

Chapter 23

Fashion Brand Management: Fashioning Value through CSR

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the potential of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to address concerns that garment-worker exploitation was involved in fashion production. It looks back to the success of philanthropy from the Victorian era in alleviating poverty and empowering employees. The chapter also considers evidence from the Hawthorne Studies to support implementing CSR for the benefit of employees and business, backed up with more recent examples from Sri Lanka. This is followed by exploring two fashion organisations for which CSR activities are central to their operations and finally, the chapter draws to a close by presenting excerpts from consumer interviews as they evaluate fashion garment labels that address the workers involved in producing fashion.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to expand theoretical knowledge, as well as to explore the opportunity for fashion brand managers to position Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as underpinning equitable production practice and increasing value for consumers. Through considering the emergence of philanthropy in the Victorian era which addressed social inequality, the chapter argues the potential for CSR to communicate to consumers that the fashion they purchase is not a consequence of garment-worker exploitation. Although CSR can include recognition that fashion production practice holds negative consequences for the environment (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), such as fabric dyes that filter into drinking water (Lee & Sevier, 2008), the negative impact of pesticides used to increase cotton production (Dahllöf, 2003) and the long-term consequences of textile waste in landfill sites (Shaw et al., 2006), this chapter considers only garment-worker exploitation. The reasons for this are twofold: firstly, the consumer data presented at the end of the chapter illustrate that it is garment-worker exploitation that is of foremost concern to consumers. This may be due to the success of campaigns by non-government organizations (NGOs) which seek to improve conditions and salaries for garment-workers. Secondly, the chapter aims to compare

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philanthropy from the Victorian era as providing a template for improving poverty and inequality, both of which are implied within current NGO campaigns for garment-workers; a similar approach could be implemented by brands and retailers that want to provide assurance to consumers that the fashion they purchase has not been a consequence of exploitation.

For a number of decades, fashion production has attracted allegations of garment-worker exploitation to ensure competitive pricing. Although not all consumers are concerned about the provenance of their consumption, research (Ritch & Schröder, 2012; Szmigin et al., 2007) has identified that those who are concerned struggle to source fashion which addresses the issue of garment-workers' salaries and working conditions. With some exceptions, such as H&M's Conscious Collection and Nike's publication of CSR activities (which includes listing all their suppliers), fashion retailers are yet to respond to the issues of concern. Further, H&M's Conscious Collection positions the environment as more of a focus than garment-workers and Nike's publication of suppliers does not provide consumers with succinct and easily digestible information that aids decision-making, although both acknowledge the growing awareness of CSR. This chapter will explore the potential to position CSR as responding to increased concern for garment-workers by examining social reform as addressing inequality as well as increasing productivity. The chapter reviews literature from a number of areas, including CSR, ethics, consumer behavior and management theories, all of which contribute to the potential for implementing a CSR model within fashion production that will appeal to consumers' virtuousness. The chapter will also examine the approach of two current fashion brands: Marks and Spencer (M&S) and jacobson, which both situate CSR as focal to their business model. The chapter concludes by arguing the importance of CSR through research analyzing consumers' evaluation of garment labels which include information on production and the workers involved in making the garments.

BACKGROUND

The fashion industry has experienced a number of changes in practice over the last few decades, primarily due to the emergence of the fast fashion business model which is reliant on global sourcing to reduce the price of production (Jones, 2006). The term 'fast fashion' refers to the amount of time taken from the conceptual design to the garment being available to the consumer (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009; Bruce & Daly, 2006). Barnes & Lea-Greenwood (2006) found that fast fashion was driven by consumer demand and that price is considered the main driver for consumption. This has a number of implications for both the environment and the workers involved in garment construction. In terms of the environment, scarce resources are required to cope with increased demand, including water and energy (Allwood et al., 2006), and ultimately increased consumption ends in landfill (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). Conjointly there are allegations that garment-workers in developing countries are exploited through low salaries and long hours to attract consumers in developed countries through competitive pricing (Hearson, 2006). There are also allegations that children are involved within fashion supply chains (Kolk & van Tulder, 2002). Neil Kearney from the International Textile, Garment and Leather Worker's Federation stated 'There's no such thing as cheap clothing; somebody has to pay and in this case it's the workers' (Dhariwal, 2009). It could be argued that there is an opportunity for CSR in fashion brand management to acknowledge such criticisms by providing information on the garment-workers and the fashion industry's efforts to avoid exploitative practice.

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