

Buy stuff, do good, save the world: Transitivity and interpellation in the sustainable fashion discourse

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Meaning production via mass media discursive practice is a complex social process, through which viewers and readers are interpellated as subjects (Fiske, 2004). Interpellation is the act of “hailing” these subjects into predetermined identities (i.e. sustainable fashion consumer) but can simultaneously “naturalize” predominate ideological frameworks (e.g. capitalism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, etc.) (Althusser, 2006). Whether a subject can resist interpellation is a matter of some debate. Who has the power to act, to speak, to resist, is naturalized through discourse (Fiske, 2004; Foucault, 1981). In this position paper, we examine sustainable fashion discursive practices in the popular press through the lens of Foucault’s conception of power dynamics as well as Fiske’s and Althusser’s interpellation theories. Thus, we will explore the most pressing issues of agency, transitivity,¹ and the limited imagination present in fashion media’s discursive practice.

The first – and arguably, most challenging – limitation is neo-liberalism’s pervasiveness as the structure within which sustainable fashion operates. Gibson-Graham argued the persistence of the neo-liberal discourse creates “...familiar understandings of capitalism as a naturally dominant form of economy, or as an entire system of economy, coextensive with social space” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. ix). By remaining firmly ensconced within this paradigm, the sustainable fashion discourse largely promotes a ‘be less bad’ narrative. The industry appears to have given up on sustainability’s economic challenges, choosing instead to label it as a ‘luxury.’ Of course, a sustainable-fashion-as-luxury discourse inevitably excludes a large portion of the population as active consumer agents (Jones & Jones, 2018), preferring the ‘natural’ order of wealthy clientele driving the market.

Furthermore, the sustainable fashion industry predominately serves a western, female clientele. Though men are increasingly hailed as fashionable consumers, sustainable fashion consumption seems largely missing from the discourse. For example, a search for sustainability-oriented editorials in *Esquire* since 1996 resulted in a scant 21 articles. A related issue is the transitivity of non-Western peoples. In *Vogue*, for example, sustainable fashion designers or influencers are the active agents; they *save the world* through their actions while artisans they hire in a variety of African, Indian, or Asian locations are *given* jobs (Sullivan, 2011). Non-western craftspeople are thus passive receivers of the West’s charity even though it is only through the artisan’s skill the designer’s idea can be realized. In turn, artisans are, for better or worse, interpellated into the neo-liberal order by participating in the sustainable fashion supply chain.

“An active imagination is a primary requirement if one has to deal with paradox, uncertainty and complexity” (Brown, Deane, Harris, & Russell, 2010, p. 5). Imagination is restricted when discursive limits are drawn – here, by excluding, or restricting stakeholders’ power to participate. These limits are established via an array of narratives, from academic research to government policy, as well as through media. Who, through these discourses, is hailed to challenge the limits of fashion’s current socio-economic models that threaten the environment and our social fabric? Naturally, the answer *should* be, “all of us.”

Notes

1. Machin and Mayr’s (2012) define transitivity as “the study of what people are depicted as doing and refers, broadly, to who does what to whom, and how” (p. 104).

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