifting many burdens from the Global South as most productions for the Global North would be developed within the Global North (Jang et al., 2012).

Recent studies delve into the role and usage of social media platforms when discussing the environmental implications of fast fashion. Mickelsson et al., (2023) and Balabanova et al., (2023) shed light on the significant role these platforms play in instigating discussions on social media regarding the environmental impacts of fast fashion. Mickelsson's exploration uncovers the disparity between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) narratives upheld by fast fashion companies and their underlying agendas, often marked by inconsistencies and shortcomings in addressing environmental concerns. This mismatched portrayal is frequently challenged and amplified on social media platforms like X, as illustrated by previous research conducted by Balabanova et al., (2023). X serves as a space where environmental activists and consumers engage in discussions, highlighting arguments and ethical considerations to critique fast fashion's environmental footprint. The findings from previous studies collectively highlight the pivotal role of social media in spotlighting discrepancies in corporate practices within the fast fashion industry and catalyze discussions surrounding the environmental impacts of fast fashion, thus contributing to broader environmental activism and awareness on these platforms.

The usage of social media for environmental activism can be demonstrated in many different strategies, however, within the context of fast fashion and the fashion industry, very little research has been conducted to better understand how social media is used within environmental activism to mitigate fast fashion consumerism and the environmental damages related to fast fashion (Nucci & Hibberd, 2021; Scully, 2021).

Beyond The Literature

The emergence of fast fashion and social media has accelerated consumerism and overconsumption, creating an insatiable demand for trendy, low-cost clothing within a short rotation period. However, the phenomenon of fast fashion has led to profound global environmental repercussions, with the fast fashion industry becoming a significant contributor to pollution and resource depletion, fast fashion has become the face of climate change. Yet, amidst these challenges, social media has become a powerful platform for environmental activism, fostering awareness, advocacy, and sustainable fashion movements. As social media users (creators and audiences together) begin to mobilize the connectivity of social media to vocalize concerns, promote ethical consumption habits, and demand accountability from fast fashion brands and users who advocate in favour of fast fashion, a growing energy for change emerges. Through collective action efforts driven by social media activism, there is a significant pathway to reshape the fashion industry toward greater sustainability and ethical responsibility and slowly begin to reframe consumption habits of the Global North in an attempt to mitigate climate change damages and prevent it from worsening at the hands of the fashion industry and overconsumption habits.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Social research delves into the methods through which social media-led environmental activism increases global awareness of the negative environmental impacts of fast fashion. Specifically, through the amplification of social movements taking place on social media websites, researchers utilize numerous theoretical approaches to understand the framing of social problems and social movements surrounding global environmental issues and climate change. The theoretical approach that informs this research is framing theory. Frames are employed by journalists and researchers by making specific aspects of a narrative more salient than others, with the rise of social media being utilized as another informational medium (alongside, or as opposed to literature and traditional news outlets), all social media users or “content creators” may employ framing methods so long as they have a platform and an audience.

There are many approaches to framing and framing theory due to its roots being traced back to many different disciplines (Ferree et al., 2002; Goffman, 1974; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). In this research, I will be working at the conceptual level to best understand how social media-led activism is practiced in the context of raising awareness against fast fashion. This study will utilize framing theory in the context of its theoretical and conceptual lens in social movements and new media (i.e., social media) framing, which is most suitable to the theme of this research. Providing the best opportunity to intricately understand how the environmental damages related to fast fashion are being framed by social media users to instigate a meaningful discussion and commence social change.

What are Frames?

The concept of framing has played a critical role in understanding how individuals and groups construct meaning through the intricacies of communication and information. Early

foundational concepts have laid the groundwork for a deeper exploration of how framing influences our interpretations and responses within social contexts. Symbolic interactionist sociologist, Erving Goffman, formalized the concept of framing and frames within a constructionist theory. Defining frames as “schemata of interpretation,” enabling individuals to interpret events and circumstances within their social world, they provide a cognitive structure that influences how individuals perceive, understand, and respond to various social issues (Goffman, 1974). Similarly, anthropologist Gregory Bateson contributed significant early insights into information processing and communication, by contribution foundational developments of framing and frames (Bateson, 1972). The process of framing provides a deeper meaning to these events and situations with significance, enabling potential actions based on that meaning. Framing shares a connection with an agenda-setting tradition, while broadening the scope of research by shifting its focus from specific topics to the fundamental nature of the issues being discussed.

The concept of framing is closely related to how individuals present themselves and shape the social reality in which they interact. When individuals engage in impression management, they are essentially framing their behaviour and communication to convey a particular image or identity. Goffman’s original work regarding how individuals and groups manipulate the presentation of self and social situations provide an important background in understanding how situations may be framed by audiences (Goffman, 1959). Goffman's formative literature on the presentation of self and the dramaturgical perspective has greatly influenced the foundation of framing theory, his insights regarding how individuals present themselves and manage impressions are deeply intertwined with the concept of framing within communication and sociology. Through various concepts that closely relate to current-day framing theory; the construction of reality emphasizes that individuals actively construct and manage social reality by framing situations,

interactions, and their own identities. Frame analysis explores how individuals interpret and categorize social situations, closely evaluating how media and communicators guide the audience's interpretation of a situation by applying mental frameworks or "frames." These frames help individuals attribute certain meaning to the events, interactions, and experiences they encounter in their daily lives, ultimately shaping their understanding of reality and guiding their actions (Goffman, 1974).

Bateson's earlier contributions to communications and systems theory can be significantly linked to framing and the later development of framing theory. The context in how information is presented plays a pivotal role in how information is shaped and interpreted by the audience, coinciding with Bateson's original statement regarding the importance of context in any form of communication (Bateson, 1972; Hallahan, 2008). Within framing, there is not only a transmission of information, but there is also a great unconscious and conscious layer of communication that is occurring, regarding how the information itself should be understood and perceived, intertwining with Bateson's thoughts concerning the implications of meaning and the importance of context. The foundational insights of Goffman and Bateson provide a conducive understanding in the development of what framing theory is, the implications of conscious or unconscious selection and emphasis of elements shape how information is perceived, interpreted, and understood in various social and communicative contexts.

How are Frames Defined?

When understanding communication and meaning attribution, it is important to establish clear definitions of the frames within framing theory that guide these interpretations of information and events. Robert Entman defines framing as the process through which media and communicators selectively accentuate certain aspects of a story or issue while simultaneously

downplaying or ignoring others to further their message (1993). This active shaping of narratives has a profound effect on how audiences perceive and understand a given subject. The interpretive structures serve as cognitive frameworks that enables individuals to make sense of situations by locating, identifying, and labeling them, thus attributing meaning within the context of their social world. What makes framing theory so particularly influential is its ability to persuade the public opinion and shape overall political discourse. Through methods of strategically selecting and deploying frames, media outlets and communicators can guide how audiences perceive an issue, potentially resulting in shifts in public attitudes and policy decisions.

Frames guide the audience's thinking, emphasizing particular elements of information, making them more salient, meaningful, and memorable, frames influence how problems are noticed, understood, remembered, evaluated, and acted upon. Importantly, frames not only include what is emphasized but also what is omitted, which can be equally influential. (Entman, 1993; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). Additionally, the power of frames lies in the acceptance of coined, or attributed, terms like “affirmative action”, where these terms abridge complex ideas in a way that shapes public discourse and gives power to these frames, they are capable of influencing perception, and guiding individuals' reactions to social policies and issues. Gamson et al. (1992) argue that once a frame becomes predominately accepted, using any alternative terms or phrases (ex. “positive action” or “positive discrimination” in the context of “affirmative action”) may risk negatively affecting the credibility and comprehension of the situation. Framing's influence extends into research paradigms, audience autonomy, journalistic objectivity, content analysis, and democratic theory, as it plays an important role in molding public perception, decoding media, and affecting democratic processes. The concept of framing provides a framework for understanding how meaning is constructed, circulated, and interpreted across many sociopolitical contexts,

indicating its dynamic and socially constructed nature with far-reaching implications for contemporary society.

How are Frames Constructed?

Frames are systemically composed of frame elements and devices, like visual icons, metaphors, catchphrases, word choices, exemplars, descriptions, and arguments (Walter & Ophir, 2019). By specifically selecting certain details of a narrative/story, audiences are encouraged to adopt a very specific, spoon-fed interpretation of the problems, the actors, or those who are framing the narrative, who are then responsible for creating and solving them, consequentially, the potential solutions to these social problems (Entman, 1993; Gitlin, 1980). When constructing and developing frames for social problems, framing occurs when a specific selection of a perceived reality is broadcast, and by making that reality more salient it is then possible for an awareness of this problem, its causes, assessments, and possible solutions are increased to a greater audience. By taking a piece of information and making it more substantial and meaningful to audiences, the social problem becomes more salient. In turn, this salience increases the probability that the audiences will perceive, interpret, and process the information provided, to better remember them (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Gamson et al., 1992).

The construction of frames is a multifaceted process that involves a selective presentation of information. Central to this process is a deliberate selection of information, by deciding what to emphasize and de-emphasize, oftentimes using metaphors and symbols to make complex ideas more accessible. Cultural and social context significantly shape the construction of these frames, as what is considered relevant is subjective across different social worlds (Ophir et al., 2023). Furthermore, the choice of the media and communication channel utilized, and the framing goals play a critical role in the building of frames. Considering the audience's point of view and beliefs

are also crucial in developing effective frames, as they are able to better resonate with the values and interests of the targeted audience and viewers. Lastly, timing and events, source credibility, and an overall awareness of framing effects all greatly model the construction frames with the ultimate goal of influencing how audiences perceive and interpret complex social problems within a specific context (Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Ophir et al., 2023; Rhee, 1997).

Framing Theory

In essence, framing theory proposes that the media not only draw attention to distinct events, but also investigates them within a broader framework of meaning (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974). Within sociology, framing theory is a conceptual framework that examines the presentation and interpretation of information through specifically expressed language, visuals, and narratives that are intended to shape individuals and/or social world's perceptions of certain events or ongoing social problems.

By highlighting the role of media, communication, and the social actors that construct these frames, which are selective, context-dependent representations they are able to influence a significant public opinion and understanding of a circumstance. According to Gitlin, "framing is the principle of selection, emphasis, and expression ... is the process of selecting, emphasizing and excluding news stories. Media framing ensures that journalists can process large amounts of information quickly and routinely, identify it into cognitive categories, and then package it for more effective presentation to the public" (Gitlin, 1980). Reality is socially constructed through interactions and shared understandings among individuals and groups. The constructionist paradigm emphasizes the role of language, communication, and cultural norms in shaping perceptions and meanings. Within this framework, framing and framing theory highlight how issues are defined, attributed, and addressed, demonstrating how social realities and collective

actions are constructed through these processes. Framing theory explores how these frames are constructed and how they directly influence how people think and respond to complex social phenomena, ultimately influencing socio-political discourse, agenda-setting, and the perception of current and previous social problems.

Framing theory provides a valuable theoretical framework that may be employed in many various ways to analyze how communication and the presentation of information influences the perception and interpretation of a social phenomenon. Framing theory may be applied across numerous domains such as: analysis of social problems, media and agenda-setting, political communication, social movements, social change, and symbolic interactionism (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1959). In sociology, framing theory is used to examine how frames are constructed by the media, actors, social movements, etc., to influence their audience's attitudes towards critical issues, prioritizations, and policy decisions. By investigating the role of framing theory in shaping social meaning, sociologists gain insights into the complexities of societal dynamics and power structures in various contexts. Framing theory and framing play an essential role in the particular areas of media, politics, social movements, and communication studies by providing great background to how and why frames that are situated by actors play such a significant role in how events and social problems are perceived and recognized.

The theoretical framework of this research will use framing theory entirely, particularly employing Benford & Snow's Framing model (2000). Framing is achieved through three fundamental tasks; diagnostic framing, involving the identification of problems and their attributions; prognostic framing, outlining the plan of attack; and motivational framing, addressing the "call to arms" or the rationale for collective action. These framing tasks serve as the groundwork for later framing tasks such as Frame Development, Generation, and Elaboration,

which are marked by essential strategic processes such as frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation. Moreover, framing theory extends into Audience Effects, Framing and Individual and Collective Identity, plans of attack, media usage, and more (Benford and Snow, 2000). This inclusive conceptualization of framing is expected to produce nuanced insights into the usage of social media in environmental activism. Furthermore, it aims to deepen comprehension of how social media activism frames intricate issues like fast fashion, unraveling the complex interplay of communication dynamics, identity formation, and collective action within the context of environmental activism.

The Critiques

As with any theoretical framework, framing theory is no stranger to criticism and critique. Highlighting these evaluations, we may illuminate areas of concern and debate its surrounding application and effectiveness in understanding the complex social and communicative processes of framing and question the conceptual underpinnings, empirical applicability, and potential limitations of framing. Critiques of framing theories and concepts developed by Erving Goffman, Gregory Bateson, and Herbert Blumer are diverse, each raising related questions and concerns within the field of sociological and communication theory.

Critiques of Goffman's framing theory revolve around concerns related to its level of abstraction and its micro-level focus, which some authors contend may not adequately highlight the complexities of broader social phenomena. Authors suggest that the theory lacks a comprehensive, theory-based structural framework for analyzing large-scale societal issues and could benefit from a more robust connection to macro-level sociological concepts (Denzin & Keller, 1981; Persson, 2018). Furthermore, Goffman's approach has been critiqued for downplaying the structural and institutional influences that shape framing processes, and does not

have a well-developed theory of power, potentially leading to an overly individualistic interpretation of how frames are constructed and disseminated in society (M. S. Davis, 1975; Persson, 2018).

Bateson's framing theory faces critiques related to its conceptual complexity and abstract nature, which may pose challenges when applied to empirical research. Critics argue that the theory lacks precise operationalization, influencing the systematic analysis of framing processes (Engler & Gardiner, 2012). Additionally, critics argue that Bateson's focus on communication and information flows may not sufficiently account for the power dynamics and structural influences shaping frames, potentially overlooking the effect of political and institutional factors. The generalizability of Bateson's concepts across various contexts is also a point of contention, with authors suggesting that his framing applicability may be limited to very specific forms of communication and may not effectively address the wide array of framing practices across different social settings (Engler & Gardiner, 2012; Handelman, 2006).

Blumer's framing theory, alternatively, faces critiques that centre on its fairly simplistic treatment of framing as a process of individual interpretation. Some authors argue that this may not fully consider the intricate structural and social dynamics that influence how frames are constructed and disseminated. Critics express concerns that the theory's emphasis on the subjective nature of framing could result in a misjudgment of the role of power, social institutions, and larger cultural forces in shaping framing processes (Lyman & Vichdich, 1988; Snow, 2001). Furthermore, Bateson's framing theory is critiqued for not providing clear guidance on empirical research methods for framing, missing specific methodologies for analyzing the production and dissemination of frames. Moreover, there are apprehensions that his theory's conceptual framework may be overly abstract and not readily adaptable to different contexts and issues,

potentially limiting its applicability in other diverse socio-political settings (Maines, 1977, 1988; Snow, 2001). These criticisms shed a light on the ongoing discussions and refinements in framing theory, attempting to enhance its explanatory power and utility in understanding complex social and communicative phenomena.

Framing Social Problems

When examining social problems through the theoretical framework of framing theory, it is evident that the selection and presentation of information within a specific frame can significantly influence how a complex social issue is perceived and interpreted. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) comprehensively delve into defining what a social problem is through framing. The essence of a social problem is not solely determined by the extent of harm or damage it causes, but rather by how it is defined and conceived within society (Blumer, 1971). Furthermore, contending that objectively defining what a social problem is requires a recognition that social problems are inherently subjective and debatable.

Hilgartner and Bosk identify several key elements that shape the life cycle of social problems. These elements include a dynamic competition among a large population of potential social problem claims, the presence of institutional arenas in which these claims compete for attention and growth, the carrying capacity, that may limit the literal number of problems that are able to gain widespread attention at any given time. Additionally, institutional, political, and cultural factors that influence the survival of competing problem formulations. They assert that there is an interplay of competition among social problems occurring simultaneously on two levels: within substantive areas where different framings of the situation for popular, widespread acceptance, and among a vast array of problems, establishing priorities of which should be regarded as most important. These institutional arenas include government branches, media,

advocacy groups, etc., where these social problems may be discussed, defined, framed, dramatized, and presented to the public.

Within these arenas, specific characteristics across most social problems emerge. Each arena has a certain “carrying capacity”, which can be indexed by measures like physical print space or television airtime. These principles of selection influence which problems are addressed, with the importance of an arena affecting the intensity of competition for public attention. This notion of a “carrying capacity” in-turn forces public attention to be monopolized in which a competition is required - where all social movements are competing simultaneously for long-lasting attention and opportunity for considerable action from their respective audiences. Drama, novelty, and saturation play significant roles, with dramatic problem formulations being more likely to survive competition. Culture, politics, and organizational characteristics also further shape the fate of social problems. Some problems become more nuanced as they align audiences with deep mythical themes or are important to the interests of powerful institutions and individuals. Organizational factors, including advocacy groups and industry associations, continue to keep problems alive and within a sphere of discussion and awareness even if they are largely unsuccessful in most other arenas, in a great attempt at maintaining notoriety and attention. Social problems that gain traction in one institution tend to spread rapidly into others, while dominating multiple arenas of public discourse (Blumer, 1971; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). However, growth is constrained by factors such as finite carrying capacities, competition for attention, and the need for continuous novelty. Success and significance of social problems are measured by the amount of attention they receive within these arenas. Importantly, public attention to social problems is unevenly distributed, with only a minor topic becoming dominant topics, or somewhat larger topics receiving moderate to minimal attention, and the remaining on the margins of public discourse.

Framing Theory and New Social Movements

Framing theory involves the development of persuasive narratives and symbols that make sense of specific issues, promote particular definitions of problems, and suggest appropriate solutions. Benford and Snow (2000) emphasize the vital role of frames in both strategic communication efforts of social movements and the responses they elicit from the broader public and society, by mobilizing support, generating collective action, and shaping the perception of social and political issues. Framing theory provides a beneficial lens to analyze and understand the dynamics of social movements. These movements, often defined by their ability to mobilize a collective action regarding current societal issues, rely on the strategic construction of frames to send their messages, define problems, and propose possible solutions. The power of framing theory within the context of social movements provides significant evidence that frames shape public opinions and perceptions, motivate audiences, and influence the sociopolitical landscape.

Social movements typically centre on material concerns that are employed by hierarchical organizational structures. Alternatively, the concept of new social movements, places a greater emphasis on post-material issues such as identity, culture, and human rights. Favouring the decentralization and participation of organizational structures, mobilizing modern communication technologies like social media, and emphasizing cultural and identity-related concerns that distinguish new social movements from traditional social movements. An essential component of these new social movements is a network of relations between the a plurality of actors, a sense of collective identity, and shared conflictual issues (Carty & Onyett, 2006; Diani, 1992; Langman, 2005). By understanding new social movements, the audiences of new social movements are not necessarily participating in said social movement with the intent of seeking material gain, rather

attempting to challenge the diffusing notions of society and politics themselves (Carty & Onyett, 2006; Melucci, 1996).

By using framing theory to understand new social movements, activists/actors strategically construct and communicate frames to shape public perception in order to mobilize mass support for their causes. Through framing theory, how social movements frame their grievances, goals, and strategies can be deeply analyzed, highlighting the role of narrative and symbolic representation in shaping collective identities, curating support, and framing numerous social issues that go beyond material concerns to embody overall cultural, identity, and human rights-related matters. Framing serves as a creative process that goes beyond mere communication strategies, rather it is a process of constructing the very reality that a social movement seeks to change (Jasper, 1997). Framing theory, as applied to new social movements, emphasizes how actors strategically construct and communicate frames to shape public perception and mobilize support for their causes. Regarding governance networks, framing theory is utilized to understand how various stakeholders, such as government agencies, interest groups, and civil society organizations frame issues and policy agendas within shared governance strategies. The way issues are framed in governance networks can significantly influence the governance processes, the allocation of resources, and the policy decisions made (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012).

When applying framing theory to social movements with strong emotional ties, it provides a valuable lens for understanding how activists navigate and communicate the strong emotions associated with their causes. There is a crucial role for framing in order to best channel and motivate action regarding these emotions (Goodwin & Jasper, 2006; Jasper, 2011). Framing allows activists to translate their emotional experiences, and the emotional experiences their audiences are undergoing into a collective action by crafting narratives that are able to deeply resonate with

audiences and potential supporters. Emotional framing within social movements provides the ability to evoke a large range of strong emotions like a sense of injustice, anger, or hope that fosters empathetic connections and motivates audiences to engage with the movement and take action. By utilizing emotions and fostering empathy across audiences, framing theory illuminates how movements strategically manage and communicate the emotional dimensions of their causes, ultimately shaping their resonance and impact (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Goodwin et al., 2001; Goodwin & Jasper, 2006; Jasper, 2011). Framing theory serves as a significant tool for understanding social movements by providing researchers the ability to deeply analyze the strategic construction of frames that are able to mold audience perceptions, motivate collective action, and convey the essential narratives to each social movement.

Framing Theory and New Media

In the age of new media, framing theory takes on a renewed significance as it connects with the evolving social world of digital communication and information. New media refer to means of mass communication that utilize digital technologies including social media, and for the sake of this research, I will be referring to new media as an all-encompassing method of mass communication including social media, websites, sharing platforms, blogs, etc., defining it separately but inclusive of social media (Cote, 2022). While the focus of this research is on social media implications, the term “new media” is more widely referred to by early framing theorists. The advent of new media platforms, alongside the rapid spread of information within the digital realm have entirely reshaped the methods in which framing processes occur. This offers a revolutionary insight into how individuals, organizations, and media outlets construct frames and thereby influence audience perceptions regarding specific social issues and movements (Gamson et al., 1992; Güran & Özarıslan, 2022).

Framing theory in the context of new media focuses on the complex process of media production, particularly how it reflects and regulates individual's perception of reality. This perspective highlights the significance of media in constructing meaning and shaping the interpretation of information, ultimately being manifested through textual forms, making text construction, interpretation, and discourse production analysis a central focus of frame theory. Furthermore, framing theory recognizes the contextual nature of media production, emphasizing its embeddedness within specific contexts and relationships (D. Huang et al., 2021; Luo & Ling, 2023). Centrally, a "frame" engages as a perceptual and representational complex, intensifying specific meanings in the selection and processing of information and conveying ideas grounded in specific cultural and social values (Gitlin, 1980; Luo & Ling, 2023).

The direct relationship between news framing and new media framing are deeply connected in understanding how media sources can have a powerful influence in how information is presented. This is particularly demonstrated through Daniel Kahneman's "prospect theory", of which the framing of news stories, whether positive or negative, may significantly shape individual interpretations and responses (Kahneman, 2011). With today's informational landscape that is significantly controlled by social media networks, have completely redefined public discourse and how they may occur. These platforms, such as Facebook, X (Twitter) and Instagram, create a new public space where personal, social, and political dimensions are merged and actors are able to wield communication power that has the ability to influence mass public opinions and debates (Castells et al., 2006; Güran & Özarlan, 2022). Castells (2015; 2006) highlights the internet's everchanging ability in structuring society, forming a "Network Society". Within the Network Society, major social media platforms control rapid interactive communication, influencing news production, organizational communication, and political discourse. Framing techniques are now

employed not only in mass media texts but also in various forms of interpersonal communication, such as images and videos (Grabowicz et al., 2012; Güran & Özarlan, 2022).

In the evolving social world of new media, framing methods have expanded to encompass a myriad of creative and impactful strategies, including the use of hashtags, metaphors, hyperboles, and messages, reshaping the way information is presented and perceived in the digital era. Social media networks contrast significantly from other traditional forms of information sharing platforms, where any and all community members have a voice and the spreading of that voice may incur in many ways such as hashtags that can group and hyperlink one topic/subject together, metaphors and hyperboles to frame a situation and create symbolism that may resonate and foster empathy upon their intended audiences better, and overall sharing of methods in different ways in order to demand a collective action. Across most social media platforms, the usage of hashtags as a primary mode for addressing issues and encouraging discourse on social media networks (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017; Xiong et al., 2019) serves as a means to raise awareness, facilitate meaningful discussions, escalate ideas, and enhance information-sharing within a social world, effectively integrating resources from social media platforms (Y. Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; J. Costa et al., 2014). Activism through social media channels mirrors framing processes, allowing activists and actors to actively contribute to the shaping of public attitudes and beliefs concerning pertinent issues (Hallahan, 2008; Hon, 2016; Xiong et al., 2019).

Figurative language are highly utilized within social media platforms and serve as a valuable addition to framing theory (Burgers et al., 2016). Such figurative language operates as both a framing device and a reasoning device, as frames that contain metaphors and/or hyperbole may offer specific depictions and evaluations of issues to their audiences. Burgers et al. (2016) proposes that figurative frames containing metaphor and/or hyperbole are more frequently

employed when addressing new topics compared to already established subjects. Additionally, abstract and intricate subjects tend to invoke a greater usage of metaphoric frames compared to straightforward topics. Figurative frames featuring any of these three elements can either challenge or reinforce existing frames (El Refaie, 2005), aligning with the dynamics of social media debates and discourse. Furthermore, the prevalence of figurative frames is higher in public debates centered around a contested status quo compared to those where consensus on the status quo exists.

As social media platforms continue to change and reshape the digital universe with each and every day, framing theory has been applied to social media activism and global conflict awareness. It fundamentally and deeply influences the ways in which narratives are constructed and individual perceptions are shaped through various methods such as news values, tone, and reactivity on social media (Brown et al., 2018; García-Perdomo et al., 2018). It is evident that conflict and human interest increases interactions, whereas controversy and relevancy, likewise, may predict the news that is shared online (Rudat et al., 2014; Trilling et al., 2017). This indicates that social media is a powerful tool when utilized for social movements around the world but are reliant on certain indicators such as the location of which the movement is occurring, the language of the source media, the type of frame being employed by the actors, etc. (Harlow et al., 2020).

Social media facilitates intricate global communication involving outside observers, governments, institutions and communities. Online social worlds act as hubs for collaboratively shaped knowledge networks and heuristics, impacting the way events and social issues are perceived and may either contribute positively or negatively to ongoing discourse. Within social media worlds, this connectivity often attracts involvement from emerging counter-publics that contest current viewpoints and question the legitimacy of traditional elites, leading into the development of certain social protests originating from social media discourse (Knüpfer &

Entman, 2018; Langman, 2005). Media framing describes a social protest as a reliance on manual coding of small samples and deductive reasoning, where the identification of frames alongside the theoretical assumptions that follow the identification of the specific covered patterns (Ophir et al., 2023).

The integration of social media and framing theory has ushered in a new era of social movements and online discourse. Social media's ability to better shape, amplify, and disseminate frames globally and in real-time has radically transformed the dynamics of public discourse and activism. Framing theory, focusing on how information is presented and perceived, plays a significant role in molding the narratives that emerge within online social worlds. These developments have empowered audiences to mobilize the effects of framing and, in turn, influence public opinions and perceptions, challenging established patterns, and engage in online discourse. The dynamic exchange between social media and framing theory highlights their significant influence on new age communication and the evolution of social movements in the digital age.

Framing Theory and The Current Research

In the qualitative exploration of environmental activism on social media platforms, framing theory stands as a fundamental lens through which I will investigate and dissect the intricate mechanisms of communication, perception, and narrative construction of anti-fast fashion activism. This theory is central to the exploration, as it plays a pivotal role in shaping how information is both presented and interpreted, utilizing previous findings and discussions related to framing theory within social movements and new media framing theory will provide an integral role in understanding how messages surrounding fast fashion's effects on the environment are distributed on social media and to what effect they may have.

Framing theory provides a significant foundation in helping to understand how activists, brands, consumers, actors, and audiences frame the issues and perceive the environmental social issue of fast fashion. Furthermore, whether matters of sustainability, ethical consumption, or corporate responsibility are ones that should be at the forefront of the conversation and social movements, determining what factors are truly to blame, the consumer or the corporation? By employing framing theory within this research, it will provide an opportunity to deeply understand the complex dynamics of information perception and presentations on social media within the context of environmental activism. Within this research, framing theory is used to better understand how actors use framing to define and motivate social movements against fast fashion and spread awareness, further shedding a light on how frames may influence public discourse and open the doors for a collective action and a social movement.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Social media has become an island for users to fly in and out of. It has become the beacon in which many social worlds cross paths, witness, and digest diverse content together, influencing opinions, perspectives, and behaviours. Social media is now the newspaper, the cinema, the comedy club, the tabloids, the stores, and the soap boxes rolled into one condensed arena only a fingertip and internet access away. While research on social media, especially online ethnographies remain new, constantly growing and evolving, its importance grows greater and greater with each trend, meme, and social movement that appears and captures society's attention. Social media never sleeps and neither does research on it, and it has become important to fill any gaps that are growing within qualitative research regarding social media. It is integral to deepen our understanding of social media and the role it plays in influencing social movements.

Research Design

The methodology that is used to explore the proposed research question is an online ethnography. Online ethnographies (also known as mobile ethnography, digital ethnography, or cyber-ethnography), focus on studying everyday life shaped by computer-mediated communication, specifically within the world of smartphones and new technology. This approach challenges conventional notions of culture, community, and identity, emphasizing that online communities are not virtual but real, and are populated by actual people. Online ethnographies highlight the potential tangibility of online interactions, noting that many individuals from online communities may eventually meet in person; there is a great significance to these digital spaces in shaping real-world connections and experiences (Silverman, 2021). Due to the nature of this research topic, understanding social media activity and behaviour in relation to fast fashion consumerism and environmental activism, this approach provides a great opportunity to deeply

understand digital culture and communication (Silverman, 2021). Hine (2000) suggests that following a sociology of media and technology approach, internet users were partaking in the co-construction of its environment: through the practices by which they understand it and through the content they produce. In turn, the internet should be understood analytically as having two dimensions: (1) as a discursively performed culture and (2) a cultural artifact of technology. Meaning is produced contextually through the situations in which the internet is used and the social spaces that emerge through its use (Hine, 2000; Postill & Pink, 2012).

Online ethnographies are employed in qualitative sociological research as a method to understand different social phenomena within online spaces. Online ethnographies are commonly used to observe a myriad of subjects occurring online such as internet culture and subcultures, community dynamics, identity formation/construction, power and inequality balances, public discourses, social movements and activism, and consumption patterns (Beaulieu, 2004; Rahm-Skågeby, 2011). The two main methods used for online ethnographies are web content analysis of large data sets drawn from microblogging and other social media sites and social network analysis. This research will be utilizing the latter to delve deeply and analyze social media-led environmental activism (Postill and Pink, 2012). Online ethnography entails a different type of digital practice, compilation, sharing and openness that involve specific departures from conventional ethnographic practices such as ethnographies that feature a researcher present and in person within a physical field of research. Online ethnographies are oftentimes characterized by research methods including participant observation, online observation, interviews and surveys, analysis of digital artifacts, and document collections. Specifically, this research will be utilizing the research methods of document collection, and online observation to best understand the research question deeply (Rahm-Skågeby, 2011; Silverman, 2021).

TikTok Research

The current research conducts an online ethnography by observing data sources including TikTok posts with content related to fast fashion and environmental activism. As the sole researcher, I initially identified related videos through a personal TikTok account through searching various TikTok posts that would commonly appear on the *For You* Page. The *For You* Page is TikTok's algorithmically generated main feed, which suggests videos to the user based on the user's past behaviour on the platform (TikTok, 2023). TikTok stands out in the social media landscape as a dynamic platform built around the creation and sharing of short-form videos. Its algorithm, powering the *For You* page, personalized content suggestions based on user behaviour, ensuring a tailored and engaging experience every time the app is opened. Users are able to explore diverse content categories, from viral challenges to comedic skits and educational snippets, contributing to a multifaceted platform. The integration of music and sounds enhances TikTok's unique creative atmosphere, allowing users to express themselves through an auditory backdrop that can connect trends/topics together. Collaboration takes centre stage with features like 'duets', enabling users to participate in interactive video performances, and 'stitches', facilitating the incorporation of others' content into their videos and vice versa. A suite of creative tools, including filters and effects, allows users to amplify the visual appeal of their content. With a global community embracing various cultures, TikTok fosters a trendsetting environment, particularly resonating with its youth demographics. In-app messaging functionalities foster a sense of community, as users interact through likes, comments, and direct messages, creating a dynamic and influential social media ecosystem (Kennedy, 2020; Lookingbill, 2022).

However, there are many notable trends and viral videos that were utilized by many actors in order to garner more attention and further build their audiences in order to motivate

environmental activism amongst TikTok users. Viral videos and trends on TikTok are often attached with a “sound” (audio/audio file) or with a hashtag. Virality can be randomized across audiences and algorithms and can vary between music clips, audio scenes from popular culture films/shows/interviews, etc., they can be a specific dance style or sequence of text/reference to make a message that can be altered depending on the discussion. Many videos that discuss fast fashion and the environment utilize current “trendy” viral videos to better garner attention and develop a stronger audience by taking advantage of algorithms, knowing that the more viral a video style is, the more likely it will reach wider audiences. Using a “foot in the door” technique where once the viewer interacts with the viral video that discusses fast fashion and shows interest, they will receive more videos on their ‘For You Page’ of the same topic and begin to learn more about the topic/social issue. There is a great advantage for actors using viral videos to begin an introduction to environmental activism and curate the audience's curiosity to build a platform where open discussions and education can begin.

TikTok was chosen on the basis that it is currently very prominent in the promotion of fast fashion consumerism, fashion “trendsetting”, in social activism, and in social discourse communications (Haenlein et al., 2020; Knupfer et al., 2023). TikTok has been a widely used social media platform in the past few years. With this rise, TikTok has become one of the most globally popularized apps for providing quick content through short videos (less than one minute each) and images, as opposed to other social media platforms such as YouTube and Reddit where content time can vary in time length and be more in-depth (Carah et al., 2022; Dantas & Abreu, 2020; Harrell, 2023).

As previously mentioned in the literature review, the discussion revolves around TikTok and its approach to content censorship have recently sparked legal discussions, given its

development in China where media censorship is prevalent. Proceeding the American Congressional Hearing in March 2023, TikTok Chief Executive Shou Zi Chew and several United States Lawmakers discussed and debated the safety and security of TikTok. Concerns have been raised globally about China's influence on social media censorship, particularly regarding its control over digital platforms and potential implications for global freedom of speech (Are, 2023; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Despite TikTok's official guidelines emphasizing content moderation based on community rules, debates persist around the accuracy of claims, with ongoing discussions about potential permanent banning or restriction in certain U.S. states. This highlights the broader impact of social media censorship on activism, storytelling, and the dissemination of information something to keep in mind throughout the research and data collection process; some videos may not ever reach audiences due potential implications of restricting global freedom of speech (Henneman, 2020). However, that may not negate the overall findings of this research, but rather allow understanding of what does reach the surface and continue to influence despite restrictions placed by different social media platforms. This current research is conducted in Ontario, Canada, and as of 2024 there has been no political discussion or debates surrounding the possible banning or censoring of TikTok, therefore it may be assumed there is little to no restriction for the researcher and potential findings.

Moving forward in social media research, it is important to identify the meaning and the usage of emoticons. The use of emoticons (emojis) as a way of expressing emotions in digital text by including a visual element embedded in text helps improve expressivity in communication online. However, understanding what each emoji means may become complicated as they may have alternative meanings (ex., a crying emoji may be indicative of laughing) (Cohn et al., 2019; Leonardi, 2022). Although on TikTok videos may not commonly use emojis as they are more

visual and auditory than other social media platforms, audiences and viewers oftentimes respond to videos via comments with emojis that can help gauge overall opinion towards the video, creator, or content/message of the video. In qualitative social media research, dealing with emojis is crucial for capturing the nuances and emotions expressed in online communication. Emojis serve as visual cues that compliment or convey sentiments within textual content. Researchers often analyze the use of emojis to discern emotional tones, contextualize messages, and understand user attitudes. Emojis can offer valuable insights into the sentiment, humour, or cultural nuances embedded in social media conversations (Liu & Sun, 2020). In order to avoid any misunderstanding with the audience's emoji usage, any ambiguous emoji will be defined utilizing Emojipedia. Emojipedia is a reputable encyclopedia for emojis where each and every emoticon can be searched and defined by its common social usage (ex., fire emoji implies metaphorical expressions related to fire, including the slang for attractive and excellent) (Emojipedia, 2024).

As of January 2024, TikTok has become available in over 160 countries with over 1.1 billion users. TikTok's current audience ranges from ages 13 to 60 years old worldwide, becoming one of the most popularly used social media platforms globally (Wallaroo Media, 2024). In terms of research, using TikTok as the research field provides valuable insight into the inner workings of user interactions and the rise of social media-led activism. TikTok serves as a valuable platform for social media research due to its diverse global user base, offering insights into various cultures and behaviours. The platform's content diversity, encompassing short videos, dances, and challenges, allows researchers to explore different forms of expression and communication. The unique algorithm and features like the *For You* page provide valuable data on user engagement patterns and content discovery, enabling real-time analysis of emerging trends and viral challenges. TikTok's popularity amongst younger demographics offers a window into youth

culture, while its global reach allows for cross-cultural studies (Carah et al., 2022). Also delving into the algorithmic aspects of content distribution and analyze the platform's impact on activism and social movements.

Data Collection and Analysis

Through the data collection, the process of data analysis is explored, unveiling the qualitative approach applied to derive meaningful insights from the collected data, and addressing the research questions and objectives. Online ethnography is a well-established methodology for qualitatively analyzing social media (Winter & Lavis, 2021). Online ethnographies are adaptable to textual and visual content, in all forms of expression such as videos, GIFs, and emojis, and provides a comprehensive and contextual understanding of online discourse. Data for this analysis was collected on TikTok by the researcher. Videos on TikTok's are algorithmic, driven by the 'For You' page, it enhances content discoverability, contributing to its widespread appeal, particularly among younger demographics.

By collecting 120 original posts on TikTok between May 2020 and December 2023 that actively advocate against fast fashion, employing various strategies such as boycotting, buycotting, guiltig and/or shaming, educational, alternative practices, social commentaries, or comedic/pointed skits. The timeline of May 2020 to December 2023 was chosen with the understanding that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic's induced global lockdown, online shopping and e-commerce skyrocketed and fast fashion became an essential form of shopping (Bilińska-Reformat & Dewalska-Opitek, 2021), heavily promoted on many social media platforms including TikTok. To maintain contextual understanding of discussions, comments were never removed from the original post. Instead, threads of conversations were collected and analyzed. Data collection was supplemented by ethnographic fieldnotes of observations and emerging

analyses. Data were collected into an extensive spreadsheet where links, key factors/video highlights, search terms and keywords used to locate the video (*Appendix 1*), and ethnographic fieldnotes were recorded such as the date TikTok was posted, comments on the type of video, and possible relative codes for later NVivo analysis. Furthermore, to enhance findings, the assumed targeted institution at fault (Who is to blame?) was recorded as; corporations, consumers, both, or neither/no target, to provide a deeper understanding of generally who is perceived to be at fault.

The TikToks analyzed throughout this research were all publicly accessible and obtained through manually searching various terms and hashtags to locate videos that specifically discuss fast fashion and the environment (*Appendix 1*). All videos that were used in this research were publicly accessible, meaning no videos required the researcher to request access or create an account to view or download video, all actors have consented to allowing their videos to be publicly viewed and accessible by agreeing to the terms and conditions of TikTok upon creating their account and uploading their videos.

The TikToks collected between January 2020 to December 2023 that suited the aforementioned parameters resulted in the collection of 120 videos. Videos ranged between 30 seconds to 120 seconds in duration, with the current video length constraints of TikTok being up to 9 minutes and 59 seconds. In total all videos together came up to roughly 2 hours of videos to be analyzed. The sampling method of this research was purposeful. By selecting TikTok videos that were most relevant to the research topic, this ensured a rich and in-depth understanding of fast fashion and environmental concerns. The sampling and data collection continued until saturation was achieved, therefore no new themes or insights emerged from additional data and the inclusion of more videos would not have a significant effect on the findings. This ensured a comprehensive and thorough approach to the topic and captured a diverse range of video themes and topics for

the analysis. The goal was to obtain a comprehensive dataset that accurately represented the topics and methods actors on social media utilize to discuss fast fashion and environmental discourse.

The collected TikToks follow such characteristics; all videos originated from predominantly English-speaking countries, thus all videos analyzed were only in English (videos in other languages that featured English subtitles were accepted, they were not manually or organically found throughout the data collection process). No data was collected for the race and gender of the actors, therefore no further discussion on the diversity of the sample population can be commented on. Most actors that posted videos that discuss the research topic further advocated for environmental activism and fast fashion by producing more videos on the same topics, focusing their account and videos on this subject entirely. Therefore, many actors who discussed fast fashion and the environment were those who were interested in environmental activism by creating a space where this topic is discussed further in depth throughout their account.

The primary method used to locate TikToks videos for the data analysis was to manually search for videos in relation to the research question and research subjects. Through the application users are able to search various sentences or keywords to view videos that are related to that topic. Following the search users are shown a choice between viewing the 'Top' (most popular) videos under that topic, general 'Videos' that use those keywords in their captions or within the video, Live streams, and related hashtags. For the purpose of this research, search focused on videos under the categories of 'Top' and 'Video' to only view TikToks that related to fast fashion and the environment. Videos were then collected manually by viewing the TikToks, determining whether they suit the set criteria, downloading them and saving them into a manually determined thematic category to later be analyzed on NVivo.

Through NVivo, all videos that were collected were transcribed fully and manually checked to ensure transcription accuracy. The TikTok videos were then coded sentence by sentence depending on the context of the video and the message the actor is intending to send to their audience. Due to TikTok having rigorous rules surrounding appropriateness and user safety, many phrases and words are usually flagged and removed automatically by the application, therefore many actors utilize lexical substitutions to alter the words that they say in order to bypass TikTok guidelines and avoid their video from being removed. For example, swearing may be omitted from subtitles or altered to other words that sound like them; “fuck” becomes “eff” or “duck”. Words that may be sensitive to viewers such as “suicide” becomes “un-alive”. These lexical substitutions are oftentimes defined in the comments or very obvious, therefore when conducting and correcting transcriptions these substitutions were altered to represent what was intended to be said to ensure clarity in the data analysis process.

Initially, TikToks were saved through their URL links then categorized based on the top three thematic categories they were determined to fall into based on the content of the video. Also recorded was the date the TikTok was uploaded, the search term used to locate the video, and any comments on the video such as a short summary of the video or if it is significant to the findings. Videos were then organized by their dominant theme and saved into NVivo. NVivo analysis determined coding similarities, the frequency of each code coded within each thematically organized video, and the frequency of overall coding references.

The current research was conducted with no specific participants, making this a non-participant observation research method. As the researcher, this allows one to observe a group, community, or social setting without actively participating in the activities being studied. This approach allowed gathering information as a passive observer, maintaining a distance from the

subjects to minimize interference with the natural flow of behaviour and interactions. Following the collection of data and the completion of non-participant online observation, all data analyzed through NVivo. NVivo was used to analyze key terms related to the research question and objections. In qualitative sociological research, NVivo is used to systematically analyze and interpret qualitative data, enabling researchers to identify patterns, themes, and insights from diverse sources such as interviews, surveys, and textual documents.

To ensure consistent criteria for analysis, the following conditions were applied: to ensure an entirely text-based analysis, only posts entirely in English or with English translations were analyzed; only videos with closed captions or transcriptions were analyzed to prevent miscommunications and mistranslations; moreover, posts had to explicitly mention "fast fashion" and "the environment," or related keywords and hashtags such as; #sustainable fashion and #stopfastfashion, excluding activism posts focusing solely on the human right violations' aspect of fast fashion. Each post had to have a minimum of ten comments to ensure engagement and allow for meaningful discussion. Through a direct sample collection of relevant TikTok posts discussing fast fashion through different contexts in relation to its impact on the environment, an analysis of findings was conducted focusing on transcriptions and captions.

Reflexivity

It is imperative to critically examine the researcher's role and positionality throughout the research process. Reflectivity serves as a vital component, offering transparency and self-awareness regarding the influence of the researcher's background, biases, and experiences on this particular study. Due to the nature of this research, I have chosen to take on various reflexivity approaches to help navigate the introspection process and do this research justice. Through personal reflexivity I acknowledge my own values, life experiences, and how they influence the

way I may interpret the findings. As a person who grew in the Global North (Canada) who uses social media often, being very active and interested in many topics including fashion, social justice/politics, and the environment, I am aware that my own personal interests and experiences that align with the subjects of the research may influence the way the findings may be interpreted. Rather than attempting to avoid bias and subjectivity or pretending that it does not exist from the perspective of a researcher, I will highlight these possibilities and utilize them as a valuable tool to make sense of the data, in reflexive thematic data.

As someone who spends a significant amount of time on social media, holding different accounts for over a decade, I have spent a majority of my youth on social media. Throughout this significant time in my life, I have worked to develop a deeper understanding of the functioning of social media, the way that cycles, trends, and exchanges that occur on social media platforms that significantly influence society beyond the screen more deeply. However, with this long-term deeper understanding of social media and fashion there are some things that may be ‘second nature’ to me and fall below my radar. To combat this as I feel it is important to the quality of the findings, I have kept notes from each collected video and taken the time to define phrases that may be ambiguous or relevant only to internet culture and would require further explanation to the average reader. This was done through second readers and close academic supervision. The reflexive engagement throughout this research not only highlights the intricacies of my positionality and biases but also highlights the commitment to transparency, self-awareness, and the continual evolution of perspectives, enriching the authenticity and depth of the research findings.

Limitations

Like any research, there are limitations and challenges that potentially influence the overall results of the findings. It is essential to acknowledge the inherent constraints and challenges faced during this research process, shedding light on the boundaries that may influence the interpretation and generalizability of this study's findings. Unfortunately, throughout the data collection process, roughly 65 TikTok's were lost due to the links for the TikToks being corrupted or the video itself being deleted or removed from TikTok (this can occur for many reasons such as, the user deleted the video, deleted or privatized their account so it can no longer be public viewed, or the video broke public guidelines and was removed by TikTok itself). Due to this loss, a significant amount of data was forever lost and could not be located, this will limit the findings of this research as there is no evidence of them, what they are about, and what influence that may have had on the audience. As a response, I adapted my data collection process to ensure that this cannot occur again by saving videos onto a personal device and writing more detailed notes for each analyzed TikTok.

Furthermore, a great limitation for this research is TikTok itself as a platform. As with any other social media platform, algorithms can affect accessibility of the videos. That means that there may be some videos that I was not able to locate due to it being "buried" by other more appealing content. Alternatively, that means that some videos may not be seen by a greater audience due to the nature of the algorithm and with low interactivity would not fulfil the criteria for this research and not be analyzed. This is a limitation due to the fact that some TikTok's may not be included in this research or be seen by enough users despite the information of the video being impactful or potentially significant for users to hear. Though there is nothing I can personally do to control the virality of certain videos, I was able to partially avoid the algorithm's effect for locating my own videos through methods such as clearing my cache, refreshing my *For You* page (this feature restarts the algorithm and shows you only current popular videos that are un-personalized), and

logging out of TikTok/using different devices, to search for videos. This provided a more well-rounded experience inside and outside of the TikTok algorithm.

It is important to note that in January 2024 (during the time of the research process) Universal Music Group (UMG) recorded catalog of music was removed from TikTok due to failure to reach a new licensing agreement with the platform over its music. Therefore, a lot of sounds/audios on TikToks had been removed from the platform and no longer appeared in searches and videos were then silent (Millman, 2024). At this time, all videos for the research had been downloaded and saved onto an external platform and were unaffected by the legal changes and access to music on TikTok. However, this raises a discussion around copyright infringement on TikTok: through the TikTok guidelines they do not allow posting, sharing, or sending any content that violates or infringes upon copyrights, trademarks, or other IP rights. Therefore, all videos that infringe on copyright laws are removed from the application and cannot be found or downloaded. The case for inappropriate videos is similar- data preparation and cleaning is then primarily completed through this process completed by TikTok.

The methodological approach outlined provides a solid foundation for addressing the research objectives. By carefully selecting methods, maintaining reflexivity, and acknowledging limitations, this methodology aims to yield nuanced and credible insights into the research questions. The deliberate choices made here pave the way for a thorough exploration of the focal point for the research and provide us with the tools to answer the research question and intricately understand the relationship between fast fashion and social media-led environmental activism.

Research Question

How is TikTok as a social media platform being utilized within environmental activism to influence consumer behaviours regarding fast fashion and address its associated environmental damages?

Chapter 4: Findings

Coding Process

The findings of the data analysis provides a deeper glance into social media and how actors utilize their platforms to motivate a message and begin (or further) social activism and political discourse. This chapter delves into the findings yielded from this current research to better understand the aforementioned research question. The goal of this chapter is to present the findings of what the collected TikToks contain while saving any critical engagement with the theoretical framework and eternal implications for the forthcoming discussion chapters. Throughout this data analysis, the findings of the collected TikToks allow an immersion of digital environments through an online ethnography, that begins to uncover cultural dynamics, community interactions, and negotiations within online spaces that advocate against fast fashion due to its tumultuous effect on the climate change crisis and global environment.

The data involved in this research includes the TikToks uploaded in the past four years that discuss fast fashion and how it negatively affects the environment. The videos collected are defined as environmental activism, regardless of the status of the actor uploading the video, whether they are a student who is creating a video-project or a professional environmental activist, the data involved in this research focuses on the videos that have managed to catch audience's attention and generate a discussion towards fast fashion consumption.

Drawing on established theoretical frameworks and the thematic areas identified through the preliminary exploration of TikTok and environmental activism, the coding scheme was designed to comprehensively cover a wide range of themes, patterns, and concepts relevant to understanding social media-led environmental activism. These themes extended across diverse content and actor's actions including but not limited to; humour, social commentary, viral trends,

lifestyle content, and educational discourse, reflecting the wide breadth and depth of content that is found on TikTok and the various actions that actors are taking to spread their message and motivate an activist movement across social media.

The application of the coding scheme involved a systematic process of viewing and annotating each TikTok video to identify segments or elements that resonated with the predefined coding categories or themes. It was pertinent and important as the researcher to approach the analysis with sensitivity to context, tone, and style, aiming to capture the nuanced variations within the video content. Therefore, this process facilitated the identification of recurring themes and patterns across the data, leading to a very comprehensive exploration of the socio-cultural dynamics, user interactions, and emerging trends within the TikTok and environmental activism on social media. Throughout the data analysis of TikTok videos, several changes and refinements were made to the coding scheme based on the original analysis and emerging insights. Such as the addition of more coding and the omission of original codes that did not yield any references. Initially, the coding scheme was developed based on a combination of existing theoretical frameworks and primary exploration of TikTok. However, as the analysis progressed and more videos were coded, it became apparent that certain codes were overlapping or insufficiently capturing the nuances of the video content. In response to this, the coding scheme was revised to combine similar codes and introduce new categories to better represent the diversity of themes and patterns observed in the videos.

Definition and Organization of Codes

A total of 120 TikToks were collected throughout the timeline of January 2020 to December 2023. Throughout the data analysis process, a total of 25 codes were developed, 12 of these codes are parent codes (master codes) and 14 are child codes (subcodes) that categorize the

results to be specific to the findings within the TikToks and the findings that were collected throughout analyzing all the videos on NVivo. Please refer to Appendix B for the full codebook.

The collected videos were categorized in such a way to define the differences in the messages sent to audiences regarding fast fashion and how they differentiate from one another all with similar goals. Furthermore, the collected videos are categorized by focusing on the actions of the actors, placing them at the forefront of the analysis. Actor's thereby are performing an action that is intended to motivate their message and persuade their intended audiences into becoming more aware of the implications of fast fashion on the environment and also to change their current consumption habits to those that are more environmentally sustainable.

Videos categorized as Alternatives to Fast Fashion contained content where the actor discussed alternative forms of purchasing/obtaining attire with different ideas such as thrift shopping or clothing shops. A total of seven videos were located under this category.

Videos categorized as Blaming consisted of moments where the actor is specifically blaming something as being the catalyst for the result of fast fashion and the environment. These codes are from direct moments where actors chose to assign responsibility for this social issue onto one of the three child codes including; 'Both consumer and corporation to blame' where the actor is assigning joint responsibility to both fast fashion corporations and consumers for the issue, 'Consumer to blame' where the actor is assigning responsibility onto the consumer and their consumption habits for the negative implications on the environment, and 'Corporation to blame', where the actor is assigning responsibility on different corporations and fashion company's actions for the environmental damage caused by fast fashion.

All three child codes fall under the idea of blaming, where the actor directly places fault on someone for the negative environmental implications caused by fast fashion. Though there is

no correct answer, oftentimes it is best to understand that consumerism and corporation advertising goes hand in hand and cannot exist without the other, the intention of blaming is to contribute to guilt and shaming and attempt to dissuade viewers from consuming fast fashion brands either through guilt or shaming their own actions, or shaming the brands from which they may choose to shop. Furthermore, in various contexts where a TikTok is also thematically categorized or coded as boycotting, it is also coded as ‘Corporation to blame’ where an actor is directly mentioning a brand/company to avoid due to their direct relationship (Figure 13). A total of 25 references were coded within this section.

Videos categorized as Boycotting contained content where the actor discussed brands that partake in fast fashion and brands that should be abandoned/avoided due to their negative environmental habits. These videos emphasize to viewers the negative environmental implications of fast fashion and specifically list or “call out” brands that are a part of this growing issue. A total of 13 videos were located under this category.

A child code that emerged from Boycotting is Greenwashing. Greenwashing is the act of making a product, policy, or activity appear as environmentally friendly or simply less environmentally damaging than it really is. Greenwashing has become a marketing method that many companies have begun to utilize as more consumers have become aware of fast fashion and its negative implications on the environment, thus demanding more sustainable fashion options from retailers. References coded as greenwashing feature actors specifically defining what greenwashing is and what companies are greenwashing their products/advertisements. A majority of coded references as greenwashing were also coded under the thematic categorization of education, where an actor is explaining what greenwashing is and what its negative implications are (Figure 14). A total of 15 references were coded within this section.

Videos categorized as Buycotting contained content where the actor discussed alternative brands that are not fast fashion and emphasized to viewers that if they are interested in purchasing new clothing/materials, these brands are more sustainable and are not fast fashion (oftentimes they are slow fashion). This code differentiates from the 'Alternative to Fast Fashion' code as these videos specifically discuss brands rather than alternative practices, there is still the attribute of consumerism, whereas the first code demotes consumerism more broadly. A total of five videos were located under this category.

Videos categorized as Comedically Pointed contained content where the actor is conducting a joke or a "skit" to discuss fast fashion and its negative implications on the environment. Oftentimes these videos partake in a viral trend or a sarcastic scenario to make fun of certain brands of fast fashion as a whole. A total of 13 videos were located under this category.

Videos categorized as Commentary contained content where the actor is openly discussing fast fashion, oftentimes these videos are more open-ended or emotional, just broadly speaking about their own personal opinions or perspective on fast fashion. A total of 19 videos were located under this category.

Videos categorized as Guilting and Shaming contain content where the actor is discussing fast fashion in a way that is intended to shame and guilt the viewer, it is intended to emotionally charge viewers and highlight the relationship between fast fashion's negative effects on the environment and its relationship to Western consumerism. These videos utilize different guilting and shaming methods that are intended to dissuade viewers and discourage them from purchasing fast fashion. A total of 12 videos were located under this category.

Videos categorized as Educating contains content where the actor is specifically discussing fast fashion and defining it, these videos go over what fast fashion is, how it affects the

environment, and the negative implications of it. They often speak in statistics or in layman's terms to objectively highlight why fast fashion should be avoided. A total of 45 videos were located under this category, being the most predominant code amongst videos about fast fashion and the environment.

Videos coded under the parent code of Messaging Strategies consisted of videos that features diverse methods and techniques employed by actors to communicate their message, including strategies that range from establishing credibility and using fear to influence behaviour, to addressing issues of overconsumption and micro-trends, motivating audiences for collective action, and even promoting pro-fast fashion perspectives.

'Credentials mentioned' was child coded for references where an actor mentions their own credentials/previous experience making them justified or well-versed enough to discuss the topic.

Now I've been in the industry for more than 12 years doing product development and production design. I came from luxury fashion. I worked for the LVMH umbrella at one point, I worked for Michael Kors, Helmet Lang, etc. And I was just really sick and tired of all the ethics and the bullshit." (@lamerostudio).

This is intended to create a form of trust between the actor and the viewers, mentioning that they are credible and the information or commentary that they proceed to discuss throughout the video is correct and knowledgeable. A total of five references were coded within this section.

Scare and fear tactics were child coded for strategies that are intended to manipulate public opinion regarding a specific issue by arousing fear or alarm within an audience. Fear tactics were coded for references that feature actors using such methods to make their audience scared of potential fast fashion damage to the environment. Fear tactics (also in some contexts may be regarded as fearmongering) include contexts where the actor is using potential environmental

concerns that may arise due to fast fashion and pushing viewers to be afraid of the future. This can include using heavy language; “Some people die for fashion! 35 percent of microplastics in the ocean come from fast fashion brands” (@loststockvintage) or implying to viewers that due to the climate change crisis and fast fashion, the world may come to an end or populations will begin to die due to this problem, intending to instil fear in audiences and push them to change their own consumption habits. A total of eight references were coded within this section.

Micro-trends and overconsumption were child coded for videos that mention or discuss habits of overconsumption and in relation, the popularity of micro-trends. As previously discussed, micro-trends are trends/fads that are accelerated, and their occurrences last for shorter periods of time than other fashion trends throughout history. While overconsumption refers to the act of consuming more resources than what is produced, overconsumption is more commonly measured on a country, continent, and planet-wide basis- where societies consume beyond more than what is needed, leading to the worsening of climate breakdown and increase of air pollution. Overconsumption and micro-trends go hand in hand because micro-trends drive niche consumption patterns that, when combined, contribute to overconsumption by amplifying diverse and often small-scale consumer demands. Videos coded with micro-trend and overconsumption references feature actors discussing micro-trends and/or the relationship between fast fashion and global overconsumption habits. A total of 22 references were coded under this section.

References child coded as motivational were within videos that featured actors who discussed environmental activism as a whole and the next steps for audiences, forms of action that they can take on to attempt to mitigate the negative implications of fast fashion on the environment and act against climate change. Furthermore, references also mention something good that is happening, such as a non-profit or an initiative they highlight as good and progressive to the cause.

These videos mention positive events or causes currently occurring and initiatives audiences can partake in. A total of 16 references were coded under this section.

Although not the intention or the purpose of this research, mentions of pro-fast fashion were demonstrated and noted throughout the data analysis process and child coded as such. These take the form of moments where the actor takes on an empathic position towards fast fashion, commenting that there are cases in which shopping fast fashion is admissible due to constraints such as sizing and personal financial situation. Furthermore, some pro-fast fashion references feature an actor discussing positive work that a fast fashion brand may be doing (although it may be greenwashing), like releasing a “sustainable fashion line”. References that positively mention fast fashion are important to note to further understand that environmental activism against fast fashion is not black and white and that grey areas such as those mentioned are not ignored by actors. A total of eight references were coded under this section.

Another parent code to emerge from the data analysis is TikTok Specific Features, these consist of coded videos that highlight the unique elements and functionalities of the TikTok that actors utilize to convey their messages about fast fashion.

Devastating imagery refers to visual representations (pictures or videos) that depict scenes of great destruction, sorrow, or tragedy. This is intended to evoke strong emotional responses and highlight the severity of a situation (Figure 11, Figure 15). It can be used to convey the gravity of a situation, raise awareness, and provoke action amongst viewers. Specifically, TikToks that were coded with devastating imagery featured the usage of sad or scary images or video clips of the environment or animals that are or potentially will be harmed by fast fashion and climate change (Figure 16, Figure 17). A total of 27 references were coded under this section.

The most significant and popular coded reference found throughout the data analysis process is statistics/science. Statistics and science features actors directly using statistics and science to back up their claims to sound more serious and professional. Uses information/statistics/facts to discuss fast fashion. Mentions “hard numbers” or technical/scientific terms, thus enhancing credibility. A majority of videos under each thematic categorization had many references under this coding, indicating that most actors prefer to use real facts to assert their message and discuss the relationship between the environment and fast fashion, furthermore, indicating that audiences respond well and interact favourably with factual videos that present information and education over any other activist method. A total of 74 references were coded under this section.

Viral trends on TikTok often involve the circulation of specific actions, challenges, dances, or memes that gain widespread popularity within TikTok’s community. Viral audios/sounds refer to the sound clips or music tracks that accompany these trends, serving as the foundation for user-generated content. These audio snippets can become popularized within the TikTok ecosystem, driving engagement and creativity among audiences as they incorporate them into their own videos (Figure 18). TikTok coded with ‘Viral trends/audio’ are videos that follow a popular trend or attached an audio or sound. Therefore, the video will gain more attention as it is currently viral or trending already. A total of 15 references were coded under this section.

Lastly, the final coded section consists of TikTok Tone Indicators. Tone indication refers to cues, signals, and inflections in written or spoken language that convey the attitude, emotion, or intended meaning behind the words. This section was divided into three child codes: angry, empathetic, and sarcastic. Angry videos (21 references) featured an actor who was visibly upset and angry throughout the video, using negative tones, harsh language, etc. to indicate to audiences

that they are extremely upset because of fast fashion and the environment, oftentimes their anger is used as a foundation to discuss what is making them angry, opening into a different thematic categorization such as guilting and shaming or commentary. Empathic videos (5 references) feature an actor using empathy to prevent or mitigate backlash. Using phrases such as "I understand that not all people can...", empathic tone is used to ensure that comments and responses to the video are not negative and fueled by hatred towards the actor for not "seeing both sides". Lastly, sarcastic videos (17 references) features actors using sarcasm, this is oftentimes coinciding with videos under the thematic category of comedically pointed, where the actor is using verbal irony to mock or convey contempt, humor, or disdain fast fashion and various fast fashion corporations. A total of 42 references were coded under this section.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the TikTok videos addressing fast fashion, seven prominent parent codes emerged that encapsulate the popular methods used by actors to engage their audience. By examining the frequency and context of these codes, we gain insight into the narrative strategies and persuasive techniques utilized to raise awareness and drive action against fast fashion. All of the videos were divided into seven parent coded categories while being qualitatively coded on NVivo. The themes videos were analyzed under followed; (1) Alternatives to Fast Fashion, (2) Boycotting, (3) Buycotting, (4) Comedically Pointed, (5) Commentary on Fast Fashion, (6) Guilting and Shaming, and (7) Educating.

The parent code, Alternatives specifically focusing on the Alternatives to fast fashion. Videos under this code focused primarily on the demotion of fast fashion through providing new ideas to audiences that are not consumption based. These videos shift focus away from purchasing new clothing altogether by highlighting options that maintain products that are currently in

circulation and increasing their longevity. Oftentimes these videos highlighted low-cost efforts that are not purchasing new clothing from any general retailers or considering handmade/refurbished clothing (DIY). Alternative options to fast fashion that were highly emphasized by actors producing these videos include; thrifting or thrift shopping, using online second-hand shopping (Facebook Marketplace, Depop, Poshmark), shopping from local garage sales and consignment shops, repairing or “flipping” old clothes, trading old clothes with friends, or attending activities called “clothing swaps” where local community members organize events where attendees can trade clothes with one another free of cost to gain new clothes without wasting old clothes or spending money on new clothes (Figure 1).

Videos coded as Alternatives, very rarely mention clothing shops that are defined as “slow fashion” or “sustainable fashion” due to the emphasis on maintaining old clothes and preventing mass product from entering circulation incessantly. Therefore, these videos focus predominantly on the sustainable options, closely aligning with the theory of the treadmill of production and the need to stop the speeding of production and entirely halt production and consumption in order for positive environmental change to occur, believing that any new consumption can and will have negative future implications on the environment and climate change (Curran, 2017).

Another code to emerge from the initial data are Boycotting videos. These videos featured an actor explicitly mentioning specific retailers and brands that partake in fast fashion or are entirely fast fashion brands, ranging from low-cost brands to high-end “expensive” brands and the role that they play in the fast fashion crisis on the environment (Figure 2). Oftentimes these videos begin with a definition of fast fashion and provide specific brands as an example, in an effort to deter viewers from shopping from that brand, following the notion of a boycott. Although not all videos actively call for a boycott, its implications are to emphasize why they will no longer be

shopping from that retailer and why their audiences should follow suit alongside them; reason being the effect of fast fashion on the environment. Majority of videos highlight many brands overall, however the most common retailers mentioned in the Boycotting code are SHEIN, H&M, and Zara.

Furthermore, these actors often use harder or “rougher” language to emphasize their points, using heavier spoken language that further vilifies the retailer mentioned and highlights its negative implications on the environment. Though not all videos focus on defining fast fashion and related environmental activism, it continues to spread through social media. Many audiences have become familiar with the phrase and its meaning but may still struggle to determine which brands are or are not fast fashion. Therefore, simply attaching the name of a retailer with the phrase “fast fashion” is enough scrutiny to call for a boycott against the corporation- it is enough for viewers to understand what it means and how they should react. Beyond emphasizing which brands are simply fast fashion or partake in fast fashion, videos coded as Boycotting also discuss current events and controversies surrounding specific fast fashion retailers such as lawsuits related to environmental neglect and instances where they have been caught “greenwashing”. For example, both H&M and German online retailer Zalando have come under fire for lying about recycling returned products through journalist investigators attaching tracking devices to their returned clothing. These two specific events have created an awareness for the power of greenwashing and how often fast fashion brands may be dishonest surrounding their “sustainability methods”.

Similar to the code of Alternatives and Boycotting, a similar code emerges in close relation; Buycotting. The code of Buycotting features actors who are specifically discussing different brands and companies to support as an alternative option to fast fashion. Buycotting differs from Alternatives as rather than highlighting options that are avoiding the purchase of new material,

Buycotting promotes companies that are defined as “sustainable” and “slow fashion”. Oftentimes these brands are using new or recycled sustainable materials (such as recycled cotton) and are made in the Global North under strict labour laws and hazardous waste management laws. Buycotted brands within this code of videos are defined as more sustainable and long-lasting, as the antithesis to fast fashion where consumers who wish to avoid fast fashion and support smaller businesses that provide clothing materials that are safer for wear and will hold greater longevity in comparison to fast fashion (Figure 3). However, it is heavily noted by the actors that create Buycotting videos that buycotted brands are more expensive in comparison due to the cost of manufacturing, properly paid wages, and expensive but sustainable materials used to create such clothing. Oftentimes Buycott videos are intertwined with Boycott videos in which an actor may begin the TikTok by explicitly mentioning brands that are to be boycotted due to fast fashion usage, and towards the end will explicitly list out the preferred buycotted brands that they suggest their audiences should support instead of the previously mentioned boycotted brands.

As TikTok is like any social media website, comedy, especially comedy that can be very pointed and direct to pass on a message is very prevalent and one of the most interacted with genres on the application. Comedy is another code that emerged throughout the data analysis. Comedic TikToks towards fast fashion have emerged in many different ways with the main purpose to make the audience both laugh and understand how negative fast fashion is for the environment, but in a bit of a more lighthearted manner (Figure 4). Comedic videos vary from videos that are simply making a joke about fast fashion. They use sarcasm or satire to directly point fun at fast fashion companies and the situation, frame the joke and fast fashion as an inside joke so that audiences are pushed to learn more to understand the joke better, and use viral trends and skits are also popular methods of comedic style videos. Sarcasm is a very popular method of comedy for many comedic-based

videos as the actors highlight real life events regarding fast fashion brands and sarcastically discuss how positive it is and how “great it is” for the environment (Figure 5). Sarcasm and satire are used in a way to pass on information of what fast fashion brands are currently doing to the environment and mocks them in a comedic way that is less often detected as bullying, by running only transcriptions and subtitles on the videos, the video may pass as positive however it is tone indication and implications of what is being said that forms the video as negative and anti-fast fashion.

“The top three most sustainable and ethical brands in the world right now... In second place is Pretty Little Thing because of their charity work and giving back. Some people might use really negative language like ‘dumping our problem on someone else,’ but I love that Pretty Little Thing uses positive language, ‘saving 100 tons of clothes from labs.’ These are 100 tons of clothes that Pretty Little Thing have made, so if you think about it, they're saving us from them, which is really kind.” (@thriftythinker)

Oftentimes the comedic videos are intertwined with the code, “Guilt and Shaming”, that is because a majority of the videos analyzed as such use a form of shaming to create the joke, as usually the fast fashion brand or consumer are the ones being made fun of by the end of the video, it doubles as a way of making fun of those who promote and buy from fast fashion. Another very common form of comedic videos are the viral trends and skits. Skits are short comedic sketches or short form parodies, suiting well with the short video nature of TikTok. Skits have become very popular methods for video creation. Viral videos are very important to TikTok and its algorithm, the more popular a video is, the more attention it will gain and appear on users’ For You Page. Viral videos coincide with viral audios/sounds where a random audio attachment becomes very popular, therefore all videos regardless of their content receive a boost in attention, developing

into a trend based on an audio snippet alone. Many actors take advantage of the virality of a trend/audio and discuss fast fashion to garner more attention/wider audiences by utilizing the already popularized (Figure 6). Many actors use skits to discuss fast fashion in forms of conversations or back and forth jokes to further get the point across regarding fast fashion and its negative implications on the environment. Some actors created popular skits where they pretend to have conversations with real life fast fashion brands to act as though they are explaining what fast fashion is and how they use it.

Oh hi, I'm James Quincy, CEO of Coca-Cola. My company has been named the biggest plastic polluter for the past five years in a row now. And until something's done about it, I'm just gonna keep doing my thing and covering it up, like sponsoring that climate conference that y'all love so much. Which I know sounds oxymoronic because plastic is made from fossil fuels, which is the same stuff that's causing climate change. (@ReLauren).

Commentary was another code that emerged throughout the data collection and analysis process. Commentary videos feature the actor who is openly discussing and their own views, thoughts, and opinions on the relationship between fast fashion and the environment (Figure 7). Commentary videos focus less on factual information, statistics, science, or being entertaining at all, and entirely focus on making a point and vocalizing the actor's opinion and opening a discussion with the audience. Many commentary videos rely on the actor's ability to persuade an audience using their own opinions and oftentimes are more emotional than other coded TikToks. The actors may be angry, visibly upset, sad, and/or disheartened, exemplifying a raw emotion that is intended to speak to their audiences emotionally. Furthermore, many commentary videos focus on simply talking about fast fashion and what it means within social contexts. Many actors

highlight different personal anecdotes related to fashion and their own views on micro-trends and the relationship society has with overconsumption.

Like for example the most stylish person I knew in high school... wasn't a rich kid... he was the most stylish person... he got his clothes from like the thrift shops like he wasn't spending all this money on designer items and anything like that and he still [looked better than] everyone [else]. (@antisocialite)

Another code that emerged from the data analysis and collection is Guilting and Shaming. Guilting and shaming features actors discussing fast fashion and the environment in a way that is intentionally targeting fast fashion shoppers and shaming them for their consumption habits, “When does it stop? I am fucking furious at this point. If you exist on social media, you have no excuse for not knowing that SHEIN is the devil”. (@makeearthgreenagain)

This code is intended to chastise fast fashion consumers and shift the blame of the environmental crisis onto them and their over-consumption habits, viewers who may identify with the fast fashion consumer may feel guilty for their actions and feel an immense amount of shame and slowly be persuaded to change their consumption behaviours (Figures 8 and 9). Audiences also at times join in alongside the actor in Guilting and Shaming fast fashion consumers by posting comments discussing their distaste towards fast fashion, pointed jokes, and mentioning other recognizable TikTok users/actors that partake in fast fashion in order to further shame their fast fashion consumption. Furthermore, Guilting and Shaming videos also target different fast fashion brands and companies, explicitly addressing them and their global actions, instigating a public shaming towards the brand that is oftentimes followed with a boycott. These videos go hand in hand with the Boycotting videos, where an actor is explicitly mentioning a brand that partakes in fast fashion to persuade their audiences to cease support, Guilting and Shaming adds another level

where the actor is additionally pointing out specific actions the company has done and uses their platform to shame the company and paint a distasteful image of the brand to their audiences.

Lastly, the most popular code for the analyzed TikToks was Educating. Educating based videos featured an actor “laying out the facts”, specifically discussing what fast fashion is, why it is bad, and how it is damaging the environment. Further videos would discuss deeper implications of fast fashion on the environment, highlighting the roles of both the consumer and corporations in this issue, what the next steps are, actions on a grand or minor scale that can be done to mitigate these damages. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a majority of westerners were turning to fast fashion for purchasing new clothes as different trends began to advance and speed up with the heightened usage of social media. With the major spike in fast fashion consumption came an increasing number of TikToks discussing why consumers should steer clear of fast fashion and the environmental consequences of their purchasing habits (Figure 10 and 11). Therefore, a majority of videos begin with a definition of fast fashion, classifying explicit examples of what fast fashion is (Boycotting), why it is bad for the environment, and what can be done to avoid buying fast fashion.

It's the dark skeleton lurking inside fast fashion's trendy closet, our generous donations are not always as charitable as they seem in Ghana's Kantamanto market. Trucks offload these bails stuffed with our used clothing It's estimated 15 million items arrive here every week.
(@CBSMornings)

Other videos go into more specific ideas, defining what micro-trends are (Figure 12), different forms of textile waste that fast fashion is contributing to, information regarding different controversies of fast fashion companies, greenwashing claims, fast fashion waste, personal health consequences, and more.

Not only do [fake leather] smell but they are water soluble which makes them easy for your skin to absorb. And yeah, if you didn't know that our skin can absorb stuff from clothing. Y'all this is another one, Formaldehyde is on our clothing. Sometimes that smell on synthetic clothing is also because products have been finished with formaldehyde.
(@delilah_isabel)

The entire purpose of educating videos is to keep audiences informed regarding fast fashion and how it affects the environment, ensuring that they are well aware of who they are supporting and the environmental consequences of their consumption habits. Frequently, audiences respond more to educating videos because they do not require much deciphering on their end: from start to finish all the information they need is presented to them throughout the video, all that is left for them to do is decide what to do with that information. Regardless of the intentions, educating videos avoid making fun of consumers, guilting or shaming them, and mostly rely on spreading information and pushing viewers to be better informed.

Chapter 5: Discussion

As social media increasingly shapes public discourse and influences public opinions, TikTok has become a powerful platform in the motivation of environmental activism, social discourse, and political discourse throughout a multitude of topics, especially when discussing the effects of fast fashion on the environment. Previous literature supports this sentiment such as, Knupfer et al.'s (2023) highlight of social media's ability to quickly spread information and generate advocacy support and Henneman's (2020) emphasis on TikTok's unique ability to engage young audiences and cultivate meaningful discussions around climate change, increasing the awareness and advocacy efforts against fast fashion. This discussion chapter will delve into the usage of TikTok by its actors in leveraging their digital presence to raise awareness about the fast fashion industry's harmful environmental impacts. By analyzing the findings and results of the research conducted through framing theory, this study provides an analysis of the usage of politics and activism on social media and its greater implications. By employing a developed and refined coding scheme, uncovering the diverse themes, patterns, and advocacy strategies embedded in these videos, the results offer a nuanced understanding of this dynamic form of digital activism to best uncover the answer to the research question and thesis.

Theoretical Analysis

Applying Benford and Snow's Framing model, TikToks are analyzed as a whole through the three fundamental framing tasks. Diagnostic framing, involving the identification of problems and their attributions; prognostic framing, outlining the plan of attack; and motivational framing, addressing the "call to arms" or the rationale for collective action, all play crucial roles in shaping the narrative and mobilizing support for social movements.

Most TikToks go through the fundamental framing task of diagnostic framing. Any TikTok, whether it be a comedic sketch-comedy that deliberately points fun at different fast fashion brands of the characteristics of fast fashion consumers, or commentary-based videos where actors offer their nuanced opinions and subjectively dissect the consumer culture of fast fashion and overconsumption. All videos at their core attempt to identify what the problem of fast fashion is and intend to emphasize to audiences that fast fashion consumption is not something to be idealized or promoted. However, TikToks that only identify the problem and its attributes, such as explaining what fast fashion is and its environmental impact, only accomplish the diagnostic framing task, and leads audiences commenting asking for more. Diagnostic framing, which involves pinpointing the issue and detailing its consequences, is a critical first step in social movement messaging. However, when actors solely focus on this aspect without progressing to prognostic (solutions) and motivational (calls to action) framing, these comments leave audiences wanting more. They highlight the issue effectively but do not continue to engage audiences in a broader discourse that includes potential solutions and actionable steps. This is occurring most often when audiences are identifying the problem by asking for alternatives to fast fashion, or for better brands to shop from that are not fast fashion, now that they are aware of its negative effects. This is a post-diagnostic framing event. Furthermore, audiences also comment asking for motivations, a rationale for changing their consumption behaviours for the sake of the environment, searching for confirmation that this is greater than themselves and that their change through collective action will make an impactful difference on the climate change crisis.

Many videos go through all three fundamental framing tasks, discussing the relationship between fast fashion and the environment. For example, videos that were theoretically categorized as “educational” and “commentary” were the most popular to achieve all three framing tasks,

alongside videos that were coded with the subsections of “statistical/science” and “devastating imagery”. These videos discuss fast fashion in terms of diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing, providing audiences with a well-rounded understanding of what fast fashion is and its effect on the environment, what can be done to mitigate these issues, and motivation for partaking in a collective action against fast fashion. Videos that made their way through all three fundamental framing tasks more or less followed the same outline/video template. Oftentimes videos began with a hook to maintain audiences and catch their attention, sometimes if they worked/studied related to the fashion or business they would mention that to increase credibility. Then begins the diagnostic framing, where the actor discusses what fast fashion is, how it affects the environment, and why it is bad. Most *successful* videos (measuring *success* in terms of virality and likes, comments, and shares) feature some form of statistics or factual evidence to back the claim they are making and use technical terms or jargon to sound more official and knowledgeable on what they are discussing. Following the identification of a diagnostic frame, the actor begins discussing a prognostic frame. What is the plan of attack? How can consumers, TikTok users, audiences of this video make a positive change and step away from fast fashion? The actor discusses alternative options to fast fashion consumption, either through more cost-effective methods such as thrift shopping, trading clothes, repairing or creating own clothes, etc. or through more expensive measures such as brands that are sustainable and classified slow fashion, a presentation of either or both options creates a plan of attack and a different option to fast fashion in order to try and mitigate the effects of fast fashion on the environment.

Alternatively, when videos were theoretically categorized as “boycotting” and “buycotting” the stylization of the prognostic framing method was highly differentiated. Boycotting and buycotting were the centre focus of the prognostic framing whilst also being the

‘plan of attack’, by discussing brands and companies that should be boycotted or buycotted they are simultaneously discussing what fast fashion is and how it negatively affects the environment, through the context of the plan of attack - changing consumption habits. These videos implore audiences change their shopping habits and stop shopping at the aforementioned boycotted stores, or shop at the buycotted stores. Oftentimes this was the extent to the actor’s “plan of attack” but regardless, the diagnostic framing and motivational frame remained the same and the video remained successful due to the dissemination of one brand but the presentation of another.

The motivational framing occurred at the end of the video and was the shortest aspect of the video by providing a brief and catchy tagline such as “there is no Planet B”. Within this narrative arc, the TikToks often follow similar patterns where a video begins with a diagnostic framing by discussing what fast fashion is, a prognostic framing by outlining what can be done (except in the case of some boycotting and buycotting videos where the diagnostic and prognostic framing occur simultaneously) and ends with a brief motivational phrase to incite confidence in audiences.

Motivational framing intends to highlight the importance of audiences changing their own consumption habits and how impactful these consumption habits are on the overall economic development of corporations utilizing fast fashion methods. Sometimes videos used ‘blaming’ to rationalize a call to arms, by leading the audience to feel negatively about their own consumption habits to guilt them into stopping, feeling as though they are a direct cause for the environmental crisis, or to be angry or upset with brands that contribute to the environmental damages by fast fashion methods that they stop supporting them, however not all videos used to blame as their motivational framing. Others framed the call to arms as something that is needed, sometimes

imploing or begging the audience to make a change for the sake of their own future and the future of the environment.

The theoretical contributions of this research speaks to the understanding of social media-led environmental activism. By examining the methods and tactics used by actors on TikTok, it reveals new insights into how framing tasks are employed in digital spaces to mobilize social movements. Specifically, the findings of this research highlights that education is the foundation for a social movement and thus producing educational content was a primary strategy implemented by TikTok actors. Furthermore, the introduction and circulation of information - the key motivational factor in their message – is a form of diagnostic framing. The emphasis on social media-led activism is on its ability to disseminate information and make audiences more educated and aware of the existence of such social movements. Analyses such as this update the traditional understanding of activism by highlighting the power of social media platforms in shaping public discourse and changing beliefs and behaviours.

Furthermore, the findings of this research highlight that offline and online social movements are complementary, particularly with the effects and strategies of education and awareness. Social media platforms provide a powerful medium for disseminating information quickly and globally, engaging a diverse audience into environmental activism against fast fashion. This particular digital engagement strengthens the reach of educational content by allowing activists to share knowledge, motivational messages, and resources that have the potential to inspire real-world actions like protests, voting, boycotts, and sustainable consumption practices. The dichotomy of online and offline movements connect in the middle by providing a stepping stone into a more strengthened and effective form of social movement where digital awareness can

directly reach an audience and foster information building and eventually translate into tangible changes.

Research Question

To properly answer the proposed research question; How is TikTok as a social media platform being utilized within environmental activism to influence consumer behaviours regarding fast fashion and address its associated environmental damages? The findings from the data analysis provide a clearer image on how social media platforms like TikTok are being used within environmental activism to influence audiences to change their consumption habits and their perspectives towards fast fashion. *Educational views yielded the highest number of coded references*, indicating that a majority of actors that are discussing fast fashion on social media are utilizing facts, statistics, and information to better influence their audiences. Based on the findings, the most common form of TikToks presented by actors are those that provide education and information regarding the creation and finishing processes of fast fashion, the real-world implications of fast fashion on the environment, the global damages, and the future effects on the climate change crisis. Audiences need to be aware of what the problem is and how the problem is occurring before “jumping on the bandwagon” to ensure informed and effective participation in advocacy efforts before they consider making a change. Knowledge and understanding are central for meaningful engagement to occur for social movements to flourish.

The digital environment allows interactions that can facilitate organic learning opportunities and the critical dialogues that lead to HRE that relates to participants’ experiences and contexts... digital technologies help them to develop a ‘rights competence’ or ‘rights consciousness’, one that develops not only a knowledge of their rights but the capacity to articulate their activism to work for rights and make the corresponding legal and political claims (Birnhack & Perry-Hazan, 2021; Sainz & Hanna, 2023)

Without a clear understanding of the issues and its underlying causes, audiences may support a cause superficially or ineffectively, leading to no change to be made. By even just providing a broad education on social issues like fast fashion, that provides its identification, environmental impacts, and possible solutions, actors can create a more knowledgeable and proactive social movement. For a change to be made, a reason needs to be presented.

The *second highest code* that was references throughout the data analysis was *boycotting*. Due to the high number of incidents where boycotting is referred to throughout the findings, this indicates that audiences highly interact with and prefer videos where an actor is specifically naming brands that they should avoid, brands that are defined as fast fashion or fast fashion adjacent. Boycotting videos or moments where boycotting was coded are moments where the actor is explicitly naming brands that their audiences should be avoiding and should no longer be supported due to their contribution to the climate change crisis. Many actors may present TikToks where they are defining what fast fashion is, *anchoring their message to the element of education* to best motivate their message and raise its importance. These educational based videos highlight the effects of fast fashion on the environment and implore their audiences to stop shopping from fast fashion companies. However, if there is a missing piece of information that is crucial for the education of fast fashion, such as making audiences aware of what brands should be boycotted due to fast fashion, this education may go at a loss due to a lack of ‘plan of attack’ for audiences to follow.

Social media, specifically TikTok is used in a multitude of ways in environmental activism to influence fast fashion consumerism and make audiences understand its environmental damages, and that is through the valuing the importance of spreading information and educating their audiences, and explicitly naming brands or corporations that are the reason for the environmental

damages in an attempt to call for an official boycott and devalue the brand. These tactics and methods used by actors to highlight the importance of information and education are significant because they allow audiences to make informed decisions regarding their own consumerism. By allowing audiences to be aware of what fast fashion is and its significance, it provides them a chance to be more environmentally aware and more mindful towards their own shopping habits.

Activism and Politics on Social Media

As social media increasingly shapes public discourse and access to various social media websites increase with each passing day, platforms like TikTok have emerged as powerful arenas for activism and political engagement. Actors on TikTok leverage their digital presence to advocate for social and political causes, in an attempt to motivate their audiences to make a difference and combat growing social issues in any way they may suggest (ex. voting, boycotting, defunding, protesting, etc.) Although in the beginning, TikTok's dazzling feature was music, dancing and comedy, it has grown beyond that, akin to other social media platforms like Twitter/X, Facebook, Reddit, and LinkedIn, where nuanced argument and commentaries take place and spread across its users' algorithms.

Politics on social media can be a polarizing topic where some may view it as a positive addition to social discourses, where others do not share the sentiment, believing politics on social media may be a threat to democracy and access to truthful information. According to the Pew Research Center (Wike et al., 2022) across 19 countries, 57% believe social media is a good thing for democracy, believing that political discourse on social media has led more people to be more informed on the current events in their own country and in other countries, become more accepting of different people from different minority groups, and become more civil in the way they discuss

politics. Alternatively, negative outcomes participants were concerned about was the ease of manipulating information and spreading disinformation, and the division of political opinions.

Activism on social media goes hand in hand with political discourse taking place on social media where one is unable to exist without the other. Digital activism holds the ability to rapidly spread information and mobilize grassroots support by offering innovative methods that were unable to be done without social media, such as spreading email campaigns, social media advocacy, organization of offline and online protests and sit-ins, organizing boycotts and global shutdowns. All of which amplify the offline protests and challenge authorities and companies involved in discourse. Furthermore, activism on social media provides safer alternatives for political expression within restrictive environments while effectively targeting transnational institutions. For many, partaking in in-person movements such as marches, sit-ins, strikes, and rallies can have negative repercussions on their personal lives such as risk of arrest and deportation, risk of being doxed (illegally identifying personal information), loss of job, etc., social media activism can provide levels of activism that are still wide reaching and effective and are able to illustrate a global reach. Furthermore, digital activism emphasizes ethical standards and transparency to distinguish itself from cyberterrorism, while performative actions like virtual sit-ins demonstrate a potential for substantial impact through coordinated online efforts.

The findings from this research indicate that social movements like anti-fast-fashion activism and related political discourse not only occur on social media, they can also thrive by in spaces where audiences can learn about different social movements, identify the social problem within a global context, plan a method of attack by highlighting the effects of protest, boycotting, donating, signing petitions, etc., and engage in a collective action by motivating a positive future where change is made – noting companies and brands that are making a beneficial change,

organization's milestones, and more. Social media has many capabilities, and *motivating audiences through spreading information* is one of the most significant features of it and why global connectivity has come to be so valued by society. Activism and politics will always have a space offline, from in-person protests in front of parliamentary and consulate buildings to voting for different political parties and movements. Online and offline activism go hand in hand and work together towards common interest and goals, motivating the public to act against current social issues and attempt to make a change in the world.

Fast Fashion on TikTok

The results and analysis from this research is indicative of many different methods and messages actors on TikTok utilize to discuss fast fashion and its effects on the environment. Fast fashion is one of many social movements and forms of activism that are being spread across TikTok and highly discussed with the intentions of making a social change and attempting to foster a change within audiences and in turn within society. Whether that be by motivating audiences to change their consumption habits through suggesting different ways to shop and imploring audiences to be more mindful of waste production and the values of companies they shop from, and/or partaking in boycotts and protests, voting for pro-environmental policies within their own countries, the goal is to diminish fast fashion in order to protect the environment and decrease the effects of climate change, all these actions are those that have been used by environmental activists on TikTok to discuss fast fashion and spread awareness towards its relationship to climate change.

Educational videos were the dominating method for TikTok production across both coding and references, throughout the timeline of 2020 to 2023, a majority of videos that discuss fast fashion and the environment are ones that are intended to be educational. Based on this finding, it

is indicative that videos that focus on educating and providing audiences information are those that garner the most success and are the most favourable by actors and audiences. Educational TikTok videos offer audiences more nuanced insights into identifying what fast fashion is, explaining its environmental impacts such as pollution and waste towards global landfills, and the specific actions that can be made to mitigate these effects, such as promoting sustainable alternatives and encouraging mindful consumer habits.

When audiences are presented with information, statistics, and science, it is less likely to develop into a subjective debate, as it has been posed as an objective fact to the audience. It allows the audience to have all the information that they need to make an informed decision on their consumption habits and their perspective towards fast fashion, providing an online space for audiences to learn and openly ask questions regarding the next steps for action. This approach empowers audiences by providing clear and actionable knowledge, which is essential in influencing consumer behaviour and promoting sustainable practices. However, just circulating information and expecting reactions is insufficient for many audiences. Without proper anchoring and context, audiences may struggle to connect the information to their personal consumption choices or fail to grasp the severity of the environmental issue. They are up against a significant landscape of competing messages, misinformation and disinformation, which can dilute the effect of these educational efforts. The consequences of this can lead to confusion, inaction, or counterproductive behaviours such as purchasing from fast fashion companies that are greenwashing and pretending to be sustainable.

Framing plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and guiding behaviour choices. Effective framing emphasizes the urgency and importance of these environmental issues caused by fast fashion, thereby motivating audiences to take action. However, framing also has its limits;

if not done accurately or comprehensively, it can oversimplify such complex issues and/or fail to resonate with its intended audiences, lessening its overall effect. The circulation of information through framing affects the reach and effectiveness of messages. Well-framed messages that are clear and relatable can enhance audience understanding and engagement, fostering a collective sense of responsibility and action. Alternatively, poorly framed messages can lead to misunderstandings or apathy, undermining the goals of the movement. This information is up against a myriad of competing narratives, misinformation, and deeply ingrained consumer habits that have been heavily promoted by powerful fast fashion brands for the past decade. These brands often utilize greenwashing in their advertising, making it challenging for consumers to discern truly sustainable practices from marketing ploys. Therefore, for educational efforts to be successful, require providing accurate and comprehensive information and also actively combat misinformation to create compelling, relatable narratives that can effectively counteract the influence of fast fashion marketing.

Ultimately most consumers do not want to harm the environment, their goal was never to send plastic into the ocean or into Global South landfills. These devastating effects on the environment caused by fast fashion are not intentional, rather, I argue, they are a result of lack of information and education on the whereabouts of their discarded clothing and a response to a declining economy and significant increase of cost of living across most Western countries. Audiences, people, society, want to do good and protect the environment to the best of their abilities but there is an awareness it is unreasonable for the consumer to carry the burden of the actions of corporations and companies that are creating textile waste, unsafely discarding chemicals into the ocean, and discarding used clothing into landfills rather than properly reusing and recycling them. The intention of TikToks discussing fast fashion and the environment is to

motivate audiences and instigate a social change through environmental activism, by pushing for audiences to change their consumption habits and corporations to change their waste discarding processes. With the overall goal of diminishing fast fashion and the culture surrounding it to both increase the longevity of clothing and keep them in cycles for longer, and to decrease the rates of pollution and chemical waste being forced onto lands and oceans.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research provided valuable insights into the intersection of social media, fast fashion, and environmental activism, by shining a light onto the significant role that social media platforms play in shaping activism and consumer behaviours, by promoting sustainable practices and emphasizing the importance of education in making informed decisions and partaking in social movements. This analysis of social media captures a fleeting moment in time where a social movement is growing and occurring with intentions of bettering the planet and taking action against climate change and its subsequent environmental issues. Although social media-led activism is still a research area that is fairly new and we are racing against time to fully understand the capacity and abilities of social media in a sociological context, this research has allowed for a deeper understanding of how, in 2024, activists and influencers are utilizing their platforms to raise awareness and mobilize public opinion against the impacts of fast fashion. There is a great benefit to capturing the social process of a moment in time by providing a deeper understanding of the potential of social media-led activism and highlighting its potential for the future of activism for upcoming social movements. The findings place a spotlight on the power of social media as a tool for environmental activism by emphasizing the ability to spread awareness, education, and the proper tools audiences require in order to make informed decisions regarding the way they approach their own consumption habits. This research not only contributes to the existing literature on digital activism and consumer culture, but it also provides practical implications for utilizing social media in future social movements.

Limitations

As with any and all research, the design of the current research is subject to limitations. Utilizing TikTok as the primary data source for this analysis posed some limitations for accessing

data. First, the dynamic nature of the platform means that videos are frequently deleted, or links become broken, leading to significant data loss before the analysis could be completed. In total, 65 TikToks were unable to be analyzed due to deletion or file corruption. This limits the comprehensiveness and consistency of the dataset. Second, the analysis was restricted to videos in English, which excludes a substantial portion of TikTok's global user base and may result in a biased understanding of environmental activism on the platform in favour of the Global North and predominately English-speaking countries rather than other countries that carry significant advocacy efforts too.

Moreover, only videos were analyzed due to TikTok's lack of a feature for searching images or slideshows. Only videos may be searched. This limitation means that infographics, which can be prevalent and impactful on users' *For You* pages, becoming extremely prevalent on social media websites like Instagram, were not considered in the analysis. Additionally, while TikTok does not have formal censorship laws, its strict community guidelines result in many videos being taken down for language, subject matter, or other violations. Consequently, videos that may have been highly influential at the time of upload could have been removed, therefore unable to be included in the analysis despite their potential effect and audience reach.

Furthermore, the absence of statistical information means that all insights are from qualitative analysis using NVivo, theoretical frameworks, and the researcher's interpretations. This can limit the generalizability and perceived objectivity of the findings. There is an inherent risk of bias in qualitative research. Despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and acknowledge potential biases, the researcher's perspectives and interpretations may still inadvertently influence the results, potentially altering the overall results of this research. Qualitative research relies heavily on a researcher's ability to interpret and analyze the data accurately, due to this subjectivity,

it can introduce variations in the analysis, especially when dealing with wide ranging data from social media platforms.

Future Research

Research on social media can be a very tricky space. With social media anything can change at any given moment, making it difficult for many researchers to keep up. Maybe in a year from today all social media will cease to exist, or maybe we will have a brand-new platform to analyze and TikTok will become irrelevant, and in turn maybe this research will too. Therefore, the most important suggestion I have for future research is to follow these changes and research alongside these movements, as time moves on and social media grows and changes, so will the way in which politics and activism occur on social media.

Future research could benefit greatly from expanding into more social media websites to understand the implications and differences across different websites and the strengths and weaknesses others offer in comparison to TikTok, such as YouTube, Twitter (X), Instagram, and Reddit. Allowing researchers to better understand how different types of videos may influence audiences, such as the difference between text-based posts and videos, to highlight formats that are more meaningful and impactful towards different forms of activism. Furthermore, expanding into deeper analysis of comments and user-to-user interactions such as the conversations within comments and forums that take place between audiences in regard to social discourses, delving into these user-to-user interactions, beyond the researched actor-to-user interactions can provide us a deeper understanding of the exchange of information and the discussions and discourse that arise from social media-led activism.

Lastly, alternative research strategies such as interviews, case studies, and focus groups would be beneficial methods for future research, in addition to attempting to analyze social media

discourse regarding fast fashion through quantitative research methods. This could allow for a deeper understanding of how social groups and online users perceive activism efforts and the strategies that they begin to implement following activist movements. This could provide a better understanding of the future implications of social media activism and whether audiences are taking action and attempting to make a change in their consumption habits, following the education and demonstration of activism.

Closing Remarks

This research has deeply explored the role of social media in environmental activism, specifically examining the usage of TikTok actor's focus on raising awareness about the fast fashion's devastating effects on the environment. Through qualitative longitudinal digital ethnography and the theoretical framework of framing theory, I identify key themes and patterns that illustrate the platforms influence and usage for activist purposes.

The major findings reveal the power of educational content in mobilizing and informing users, emphasizing the need for comprehensive and accessible information to drive meaningful engagement. Furthermore, finding that many different methods of discussing fast fashion and imploring audiences to avoid fast fashion are significant means that actors utilize to motivate their message, methods such as discussing alternatives, implementing company boycotts and buycotts, creating comedic videos, having open commentary, guilt and shaming their audiences or corporations, and educating their audiences. There are many different forms of videos that have been created and developed between 2020 to 2023 regarding fast fashion and the environment, all of which with the goal of motivating audiences to change their consumption habits, become more aware of their consumerism, and avoid purchasing from fast fashion companies to decrease contributions to climate change.

The overall findings and insights from this research may have wide reaching use for future researchers, activists, and educators, with goals of leveraging social media for future advocacy and social movements, as they emphasize the importance of clear and accurate information distribution and education for the beginning groundwork in social movements. Information, especially accurate and timely information, is crucial for mobilizing supporters and sustaining social movements. Without a solid understanding of the social issue, activists and their supporters cannot effectively challenge the status quo or propose viable alternatives to make a change (Tilly & Wood, 2015). This research emphasizes through its findings that when they are well-informed, they are more likely to engage effectively in social movements, reinforcing the critical role of education in fostering sustainable activism. Oftentimes, audiences seek out information and rationalizations for making a change and partaking in a social movement; by providing audiences with that information, they are able to make well-informed decisions and better partake in a social movement. Finding that ignorance leads to non-action, resulting in a social movement that never truly leads to action. “The information they shared and created reflected their views about the role of education in addressing the climate crisis and the urgent need to ‘educate people’ on how to best take action. ‘Education is how we secure the future’” (Sainz & Hanna, 2023). By understanding these dynamics, future strategies for activism led on social media can be better understood and implemented in a way that can better ensure that the efforts to combat different social issues, like combatting fast fashion’s effect on the environment, are impactful, meaningful, and far-reaching that can truly make a difference in the world.

The goal of this thesis was to explore the methods activists on social media are using to mobilize their message and implore their audiences to make a difference and partake in a social movement that was actively combatting climate change and overconsumption. Furthermore, this

thesis attempted to explore activism on social media and finding that non-activists, have a significant role in the dissemination of information across their audiences to motivate the message and highlight different methods of activism that can be done through social media. Following these goals and findings, the question of this thesis was never to offer solutions or corrective promises that may create a new form of activism or end climate change but rather to illustrate the ways in which digital activism is produced and provide a better foundation for future activists to begin social movements and motivate causes through social media. By discussing the negative effects of fast fashion on the environment and the ways in which actors have motivated this social movement throughout the span of three years on TikTok, there is a greater and brighter future for other social movements to also begin to flourish on social media and allow audiences to become more politically and socially aware than ever before. In doing so, these knowledges of social movements and activism may lead for many great changes to come along in society.

Figures



Figure 1: Demonstration of Buycotting (@Maevesmarick)



Figure 2: List of boycotted fast fashion brands. (@hottest_babe_lizzo)



Figure 3: *Bycotting, sustainable recycled shoes (@SpicyMoustache)*



Figure 4: *Satirical T-Shirt (@cringeytees.com).*



Figure 5: Actor sarcastically using TikTok filter to define greenwashing. (@sarah.c.grace)



Figure 6: Actor sarcastically showing off a junkyard. (@MarketBotany)



Figure 7: Commentary on quality of clothing and planned obsolescence (@heygranty).



Figure 8: Compilation of actors doing "fast fashion hauls" (@thefairedit)

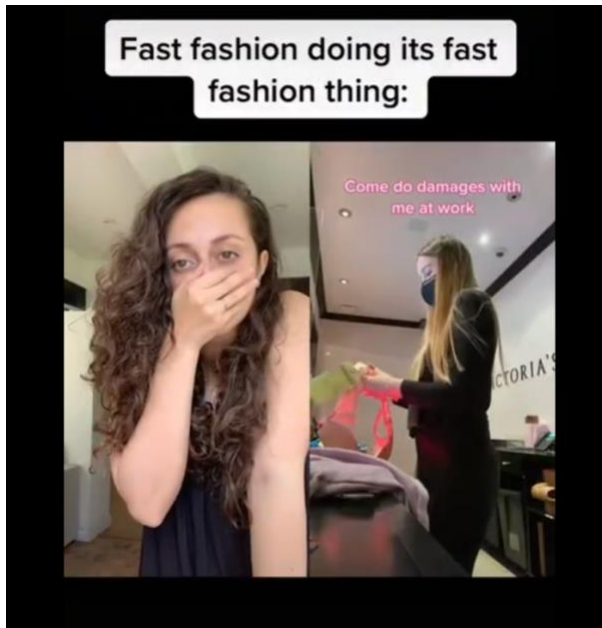


Figure 9: TikTok of actor reacting to a store employee destroying returned clothing (@veoworldofficial)



Figure 10: Pile of garbage, "100 million tonnes of clothes are thrown out each year" (@news.com.au)



Figure 11: Image of a tall landfill (@Sustain.ly)



Figure 12: Explaining microtrends. (@PBSDigitalStudios)

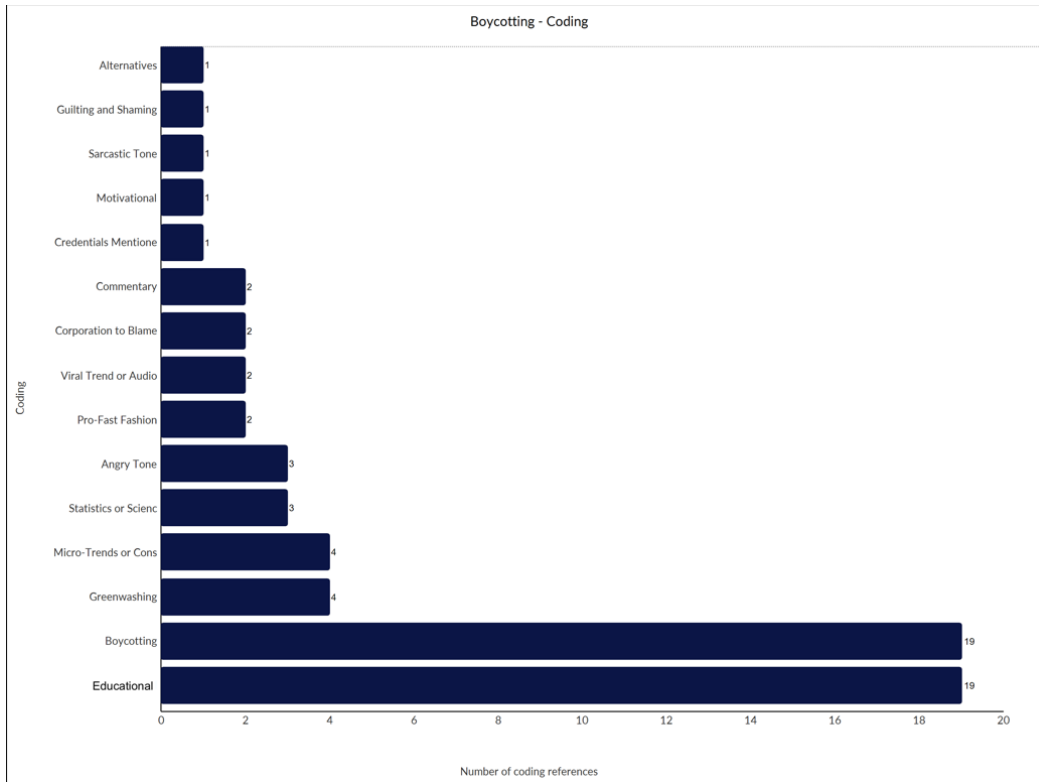


Figure 13: Number of coding references for Boycotting theme.

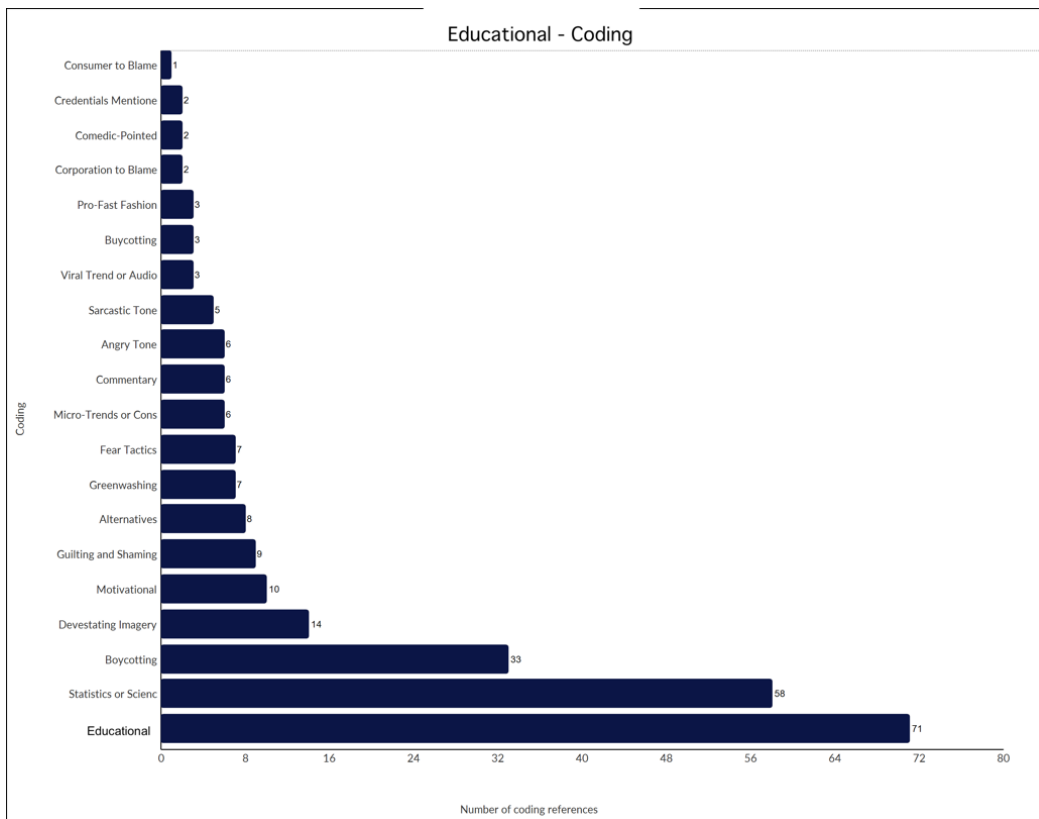


Figure 14: Number of coding references for Educational theme.



Figure 15: Image of people protesting against fast fashion and a destroyed city (@loststockvintage)

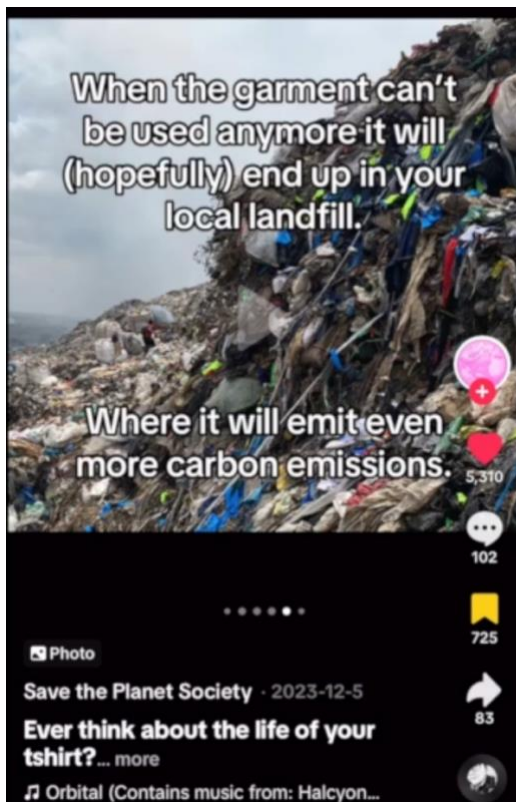


Figure 16: Image of a landfill. (Save The Planet Earth)



Figure 17: Aerial video of a landfill and tractor (@sustain.ed).



Figure 18: Girl dancing to popular TikTok sound/trend and pointing at facts (@sunseteuphoria)

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Appendix A. Data Collection Keywords and Search Terms

1. #FastFashionSucks
2. #StopFastFashion
3. #SustainableFashion
4. #SustainableFashionTips
5. Environment and Fast Fashion
6. Fast Fashion
7. Fast Fashion and Environment
8. Fast Fashion and the Environment
9. Fast Fashion Climate Change
10. Fast Fashion Consumption
11. Fast Fashion Environmental Effects
12. Fast Fashion Impacts
13. Fast Fashion Problems
14. Fast Fashion Problem Consequences
15. Fast Fashion Sustainability
16. Fast Fashion Sucks
17. Stop Fast Fashion

** Four videos were located through TikTok's For You page algorithm that randomly appeared on the social media platform's main feed, requiring no search.*

Appendix B: Fast Fashion on TikTok NVivo Codebook

Name	Description	Files	References
Alternatives	Indicates/discusses alternative options to Fast Fashion and apparel shopping	6	28
<u>Blaming</u>	<i>Section Codes Different Forms of Blaming</i>		
Both Corporation and Consumer to Blame	The actor is implying that both fast fashion corporations and consumers are responsible for the negative implications on the environment	2	2
Consumer to Blame	Actor is blaming the consumer for the current event	4	10
Corporation to Blame	Actor is blaming corporations for the current event	5	13
<u>Boycotting</u>	Explicitly mentions specific brands and companies to be boycotted and avoided because they are fast fashion	7	83
Greenwashing	Mentions of company/brand greenwashing or greenwashing events	5	15
Buycotting	Explicitly mentions alternative new brands and companies to purchase from that are sustainable and new fashion	5	20
Comedic Pointed	Comedic skit, uses trends or sarcasm to make fun of fast fashion, consumers, or brands	2	15
Commentary	Talks about fast fashion opinionated or emotional, not mentioning any informational/statistics. An opinionated positionality.	6	39
Guilting and Shaming	Actor is using guilting or shaming methods when discussing fast fashion towards the corporation or consumer. Intended to make the audience feel bad for their own actions.	5	28
Educating	Actor uses information to discuss what fast fashion is and how it is bad for the environment.	7	115
<u>Messaging Strategies</u>			
Credentials Mentioned	Actor mentions their own credentials/previous experience making them justified or well-versed enough to discuss the topic.	4	5

Fear Tactics	Actor is using methods to make the audience scared of the potential Fast Fashion damages on the environment	2	8
Micro-Trends and Overconsumption	Actor is discussing or mentioning overconsumption or micro-trends.	4	22
Motivational	Something good that is happening, like an NGO or an initiative they are highlighting as good. Mentions positive events or causes currently occurring.	5	16
Pro-Fast Fashion	Comments that empathize or validate consumers/audiences Fast Fashion usage or events that promote a fast fashion brand's action towards sustainability	3	8
<u>TikTok Specific Features</u>	Actor is using components of the app to push message/garner attention.		
Devastating Imagery	Video uses sad or scary images or videos of the environment or animals that are or potentially will be harmed by fast fashion and climate change	3	27
Statistics or Science	Actor is using statistics and science to back up their claims to sound more serious and professional. Uses information/statistics/facts to discuss fast fashion. Mentions "hard numbers" or technical/scientific terms. Enhancing credibility	8	74
Viral Trend or Audio	Video is following a popular trend or attached an audio or sound. Therefore, the video will gain more attention as it is currently viral or trending already.	7	15
<u>Tone Indicators</u>	Actor is using specific tone to frame/emphasize narrative		
Angry Tone	Actor is angry	5	21
Empathetic Positioning	Actor is using empathy to prevent or mitigate backlash. Using things like "I understand that not all people can..."	3	5
Sarcastic Tone	Using sarcasm	4	17