

Colonialism and Fast Fashion:

Colonial representations in the fashion industry and the resistance of colonial mindset in alternative fashion entrepreneurship



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BACKGROUND

- The fashion industry is the second biggest polluter in the world after the oil industry, only less than 1 % of its waste is recycled (2). The US alone generates 25 billion pounds of textile waste per year (3).
- The industry growing at a fast rate with the convenience of online shopping and social media promotion. We are also consuming fashion more than ever (1).
- The fashion industry involves a wide range of human rights violations including child labour, modern slavery, below living wage pay for garment workers, etc(4).
- Positive and radical changes in the fashion industry can contribute to Sustainable Development Goals that are made by the United Nations (6).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



- How does the traditional fashion industry framework/model represent colonial oppression in abstract and concrete forms?



- How does the resistance of colonial representation manifest in the rise of the alternative fashion business and how would that stimulate the growth of a truly sustainable fashion industry?

METHOD

- This research is an exploratory study that includes a comprehensive literature review and recorded semi-structured interviews.
- Literature was searched with keywords: sustainable fashion, colonialism, fashion
- Four Toronto-based alternative fashion business owners/entrepreneurs (focuses: thrift and coffee shop, upcycle label, slow fashion, transparency, and slow growth) were interviewed via Zoom, interviews are recorded, transcribed.
- Transcripts were analyzed, the interpretation of the results from the interview is discussed in six different themes.

KEY FINDINGS

Six major themes discovered from interviews:

1. Alternative fashion business foster fundamental change
2. Community engagement/support /non competitive operations
3. Anti-growth/ healthy growth/ limited growth
4. Diversity in Practices
5. The responsibility of education
6. Critiques and hopes for the current fashion industry



Findings from the literature review:

1. The current focus of sustainable fashion is mainly on the business model and innovation, circular economy, supply chain efficiency, and financial performance(5).
2. Value and culture inside and outside of an enterprise: business ethics/corporate culture and ethical/sustainable consumer behaviour.
3. Issues of current sustainable fashion:
 - a. Lack of ethical foundation and intrinsic motivation from businesses and consumers
 - b. Greenwashing in the fashion industry to gain popularity as sustainability is becoming trendy
 - c. Largely focusing on design "band-aid" solutions
 - d. Lack of radical and fundamental change



CONCLUSION

- The fashion industry is built on a colonial framework (surrogate and exploitation colonialism). Its operational structure and culture and value embody colonial legacy.
- Some of the sustainability approaches within the fashion industry still operate in the colonial/capitalistic framework of business development (maximize profit and sales).
- Alternative small fashion business challenges the value, cultures, and ethics of the fashion industry looks the most hopeful for making a change.
- If fashion in the past was used as a tool for oppression and colonization, it can be reclaimed with the power that fashion holds. We can then use it as a tool of resistance.
- Some small local businesses are actively resisting and dismantling the colonial mindset that drives the fashion industry.
- We must decolonize how understand the idea of fashion and foster alternative fashion ideology.



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