Young People as Heroes or Villains in Sustainable Fashion: Interrogating TikTok

Word Count: 31,713

Alice Grennan

Supervised by Dr. Nadia Von Benzon

September 2024

Lancaster University

This thesis is submitted for the postgraduate degree of Master of Science by Research

Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University

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Alice Grennan

Abstract:

Young people have been portrayed in two contradicting ways in relation to the wicked problem of sustainability within the fashion industry. One of these depictions describes young people as heroes, the innovators for the sustainable fashion industry; however, they are also described as the villains, partaking in a hedonistic lifestyle, halting the movement towards sustainability within the fashion industry. This research aimed to explore these contradicting portrayals, investigating their effectiveness in describing the reality of young people.

TikTok, a 2018 launched application with a majority demographic of young people, was used, due to the observed large cultural impact on both consumer behaviour and political activism of young people. The use of TikTok will provide a new lens and insight into the sustainability discussion.

The TikTok research material depicted a large community of fast fashion consumers, who participated in competitive consumption, over-consumption, and behavioural traits of addiction. These trends were shown to not be specific to TikTok nor young people, highlighting a wider societal theme of the normalisation of over-consumption and thus consumption-based society.

Additionally, a smaller yet active community of digital activists advocating for sustainability were also identified on TikTok, alike to the exclusive group of activists observed in offline society. The observed activism was identified to be routed in emotion, such as humour and frustration, differing from the 'traditional' understanding of activism. Responses of the wider TikTok community to this content differed greatly dependent on the style of activism. Comedic and socio-economically sympathetic activism produced the most productive discussions on sustainability.

In conclusion, I identified that the binary contradicting portrayals did not effectively describe the behaviour of young people as they neglected the complex navigation young people partake in to feel the fundamental desires of belonging and superiority in society.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to especially thank Dr. Nadia Von Benzon, for her support, kindness and patience throughout this year. Nadia has provided invaluable insights throughout the year, and I am extremely grateful and thankful to have had her valued time as my supervisor in this project. Her love for research is inspiring, and with her support I have been able to grow in confidence into the world of academics, despite lack of assurance in myself at the start of the year due to my struggles with dyslexia.

This year would also not have been possible without the support network of Lancaster Environment Centre Society, namely the netball branch of the society. Throughout my undergrad and postgrad years I have been surrounded by such amazing people and an incredible support network, supporting me to complete this project. Even though we made the outdoor netball courts our second home, over the library.

Additionally, I would like to extend my gratitude to my family and partner, who have spent too many hours watching daytime television, whilst writing, to keep me company. Without their continued support and love, completing this thesis would not have been possible.

Finally, I would like to thank the Peel Trust Board who awarded me a scholarship towards my tuition fees that allowed me to progress to postgraduate study.

Authors Declaration

In submitting this document, I declare that this submission is my own work. I have not submitted it in substantially the same form towards the award of a degree or other qualification. All sources have been appropriately referenced or acknowledged.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Sustainability of the Fashion Industry

The fashion industry, that includes a variety of product categories such as clothing, footwear, and accessories, is an industry that presents 'many opportunities for reducing waste and improving the environment' (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019, N.P). However, presently, there is a plethora of ethical and environmental destruction undertaken in the fashion industry, meaning movement towards sustainability in the industry is described as complex and multi-faceted (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Larsson et al., 2010; Jin & Shin, 2021). Hence, through such observations, the movement towards 'sustainability' in the fashion industry is often described as being a 'wicked problem' (United Nations, N.D.; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Larsson et al., 2010; Jin & Shin, 2021). The 'wicked problem' of sustainability is defined, by Rittel & Webber (1973), as a multi-faceted problem that lacks definitive causes and solutions, creating great uncertainties and contradicting theories of how sustainability can and should be achieved (Larsson et al., 2010; United Nations, N.D; Jin & Shin, 2021). Therefore, this description wholly encapsulates the complexity of moving towards sustainability in the valued USD 1.3 trillion fashion industry (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Geneva Environment Network, 2024).

Significant discussions have occurred on resolving the wicked problem of sustainability in the fashion industry, across both academia (e.g. Crew, 2008; and Costa, 2021) and wider society, such as the 2019 launch of the United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019). Conversations that are fundamental in the exploration of achieving sustainability in the fashion industry. Predominantly, these discussions have revolved around moving away from a branch of the industry named 'fast fashion', that strives for an increase in profits through mass-production and consumption through using unethical and environmentally destructive practices as a foundation for their business models (Yang et al., 2017; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Mukendi et al., 2020; Maguire & Fahy, 2021). And, instead towards the concept of 'sustainable fashion', a supposedly less environmentally and socially destructive industry (Yang et al., 2017; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Mukendi et al., 2020; Maguire & Fahy, 2021).

Despite the increasing occurrence of conversations concerning the movement towards sustainability in the fashion industry, at the current time, much of the industry is still complicit in a variety of environmentally and socially unethical and destructive practises (Yang et al., 2017; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Maguire & Fahy, 2021). The destructive environmental practises of the fashion industry can be exemplified through its responsibility for 2-8% of global carbon emissions, that on its present trajectory could increase to 26% of global carbon emissions by 2050 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Geneva Environment Network, 2024). As well as an equivalent of one full waste truck of textiles being burned or dumped in landfill every second (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Geneva Environment Network, 2024).).

Additionally, the destructive nature of fast fashion companies can also be identified in the industries' social practises. The fashion industry employs over 300 million people across its supply chain and is labelled as 'built upon a system of exploitation' and encompassing the 'super-exploitation of global labour' (Guthman & DePuis, 2006; Crew, 2008, p:29; Lavergne, 2015; Geneva Environment Network, 2024; Ellen MacArthur, 2017; Costa, 2021). Super-exploitation occurring in this industry can be highlighted in the Rana Plaza disaster of April 2013, an incident where a building, housing multiple factories for garment making companies, collapsed in Bangladesh (Costa, 2021). Although multiple workers of the factory expressed concern towards the factory's declining infrastructural condition the factory was left to further deteriorate, meaning in this disaster over 1,100 people were killed and thousands more were injured (Styles, 2014; Appelbaum & Lichtenstein, 2014; Costa, 2021). Media and societal outrage towards this disaster were noted; however, over 10 years post-Rana Plaza disaster the exploitation in the fashion industry is still prevalent, with 10% of cases reported to the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline, in 2021, found to be related to the fashion industry (Costa, 2021; UnSeen, 2023; Gilchrist, 2024).

The continued rise and participation of companies in these devastating practises, such as the exponential growth of fashion powerhouse Shein despite its 'murky practices', illustrates the normalisation of the fashion industry using unethical practises as a foundation to their companies (Hodell and Letts, 2023, p:2; Costa, 2021; Gilchrist, 2024). Normalisation refers to activities or products, that may have previously been seen as 'different', becoming mainstream and accepted as a social 'norm' (Rettie et al., 2013). A normalisation to the common traits of the fast fashion industry has occurred due to consumers being 'seduced' by these companies,

to create an unempathetic distinction between a consumer and those affected by the unethical practises of these fashion companies within their supply chain (Crew, 2008, p:27). Hence, consumers have been identified to take for granted the geographical journey of their clothing, from source, to supply chain, to acquisition (Crew, 2008; Geneva Environment Network, 2024; United Nations Environment Programme, 2019).

Therefore, these conditions, such as the normalisation of unethical practises creating a destructive unsustainable foundation to the industry alongside the seduction of consumers to take for granted the geographical journey of their clothing, has allowed for fast fashion companies to thrive. With Zara, a high-street fast fashion company, alone producing 850 million garments per year generating the company a pre-tax profit of £5.9 billion in 2023 (Algamal, 2019; GreenPeace, 2020; Wise, 2024). Thus, the profitable nature and thriving of fast fashion companies in the industry's current state creates further pushback from companies to move towards sustainability, as they prioritise their own growth over any resolution to their practises. Hence, perpetuating the wicked problem of sustainability in the fashion industry.

1.2. The Role of Young People in the Fashion Industry's Sustainability Narrative

A recurring theme, that appears within academic and societal debates, on the sustainability of the fashion industry, is the crucial role of young people, defined by the United Nations as those aged 15–24-years-old (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Ziesemer et al., 2021). Within this debate, academia and wider society have had the tendency to portray young people as having two contradicting behaviours towards the sustainability movement, namely 'sustainable saviours' or 'hedonistic consumers' (Niinimäki, 2015; Collins, 2019; Hicks, 2020).

'Hedonism' refers to being self-indulgent and put into the context of consumption habits illustrates an impulsive, wasteful, and consumption-orientated person, that cares for pleasure over wider social concerns (Stanes & Klocker, 2016). Young people have been labelled 'hedonistic' due to 'Gen Z's' strong and influential buying power, with this age group, in the global north, accounting for 40% of all consumers (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; Wang, 2021; Mitola, 2023). Hence, young people have been described as undertaking a consumption-orientated life, that is based upon owning the newest and most

on trend items (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; Wang, 2021; Mitola, 2023). The word choice of 'hedonistic' illustrates a broader media narrative of young people, as lazy and self-serving, a problem in today's society, creating a villainization of young people in the sustainability movement within the fashion industry (Hume, 2010; Stanes & Klocker, 2016).

However, these behaviours have been identified as not specific to younger generations, with much of the western world identified as participants in the current consumption-based society (McNeill and Moore, 2015; Niinimäki, 2015; Nesterova, 2022). A consumption-based society is based upon owning a large quantity of 'correct' things, that must be consistently re-evaluated to achieve trendiness (McNeill and Moore, 2015; Niinimäki, 2015; Nesterova, 2022). This current consumption-based society is built upon the impacts of capitalism, creating the normalisation and desire for consistent growth within society (McNeill and Moore, 2015; Niinimäki, 2015; Nesterova, 2022). Therefore, the consumer-based society is continuously growing in consumption expectations, exemplified through the prediction that global apparel consumption will increase by 63% between 2019 and 2030 (Algamal, 2019; House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2019). This increase in consumption is equivalent to 40 million tons of garments, comparable to more than 500 billion t-shirts, over 11 years (Algamal, 2019; House of Commons Environmental Aduit Committee, 2019). Thus, illustrating a wider societal norm of over-consumption, a lifestyle of consistent acquisition that is larger than a person's basic needs, that cannot be only attributed to young people (Start et al., 2020; Hakansson, 2014).

Comparatively, young people have also been described as 'sustainability savours', a status that has meant young people have been identified as a crucial target group for innovating and creating new solutions for sustainability in the fashion industry (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Ziesemer et al., 2021). This title has been attributed to young people due to quantitative research, in the global north, that has consistently depicted that young people have a higher level of knowledge and understanding for environmental concerns such as climate change (Jenkins & Pell, 2006; Stanes & Klocker, 2016). An example of this knowledge is research conducted in English schools (Jenkins & Pell, 2006; Stanes & Klocker, 2016). A sample of 1277 youths, aged 13 to 17, were questioned on their knowledge of climate change (Jenkins & Pell, 2006; Stanes & Klocker, 2016). In this survey, 77% of students disagreed that

environmental issues were not their business, illustrating young people's desire to be a part of the solution for sustainability (Jenkins & Pell, 2006; Stanes & Klocker, 2016). Further quantitative studies in the UK, at university level, also identified a growing concern towards climate change (Forum for the Future, 2008). In this study, from a sample group of 23,596 students, 85% believed that climate change would affect their lives by 2032 (Forum for the Future, 2008). This increased knowledge and understanding about environmental concerns has led to increased activism from young people (Juris & Pleyers, 2009).

Nevertheless, the 'sustainability savours' title creates undue pressure on young people to become the heroes, and thus innovators and saviours, for the wicked problem of sustainability in the fashion industry (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Ziesemer et al., 2021). Illustrating, an unjust title usage when wider society and company actions are also understood to be perpetuating unsustainable practices.

Therefore, this contradicting binary depiction of young people as either good, sustainability savours, or bad, hedonistic consumers, in the sustainable fashion narrative, could highlight an inefficiency of current academia in effectively describing the behaviour of young people and their current role in the sustainability movement of the fashion industry (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; Klocker et al., 2012; Moisescu & Gicã, 2020). Hence, drawing attention to the additional exploration and research that is needed to successfully capture the role of young people in the wicked problem of sustainability in the fashion industry.

1.3. The Emergence of TikTok

Social media, such as Instagram, X (Twitter), Facebook, and TikTok, has become a fundamental platform for informing consumption behaviours, environmental awareness and activism participation (Chen & Madni, 2023). Specifically, the 2018 launched social media platform named TikTok, a video posting app that allows users to create, share and discover video content, has grown exponentially in popularity (Becker, N.D; Kanthawala et al., 2022; Ceci, 2024). Globally, since its launch TikTok has collected over 2 billion downloads with the site challenging popularity of established social media sites such as X (Twitter) and Facebook (Becker, N.D; Kanthawala et al., 2022; Olvera et al., 2023). In the first year after its launch,

monthly active users increased by 800% between January 2018 and August 2020. Thus, TikTok has become the seventh largest social media network globally (Kanthawala et al., 2022; Olvera et al., 2023).

Additionally, the popularity of the site is particularly prominent amongst young people, with the site being the most popular social media platform with UK young people in 2023 (Ceci, 2024; Dunn, 2024). This is exemplified through 38.5% of TikTok users being aged between 18 to 24, creating a high exposure of young people to the consumption and activism behaviours that are present on the site (Ceci, 2024; Dunn, 2024). The high percentage of young users on TikTok highlights a wider phenomenon of young people being described as a 'truly digital first' generation (Silicon Foundry, N.D), who have been depicted as born into the everyday use of online spaces, where their identity has been shaped by these digital spaces (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; McKinsey & Company, 2024).

Hence, TikTok has been identified to have large cultural impacts on the everyday lives of young people (Song, 2021; Kanthawala et al., 2022). This impact can be recognised through TikTok's wider influence on young peoples' consumption behaviour, with research conducted by TikTok (2022) observing that 46% of Gen Z TikTok users have purchased a product after viewing it through a live stream on the app (Song, 2021; Kanthawala et al., 2022). Also, TikTok (2022) identified that 74% of young people believe that TikTok influencers/creators are reliable in their recommendations, and 57% of weekly young TikTok users stated that advertisements on the application often lead them to discover new products and companies.

The cultural impact of TikTok can also be identified in the presence of activism on the platform, developing political understandings and increased activism participation amongst young people (Oluoch, 2023; Reach3, 2020). TikTok has previously tried to remain an 'apolitical app', with only entertaining content; however, the platform has been described as 'one of the most widely consumed sources of political discourse and activist content' (Oluoch, 2023, N.P). Thus, the political impact of the site can be illustrated through the 77% of TikTok users aged 13-24-years-old stating the platform has aided their learning about social justice and politics (Oluoch, 2023, Reach3, 2020). The platform has also become pivotal in the mobilization of young people (Solender, 2020; Oluoch, 2023). For example, political TikTok users, in 2020, spread political messaging against Donald Trump creating the trend to purchase Tulsa rally tickets,

with no intention of showing up, creating 13,000 empty seats at the Tulsa Trump event (Solender, 2020; Oluoch, 2023).

Therefore, it can be understood that users, particularly young people, are actively using the site to inform their everyday behaviours, in both consumption patterns and activism engagement. Nevertheless, despite this observation, TikTok is currently an under-utilised platform for research into the portrayal of young people in the sustainable fashion movement (Becker, N.D.; Kanthawala et al., 2022). This could be explained by the relatively new creation and growth of TikTok. Hence, the use of TikTok, to explore the binary depiction of young people in this research, provides a new angle to this discussion.

1.4. Forthcoming Chapter Overview

In chapter 2, the exploration of current academic literature occurs, on the opposing branches of the fashion industry, the contemporary consumer-based society, and further exploration into the binary portrayal of young people in the sustainable fashion movement, exploring the reasoning behind these portrayals. It is concluded that these two contradicting portrayals of young people neglect a large set of external contexts, alongside the everyday navigation of a complex and multi-faceted fashion industry.

Chapter 3 begins by exploring academia surrounding 'netnography', alongside the social media platform of choice, TikTok, highlighting its under-utilisation in research and pivotal ethical criterion to be considered. From this understanding, the chapter moves to discuss the methods for interrogation of TikTok. Discussing the use of hashtags to generate searches on the discovery page of TikTok, with the ten chosen videos extracted into a data collection template, that was adapted from Wilkinson et al.'s (2020) work. Before the data was thematically analysed, using the 6-step approach of Braun & Clark's (2006) work.

Within chapter 4 and 5, the presentation of young people as either over-consumers or sustainability activists was investigated in the context of TikTok. The TikTok research material highlighted that communities of either depiction can be identified. Specifically, a large community of TikTok users who promote and perpetuate the normalisation of over-consumption, and behavioural traits of addiction were identified. Nevertheless, contrary to

current academic understanding, these users were consuming to own as much as possible to gain superiority, rather than to own the 'right things'. Markedly, the research additionally highlighted a smaller yet more active activist community, who had moved away from the traditional based activism and towards activism that is routed in emotions. Generally, TikTok users responded more positively to comedic activism, than to activism that was rooted in frustration towards fast fashion consumers. Videos that created a negative response, on activism content rooted in frustration, created unproductive exchanges that led to conflict between users.

Following from the previous two discussion chapters, the concepts of community and competition, were identified as recurrent themes effecting the consumption behaviour and activism engagement of young people. Despite the consistent separation of community and competition within academia, this research observed the intertwining of these theme with competition observed both within and inter-community. Therefore, these themes were investigated in chapter 6. Through this analysis, it illustrated the complex navigation of a user's desire to obtain the fundamental desires of belonging and superiority within communities, that can only be achieved by participating in competition.

Thus, chapter 7 concluded that young people should not be viewed as good or bad people, and the mould of a binary depiction is not effective in describing young people. Instead, the multi-faceted navigation young people participate in within their everyday lives must be appreciated, that emphasizes a wider conversation must take place in offline society to create a productive discussion on moving towards sustainability in the fashion industry.

1.5. Contribution

In conclusion, this thesis will examine the binary portrayal currently given to young people in the wicked problem of sustainability within the fashion industry. This aim is explored through the interrogation of the, under-utilised in research, social media network TikTok.

By exploring this binary depiction through use of a newer platform, the research hopes to provide a valuable innovative insight into whether this binary depiction correctly and effectively captures the complex behaviour patterns of young people and thus wider society.

A more effective depiction of young people allows for a wider understanding of how productive conversations on the movement towards sustainability should be framed, without placing undue pressure or responsibility onto one age group.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. 'Fast' Fashion

Two opposing branches of the fashion industry have been coined in mainstream media and academia, named fast and slow fashion (Meyer & Höberman, 2021). These two differing concepts have no constant definition, adding to the complexity of navigating sustainability in the fashion industry (Meyer & Höberman, 2021). The 'fast' fashion industry is associated with the consistent and mass creation of designs, that are rapidly produced, to supply the latest fashion micro-trends. Therefore, in order to create profit in the clothing industry, companies utilise an unethical supply chain, based on environmental and social exploitation, to mass produce garments that can be purchased for low cost, to keep up with the contemporary consumer-based society (Yang et al., 2017; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Maguire & Fahy, 2021). The modern-day consumer, characterised by around-the-clock consuming, is observed to be an indicator of a larger issue within the fast fashion industry, that illustrates how our current way-of-life on Earth, in this capitalist economy, is utterly unsustainable (McNeill and Moore, 2015; Niinimäki, 2015; Nesterova, 2022).

Shein, named the 'new global superpower in fast fashion', is appreciated to be one of the fastest growing fast fashion companies globally. A status given to the fast fashion brand after climbing in sales from $10 billion to $100 billion, between 2020 and 2022 (Liu, 2022; Jin, 2023; Rajvanishi, 2023). Shipped to more than 150 countries globally, the company has been identified as having more than 6,000 factories in China (Rajvanishi, 2023; Matsakis et al., 2021). Additionally, an investigation conducted by *Rest of World* revealed Shein adds between 2,000 and 10,000 items onto the Shein app every day, with similar investigations finding the company produces over one million garments per day (Rajvanishi, 2023; Matsakis et al., 2021; Gilchrist, 2024). Therefore, to create such a large quantity of clothing consistently, sell items to consumers at cheap rates, and generate a surplus of profit, Shein has been identified to practise environmental and social exploitation, a common trait of companies within the fast fashion industry (Liu, 2022; Jin, 2023; Rajvanishi, 2023). Hodell and Letts (2023) stated Shein is 'notorious for its murky practices and questionable ethics', illustrated through the lack of Labour Standard certification of Shein's supply chain (Gilchrist, 2024). Without this certification it cannot be ensured that workers have minimum worker rights and minimum

pay are being met (Gilchrist, 2024). Hence, the growth of Shein, despite the known ethical and environmental concerns, displays the normalisation of 'fast fashion' practises within wider society (Yang et al., 2017; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Maguire & Fahy, 2021).

2.2. 'Sustainable' Fashion

Comparatively, 'slow' fashion, often mis-interpreted to be an opposition to fast fashion, is the understanding of how long-term sustainability and ethical thinking can be actioned into the fashion industry (Meyer & Höberman, 2021). Therefore, due to the definition that underpins the 'slow' fashion movement, the cycle of the product produced through 'slow' fashion is expected to be sustainable, both ethically and environmentally. However, research has observed that consumers have reservations about the branding of 'slow' fashion, due to the high costs of products that are often attached to these 'slow' companies. Thus, it has been identified that predominantly consumers respond more positively to the term 'sustainable' fashion, an umbrella term, that allows for the inclusion of second-hand consumption and ideas of minimising consumption through creating a capsule wardrobe; basics that can be re-worn and re-styled, for long-term ownership of items (Yang et al., 2017; Kaner, 2021). 'Sustainable' fashion is a relatively new term that gained traction during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yang et al., 2017; Kaner, 2021). The term's recent popularity growth can be exemplified through phrases such as 'sustainable fashion' and 'sustainable clothing' peaking in search count and staying on trend since June of 2020 (Google Trends, 2021).

An example, of a company that is currently challenging how 'sustainable' fashion can be achieved is 'Patagonia' (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). This family-owned business looks to not only create the best product for its purchasers, but to counter the current humanitarian and environmental exploitation occurring in the fashion industry. Initiatives by Patagonia include: 1% to the Planet initiative, where 1% of profits or sales are donated to environmental causes; Sustainable Apparel Coalition, that developed the Higg index a measuring tool to investigate sustainability in supply chains; alongside strong activism in political and economic debates addressing the environmental and social impacts of the clothing industry (Chouinard & Stanley, 2013; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018; 1% for the planet, N.D; Sustainable Apperal Coalition, N.D.). Furthermore, Patagonia is additionally famous for its Black Friday 2011

campaign: ‘don’t buy this jacket’. The promotion illustrated the environmental harm of one Patagonia jacket, with many praising the company for ‘doing good’. However, for many this highlighted the environmental harm that is still being done even by a company with accolades for its sustainability (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018).

Therefore, the consumption of ‘sustainable’ fashion can be identified as extremely complex, with issues such as companies’ ability to ‘greenwash’ drastically increasing the complexity for consumers to successfully acquire sustainable fashion (Meyer & Höberman, 2021). Greenwashing refers to the misleading of a consumer about the production of an item or service, disguising the product to be more sustainable than it is. Companies that have been labelled as greenwashing include H&M, the second largest fashion retailer in the world. Particularly contentious, was the launch of their range ‘conscious’, in 2010. Since the launch, the collection has been released on an annual basis. However, controversy has arisen due to the promotion of annually re-purchasing garments, alongside the large range of products thought to still be exploitative in nature (Kaner, 2021). This illustrated that although ‘sustainable’ fashion may be increasing in popularity, there are complexities for consumers to consider when they purchase a ‘sustainable’ product.

Academic research, on the topic of sustainable fashion has significantly increased in recent decades (Nagano, 2023). Nagano’s (2023) literature review of research on sustainable fashion, discovered that research has concentrated on models to understand the context of sustainable fashion. This includes a specific focus of research towards a circular economy, a model demonstrating reusing, recycling, and reducing waste (Gardetti et al., 2020; Nagano, 2023). Nevertheless, works that were analysed in Nagano’s (2023) literature review illustrated the complexity of the models that academics were publishing and their inaccessibility to the public. Therefore, further research needs to be conducted into the level of understanding that the general public has on the topics of sustainable fashion industry.

2.3 Understanding Consumption

The term ‘basic needs’ was coined in psychological literature in the 1940s by Albert Maslow and was adapted in the ILO report for the 1976 World Employment Conference that defined basic needs, in the contexts of clothing, food, housing, education, and public transportation

(ILO, 1976; Emmerij, 2010). The ILO defined basic needs 'within a broader framework, namely the fulfilment of basic human rights' (ILO, 1976; Emmerij, 2010). Hence, through the understanding of these definitions, in the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio 'Earth' summit, under Agenda 21, sustainable consumption was defined as consumption to meet basic needs, whilst minimising expenditure and depletion of natural resources for future generations (Hobson, 2002; Lui et al., 2019). Additionally, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, under Goal 12, named responsible consumption and production as a primary goal for 2030. For the United Nations this means by 2030 that globally everyone should have the education and knowledge to make relevant decisions to consume sustainably and live a sustainable lifestyle (United Nations, N.D; Stanton, 2020).

The multi-faceted and evolving definitions of what it is to consume sustainably and responsibly, reflects the complex environmental and social exploitation across multiple industries, which can be exemplified in the fashion industry's textile supply chain that produces 1458 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions, and 92 million tons of waste (Meyer & Höberman, 2021). Although the environmental costs of the fashion textile supply chain are pivotal in the movement towards a 'sustainable' future, the social costs should not be ignored. For instance, the current recorded census of garment workers globally totals 60 million, with 27 million of these workers struggling with occupational diseases (Meyer & Höberman, 2021).

Consumers have shown an increased interest in the environmental and social ethical journey of a product, from source, to production, to purchase. Nevertheless, a consumer's desire to be fashionable typically out-weighs the ethical concerns of their purchases (McNeill and Moore, 2015). Peer and media pressure has been identified as the main socio-cultural pressure that causes consumers to be naive to the wider ethical journey of their purchase (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Lui et al., 2019). Academics, such as Crewe (2008), have argued that consumers may also choose to turn a blind eye and have a level of acceptance of the exploitative supply chains of the fashion industry. This is because consumers have a desire to purchase cheap goods, with a preference to not know how we are connected to others. Analysis of these suggestions from Crew (2008) highlights the moral proximity theory. The moral proximity theory is the understanding there is a lack of empathy due to technological advancements and an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach (Barnett et al., 2005). Thus,

consumers feel a lack of responsibility for their consumption habits, and therefore a lack of connection to those who are exploited through these global supply chains (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Lui et al., 2019).

The utilisation and acceptance of this exploitative nature, by companies and global north consumers, can be illustrated through 90% of produced 'clothes' coming from low-wage countries, often named within the global 'south', that are transported to and consumed by, predominantly, the global 'north' (Meyer & Höberman, 2021). Additionally, there is the added issue that companies have increased product disposability, through low quality and low prices of clothing and harnessing societal pressures to consistently stay 'on trend' (Maguire & Fahy, 2011; Meyer & Höberman, 2021). This has allowed for the growth of a contemporary consumer society, defined as the need for society to consume more than 'any reasonable conception of basic needs' (Goss, 2004; Maguire & Fahy, 2011). To illustrate, 40% of garments purchased are never worn (Ro, 2020). In these circumstances of a consumer-based society, the fashion industry thrives, with an estimated worth of $343 billion (U.S. dollars) in 2015 (Yang et al., 2017). The acceptance of the fashion industry despite its exploitative practises, shown through the mass over-consumption of products, displays to fast-fashion companies that there is no need for them to evaluate their current environmental and social policies to move towards sustainability (McNeill and Moore, 2015; Maguire & Fahy).

2.4. Understanding Young people's Role in the sustainable fashion movement

Young people have consistently been identified as the most crucial group in sustainable fashion consumption debates (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Ziesemer et al., 2021). Within the 'wicked problem of sustainability', young people have been portrayed in two conflicting ways: as heroes; and as villains (Niinimäki, 2015; Collins, 2019; Hicks, 2020).

Understanding Young People's Heroic Title

One of these presentations of young people is the pressure-inducing title of 'sustainability saviour', named as a pivotal actor in driving a new sustainable consumption-style (Ballantyne et al., 2006; Collins, 2019; Ziesemer et al., 2021; Hur & Faragher-Siddal, 2022). This understanding of young people as 'sustainability saviours' has been lent into within academic

literature (e.g., Larsson et al., 2010), with young people's trendsetting being identified as crucial in creating ripples in wider social groups, such as peers, family, and friends, to create the change towards sustainable lifestyles (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2018; Larsson et al., 2010). Therefore, young people have been coined 'citizens', advocating for the world's future by campaigning for political, environmental, and social change (Collins & Hitchings, 2012). An example of this activism includes the 2018 'Fridays for Future' movement, a campaign centred around students not attending school to advocate for the development of environmental policies (Ziesemer et al., 2021).

Thus, across multiple academic disciplines, young people have been defined as 'citizen-consumers', people who will put their citizen role above consumption and the desire for material good, illustrating a wider merging of political stance and consumption behaviours (Trentmann, 2008; Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Stanes & Klocker, 2016). This idea of 'citizen-consumers' with a desire for fashion brands to uphold their social values, can be illustrated by the 2017 Futurecast research that found 60% of Gen-Z seek companies they purchase from to uphold trustworthy social ideals, with further research concluding that 94% of Gen-Z would like fashion companies to do more to address social causes and the environmental crisis (Editorial, 2019; Wang, 2021). Leading to the rise of key influential environmental youth activists, such as Greta Thunberg, an exemplary example of a youth 'citizen-consumer', a solution-maker to sustainability, campaigning for environmental and social change (Jung et al., 2020). Due to this political and environmental awareness, young people view their consumption habits as an extension of themselves, wanting fashion brands they consume from to uphold their social values (Amed et al., 2019). Therefore, young people's ever-increasing understanding of sustainability and their strong desire to advocate for environmental and social policies, illustrates why they are considered the 'hope' for solving the wicked problem of sustainable fashion consumption.

Social media has become a pivotal platform for the increased understanding of sustainability, and therefore strong desire of young people to advocate for environmental and social policies (Ozkula, 2021; Carengie, 2022). Particularly, on social media networks, this phenomenon has been named digital activism, transforming the landscape of 'activism' (Ozkula, 2021). The term 'Digital activism' refers to political activism on the internet, such as on social media platforms including Instagram, Twitter (X), Facebook and TikTok (Ozkula, 2021; Herawati et al.,

2024). Digital activism has been praised for allowing an increase in the mobilization of the public that can occur over a shorter period, due to an increase in the ease of coordinating activism and the reduction in activism barriers (Herawati et al., 2024). The impact of digital activism can also be seen in the 2020 study of 8-17-year-olds, from UK Safer Internet Centre, that found 34% of their research pool have been inspired by the internet to act on a cause and 43% noted that the internet made them feel as though their voice and opinion on causes mattered (Carnegie, 2022). Ozkula (2021) identified that 'digital activism' has gained an increasing amount of traction in academic research; however, Ozkula (2021) also acknowledged that the term currently lacks a clear consensus on a precise definition and scope. The difficulty defining the term arises as academics have struggled to classify what counts as digital activism and what may not, such as Adi & Miah (2011) who explored whether sharing an activist website through a tweet, on Twitter, should be seen as digital activism (Ozkula, 2021). However, despite this clear consensus in academia, the phenomenon of digital activism has been pivotal in furthering young people's understanding of sustainability and drive to partake in sustainability movements (Ozkula, 2021; Carnegie, 2022).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 era additionally allowed for young people to be presented as the solution for sustainable fashion consumption (Degli et al., 2021; Okur et al., 2023). Specifically, young women were more likely to take an interest into educating themselves on sustainable fashion consumption and were more likely to make the commitment towards consuming sustainably (Degli et al., 2021). The increased pro-environmental movement during this period, could be attributed to the increased anxiety about the future and the environment brought on by COVID-19 in the global north, alongside decreased opportunity to shop in-store triggering increased thoughts on the environmental crisis and an increase in passion to act (Jian et al., 2020; Degli et al., 2021; Okur et al., 2023). Therefore, as we move into a post-COVID-19 era, defined as the fourth industrial revolution for the global north, little research has been published on whether these attitudes are ongoing as life returns to the new 'normal' (Degli et al., 2021; Okur et al., 2023).

Understanding Young People's Villainization

Nevertheless, although activism and movements of 'citizen-consumerism' has been identified in young people, the observed consumption habits of this generation have been named as a direct contradiction to the hope that has currently been placed onto them (Collins & Hitchings,

2012; Hicks, 2020). Consequently, this contradictory portrayal of young people leads them to be identified as an issue that needs to be overcome in the movement towards sustainable fashion consumption (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Hicks, 2020).

The use of such terminology to describe young people, neglects the complex navigation of the wider social context and pressure that young people increasingly experience, such as the use of fashion to portray their identities, group affiliations, and to increase self-confidence (Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016). The intensification of the wider social contexts and pressure that young people experience has been categorised in academia to be due to external social pressures, including social media and peers, a symptom of the ever-increasing hyper-connectedness of young people (Collins, 2019). The pressures of this exponentially increasing hyper-connectedness are exemplified through the statistic 1 in 10 young people would dispose of an item, once they are pictured with it three times online (Bayley, 2018). Consequently, young people often reject the concept of owning 'enough', due to the expectation and social anxiety of consistently been seen wearing something new (Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; McNeill & Venter, 2019). A key driver of this social anxiety is the rapidly growing trend of 'haul girls' on social media sites, defined as young women who post videos to display their purchases and consumer-based lifestyle, (Collins, 2019). Young girls have been identified as largely influenced by these social-media 'influencer lifestyle' videos, which has led to impulsive, irrational and large consumption-habits, due to the short-term pleasure that is attributed to consistent acquisition to obtain the 'influencer lifestyle' (Collins & Hitchings, 2012).

A main driver for these irrational decisions and pressure, to achieve 'influencer lifestyles' and the rejection of owning 'enough', is due to comparison to others (Festinger, 1954; Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Garcia et al., 2013; Collins, 2019). The social comparison theory, coined by Festinger (1954), encapsulates how social media platforms and content on these sites, such as videos that discuss the incoming trends for a seasonal period, cause the scrutiny of oneself and comparison across multiple aspects of life (Pellegrino et al., 2023). Hence, the social comparison theory also highlights how the tendency of comparing oneself to others creates a competitive style of behaviour (Festinger, 1954; Garcia et al., 2013). Competitive consumption is defined as a style of acquisition that can be used to show superiority over peers online and offline (Burns, 2019). As there has been an increased interconnectedness, from the increased

usage of social media, comparison to others has intensified, causing competition to achieve the same highlight-reels that are strategically posted onto social media, from users. Therefore, to define young people as the 'problem' is problematic, as it neglects and invalidates the social context that is causing this behaviour (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016).

Additionally, the title of 'hedonistic' being placed on young people, presenting them as the problem in sustainable fashion consumption, removes other generations and their responsibility towards sustainable fashion consumption (Moisescu & Gicã, 2020; Klocker et al., 2012; Stanes & Klocker, 2016). An older person, defined as a person over the age of 65, have been identified to have less environmental knowledge, and a less-positive attitude towards 'green' consumption options, alongside being more likely to involve themselves in climate scepticism and advocate that the data is being exaggerated (Moisescu & Gicã, 2020; United Nations, N.D.). It is common for these opinions to be passed from family/close relations to young people (Klocker et al., 2012; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; Moisescu & Gicã, 2020). Additionally, for older people, psychological denial has been identified as a natural response to the harsh reality of climate change, a contrast to the 'hedonist' definition placed on young people (Hicks, 2020). Thus, this presentation of young people as 'hedonists' allows for the removal of older people and their responsibility in the sustainability narrative, allowing for blame to be solely placed on young people. Instead, the young peoples' behaviour can be attributed to the learnt behavioural response of denial, alike to older people (Klocker et al., 2012; Stanes & Klocker, 2016).

2.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the two contradicting portrayals of young people, as either the problem or the solution in sustainable fashion consumption, neglects a large set of external contexts such as social media and peer pressure, the utilisation of garments for self-confidence, learnt behaviour styles, and allows for other generations to be removed from the conversations on solutions towards sustainable consumption of fashion, alongside, a larger complex navigation of the multifaceted fast and sustainable fashion industry (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; Klocker et al., 2012; Moisescu & Gicã, 2020).

Nevertheless, the increasing understanding and desire for activism has caused a growth in campaigns for political and social change, specifically in young people. This has illustrated a willingness to solve the sustainable fashion consumption crisis, during the COVID-19 era; however, from academic research it becomes apparent that external factors such as capitalism and social factors are halting young people's desire to put their citizen status over their consumption desires (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Hicks, 2020). Therefore, as we move into the post-COVID-19 era, additional research needs to occur to understand whether the knowledge acquired during COVID-19 has created a new normal for citizen-consumers, or if attitudes have returned to a consumer-based hedonist lifestyle, for young people (Degli et al., 2021; Okur et al., 2023).

Additionally, through investigating the portrayal of young people in the sustainable fashion narrative, it becomes apparent that this binary depiction of young people, as heroes or villains, may not portray an accurate representation of the complexity of human behaviour. Hence, as sustainability continues to become a pivotal agenda globally, is the binary depiction of young people correct and where do young people position themselves in the sustainable fashion movement?

Chapter 3: Methods

3.1. Netnography and TikTok use in Academic Research

Netnography

Netnography is a qualitative research method based on utilising online platforms for data collection. Specifically, this open-ended process is typically used to explore online communities and cultures (Halliwell & Wilkinson, 2021; Wilkinson & von Benzon, 2021). The method coined 'netnography', developed by Robert Kozinets in 1997, was developed to be a research technique that leveraged the exponentially expanding online publicly generated content, particularly to understand consumption-based behaviour online (Kozinets, 2006; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). The use of these online communities by the public, means that users often become grouped, with alike interests, habits, and passions bringing people together (Kozinets, 1997; Kozinets, 2002). Netnography has been identified as an exemplary method to obtain pivotal candid insights into the lifestyle, choices, perceptions, and behaviours of the everyday lives of the public (Kozinets, 2002; Halliwell & Wilkinson, 2021; Wilkinson & von Benzon, 2021).

At the beginning of its development, netnography was consistently used in marketing research, applying netnography to online communities to understand customer experiences with brands (Medberg & Heinonen, 2014; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Brown and Patterson in 2010 used netnography to investigate the popularity and thus marketing tactics of the Harry Potter franchise. Netnography was particularly used in this context to look at the online communities of Harry Potter lovers, haters and those who are indifferent to the franchise, alongside focus groups and interviews (Brown & Patterson, 2010). Additionally, Medberg and Heinonen in 2014, also utilised netnography to study perceptions of retail banking. They searched key words in Google to find online communities and threads. Therefore, illustrating the use of netnography in understanding brand to customer relations, at the beginning of its deployment.

Nevertheless, the ever-expanding digitalisation of everyday lives, specifically in terms of social media and young people, has meant that the scope of platforms available to netnography has increased (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023; Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Due to the development of new online platforms, there has been a movement in netnography from using sites such as

discussion forums, newsgroups, and Google searches to a plethora of social media applications (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). Therefore, to generate and capture netnography research, social media has become fundamental to cultural understanding (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). This is due to the development of these sites from a messaging service to contact family and friends, to viral sites that allow for instantaneous messaging with people around the world, and up-to-date user-generated information in one's hand (Vladimirova et al., 2023; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023; Ziesemer et al., 2021). Examples of these social media platforms include Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. This digitalisation of everyday life was a reality for young people as they grew up, shaping their developmental years and establishing a new norm (Silicon Foundry, N.D; Francis & Hoefel, 2018; McKinsey & Company, 2024). Therefore, allowing them to become a truly digital first generation (Silicon Foundry, N.D; Francis & Hoefel, 2018; McKinsey & Company, 2024).

Additionally, to the benefit of netnography, there has been an exponential growth in active users across these social media sites. The first social media site, MySpace, reached 1 million active users in 2004, compared to TikTok in 2024 that has 1.56 billion active users per month (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Vladimirova et al., 2023; Singh, 2024). Particularly, there has been an increase in the number of young people, across all social media platforms (Vladimirova et al., 2023; Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Ziesemer et al., 2021). This can be illustrated by the fact that, in research conducted by Stem4 that sampled 1024 young people in the UK in 2023, 97% were active users on social media, with the youngest social media user in this sample being aged 12 (Hill, 2023). Moreover, across social media platforms, young people were identified as spending an average of 3.65 hours daily on these sites, illustrating the normality of social media in young people's digital first everyday lives (Silicon Foundry, N.D; Vladimirova et al., 2023; Hill, 2023). Therefore, social media has been identified as a crucial channel for capturing large-scale interactions, perspectives and everyday digital behaviours of the public (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). Providing current insights into a digitally first generation that allows researchers to capture both organic and manufactured trends, and the discussions young people are being exposed to, on a day-to-day basis, that shape their identities and behaviours (Silicon Foundry, N.D; Francis & Hoefel, 2018; McKinsey & Company, 2024).

With the development of new applications that can be used in netnography, there has been an increase in academic research that uses social media platforms (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023).

Examples include Juliadi et al (2021). The authors observed six Indonesian climate change Instagram influencers' accounts, a person with a large or highly engaged following on TikTok, to see engagement levels and their influence on social media users for climate change awareness. The observations that informed their research include the engagement (size of following, engagement rate, like average and, comment amount average) for each influencer. Additionally, the climate change related hashtags used by each influencer were investigated to understand the size of influence they had. Finally, the tone of comment sections was observed, on whether users' responses were positive, neutral, or negative. From their research, they concluded that engagement level from Instagram-users with these influencers' platforms was below the usual industrial standard (Juliadi et al., 2021). This illustrates the development of netnography, from a research method for investigating marketing, to a method that informs researchers of wider social changes.

TikTok in Academic Research

TikTok has been under-utilised in netnography to aid understanding of communities and cultures in the 21st century. This could be because of the relatively recent release of the app, with a global launch date of 2018 (Becker, N.D; Kanthawala et al., 2022). Due to its exponential rise, TikTok is understood to be making a 'cultural impact' to 21st century society, particularly on the consumption behaviours of young people, with many other social media sites beginning to copy the main functions of TikTok (Song, 2021; Kanthawala et al., 2022). Therefore, analysing the site in the context of sustainable fashion, will allow for a detailed understanding of young people in the sustainable fashion narrative.

Furthermore, to use TikTok in academia, a clear approach is required to source relevant data, this can be developed by investigating previous research in this space. This includes Herrick et al., (2020) research, who researched young people's interaction in mental health activism on TikTok and how young people displayed their journey with eating disorder, through posts and content on TikTok (McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Herrick et al., 2020). One hashtag ((#) EDrecovery) was used, in this work, and the top 150 results on TikTok were thematically analysed. From this analysis, five themes were identified, alongside a 'community' of people who were often struggling or in recovery from eating disorders. Additionally, other works that identified a clear approach to TikTok data collection included McCashin & Murphy (2022), in a review of Irish Mental health activism research, they identified that in a majority of TikTok

research, one main hashtag was used for sourcing data. However, McCashin & Murphy (2022) also noted that it should be considered that a narrow focus, alongside a lack of TikTok terminology, would not truly replicate the ways in which young people engage and come across content.

3.2. Research Questions

To understand the question 'Does TikTok demonstrate young people as the heroes or villains in the sustainable fashion movement?', the broad question will be split into the following research questions:

Research Question 1: To what extent does TikTok show young people as over-consumers of fashion?

Research Question 2: What methods of activism do young people adopt on TikTok?

Research Question 3: Does addressing young people's consumption and activism through a lens of 'community' and 'competition' complicate the 'saviour' and 'villain' binary?

3.3. Ethical Considerations for using TikTok in research

Before methods can be developed, the ethical considerations of using TikTok in academic research need to be explored, to make sure ethical research is upheld, which is the duty of the researcher (UK Research and Innovation, 2023). In the context of using TikTok in research, there are a plethora of ethical considerations that need to be made before research is conducted. In this process, the Lancaster Environment Centre research ethics form was completed before data collection commenced, in discussion with my supervisor. The ethical concerns that need to be considered included: using publicly generated content for research, minors on TikTok, working with TikTok's individualised algorithm, and creators' ability to restrict their comment sections.

Using Publicly Generated Content for Research

Firstly, it is important to note the ethical concerns of taking publicly generated information and placing it under a magnifying glass (Kanthawala et al., 2022). In the context of social

media, researchers consistently dispute whether data on social media should be considered public or private, and whether informed consent should be sought from the accounts that created the data (Townsend & Wallace, N.D.; British Psychological society, 2013). A majority of academic research (e.g., McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Herrick et al., 2020; Plötz et al., 2023), deemed research on social media that had been publicly posted, and accessible to all social media users, to be a part of the 'public domain' (Herrick et al., 2020; Kanthawala et al., 2022). Additionally, multiple researchers have noted that on multiple social media platforms, when signing up to platforms the user must accept multiple terms and conditions that set out how data may be used by third party individuals, such as researchers (Townsend & Wallace, N.D; Herrick et al., 2020). However, the definitions of public and private data are highly contested in research. This can be illustrated through Boyd and Crawford (2012), who deemed that although social media content is accessible, and therefore public for researchers to use, ethical considerations should not be ignored (Townsend & Wallace, N.D.; Boyd & Crawford, 2012). To mitigate ethical concerns that arise from using user-created information, only posts that are publicly accessible and able to be shared, and downloaded, should be used in research. Both functions must be enabled by the creator, on TikTok, meaning the creator has decided to allow for their post to be shared across platforms and is content with their posts to be disseminated (Herrick et al., 2020). Specifically, for content creators under the age of sixteen, they will not have the option to manually allow for their videos to be downloadable (TikTok, 2023).

Furthermore, in signing up to TikTok, users must accept the terms and conditions that acknowledge that third parties may obtain and use the provided public data (Herrick et al., 2020). Additionally, on this page TikTok depicts how third parties that have 'legitimate interests may use the site to 'facilitate independent research that aims to develop society's collective knowledge, including in the areas of misinformation and disinformation, violence, cybercrime, and social trends' (TikTok, 2023). Therefore, users agree to the use of public data for research of legitimate interests when first signing up to use the app and creating an account to post, comment and like.

Considering Minors on TikTok

TikTok is a popular site with young people under the age of eighteen. As of 2021, 27.86% of 13-18-year-olds are consuming videos on TikTok (Ceci, 2024; Shepherd, 2024). Research by

the Business Insider approximated that 11-17-year-olds spent 2 hours on TikTok per day (Rosen, 2022; Shepherd, 2024). You must be over thirteen to gain access to the main TikTok application, with TikTok consistently reinforcing that users should report accounts they believe to belong to users under the age of 13 (TikTok, N.D.). However, this does not remove the opportunity of younger people, being dishonest about their age, as there is no age verification in the TikTok sign-up process (Townsend & Wallace, N.D.). This means that although videos created by content creators under the age of sixteen should not be downloadable, if an incorrect age has been entered by the user, their settings will not be restricted by TikTok's privacy and safety settings for young people (TikTok, 2023; Townsend & Wallace, N.D.) Furthermore, contrary to this agreement by TikTok, in the United States, TikTok has brought out an under 13 account, which offers a limited experience, with TikTok believing this puts young people 'into an age appropriate TikTok environments' (TikTok, 2019). Under this TikTok account, they are unable to comment, share, or be shown inappropriate TikTok content (TikTok, 2019).

With this understanding, it cannot be said with full confidence that all TikTok users will be over the age of thirteen, meaning that there may be children under the age of thirteen, posting, commenting, and engaging with data that will be used in this research. Therefore, data that was collected was not analysed or stored on my computer, if I have reason to believe that the poster/commenter is under the age of sixteen. All data downloaded and stored on my computer will be anonymised.

Working with TikTok's Individualised Algorithm

From previous articles that used TikTok in their research, an initial concern that was consistently raised was the individualised algorithm, based on recommendations for the user. This has been categorised as a cause for its large cultural impact in the 21st century (Kanthawala et al., 2022; McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Herrick et al., 2020; Plötz et al., 2023; Hill, 2023). The TikTok individualised algorithm, means that the main '*For You Page'* (FYP) is based upon a magnitude of complex factors (Kanthawala et al., 2022). These factors include: the popularity and interaction of others with a post, the overall popularity of the post's creator, the previously liked and interacted with posts/creators of the user, and the geographical location of the device that is being used by the user (Herrick et al., 2020; Klug et al., 2021; Kanthawala et al., 2022). Therefore, this complex algorithm, hinders research, due

to the unique experience of each user, meaning it can be difficult to navigate and replicate the experience of users in TikTok communities (Herrick et al., 2020; Kanthawala et al., 2022). Collectively, this allows for the understanding that there is not a universal experience on TikTok, and findings must be highly contextualised geographically. Thus, to try and replicate the experience of TikTok users without personal TikTok usage affecting research, previous researchers have created new accounts on the site, often on new devices, to mitigate any connection to their personal user accounts and activity that may affect the reliability of the research (Kanthawala et al., 2022; McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Herrick et al., 2020; Plötz et al., 2023).

Additionally, it is important to understand that the individualised algorithm takes into consideration the engagement, likes, comments, rewatches, and shares, of the account that are displayed to the user on their FYP (Herrick et al., 2020; Klug et al., 2021; Kanthawala et al., 2022). Therefore, TikTok is more likely to display media that the user will engage with. Due to this, grouping of people to specific content that TikTok believes will be 'for you', the site has been found to develop 'echo chambers' (Gao et al., 2023). Echo chambers are groups of people, where their political beliefs, learning, or perspective of a topic, are reinforced by repeated interaction, with specifically on social media posts, influencers, and threads, which will reflect their opinions (Jiang et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2023).

Influencers and Paid Partnerships on TikTok

'Influencers' are prominent across TikTok. With over 1 million influencers on TikTok it is estimated that 100,000 creators are using their TikTok content as their primary full-time job (Dunn, 2025). For many influencers, a large revenue stream is through brand partnerships - a collaboration between a brand and influencer to create resonating content for the brand (Lammertink, 2025). The brand financially compensates the influencer for the creation of the content and for posting the content on their channels (Lammertink, 2025).

These pieces of content have a transformative impact on TikTok, shaping trends and demand for brands (Lammertink, 2025). This can be illustrated through the 193% increase of engagement rates from viewers seeing a brand partnership piece of content and directly engaging with that brand (Dunn, 2025). Such results are exaggerated on TikTok, as TikTok users have been noted to view TikTok creators as increasingly reliable, authentic and trustworthy,

meaning their product suggestions are listened to with great confidence from their audience, in comparison to creators on other social media applications (Ridings et al., 2002; Aichner et al., 2021; Jeffries, 2023; Dunn, 2025). Additionally, to further the impact of brand collaborations with influencers, brands can pay to use an advertising tool on TikTok known as content 'promotion' (TikTok, N.D.). This 'promotion' can improve the engagement and visibility of posts, paying TikTok to push the content to like-minded users through their algorithmic technology, creating an echo chamber of perspectives on that post (TikTok, N.D.).

With the creator economy expected to be worth $480 billion by 2027, the process of product suggestions for financial compensation and paid promotions can manufacture artificial trends and distort a creator's opinion to achieve their financial compensation (Yovanno, 2024). Hence, it is difficult to interpret whether a bias in opinion has occurred for the benefit of selling a product to the TikTok audience for the commercial partnership to occur. Therefore, to mitigate against content that lacks diversity in perspectives due to motivations around income-generation, no paid partnership videos will be used in this research. To achieve this, TikTok advertising tools will be observed, such as the 'Paid Partnership' label, that can be enabled in settings and is suggested by TikTok when it detects paid partnership content. Additionally, under the Federal Trade Commission (US) and Advertising Standards Authority (UK) paid partnership content must be labelled with #ad or #sponsorship in the description of the video (Barnett, N.D.). No content will be used that has either labelling indicating a paid partnership between a brand and creator.

The Restricting of Comment Sections by Creators

On the TikTok application, there are multiple settings that allow for creators to censor their comment sections. Settings that restrict comments, that can be applied to one, multiple or all of the creator's videos, include privacy settings (that means only people who you follow or that you follow back can comment), filtering of comments (only comments approved by the creator can be commented), keyword, spam and offensive comment filter (keywords chosen by the creator cannot be commented), and deleting comments (creator can delete one or bulk, maximum of 100 at once, comments) (TikTok, N.D.). These settings can be applied before a video is uploaded, or in retrospective on published videos (TikTok, N.D.). All these settings are only available to people who select their age to over seventeen. Those who are 13-15 years old only have two comment settings enabled, by TikTok. The two settings that are

enabled for this age group include having their 'friends' (people they follow and follow them back) or no-one comment on their videos (TikTok, N.D.). Young people who are 16-17 years old will automatically have their comment section restricted to 'friends' as their default setting, they, as the user, will have the option to manually change the setting to allow for more of the public to comment on their posts (CBC Kid News, 2021). Therefore, although comment sections will be used to grasp response to users' videos, it must be noted that the creator may be limiting the reactions of people to their video, meaning comment sections might not be an accurate representation of wider users' responses to videos on TikTok.

The Research's Ethical Criteria

With the above ethical considerations, this research project follows the norms established in TikTok research as demonstrated in McCashin & Murphy (2022), Herrick et al., (2020) and Plötz et al., (2023). Therefore, a device that has not previously had the TikTok application downloaded onto its system will be used, alongside a newly made TikTok account. Also, in the management of the account, TikTok will not be granted access to the location of the device nor the access to personal information, such as the devices contact information. This will allow for a mitigation of the personalised algorithm, which uses location and personal information, which will be in occurrence on the researcher's own personal TikTok account (Kanthawala et al., 2022).

Additionally, account posts will only be used and analysed, in this research, if they are available publicly and if, from observations, it is believed that the poster is over the age of sixteen. These observations will include the investigation into the comment restrictions on the post and the creators' profile to create an informed decision, on if the creator's age and if the content should be used. To further this, posts will need to be shareable and downloadable, a setting that is available for users to turn on for each individual post (McCashin & Murphy, 2022; Herrick et al., 2020; Plötz et al., 2023). Additionally, the comment section will be checked, to see the quantity and style of comments, in order to observe whether one of the discussed comment section restrictions have been applied as this could impede the comments representing a discussion between a variety of perspectives. It will be up to the researcher's discretion to decide whether specific comments should be used, after investigating the comment section's relevance to topic, engagement, and ethical consideration of comment

restriction. Furthermore, in the data collection of the videos and comment sections all user information must be anonymised.

Therefore, the ethical criteria for a post to be used in research will be a publicly available, downloadable, shareable post, that has an un-restricted comment section, is thought to have no paid partnership aspect, and the content creator is believed to be over the age of 16. All criteria must be met, for use the of the content in the research.

3.4. Interrogating TikTok

Data Collection

The use of hashtags that describe a video, are commonly used in the caption of videos on the TikTok platform. Therefore, and collect data from TikTok by hashtag searches, the key slang and buzzwords being descriptive hashtags can be used to obtain videos and comment sections to obtain data. To use used on TikTok, by young people, needed to be understood. To find and understand this slang, on the topic of fast and sustainable fashion, intext and site operator searches were pivotal (see appendix). Hashtags, found via the intext and site operator searchers, were noted if they were deemed to be relevant to the research topic. Relevant Hashtags noted were:

Theme*:* Sustainable Fashion

Hashtags (#): ConsciousFashion (Conscious Fashion), ShopSustainableFashion (Shop sustainable fashion), SustainableStyle (Sustainable Style), AffordableSustainableFashion (Affordable Sustainable Fashion), SustainableFashion (Sustainable Fashion), TextileToxicity (Textile Toxicity), FastFashion (Fast Fashion), FastFashionSucks (Fast Fashion Sucks), FastFashionisntcute (Fast Fashion Isn't Cute).

Theme: Fast Fashion

Hashtags (#): Fashion (Fashion), FashionTok (Fashion Tok), OutfitIdeas (Outfit Ideas), haul, ZaraHaul (Zara Haul), SheinHaul (Shein Haul), Tryonhaul (Try on haul), SpringFashion (Spring Fashion).

The identified relevant hashtags were searched on TikTok by using the discovery page and search bar, located at the top of the discovery page. By using the search bar, relevant videos

that also met all the research criteria, were favourited, and added into a TikTok collection, based upon the content of the TikTok video and comment section interactions. These collections were named 'Fast Fashion' and 'Slow Fashion'. Once an abundance of videos had been favourited, the videos were re-evaluated and placed into a 'Chosen Videos' collection, if they were going to be used in the research. Videos were selected depending on whether the video and comment sections were believed to provide rich data to inform the research questions, alongside the decided ethical criteria. Imperatively, the selected videos needed to include contrasting types of videos, discussions, and perspectives, to create an informed approach to the research, and the distinct narratives described of young people as hedonistic or sustainability saviours. Each video was selected as it highlighted a specific perspective, created an interesting discussion in the community, or illustrated a wider trend on TikTok. In total ten videos were deemed of importance to inform the research questions, this consisted of six sustainable fashions TikTok videos and four fast fashion TikTok videos.

Analysis

The chosen TikTok videos were analysed through content and thematic analysis, using an inductive qualitative approach (Carter et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2020). The inductive approach to this analysis allowed for understanding to be led by the data collected from TikTok.

Inspiration from Carter et al. (2017), in their analysis of YouTube videos, and Wilkinson et al. (2020), analysis of Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook posts, were used to inform this research's analysis process. In Wilkinson et al's (2020) research project, a data extraction template was used to extract data from multiple social media sites. These data extraction tables were used to understand how mothers of children with complex health care conditions are portrayed on social media. The successful data collection and presentation in their research, highlighted the need for such table design. Therefore, the data extraction template approach was followed in this research. Changes were made to the template to allow to fit this research project and successfully collect data that would inform the research questions (see table 1 below). Additionally, comments and comment threads associated with the ten chosen videos were also analysed, there is space on Table 1 for inclusion of this information. The collected data in comparison to the TikTok videos and comments were reviewed twice, to ensure all relevant

information had been extracted into table 1. A summary of the videos collected in table 1, can be found in table 2.

Table 1. *Adapted from Wilkinson et al. (2020), this plain template was used to extract the data from the chosen ten TikTok videos and comment sections.*

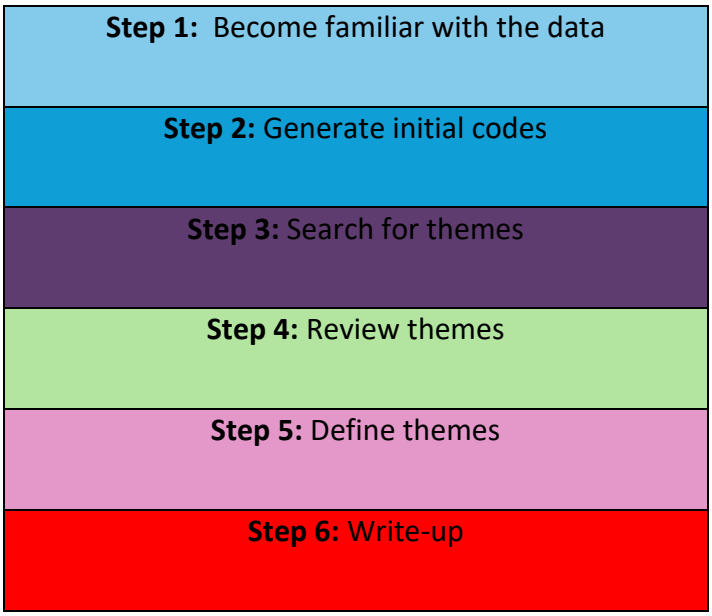
Date of 1st Review: **Date of 2nd video Review:** **Date of 2nd comment review:**			
Date Video Posted		**Number of Shares**	
Video Caption		**Number of Views**	
Hashtags Used		**Number of Likes**	
Found via hashtag		**Number of Comments**	
Why has this video been chosen?			
What is happening? (foreground/background)			
Who is the main narrator or person in the video?			
What is the main content of the video? (Concentration on fast or sustainable fashion, informative factual video, relaxed style video)			
General trend of comments (positive, negative, neutral with description)			
If applicable: comment(s) or comment thread to be analysed.			

Table 2. *A video identifier and summary of the 10 videos collected and inputted into table 1.*

Video Identifier	Video Summary	Fashion Industry Focus
Shein Haul	A 37 item Shein Haul.	Fast Fashion
Need for Clothes 24/7.	A carousel of two photos, to show that the desire to have more clothes is on their mind, always.	Fast Fashion
Cool girl trends 2024.	The 'cool girl' trends for Spring 2024.	Fast Fashion
Hurry Shein workers	A green-screen video, joking about going to a Shein factory to find out why children Shein workers are taking an extended amount of time to create and send their order.	Fast Fashion
Frustration with a Survey Result.	A male emphasising disappointment in a survey result. This survey result shows that the public believe H&M, Nike, Primark, M&S, and Amazon to be the top five most sustainable brands.	Sustainable Fashion
Difficulty Slowing Consumption.	A comical fighting sound that highlights that the user finds slowing their consumption 'the hardest part' for having a 'more sustainable wardrobe'.	Sustainable Fashion
Campaign Against Pretty Little Thing.	Comparison of a campaign against Pretty Little Thing as a 'work of art', compared to Pretty Little Thing Instagram posts that were 'bullsh*t'.	Sustainable Fashion
Company Deinfluencing and Advertising.	A de-influencing video that described the 'un-sustainable' nature of six fast fashion brands. The brand goes on to promote their 'sustainable' brand as an alternative.	Sustainable Fashion
How To Shop Sustainably.	Male describing how a person may try to shop more sustainably, using five 'top tips' to achieving this.	Sustainable Fashion
Recreating by 'Sustainable' Fashion.	Recreating an outfit by only shopping 'sustainably', by spending the day charity shopping and adjusting the clothes to achieve this.	Sustainable Fashion

Once the data had been inputted into table 1 for each individual TikTok video, the process of inductive thematic analysis was conducted. There are a variety of unique styles of thematic analysis. However, alike to many other works, such as Maguire & Delahunt (2017), in this work the established Braun & Clark (2006) steps to approaching thematic analysis were used (see Table 3). Reviews of the data were completed numerous times to complete all 6-steps of Braun & Clark's (2006) approach to thematic analysis.

Table 3. *Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, table adapted from Macquire & Delahunt (2017) work to illustrate the thematic analysis process.*



Therefore, using the qualitative research method of netnography, TikTok has been identified as a data rich platform to inform the research questions. An ethical criterion was created, based on the identified ethical concerns of using publicly generated content for research purposes, considering minors on the site, TikTok's individualised algorithm and the restricting of the comments by creators. The ethical criteria were upheld for all videos selected for research use. Using the data collection table (see table 1) videos and comments were reviewed numerous times, followed by a process of inductive thematic analysis following Bruan & Clark's (2006) 6-step approach, providing rich data to inform the research questions.

Chapter 4: To what extent does TikTok show young people as over-consumers of fashion?

4.1. Introduction

Hakansson's 2014 work of finding a clear and unified definition of over-consumption, through the review of academic papers, published between 2010 and 2012, observed that over-consumption was often described as 'consumption of hedonic goods by individuals with undesirable personality traits' and 'low morals'. This definition specifically criticizes consumers, removing causes such as social pressures and businesses promoting consumption from the over-consumption narrative. Alternatively, more recent work such as Stuart, Gunderson & Petersen's (2020) research, illustrates that the overproduction from businesses drives consumption, and that business advertising promotes a false sense of need and desire. Therefore, Start et al. (2020) uses the term 'over-consumption' to refer to a lifestyle, of consistent acquisition to obtain superiority, that many feel they need to obtain, due to external pressures from companies' marketing and production rates.

This 'over-consumption' style has been identified to have intensified in the global north after the end of the pandemic-era, due to an increase in social pressure from increased social media usage (Jiang & Ananthachari, 2023). Pressure to consume can be promoted by specific content styles, including 'haul' videos, the unpacking of items that creators have purchased, and 'try-on' videos, where creators wear their purchases with the creator often reviewing how the item looks whilst wearing. These then receive thousands of views, with the hashtag '#sheinhaul' having 888,300 posts and 2.6 billion views on the TikTok platform alone (Gan, 2021; Denton, 2023; TikTok, N.D.). Additionally, content creators use the popularity of the haul trend to create anticipation for haul posts by mentioning through posting pictures/videos of themselves online/in-person shopping, telling users to come back for their haul posts (Graves, 2023; Indita, 2023). Thus, the trend to post large hauls and try-on videos, alongside social media fashion trends, has normalised the idea of over-consumption for many people (Savage, 2022; Jiang & Anantachari, 2023). For many, the expectation to consistently acquire and be on-trend means that the concept of owning 'enough' is rejected, as consumers become fixated on meeting the consumption goals, of mass consumption, iterated to them on social media,

creating the idea that consistent consumption is a societal norm (Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; McNeill & Venter, 2019).

Therefore, this chapter will explore the presentation of consumers on TikTok, specifically looking at the behaviours of young people in the context of normalised over-consumption. Through the analysis of TikTok videos and comments, overarching themes were identified to describe over-consumption of fast and sustainable fashion in young people. This included: the normalisation of fashion over-consumption, due to consumption-promoting online content; the social pressures of social media; addictive shopping behaviours; and enabling behaviours and echo chambers that facilitate these traits.

4.2. The Normalisation of Over-consumption

Normalisation of Over-consumption: The Haul Video

In the research material a TikTok haul video consisting of 37 items from Shein was identified (Video- Shein Haul), with a large positive response to the content also noted, with 890,900 views, 37,100 likes, and 3751 comments on the video, on the date of data collection. The 'Shein Haul' video encourages users to purchase the products displayed in the video and to create this style of video, to share with their own followers and friends, seen through the 114.6 million posts on TikTok that relate the word of 'haul' (Denton, 2023; TikTok, 2024). Hence, haul videos have been identified to be a common occurrence on TikTok and have become a widespread phenomenon amongst young people and are often most associated with fast fashion brands such as Zara, Primark, Shein, BooHoo and Amazon (Maguire, 2022; Mcleod, 2022; Denton, 2023). Due to the consumption-focus of haul videos alongside the high and positive engagement levels of this content, haul videos have been named 'consumption-promoting' online content (Frick et al., 2020). Therefore, Frick et al. (2020) identified that online exposure to this style of content, paired with social norms, can promote the normalisation and participation in over-consumption.

Many of these videos concentrate on emphasising the money that was spent on the hauls or the quantity of clothes they bought, to gain audience, such as in the 'Shein Haul' video that used the text 'Huge Shein Haul 😍' as the initial onscreen text hook for the video (Maguire,

2022; Mcleod, 2022). The consistent promotion of how much has been purchased and the monetary value of these hauls, by online content creators who are both popular influencers and 'normal' young people, could increase the material aspiration levels of users. This is caused by the craving to match the product acquisition rates of the haul creators, further pushing and normalising over-consumption (Frick et al., 2020; Maguire, 2022). As more people participate, due to the social influence to match their desired aspiration levels, it further perpetuates the ideal that these large hauls are a social norm, which can promote a comparison and hence jealousy to match the creator within users who are shown this content, promoting over-consumption to social media users (Frick et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017; Rosely & Syed Ali, 2023). With 66% of young people, aged 14-27, identifying that they have bought more fashion since being a user of TikTok and Morning Consult, an American news and survey research tool site, finding that haul videos are the most likely style of content to cause consumption within young people in America, this style of content glamorizes a consumption-based lifestyle for many young people who use the TikTok platform and is clearly an influential-style of content (Meehan, 2021; Denton, 2023; Indita, 2023).

Normalisation of Over-consumption: The Seasonal Trend Video

Specifically, the seasonal trend video selected for research-use (Video- Cool Girl Trends 2024), contained the description of people as 'cool' if they were to buy and wear the 'cool' clothing in the specific seasonal time window of Spring. The 1,700,000 views, 100,600 likes, and 1379 shares, on this video highlights the large quantity of users who saw and positively interacted with this consumption-promoting post on TikTok, further illustrating the desire of TikTok users to be a part of the latest and increasing-frequency fashion trends (Frick et al., 2020). The increased regularity of trends has been named micro-trends, that are the new 'it' style for short periods of time, that are often linked with fashion brands that are quickly rotating their fashion drops, such as Shein that drop 700 to 1000 new styles daily, on their website (D'abreo, 2024). Thus, by using the word choice of 'cool' it creates an ideal and comparison of how a TikTok user should look for that season, compared to a users' current wardrobe, creating a desire to follow the herd behaviour of purchasing that season's micro-trend to gain social status to peers offline and online (Collins, 2019; Atkins, 2023; Pellegrino et al., 2022; D'abreo, 2024). The long-standing understanding of 'cool', alongside the increased regularity and popularity of trends, illustrates the large social pressure being placed on TikTok users to stay

on trend, as they compare to others such as peers and online influencers to see how much of these trends, they and others can achieve (Pellegrino et al., 2023).

Hence, this popular consumption-promoting online content, such as the content of 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' video, illustrates an increasing social pressure to participate in trend cycles. Pressure to participate in trend cycles, could also be identified in the comment section of the 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' video. The TikTok had numerous users posing questions to the creator of how and where they could purchase clothing items in the video, displaying that the video had created a sufficient drive and urgency for the user to immediately begin the process of investigating how they can achieve the 'it' wardrobe for Spring. Questioning comments included 'what brands are those leopard pants!' and 'Do you know where the red striped button up was from?' Pressure caused by social media is well-understood to cause impacts on consumption behaviours of society, and young people (Collins, 2019). This understanding is longstanding, with Bush and Gilbert in 2002 concluding that social media causes increased levels of materialism in consumers, in comparison to those who read newspapers (Pellegrino et al., 2022). Furthermore, in 2021, a survey conducted by UNiDAYS, an app promoting discounts for brands to students in the UK, found that 49% of 20 million survey participants identified that they made fashion purchases due to social media pressure, to keep up with the 'ins' and 'outs' of fashion trends (UNiDAYS, 2021; Atkins, 2023).

This competitive consumption style can be viewed in the comment sections of the 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' video, that showed multiple users asking questions about where they could purchase the clothing shown in the video. These questions were met with responses such as '(insert clothing item) that you NEED for your spring wardrobe', followed with a video response that depicted where you could purchase such clothing items. The word choice of 'NEED', alongside links to clothing items, can promote consumption as users desire the most on trend fashion items to feel a sense of belonging to the wider fashion community on TikTok (Kwayu et al., 2017). Creating competition, or a perception of such for consumers to purchase the products for users to get their hands on the desirable item, before they sell out (Park & Li, 2023).

Alternatively, the comment section of the video 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' could display a sense of community through over-consumption practises, this can be seen in the replies to questions

such as ‘I saw similar ones at Old Navy and H&M! Also could possibility get it thrifted 💘’. These comments could highlight the community that is created when conversing and exchanging knowledge to aid each other in the process of achieving seasonal and micro-trends to feel a sense of belonging to the community (Aichner et al., 2021). Creating a TikTok community around over-consumption, could further a users’ desire to imitate and be-alike to others in the fashion community, which was also identified on the ‘Shein Haul’ video where the haul inspired users to consume, seen through the comment ‘just done a shein order but now I feel I need to do another 😭🤣 so many cute things’.

TikTok Users’ Push Back to the Normalisation of Over-consumption

In response to content that promoted the normalisation of over-consumption, comments identified as negative and critiquing were observed, including on the ‘Cool Girl Trends 2024’. Shorter scrutinising comments, displaying a dislike for the consumption-promoting content, included ‘Brainrot! 💘’, ‘Hate 💔’ and ‘I’m so tired of this.’. These comments actively displayed a strong disliking to the trend’s content, with the emoji choice of hearts (💘, 💔) used to add a patronising tone to their comments. However, the lack of context to the comment could decrease the effectiveness and prevent other users being educated on sustainability, as they view the movement as partaking in negative and patronising comments (Haslem, 2022).

Additionally, further commenters particularly critiqued the promotion and normalisation of seasonal and micro-trends and were identified in the comments ‘Defining a “cool girl” only makes you look like a bully. And isn’t it always people with the opposite style of popular that actually stand out. Fast fashion can suck it.’ The negative description of the creator as a ‘bully’, defined as an aggressive person where they use an imbalance of power to intimidate or mistreat others, illustrates a strong disliking to the creator’s promotion of consuming for a seasonal Spring wardrobe and that they are wrongly enforcing this normalisation onto others (Smith & Monks, 2008). Further comments that displayed a push back to the normalisation of over-consumption included ‘cool girls participate in fashion and it’s fleeting trend cycles sustainably and mindfully, if at all 🙏’ and ‘cool girls wear what they already have cuz they don’t encourage micro trends and fast fashion 😌’. This push back against the normalisation to over-consumption is not a specific movement to TikTok and can be identified at a national

scale. Such as, in McKinsey (2020) research that found two thirds of participants would like to 'turn their backs on fast fashion' alongside the limiting of impacts from climate change as extremely important to participants following the COVID-19 era (Inman & Bartholomew, 2023).

However, the scrutinising comments could be identified to have minimal impact on other users on TikTok. Only 75 scrutinising comments were identified, out of the 552 comments on the 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' TikTok video. Alongside this, responses from the creator could be identified to mis-interpret the scrutinising comments displayed through the creator's responses of 'you can thrift all of these 🥹' and 'they are great inspo but no need to participate if it's not a style you resonate with 😊 🩶'. Particularly, the comment 'you can thrift all of these 🥹' continues to promote the over-consumption of fashion meaning the creator may view the over-consumption of fashion from 'sustainable' outlets as alternatively participating in sustainable consumption. This contradicts the points made by commenters, who were specifically concerned about the impact of consuming fleeting seasonal and micro trends rather than the outlet choice. Hence, a minimal impact could be identified from the push back style comments on consumption-promoting material.

Gamification of consumption

Once more, it has been identified that businesses use competition as a marketing technique to capitalize and further motivate consumers to be competitive in their consumption behaviours, driving over-consumption. On TikTok, a business using competition to promote consumption was identified and can be illustrated through the 3463 comments on a singular TikTok requesting and exchanging 'Shein codes', found in the comment section of the 'Shein Haul' video. The basis of these comments is to exchange a certain amount of Shein codes to unlock discounts and money to put towards Shein orders, a game-like feature. Shein's strategy, of using different numbers of code exchanges to achieve different levels of discounts, means consumers are competing to achieve the highest reward and discount for their Shein orders, creating superiority for those who achieve the higher levels and therefore winners and losers (Aggarwal et al., 2011; Park & Li, 2023; Hibbard, 2000).

Therefore, Shein has used the gamification of discounts by creating temporary large price deductions in their stock to promote aggressive consumption and urgency to consume

(Aggarwal et al., 2011; Park & Li, 2023). This unique feature to Shein, that has a relatively young consumer base, means that consumers paid a high amount of attention to this feature, shown through the high quantity of comments on TikTok trying to compete for Shein code exchanges (Carpenter et al., 1994; Park & Li, 2023). Through the popularity of this Shein game-like feature, to defeat other opponents to achieve the best discount, the users will be more likely to order and purchase more from their site. Thorpe (2023) identified that shoppers are twice as likely to purchase a product if it has been discounted by 20% (PayPal, 2024). Therefore, this game-feature marketing strategy, using competition between users, to increase sales, promoting irrational consumption, based on desire to get a discounted product deal (Park & Li, 2023). Hence, when the gamification of consumption and discounts is advertised on TikTok, named a fashion powerhouse and fashion hub, the site and users respond positively and in mass to this marketing strategy, as observed in the Shein code exchanges (D'abreo, 2024).

4.3. Addiction to Consuming

Over-consumption and Addiction

Furthermore, the normalisation of over-consumption was also viewed on TikTok through the identification of addictive traits and behaviours. Traits of addictive behaviours were identified in TikTok content including the video 'Need for Clothes 24/7', where the creator described that the idea of purchasing clothing was always on their mind. This video had a notable positive interaction from TikTok users that agreed with the relatability of the post, such as 'I'm constantly 'reinventing myself so year, I do need new clothes' and 'even though my wardrobe doors won't open without me absolutely yanking them because it's so full with clothes 😅'. Many users feel a consistent need to think about what and when they will get to purchase next, which can be likened to and indicate traits and behaviours of a shopping addiction.

In the context of traits of a shopping addiction on TikTok, users have highlighted multiple traits of a behavioural shopping addictions in the comment section of the 'Need for Clothes 24/7' video. User's impaired control can be identified in the comment 'I spent £500 in the Zara sale and I keep looking 😭 😭 😭', illustrated impairment through the comment 'I only have 4 pairs of pants 😩 😩', and risk use through the destress these continuous thoughts create for users

seen in the comment ‘it’s like not even okay cs [because] I’m 24/7 stressing about clothes. I NEED MORE CLOTHES.’ Therefore, illustrating that traits of a shopping addiction could be likened to consumers behaviour on TikTok. These traits linked to Fabar & O’Guinn’s work (1989) that defined a shopping addict as someone who cannot resist their need to purchase, even if the product is not ‘required’ (Griffiths, 2005; Wahyuningsih & Fatmawati, 2015). Additionally, behavioural addictions were identified by Chamberlian et al., (2016) to have impaired control, impairment, and risky use to achieve their behavioural addiction, all traits that were identified in the TikTok research material. Therefore, illustrating that traits of a shopping addiction could be likened to consumers behaviour on TikTok, through the content and comments that were collected.

Traits of a shopping addiction has been reasoned to be due to a person’s need to look fashionable and on trend in front of friends, peers and for online (Assael, 2001; Wahyuningsih & Fatmawati, 2015). In the comment section of ‘Need for Clothes 24/7’, the need to look good in front of peers can be seen through comments such as ‘no fr [for real], I be going anywhere with the same clothes…outfit repeater 👻 👻’ (the user will often be seen in the same clothing, which is seen as repeating an outfit), alongside the comment ‘I feel this. Quarantine I didn’t feel like buying anything cause [because] I wasn’t going anywhere but now’ (during the COVID-19 lockdowns the user did not feel as though they needed to purchase outfits, but due to getting back to regular life they feel a need again). These comments convey a perception that it is negative to re-wear outfits that they have been seen in before, with the term ‘outfit repeater’ being used as an insult against themselves, exemplifying the social pressure users feel to be seen in new clothing, such as at social gatherings, in front of peers. The social pressure experienced by social media users is illustrated by a UK study of 2000 participants. Bayley (2018) found 1 in 10 people would dispose of an item of clothing if them wearing the outfit has been posted online 3 times. For 1 in 5 study participants, this would mean throwing the item in the bin (Bayley, 2018). This illustrates the pressure that social media user’s feel to consistently be seen in different clothing, and the huge environmental impact of this experience.

Nevertheless, the increasing amount of haul videos on TikTok, seen through the 65.6 million posts under #haul on TikTok and Shein Haul video, alongside comments such as ‘I have so much clothes but I don’t wear any of them 😭’ (Video: Need for Clothes 24/7), illustrates the

need to showcase purchases in that unboxing phase and demonstrates that often the clothes that are being purchased are not being worn. Therefore, it can be inferred that the addictive feeling comes from the excitement and anticipation of receiving and unboxing the clothing, seen through the increase in haul content on TikTok (Frick et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017; Rosely & Syed Ali, 2023). Robert Sapolsky identified that when you are waiting to receive a parcel, the brain releases an anticipation dopamine, making the parcel transit wait one of the most exciting sections for a consumer (Rees, 2022). Additionally, the positive surprise of the parcel coming well-packaged and alike to how it appeared online, further stimulates the brain with positive dopamine when you first receive the parcel (Rees, 2022).

Consequently, the anticipation and positive dopamine that are released in the early stages of ordering, waiting, and receiving the parcel, could explain the traits of a shopping addiction that are identified on TikTok, which could be displayed in the comment 'I'm a compulsive buyer, okay?' (Video: Need for Clothes 24/7). The idea of being 'compulsive' has been identified by Lee et al. (2019) as an 'irresistible urge to perform a behaviour that may function to avoid or decrease a negative internal state' and considered a 'core impairment underpinning addictive behaviour'. This 'irresistible' urge to achieve the dopamine hit could promote irrational decisions in consumption behaviour, with additional research from Khan & Dhar (2006) and Wilcox et al., (2011) identifying that the larger amount of time spent on social media causes more irrational decisions to be made, in terms of consumption (Pellegrino et al., 2022). Thus, users are purchasing to receive their next dopamine hit, instead of a desire to wear and be seen in the clothing (TikTok, N.D; Rees, 2022).

Additionally, the normalisation of over-consumption can also be observed through the large quantity of enabling behaviour, seen predominantly through the comment sections, that continue to enable many users' traits of addictive behaviour and encourage them to unsustainably consume. Enabling behaviours have been described as the process of allowing and promoting people to continue an addictive behaviour (Huntington, N.D.). Therefore, these comments are important as enabling comments have been identified to be greatly influential in an individual's consumption decision (Frick et al., 2020). Examples of enabling comments that were identified on TikTok, consist of 'this is you sign to get more (clothes)' (Video: Need for Clothes 24/7) and 'but, hey! It was SALE 💉' (Video: Need for Clothes 24/7). Research by Ballew et al. (2015) found that these types of exchanges on social media, with peers and the

wider social media community, can influence multiple psychological factors, including personal norms and social norms (Frick et al., 2020). Hence, enabling comments could further iterate to users that over-consumption is a norm, or at least an acceptable faux pas. It is interesting to see how this faux pas is a norm, rather than becoming a taboo subject. This is due to the enabling content and comments illustrating a narrative that over-consumption is positive and should be strived for, whilst additionally promoting that the style of consumption that is attributed to addictive behaviour, should be a personal and social norm, that is inspired and further enabled by TikTok content and comments (Karlsson et al., 2004; Frick et al., 2020).

Over-consumption in Sustainable Fashion

Nevertheless, there is not a clear-cut dualism between enabling behaviours on fast fashion and sustainable fashion content. On a pool of TikTok content creators who are advocating for pro-environmental behaviours and sustainable fashion (Videos: Recreating by 'Sustainable' Fashion' and 'Difficulty Slowing Consumption'), enabling comments, that could further a narrative of over-consumption being the norm, were noted. Comments that were identified as enabling traits of a shopping addiction include 'I think we should go on a thrifting spree', 'because shopping is fun 😵' and 'the irony of seeing this TikTok & being introduced to another cute sustainable brand 😩'. Although the emojis used on the sustainable fashion TikTok display a level of embarrassment for their consumption behaviours, there is still a normalisation to the behaviour of over-consuming 'sustainable' fashion. The enabling and normalisation of over-consuming 'sustainable' fashion, could be attributed to the accepted social norm of over-consumption, across the fashion industry (Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; McNeill & Venter, 2019).

In the context of the normalisation of sustainable fashion consumption, misconception, and confusion on what over-consumption was and the effects of it, were identified. The confusion about over-consumption can be seen through comments such as 'question tho: how is over-consumption bad if it's secondhand? It's not generating any new waste?', 'I thought thrifting every weekend was sustainable' and 'I guess but over-consuming from the thrift stores seems to be solving the problem. Like using the habits for something good'. As noted by the TikTok users, the increase in popularity of 'sustainable' fashion and movement away from fast fashion, is beneficial for the environment causing a reduction in demand for new products and

therefore reduces the fashion industry's environmental footprint (Leuven, 2024). Nevertheless, specifically over-consuming from thrift or second-hand mimics the fast fashion cycle increasing the disposability of items (Hietala, 2024; Leuven, 2024). Particularly this could create the illusion to fast fashion consumers that second-hand outlets are 'glorified dumpsters', meaning they can consume as much as they desire from fast fashion outlets as long as, when they are bored or done with the items, they donate them to second-hand stores, such as Vintage or Charity outlets (Hietala, 2024; Leuven, 2024). Further promoting the over-consumption of fashion. Additionally, second-hand shops, such as charity and vintage store and online outlets, such as Depop and Vinted, are low in cost promoting over-consumption to purchase 'bargains', increasing the disposability of the item as mass consumption occurs of items that are stereotypically viewed as 'dirty' by wider society (Cuc & Tripa, 2014). The disposability of fashion can be exemplified through textile accounting for 5% of landfill space globally (Cuc & Tripa, 2014). Therefore, confusion of sustainable consumption from second-hand outlets can be identified on TikTok, illustrating wider normalisation of over-consumption in fashion that has not been removed from the sustainability narrative.

Echo-Chambers

From the posting of this content on TikTok, accompanied with the complex and personalised algorithmic technology, this can promote the creation of homogeneous echo chambers, on the TikTok site (Jiang et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2023). An example of an echo chamber surrounding a post is the 'Shein Haul' video, this video had no negative comments noted out of the 3751 comments on the video. The lack of negative comments could illustrate that the video has not reached a heterogenous cross section of the TikTok site's users, this is due to the increasing number of people who are educated on and criticize Shein and its ethical practises (Bangalore, 2023). The Morning Consult survey found that young consumers who would consider making a purchase from Shein had fallen by 7% between 2022 and 2023, reasoned to be due to ethical concerns of the brand (Bangalore, 2023).

Echo chambers, also known as filter bubbles, often lead users to become connected to other like-minded people, creating online communities based on interest. However, when these communities are identified by social media algorithms, an over-exposure of the specific type of content occurs (Onitiu, 2022; Gao et al., 2023). This can create an echo chamber that is specific to the normalisation of consumption behaviour, pushing the large hauls and enabling

behaviour consistently onto the *For You Page* of users, such as the 'Shein Haul' video. In an interview by Shulz (2023) with Alexandra Hildreth, a fashion journalist and commentator, Alexandra identified that it is easy to identify a person's TikTok screen time and who they follow on TikTok by the outfit they wear, as people's personal style are becoming based on their TikTok algorithm's echo chamber. This understanding, from Shulz and Hildreth (2023) illustrates not only the impact TikTok is having on personal style, but also how prominent echo chambers are on the TikTok site. However, users of TikTok, seemed to have a level of awareness of the creation of these echo chambers, seen through the 'commenting to stay on Shein Tok!' (Video: 'Shein Haul'), where the user understands their positive interaction and engagement with posts will allow them to continue seeing this style of post. But, also, showing that TikTok users would prefer and like to be exposed, on their *For You Pages*, to the fashion community and consumption-promoting echo chambers.

4.4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the wider normalisation of over-consumption in society was identified in the research material collected from the TikTok platform, in both the research material on sustainable and fast fashion TikTok content (Savage, 2022; Jiang & Anantachari, 2023). This normalisation of over-consumption in both spaces of fast and sustainable fashion creates difficulties for TikTok users identifying what is an acceptable or sensible rate of consumption and whether they are over-consuming. On TikTok, this was seen through traits of addictive behaviour, that highlighted impulsivity, impairment, and risky use, alongside trends such as large haul videos, positive interactions with micro-trend videos, and enabling behaviours, meaning that these certain TikTok communities were considered to meet the researcher's definition of over-consumption. However, the complex navigation of social pressures caused by social media, consumption-promoting online content, marketing strategies, companies' overproduction, and algorithmic echo chambers, that facilitate a normalisation of over-consumption for TikTok users, should not be ignored. These external factors have impacted how consumption behaviours occur and are understood. A minority of smaller communities displaying a push back to the normalisation of over-consumption was identified on the site; however, their impact on the community was minimal due to the majority or content creators not interacting with these critiquing comments.

Additionally, contrary to research in the area, the research highlighted that consumers were participating in these trends, for reasons beyond showing superiority by wearing the 'right' things (Burns, 2019). Instead, the TikTok videos and comments may illustrate that consumption was the end goal for many users, due to the social superiority that is gained from owning an extensive number of things. Social superiority is gained through owning things due to increasing desires to aspire to social media lifestyles, such as those who can make social media their primary job (Mayer, 2023). With 57% of young people interested in careers as social media influencers, the popularity and consistency of extensive and expensive 'haul' videos highlights a trend of users consuming to show off they can participate in large purchasing orders. Hence, through overconsuming they can post alike to influencers who show extensive PR unboxing, large hauls made from their own purchasing or sent to them from businesses for collaborative posts. Thus, for young people there is both social and economic superiority to be gained through showing one's ability to overconsume on TikTok, making overconsumption an increasing goal to participate in.

Moreover, as mass overconsumption has become a status symbol across TikTok, each individual possession is arguably becoming increasingly valued not only for their individual appeal but for their role in enabling over-consumption. This elevates the value of the possession, as it is appreciated as part of a larger cycle of overconsumption.

Predominantly, this led to the over-consumption of lower cost fast fashion, seen through the popularity of overconsuming from the notoriously low-cost Shein, observed in the Shein Haul trend. Additionally, similarly to fast fashion, the over-consumption of sustainable fashion was of similarly low cost, noticed to be from charity shops and online-second hand sites (i.e. Vinted, Depop). The low cost of these items can often perpetuate over-consumption, as users can purchase more items for less money. Often this had led to the discussion that the low cost increases the disposability of items as they are seen to be 'worth less'; however, this is an interesting contrast to how these low-cost clothing items are shown off on social media and used to gain superiority. This contrasting dynamic of low-monetary worth but ability to gain superiority from showing your ability to purchase it, highlights how each clothing item is no longer viewed as merely an acquisition but increasingly as a possession of status. The purchasing of each clothing item signals their ability to participate in the wider system of overconsumption.

Therefore, on a site named a fashion hub and powerhouse of the 21st century, with a largely young user population, TikTok users are identified as participating in over-consumption to own as many things as possible, rejecting the idea of owning 'enough' (D'abreo, 2024; Collins, 2019; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; McNeill & Venter, 2019).

Hence, the conversations occurring on the topic of over-consumption behaviour, including how to transition away from normalising and partaking in over-consumption for young people, should be re-evaluated with this research's outcome on over-consumption culture. The research material depicted that the purchasing of clothing was not to show-off specific outfits, to adorn the body, but instead often simply purchased to show-off the quantity of goods and possessions that have been acquired. Therefore, a contrary finding to current research was identified in the research material. With prior research depicting young people as over-consuming to own the 'right' things to gain superiority in society, instead this research displays that mass owning is more beneficial and the desire for gaining superiority in the TikTok community (Burns, 2019).

Chapter 5: What methods of activism do young people adopt on TikTok?

5.1. Introduction

The rise of digital activism, through recent decades, has changed the landscape of activism, and created significant activist movements (Ozkula, 2021). This includes the Black Lives Matter online movement, in 2020, that was to raise awareness on the racism still occurring globally after the death of George Floyd. The movement was used to educate and to spread information on the organisation of global in-person protests. The scale of this movement can be seen through the 48 million uses of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter across social media sites from the 26th of May to the 7th of June 2020, alongside the 12 billion views of this hashtag on TikTok (University of Sussex, 2022). Additionally, the 'Me Too' movement, in 2017, that hoped to create a space for conversations and support for sexual assault survivors, showed the potential scale of digital activism. It was reported by Facebook that within 24 hours of a viral tweet about the movement, 4.7 million people globally had engaged with the #MeToo movement, with 12 million posts, comments and reactions on Facebook (Khomami, 2017; University of Sussex, 2022). Particularly, in the context of sustainable fashion, 50% of survey respondents identified that they rely upon social media to help them make informed decisions on the 'sustainability' of both product and companies, when purchasing (Barakat et al., 2023). Therefore, digital activism is a main driver for the increase of young people's participation in global activism and a key area to consider within drives to improve the sustainability of consumption amongst young people (Teixeira, 2024; Carnegie, 2022).

Current academia has often focused on 'traditional' iconic and large-scale activism; however, as identified by Horton and Kraftl (2009) this traditional definition of activism excludes the everyday implicit activism that occurs across society. Horton & Kraftl, in their 2009 work, defined implicit activism as often 'modest' actions that required 'not too much fuss' and no commitment to an activist identity. Additional work, such as Martin et al. (2007), also critiqued the boundaries of traditional activism. In this work, they considered how activism that included actions and participation that has smaller reach, that were 'normally considered too insignificant to count as activism and yet do create progressive change', should be seen as activism. The actions creating implicit activism have been observed to create effects in a person's community, both in their offline and online communities, to create political impact and change (Martin et al., 2007). Thus, although social media lacks the 'centralised

organisation' of traditional activism, social media is too pushing the boundaries of what is seen as 'activism' (Bennett, 2003; Hautea et al., 2021). Hence, the identification of everyday implicit activism has opened the definition of activism to encompass that 'participation', such as the sharing of a political or informational tweet, on Twitter, should be observed as digital activism (Adi & Miah, 2011; Ozkula, 2021).

Current academic research depicts that activism and political expression is consistent across different social media platforms; however, it is becoming increasingly identified that each individual social media platform has a different style of culture that promotes different activism styles (Bode & Vraga, 2018; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2023). TikTok has become a vital space for digital activism, for young people, due to its large cultural impact and normalisation of creative approaches to digital activism (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2023). Hence, this has created a platform where digital activism, that young people are most concerned about, is presented in a creatively rich and engaging way, with Price (2019) identifying that TikTok activists are 'changing the world in 15 seconds' (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2019; Lierat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2021; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2023). Previously known as a 'jokey' platform that had a significant amount of content that included lip syncing videos, trending dance and 'memes', TikTok is reimagining what digital activism is (Price, 2019).

'Communities of activism', defined in this research as places where TikTok users were positively partaking in digital activism in a shared space, such as a video comment section, were identified in the TikTok research material, with different creators taking different approaches to what activism is. Historically, the dominant understanding of 'political expression' and 'activism' was based upon work such as Schudson (1998), that identified a 'good citizen' as those who are a 'private, rational 'informed citizen' (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2023). Therefore, through this ideal, expression was desired to be serious in nature, based upon discussing facts and confirmed information (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2023). However, Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick (2023) identified that the political expression and activism observed on TikTok was a drastic contrast to Schudson (1998) definition of political activism. Instead, the political expression on TikTok was found to be routed in emotion, described by Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick (2023) as being 'humoristic or cynical, colourful, often

over-the-top, and infused with popular culture references' (Barbalet, 1998; Klere & Wellgrenenen, 2017).

Therefore, this chapter will explore activist posts on TikTok, investigating, through the research material, the styles of activism that were posted on TikTok alongside examining the response of users to the TikTok content. Through the analysis of the TikTok videos and comments, themes were identified; this included the use of 'traditional', comedic and frustrated with hints of blame activism posts, that will be examined alongside relevant TikTok user's responses, alongside the desensitisation to activist posts.

5.2. Traditional Activism

Educational Videos

Communities of activism were noted across the TikTok research material, this took many forms across the site. One of the most positively received styles of activism, from the TikTok research material, was noted to be a more 'traditional' approach to activism, that was relaxed, conversational, informative style videos, this style of video can be exemplified in the TikTok 'How to Shop Sustainably'. In this video a mid-20s male discusses, in a 2 minute and 38 second video, five ways a person could shop more sustainably. The How-To guide includes the points '1. Buy less and thrift 2. Buy from ethical- do your research, check for quality, 3. Take better care of your clothes. 4.Resell or donate. 5. Political Research'. The 'How to Shop Sustainably' post was a part of a video series, that spoke about 'sustainability' in the fashion industry.

Additionally, the creator began the post by stating 'it becomes painfully obvious that under a capitalist society it is nearly impossible to shop sustainably. And, yeah, it's super discouraging, so here's five things that you personally can do to be a more ethical shopper'. Many activists have claimed their calls for mobilization, to facilitate action for their causes, loses efficiency when using guilt and blame to push a specific narrative for activism (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). Instead, Ojala's (2012) study of young people found that youth activists, in the global north, often found the use of 'hope' by pushing a 'collective' approach to be more beneficial to the climate change movement (Wettergren, 2009; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). The creation of hope by a 'collective approach' aims to show how mobilising communities can aid finding

solutions, to drive more people to partake in the activism. (Wettergren, 2009; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). Therefore, by establishing the understanding tone and a 'collective approach' to sustainability at the start of the video, it promoted a positive interaction between different commenters and the creator, with users showing appreciation for the post, illustrating an effectiveness to this activism. A comment displaying appreciation for the post included 'this was a very important, powerful, and well thought out response. Appreciated this'.

Also, as identified by Salam & Alanadoly (2021) creators who use hope and a collective approach to activism can inspire a sense of community (Barakat et al., 2023). This sense of community can be identified by users exchanging knowledge and could indicate an increase in desire to partake in the ethical consumption discussed in the content of the video. This is illustrated in comments such as 'what brands are more ethical?' and 'does anyone know if h&m is greener or am I being greenwashed by them?' These comments were then followed up by comments from other users creating positive discussions.

Additionally, commenters valued the socio-economic understanding-perspective taken by the creator, conveyed through comments such as 'between being plus size and having low income is not easy buying clothes!! Some people don't get it!! 😬 Thank you!!! New sub [subscriber/follower] here!!' and 'thank u for mentioning the lack of size inclusivity!!! it's hard to shop sustainable when ur plus size as most sustainable brands don't cater to plus'. The comment 'New sub [subscriber/follower] here!!' shows that the hopeful approach to activism, taken by the creator, promotes new members of the community to feel comfortable in engaging with this style of activism content, alternatively to immobilizing communities with the collective burden of guilt (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Norgaard, 2011). By showing understanding to this community, it removed a sense of blame away from consumers who found the socio-economic concerns of purchasing sustainably a deterrent to being involved in the activism (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Norgaard, 2011). Hence, another significant benefit to this video is the relatability of the post, meaning it gained attention by groups who found the socio-economic concerns relevant and important to them, increasing the interactions with the post (Kennedy, 2020; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023).

Authenticity in Videos

The 'Company Deinfluencing and Advertising' TikTok post, also used a traditional approach to activism, by educating users on specific companies' ethical and sustainability policies, in a relaxed, sit-down style video. Differently to the 'How to Shop Sustainably' post, the 'Company Deinfluencing and Advertising' post took a more factual approach to activism, and therefore also fit the description of the traditional 'good citizen' activist, producing positive engagement with the factual information of the video. In the TikTok video, the creator provided information about 5 fast fashion brands: Urban Outfitters, Adidas, Brandy Melville and Shein. The video made short statements on each brand, concentrating on the social and ethical practises of the companies. This included statements such as: 'their (Urban Outfitter's) CEO Richard Hayne donates to anti LGBT charities, and opposed gay marriage and abortion rights', 'Adidas they're set to make 426 million dollars on their World Cup Official Kit, but they owe garment workers 11.7 million dollars in unpaid wages' and 'there's reports from (Brandy Melville) employees that they have been fired for over cutting their hair and gaining weight…and apparently your appearance determines how much you're going to get paid'. The statistics and reports stated in the video were not referenced.

The stating of ethical information about companies, observed in the 'Company Deinfluencing and Advertising TikTok' is a take on the 'Deinfluencing' trend, that provides user-led information to discourage TikTok users from 'overhyped' TikTok trends and obtaining an excess of products that they do not need (Chockrane, 2023). Specifically in this video the creator was a company who markets themselves as selling sustainable products, deinfluencing against fast fashion brands. With the 'Deinfluencing' hashtag having over 1 billion views on TikTok, this viral trend is becoming increasingly popular to create (Chockrane, 2023). Hence, this video was noted as being one of the companies most popular TikTok posts, on the date of data collection (1st April 2024). Additionally, due to the popularity of the post, the video was noted to reach outside of the activists' communities, with commenters expressing surprise to the content of the video, including 'Brandy Melville one had me shook', 'omg I had no idea about BooHoo' and 'No not urban'. The video reaching outside of the activist demographic could be attributed to the 'traditional' educative approach taken to activism, alongside the use of the popular 'Deinfluencing trend'. Young people have been identified to be eager for learning opportunities and with 75% of users feeling educated after spending

time on TikTok, it could be identified that communities of young people are highly engaged with creatively rich informative videos on TikTok (Hunterlodge, 2023; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick, 2023). Additionally, the attractiveness of young people being able to learn directly from other young people, with most authors of educational content on TikTok under the age of 34, activists and users have a unique opportunity to explore educating and learning from other young people (Fiallos et al., 2021).

Authenticity as Marketing

However, the 'Deinfluencing' trend's use by influencers and companies has been called into question as to whether use of the trend is a 'savvy marketing ploy', by using the trend and its platform for marketing benefits (Chokrane, 2023). For example, the 'Company Deinfluencing and Advertising' video, after discussing the ethical concerns of the 5 brands, discussed the ethical benefits and the advertisement of their own 'sustainable brand'. Quotes from the video included 'but to end on a positive influence, I will share a sustainable brand that do care about people and do care about the planet…So, a positive sustainable alternative to all of the fast fashion brands that are harming the planet and people'. Additionally, they promoted the brand through the comment section, 'anyone looking for sustainable but affordable brand (similar prices to boohoo, plt, etc) try @ (tag of alternative brand name) 🥹', with the creator responding 'try *own brand name*!!''. The advertisement decreased the effectiveness of the companies educating, as users concentrated on the marketing, finding it frustrating and hypocritical that the information had been used to boost their own brand, seen through comments 'but you're still encouraging waste & consumerism through producing ranges etc', 'ah yes, influence us by deinfluencing us (say other brand are bad but yours is good 👍)' and 'ah… an advert'. The use of this trend in an advertising manner, goes against the increased transparency and credibility created by the 'deinfluencing' trend, therefore decreasing the educational benefit of the TikTok video and content (Chokrane, 2023; Keyser, 2024).

5.3. Activism Routed in Emotions

Humour and Activism

An additional style of activism, that was noted to have positive interactions, was activism through comedy, observed in the 'Difficulty Slowing Consumption' video. In this TikTok video, the creator used a viral comedy TikTok sound, to illustrate that slowing their consumption, rather than 'quitting fast fashion', was the 'hardest part' for the creator to achieve 'a more sustainable wardrobe'. The sound accompanying this video was a viral sound, that has 185,400 posts on TikTok, the sound is a humorous trend with fighting and crowd cheering sounds. This style of video illustrates a movement away from the widely accepted idea of 'political' expression, with works such as Schudson (1998) describing a 'seriousness' needed in the process of political expression and activism, a direct contradiction to the 'jokey' activism that is becoming increasingly accepted on TikTok (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick 2023). As discussed in Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick's 2023 work, TikTok invites young people to communicate their political opinions and activism through means that is engaging to them (Price, 2019; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick 2023). Humour and comedy play a pivotal part of TikTok's culture, meaning the use of viral 'memes' to discuss serious topics is common-place on the TikTok platform (Price, 2019; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick 2023; Matamoros-Fernandez, 2023).

Price (2019) identified that topics across the site were being discussed in this manner, such as climate change and socio-economic disparities, and were often popular and positively interacted with. In response to this video, approximately half of the comments were commenting on the reliability of the post, including comments such as 'LITERALLY', 'THIS', 'relatable' and 'ME', exemplifying the positive engagement with this comedic activism. Additionally, due to the comical tone of the video, a positive environment for people to interact and create a community of exchanging knowledge, was created. Exemplified through the questions on the video including 'I need tips on how to slow my consumption!! I thrift so often it's like my fave hobby but I always get something', this was followed by an exchange of knowledge, to show their tips to slow consumption, such as 'I always think about how much I'm going to regret buying something and be embarrassed about my weak will ☠'. Humour has been identified to provide people with a 'safe entry' into 'taboo topics', this is done by

creating a more energetic and optimistic approach to social change and using the memorability of comical content over more 'serious' activist posts (Reason, 2022).

Moreover, the style of sustainable fashion activism, alike to the 'Difficulty Slowing Consumption', that used the tone of an unserious and comical sound to convey a message was also noted in the 'Frustration with a Survey Result' TikTok. In this post the creator, who is a former Love Island (an ITV dating show) contestant, used the sound 'I don't think I can control myself', mimed by an early-20s male, in a disappointed acting style. The overlayed text reads 'Consumer survey said these are the top 5 'sustainable brands': H&M, Nike, Primark, M&S, Amazon'. However, unalike to the 'Difficulty Slowing Consumption' TikTok, the 'Frustration with a Survey Result' video was met with a negative tone of comments, despite the use of humour in their content. The negative tone of comments concentrated on users' making assumptions or stating that the creator of the video does not live a 'sustainable' life, and therefore should not comment on 'sustainability' of others. Comments noted to make such observation including 'and how did u get to go to love island, a plane… not very good for the planet😩', 'embarrassing hahaha, your replies don't even make a point. you've got no defence for using something sponsored by fast fashion (reference to the creator's time on Love Island) to get famous' and 'but do you not actively interact with you [your] LI [Love Island] mates when they get partnership and do ISawItFirst and Primark ads? 😩'. In the face of negativity, the creator stated that 'this video may be misconstrued it merely highlights that these brands are lying to us and it's working but its THEM who need to be held responsible. It is not the consumers fault'. Nevertheless, the defensive nature, that is the critiquing of other's sustainability, could convey that users felt under-attack and a need to defend themselves by retaliating to the creators' and other commenters' disappointment. This reaction could have been provoked as users 'by mistake' came across this video when searching about previous Love Islanders and could be seen as unexpected from a previous contestant due to the fast fashion history of the show (Wadham, 2021; Soen, 2023). The fast fashion history of the popular ITV show can be seen through its previous sponsorships by the fast fashion brand 'ISawItFirst', before being sponsored by eBay in recent years, alongside numerous previous contestants who have gone on to work with fast fashion brands such as Pretty Little Thing and Boohoo (Wadham, 2021; Soen, 2023). Whilst additionally highlighting that the use of comedy and humour may not continuously provide a positive engagement and entry into activism.

The negativity in the comment sections, that initiated the critiquing negative tone of comment, could be due to comments such as 'are they [survey respondents]….okay?' (Video: Frustration with a Survey Result), 'Imaging [Imagine] not having the mental capacity to understand the point from that comment 😂 😂 😂' (Video: Frustration with a Survey Result) and 'his replies make perfect sense, it's just all the PLT [Pretty Little Thing] girlies getting mad in the comments bc [because] they don't wanna [want to] be held responsible lol [laughing out loud]' (Video: Campaign Against Pretty Little Thing). These comments were from an array of videos that were critiquing the intelligence of users who did not understand or showed a disliking to the sustainable fashion video content and comments. These conversations are unproductive and patronising for both parties, as it alienates people from the political movement, whilst also normalising the marginalization of people who are believed to be not educated enough or having the correct life experiences to comment (Haslem, 2022). Therefore, creating instances where humorous activist content may not produce positive engagement with the TikTok community.

Frustration Activism

Within research, this frustration and anger has been consistently identified as a pivotal driver for partaking in activism, hence why frustration may be a theme in activist posts across the TikTok platform (Carnegie, 2022; Niranjan, 2023). An example of this 'frustration' activism includes the 'Campaign Against Pretty Little Thing' TikTok video. This video compared Pretty Little Thing's Instagram posts and a recent campaign against Prettly Little Thing, using the viral TikTok sound 'this is a work of art, this is bullsh*t'. Hence, in conjunction with this sound the creator mimed that photos from Pretty Little Thing's Instgram were 'bullsh*t', compared to photos from a recent protest, that happened against Pretty Little Thing's ethical and environmental policies, naming these photos 'as a work of art'. Photos of the protest showed campaign signs, on these signs included the writing 'Boohoo CEO net worth: 1.42 billion. Leicester garment worker: £3.50', 'Pretty Little THIEVES (PAY YOUR WORKERS)', and 'PLT's Hottest Looks for 2022: heat waves, intense draughts, loss of species, micro-plastics, fossil fuels, rising sea levels, burning landfills, wildfires'. The main content of this video, and campaign signs, placed the blame and frustration of ethical and environmental issues, caused by Pretty Little Thing, onto the company and associated influencers who support and work with the brand, including Molly Mae Hague, a popular influencer and ex-creative direction of

Pretty Little Thing (Glynn, 2023). The placing of blame onto specific groups, closely links to the emotion of anger and the hope to place sufficient guilt onto the parties involved, to hopefully stop them from consuming from fast fashion brands such as Pretty Little Thing (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). The desire to create guilt for Pretty Little Thing and associated influencers can be seen through the creator's comments, such as 'as an influencer/human being she (Molly Mae Hague) should want nothing to do with a brand that exploits other people in the way PLT (Pretty Little Thing) does' and 'can we stop playing the 'but so and so is worse game' I thought we learnt about accountability in 2021…..'. Specifically, the word choice of 'human being' conveys the creator has a disbelief for the moral compasses of people who purchase, associate and support the brand, which was furthered by comments from users' such as 'Wow the DENSE people in these comments. Anyone with morals would NOT support let alone WORK with PLT', 'Just to make it clear to people, Molly is not blind to all of this and never has been, putting ur fingers in ur ears makes u just as bad as the rest' and 'she earns millions FROM modern day slavery. There's no excuse'. These comments illustrate the frustration and emotion many activists feel on the topic, and how heated 'blame' conflicts become in the comments.

The style of activism that places blame and guilt onto specific groups, has been identified to be inefficient in invoking a positive and understanding response from young people, this was observed through the consistent and predominant negative tone in the comment section. Negativity that was noted from the comment section of this post included '@tag (of another user) why do these keep coming up on my fyp [*For You Page*] 🤨 lemme [let me] buy my 2p tops in peace' and 'I mean I don't. agree with it but tbh [to be honest] in [I am] still gonna buy a £7 bodysuit ngl [not going to lie]' and 'my store picks are bershka, pull n [and] bear, and h&m ion [I do not] care how many kids work for free to sustain the store or some bullsh*t, imma [I am going to] stop there'. These comments demonstrated that although viewers are aware and educated about sustainability and the ethical concerns about the fast fashion industry, they actively choose to ignore these concerns to continue purchasing from these brands. Particularly, the response of these comments on the 'Campaign Against Pretty Little Thing' video may be due to the blame placed on specific parties in the video. Although not initially placing blame onto consumers, the placement of blame onto a well-known and loved influencer and brand, for young people, can create a collection of emotions. These emotions

include a feeling of guilt, and hopelessness, alongside the known 'fear' of climate change, meaning for many these emotions can present as denial and defensive avoidance (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Drury, 2021). Alongside, the humorous culture of TikTok can mean comments become a mixture of humour and denial, showing a desensitisation to fast fashion industry practices (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Matamoros-Fernandez, 2023).

5.4. Desensitization to Activism

The desensitisation to fast fashion ethical practises could be identified in the research observed in both the comment sections and the content of TikTok videos. A TikTok video that displayed this desensitisation to fast fashion practices included the 'Hurry Shein Workers' video. The main content of the video was using a greenscreen edited video, to complain about the extended length of time child workers, at Shein, were taking to send a parcel to the creator, understood by the onscreen writing 'me going to China to see what's taking those Shein kids so long to send my order'. The video followed a woman who had been edited into different places, such as an airport, on a plane, following the process of vising a Shein factory in 'China'. The video, posted on the 13th of April 2024, had amounted over 46,400 shares, 647,400 views, and 66,900 likes, in the 9 days before data collection of the video, showing popularity and high engagement with the video. The popularity of the post was also displayed in the comment section, the video was met with comments of further desensitised 'humour', including 'they better get working sew the fabric faster maybe 💀', '@tag (of another user) those kids better hurry up you've been waiting ages😏😂', and 'chop chop temu workers 😭'. Furthermore, some commenters showed their knowledge of ethical practises, but still chose to participate in positive commenting, and included 'GIRL, screaming, crying, throwing up. 😂😂😂😂😂', 'I don't support Shein but this is so funny😭' and 'Feels so wrong to laugh lmao😭😭😭😭'.

The use of humour to converse on serious topics has been identified to be at the centre of TikTok culture, with Matamoros-Fernandez (2023) identifying that the culture of humour is consistent across the site. The American Academy of Paediatrics identified that this emotional desensitisation occurs when there is a continued high frequency of exposure to a scenario, hence people experience 'compassion fatigue'. Compassion fatigue is defined as a person who

is experiencing a limited capability to feel compassion and empathise to others (Pittaro, 2019; Coombe, 2020). Emotional desensitisation, caused by compassion fatigue, could be a main driver for the humour identified, that is at the Shein workers' expense, due to the increased interest and activism taken into 'sustainability' through the COVID-19 era causing a desensitisation to the ethical practises of Shein (Google Trends, 2021; Degli et al., 2021; Okur et al., 2023). Alternatively, Crew (2008) highlighted that desensitisation could also be caused by moral proximity theory, that promotes an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach to empathy, due to technological advancements (Barnett et al., 2005). Hence, moral proximity theory identifies that there is a lack of responsibility and connection to others, such as those experiencing the ethical practises of fast fashion companies (Crew, 2008; Barnett et al., 2005; Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Lui et al., 2019). Therefore, the 'Hurry Shein Workers' video, alongside comments, highlighted the reliability of this scenario for a proportion of the TikTok population. However, it also demonstrates how consumers may 'ignore' ethical and environmental concerns to consume from popular brands, showing a level of desensitisation caused by intertwining reasons such as humour culture of TikTok, emotional desensitisation, compassion fatigue, and moral proximity theory.

Therefore, this desensitisation to activism displays an active community on TikTok who lack empathy or a desire to be involved with the sustainable fashion movement. These communities of TikTok users who actively display a desire to not be involved in sustainable fashion movement are a direct comparison to the communities who were identified to be activists and striving for substantial change across the fashion industry. However, these large communities who have pushed back to the sustainable fashion movement, partook in unproductive conversations, and displayed desensitisation to fast fashion ethical practise, could illustrate that there is a smaller community of activists who are battling this wider community on the TikTok.

5.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, a range of activist posts and communities were noted across the research material TikTok, with the posts using an array of activism styles to discuss the fast fashion industry and sustainable fashion. Notable, in the research material, the use of more

‘traditional’ activism, as identified by Schudson (1998) as requiring a level of seriousness, was positively received and engaged with by TikTok users, shown through the ‘How to Shop Sustainably’ TikTok. Similarly, a positive interaction and engagement was noted with the comedic content on TikTok, this could be due to the culture of TikTok, that heavily relies on humour (Price, 2019; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchick 2023; Matamoros-Fernandez, 2023). Therefore, the use of comedic and relaxed ‘traditional’ activism, could be identified to provide significant mechanism for educating young people, on topics such as the sustainable fashion movement, providing a source for influencers and businesses to harness TikTok activism.

However, activism that was noted to include hints of blame, on consumers or influencers, had large negative reactions by users, with a visible push back from TikTok users to this style of activism. Negativity was noted in TikTok videos despite the blaming being encompassed in conventionally attractive videos, such as humorous and comedic TikTok videos. The negative reaction created unproductive conversation in the comments, TikTok users would often dispute between each other in comments about the ‘sustainability’ of creators or by using humour to convey that they did not care about the ethical practises in the fast fashion industry. These interactions could further marginalize groups from being involved with and interacting with the sustainable fashion movement (Haslem, 2022).

Therefore, although communities of activism were noted, in the research material, the negative responses from TikTok users to specific styles of activism, due to the emotions attached to sustainable fashion activism, such as fear and frustration, and the desensitization to ethical practises, through compassion fatigue and the moral proximity theory, drastically reduced the effectiveness of these posts (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Drury, 2021; Pittaro, 2019; Coombe, 2020; Crew, 2008; Barnett et al., 2005). Therefore, for businesses, corporations, and influencers, to harness digital activism, a promotion of positive engagement without unproductive conversations, needs to be created for effective activism.

Chapter 6: Does addressing young people's consumption and activism through a lens of 'community' and 'competition' complicate the 'saviour' and 'villain' binary?

6.1. Introduction

Within the TikTok research material, interestingly themes of community and competition were consistently identified and were observed to be heavily intertwined in effecting young people's consumption behaviours alongside their involvement and interaction with activism, throughout discussion of Research Question 1 and 2. Therefore, this heavy intertwining and multiple identifications of community and competitions creating great effects on young people's behaviour, was deemed important in informing the portrayal of young in reality and providing context as to why these realities may occur.

An online community, alternatively known as a virtual community, has not had a consistent definition across academia (Watts & Strogarts, 1998; Li et al., 2018). Combining both Balaubramanian & Mahajan (2001) and Ridings et al., (2002) understanding of online communities the term can be defined as a space where users' have a well-understood focus, such as an objective (i.e. sustainability, political motivation), identity (i.e. lifestyle choice, identity), or shared interests (i.e. a hobby), and create 'small worlds', a pocket of inter-connected users, who can become dedicated to their communities focus (Watts & Strogarts, 1998; Li et al., 2018; Aichner et al., 2021). On TikTok, communities often form around a specific interest, hobby, or object, have consistently been identified, and include MoneyTok, a space for conversations of financial advice, and BookTok, for users for have an interest in reading, alongside a plethora of other communities (Hynes, 2024).

Moreover, online communities were identified to have a virtual 'place' were exchanges of information, thoughts and opinions occurred, this 'virtual place' was identified by Ridings et al., (2002) to include a 'chatroom, bulletin board, or listerv e-mail program'; however, with technological advancements, social media, such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, have become pivotal platforms for the 'virtual place' of online communities (Aichner et al., 2021). The pivotal role of social media in the development of communities can be illustrated through Kietzmann's et al., (2011) work where social media was described as a 'honeycomb' of identity, conversations, sharing, relationships, reputations, and groups (Aichner et al.,

2021). Specifically, on TikTok to further the 'virtual place', the app has been identified to create homogeneous echo chambers, using a complex and personalised algorithmic technology on the site, which can further perpetuate users into communities (Jiang et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2023).

In addition to the need for a virtual place for online communities to thrive, these communities have also been observed to develop around 'influential leaders'. An 'influential leader' can be defined as an active user who has become pivotal in the dissemination of information and the operations of the online community (Li et al., 2017). These influential leaders take multiple forms on the site, from the creator posting informational activism posts to 'haul' videos that disseminate the latest micro-trends for the season.

Alternatively, competition has been defined as comparing one's own competence, belongings, and self, to others (Hofmann & Smits, 2007; Syed et al., 2023). These thoughts of comparison can be understood by the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Garcia et al., 2013). Social comparison theory refers to the judgement a person will put on themselves in comparison to others' creating the urge and a competition to achieve a lifestyle alike to others (Festinger, 1954; Garcia et al., 2013; Orji et al., 2019; Syed et al., 2023). This comparison to others has been amplified due to social media and the posting of highlight reels by users on the site, promoting an almost unobtainable lifestyle to achieve and replicate (Orji et al., 2019; Syed et al., 2023). It has been identified in works such as Weeks et al., 2011 and Wang et al., 2020 that individuals will favour comparison to closer relations than strangers (Syed et al., 2023). However, with the increasing interconnectedness of people through social media, removing both spatial and temporal barriers, social media users' feel closer than ever, removing the idea of users seeing each other as 'strangers', promoting increased comparison online, with Li et al (2017) describing social media as making 'the competitions even keener than ever before' (Erickson, 2010; Garcia et al., 2013).

Research on community and competition have often separated the terms, looking at either concept through the topic of consumption behaviours and activism. This includes works such as Ghita's (2016) research that investigated competition between individual activists and volunteers working in the 2015 refugee crisis, to Charoensukmongkol's (2017) research that investigated social media comparison between children causing competition among friendship groups. Minimal research, such as Li et al (2017), has investigated how community

and competition may be intertwined and how it may affect the everyday lifestyle of people, including consumption behaviours and involvement in activism. Within, Li et al's (2017) work, they identified that competition occurs within and between online communities, and that 'the competition among communities will be a long-lasting social phenomenon'.

To support Li et al's (2017) work, through analysis of the TikTok research material, competition within and between communities was identified, causing effects onto the consumption behaviour and activism of young people. Thus, this chapter will build upon this work, proposing that community and competition are heavily intertwined and should not be seen as entirely separate entities and therefore aid the wider understanding of young people as heroes or villains in the sustainable fashion narrative.

6.2. Community on TikTok

As categorised by Balaubramanian & Mahajan (2001) and Ridings et al., (2002), community can be created around both a shared hobby and interest, such as consuming from fast fashion, alongside an objective, including sustainable fashion activism. Additionally, Erickson's (2010) work observed that 'conversing' on social media networks, such as through comment sections and threads, was a sufficient platform to build community spaces. Therefore, in agreeance with this understanding, community across the TikTok research material was frequently identified as users positively interacting and engaging through conversations in the comment sections of the videos and were observed across both the Fast Fashion and Sustainable Fashion TikTok research material.

Initial observations of community, surrounding fast fashion, can be seen through the popularity and strong positive engagement on the TikTok posts. Across the research material, Fast Fashion TikTok posts had on average of over 3 million views, 376,150 likes, 13,550 shares, and 1764 comments per post. This popular and engaged community can be observed to be creating a 'virtual place' around the shared hobby and interests of seasonal micro-trends, fast fashion brands, and the consumption-behaviours of other users, being named 'consumer communities' (Balaubrmanian & Mahajan, 2001; Ridings et al., 2012; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Aichner et al., 2021). Users also exemplified a belonging to the community, through a desire to continue seeing the community TikTok posts and retain a position in the community and

echo chamber, seen through the comment 'commenting to stay on Shein Tok!' (Video: Shein Haul) (Jiang et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2023). Displaying for some users, this content appearing on their *For You Page* is both a positive experience and a community they would like to continue belonging to.

Moreover, TikTok users displayed community through their exchanges of information, in both the content, by influential leaders, and comment section, by users within the TikTok community. Specifically, in the 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' Video, the creator discussed their predictions for Spring 2024 trends, describing clothes users would need to consume to participate in these trends. Specifically, the creator of the 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' included a prediction for an increase in popularity of wearing colourful trainers and oversized shirts. Through this influential leader, the creator of the 'Cool Girls Trends 2024' video, providing their opinion on trends to their wider community they are also disseminating information, on how, where from, and what their community should be wearing in Spring 2024. TikTok users are likely to take this opinion as a matter of fact, due to the opinion that TikTok creators are reliable, authentic, and trustworthy, creating confidence in users for a creator's predictions for their community (Ridings et al., 2002; Aichner et al., 2021; Jeffries, 2023). The theme of reliability and trustworthiness in creators' dissemination of information was a theme noted across the Fast Fashion TikTok communities, in the research material. This includes in the comment section of the 'Shein Haul' TikTok, where users' were observed to be basing their consumption desires, on the creators' purchases, demonstrated in the comment 'Just done a shein order but now I feel I need to do another 😭🤭 so many cute things' (Video: Shein Haul). Illustrating that fast fashion content, on TikTok, is being used as a supply of information for a community to influencer their own consumption habits.

Furthermore, the creator of the 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' included a prediction for an increase in the popularity of wearing 'animal print' clothing. The creator also noted that if users did not like 'animal print' they could alternatively wear 'animal print' via a pop of the print on their shoes, to allow users to still participate in the trend even if they disliked it. The description of needing to participate in a trend despite disliking it, by a trustworthy source, could demonstrate to users that to feel a sense of belonging to this community that impulsive consumption needs to occur, if they are to retain a space in this community (Thornton, 2023). Re-iterating that consumption-based communities may be increasingly normalised and

expected for belonging in the fashion community on TikTok (Thornton, 2023). A TikTok user's desire to feel a sense of belonging to this consumption-based community, can be demonstrated by user's conversing by asking questions, on the 'Cool Girl Trends 2023', as to how and where they can purchase recommended trendy clothing. This includes the comments 'what brand are those leopard pants!' and 'Do you know where the red striped button up was from?'. In response both comments received comments back from the creator and other TikTok users, with descriptions on where they could purchase the predicted trendy clothing from, repeating to users that this consumption needs to occur.

Additionally, comments from TikTok users on the 'Hurry Shein Workers' displayed how users may participate in a trend or engage with a video to further feel a sense of belonging to a TikTok community (Hello Partner, 2021). On the TikTok video 'Hurry Shein Workers', many users participated in desensitised humour and jokes, at the expensive of factory workers in the Shein supply chain. Following the desensitised theme of the 'Hurry Shein Workers' video content, that stated 'Me going to china to see what's taking those shein kids so long to send my order'. Comments demonstrating this included 'they better get working sew the fabric faster maybe 💀', 'chop chop temu workers 😭', and 'work harder i need my rose toy now 😔 😳 😖 🤬'. These comments disregard the conditions of the workers as a humorous seen through emoji choices of '😭' and '💀', whilst also stating their products and arrival are of more importance to them than the ethical concerns of Shein. Additionally, many users who despite having concerns with the brand's ethical practises, chose to participate in engagement with the video, seen through the comments 'I don't support Shein but this is so funny 😱' and 'Feels so wrong to laugh lmao [laughing my ass off] 😱 😱 😱 😱'. These comments demonstrate that the TikTok users have put their own opinions and feelings aside on the ethical concerns of the brand, seen through the 'I don't support Shein but…' and 'feels so wrong to laugh…' to be able to participate in a community joking at the expensive of 'kid' workers (Hello Partner, 2021). Therefore, users illustrate their desire to feel connected and belonging to a virtual space and community, despite their own ethical and political opinions on fast fashion (Hello Partner, 2021).

Alternatively, the Sustainable Fashion community was identified to be smaller, yet active community, seen through the average 461,167 views, 64,050 likes, 1076 shares, and 383

comments per TikTok on the sustainable fashion research material posts. For much of this community, the collective objective was to raise awareness, spread information, and discuss the topic of sustainable fashion and consumption-behaviours. The activeness of the Sustainable Fashion community can be demonstrated by the on average 1 comment made per every 1,204 views on a sustainable fashion post, and on average one like per every 7 views. Comparatively, on the collected Fast Fashion TikTok research material, per every 1,848 views there was a comment left on the video and per every 9 views the video received a like. This statistic exemplifies the Sustainable Fashion community as, on average, more engaged and motivated to increase their activism to discussions in comment sections, than users in the fast fashion community.

'Conversing' in the comment sections of videos, on the objective of sustainability in the fashion industry, was the main form of community identified for sustainable fashion activists (Erickson, 2010). Conversing was identified as asking questions towards the creator, the influential leader, and wider community, particularly on the sustainable fashion content users would engage with the objective through asking questions on how they can achieve a more sustainable lifestyle, with other users in the community answering with helpful advice (Erickson, 2010). This included comments such as 'question tho: how is over-consumption bad if it's secondhand? It's not generating any new waste' (Video: Difficulty Slowing Consumption) and 'I need tips on how to slow my consumption!! i thrift so often it's like my fave hobby but i always get something' (Video: Difficulty Slowing Consumption). By conversing with others in this activist community, through asking questions, users can further their own learning, understanding and ability to achieve the community's common objective, of consuming sustainably and from sustainable outlets. By furthering their understanding, their position within the community can be promoted as they are able to answer the questions of others in the community (Erickson, 2010). Users using their understanding to disseminate information to others in the community, to achieve the common objective, includes the comment 'i always think about how much i'm going to regret buying something and be embarrassed about my weak will ☠' (Video: Difficulty Slowing Consumption).

Nevertheless, although communities were identified, exchanging information to achieve the common objective of sustainability, in the fashion industry and their own fashion consumption-behaviours, a contrasting community was also identified. The alternative

community has a main objective that was to discredit and negatively discuss the sustainability objective and the members of the activist community. For example, on the 'Frustration with a Survey Result' TikTok, a user commented 'you went on a show sponsored by a fast fashion brand though?', in response to an activists TikTok post. In the thread of argumentative discussion that followed this comment six users additionally came into the discussion to dispute the sustainability and ethics of the content creator. This can be seen in comments 'embarrassing hahaha, your replies don't even make a point. You've got no defence for using something sponsored by fast fashion to get famous' and 'care to tell us which episode you 'used the show to highlight these issues'? don't remember this being mentioned until you got your 5 minutes of fame'. The contrasting community was not a one-off phenomenon on the 'Frustration with a Survey Result' TikTok and was noted by activist communities on additional posts, including the 'Company Deinfluencing and Advertising' TikTok video. Comments illustrating the noting of a contrasting community, by activists, include 'Yes Love this! I made a tiktok about how terrible shein is and got brutalised in the comments for it 😂' in response the creator commented 'don't worry I did too haha – every time I slate shein 😂'. Hence, demonstrating that for many activist creators they identify it as a common place for this negative and discrediting community to comment on their posts, when discussing sustainable fashion and the ethical concerns of specific brands. The noting that a community will defend the brand Shein is also appreciated in academic research (FORTAY Media, 2023; Sollwedel & Bak's, 2023). Identified by Sollwedel & Bak's (2023) research, their participant felt 'solidarity' towards Shein and other Shein product consumers, creating a community for Shein consumers and a desire to 'defend' their favoured brands, other Shein consumers, and their own consumption-behaviour.

6.3. Competition on TikTok

Additionally, the theme of 'competition' was consistently noted across the TikTok research material. Particularly in the research material, competition took place within community spaces, between TikTok users and between differing TikTok communities, surrounding a brand, style of consumption, and activism objective. Within the Fast Fashion research material, the competition between users and community was identified to orientate around

competitive consumption, defined as consumption that is to show superiority over peers both online and offline (Burns, 2019). Comparatively, the Sustainable Fashion research material illustrated behavioural competitiveness, between sustainable fashion activists and non-activists, classified as inter-community competition (Li et al., 2017).

An example of competition between users, in a community space, can be illustrated by the 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' TikTok video, named a consumption-promoting style of content surrounded by a consumer community. In this video the creator described what they predict the 'cool girls' will be wearing in Spring 2024 (Burns, 2019; Frick et al., 2020). The creator predicted certain styles that would be on-trend during the Spring season, including animal print, striped oversized shirts, and colourful trainers. By describing those who participate in the trend as 'cool', it can create an elite aesthetic to aspire to, with users likely to take a TikTok creator's fashion opinion as fact due to the identified increased level of trust TikTok users feel towards TikTok creators, an opinion promoted by the 'authentic' feel of the site and thus creators (Turtis, 2023).

Moreover, in response to users' questions, asking where they could purchase items described, the creator responded '(insert clothing item) that you NEED for your spring wardrobe' alongside a video response describing outlets that the clothing can be bought from. This convincing word choice, of 'NEED', alongside description of 'cool girls', and time sensitive window of the upcoming season, furthers users' feelings of needing to conform to this elite 'cool' aesthetic. Conforming to this aesthetic thus promotes consumption; however, there is an increased sense of urgency for consumption due to the popularity of the post creating uncertainty on how long specific recommended items will be available for. Therefore, users can become increasingly uneasy creating urgency and impulsivity to their consumption, due to the desire to beat other consumers to the products to gain the 'coolest' Spring wardrobe, to gain a position of superiority in the community (Burns, 2019). This gaining of 'coolness' and superiority in the community, promoting consumption of users, can be described as 'competitive consumption' (Burns, 2019).

Moreover, the competitive desire to be viewed as 'superior' can be observed in multiple comment sections of the 'Fast Fashion' TikTok research material. This includes the comment section of the 'Need for Clothes 24/7' video. In the comment section, users boasted their consumption habits, often including specific monetary values of their recent orders and boasts

on the amount of clothes they currently own. Examples of these comments include 'I spent £500 in the Zara sale and I keep looking 😭 😭 😭', 'Even though my wardrobe doors won't open without me absolutely yanking them because it's so full with clothes 😅' and 'i only have 4 pairs of pants 😩 😩'. These comments can be identified to be 'bragging', defined as a way of promoting a favourable self-image through positive statements about oneself (Jin et al., 2022). These comments, boasting their high levels of consumption on a public platform, can be specifically identified as 'humblebragging' a phenomenon of boasting alongside the theme of complaining to minimise their bragging (Feng et al., 2023). This observed phenomenon of 'humblebragging' illustrates a wider phenomenon of highlight reels and boasting occurring across social media, such as the 'Shein Haul' that bragged about their 'large' number of items or monetary value in their haul. From bragging, research such as Lee & Eastin, 2020, have identified that consumers become increasingly envious and feel admiration to aspire to others consumption levels, promoting comparison between consumers (Feng et al., 2023). Through social comparison, and the negative emotions attached such as envy, the promotion of competition to feel superiority over others may occur, causing consumption, creating a viscous cycle of competitive consumption for the TikTok users (Festinger, 1954; Garcia et al., 2013; Jin et al., 2022).

Furthermore, companies have been identified to use 'competition' to generate sales and profit. In the comment section of the 'Shein Haul' TikTok video approximately 92% of the comments, on date of data collection, were requesting an exchange of Shein 'codes'. Comments that illustrate users strong desire to achieve in the Shein code exchange include 'please help: (insert code)', 'code for code 🥹 (insert code) need 15 🥺' and 'Need help too, please. 🥺 🥺 (insert code)'. Word and emoji choices of 'please', 'help', and '🥺' convey a level of desperation from the users to exchange codes to achieve their next discount. Their desperation to achieve discounts, in this competition, will be furthered by the identified strong affiliation and community around the brand of Shein, alongside the consistent posting of consumption-promoting material bought from Shein, such as the 'Shein Haul' video. Therefore, furthering users' desire to achieve the discounts in the competition to allow for consumption from Shein (Sollwedel & Bak's, 2023).

Additionally, competition was identified across the Sustainable Fashion research materials comment sections. A main source of competition was observed between those who were for the sustainable fashion movement and those who were fast fashion consumers. Many of the competitive conversations between users were based upon dismantling the other's objective. Comments from fast fashion consumers trying to dismantle the sustainability objective include 'Also, would love to see how many people slating PLT [Pretty Little Thing] have a cheeky lil PLT / fast fashion number in their wardrobe 😵' (Video: Campaign Against Pretty Little Thing) and 'but do you not actively interact with you [your] LI [Love Island] mates when they get partnerships and do ISawItFirst and primark ads? 😵' (Video: Frustration With a Survey Result), and 'when its over-consumption 😵, but it's through depop 😏' (Video: Difficulty Slowing Consumption). Alternatively, sustainable 'activists', for the sustainable fashion movement, also took part in putting down non-activists through comments such as 'his replies make perfect sense, it's just all the PLT [Pretty Little Thing] girlies getting mad in the comments bc [because] they don't wanna be held responsible lol [laughing out loud]' (Video: Frustration With a Survey Result), 'Wow the DENSE people in these comments. Anyone with morals would NOT support let alone WORK with PLT [Pretty Little Thing] (Video: Campaign Against Pretty Little Thing) and 'You're a perfect example of why luxury companies get away with it – ppl [people] like u refuse to believe they're not a profit over ethics companies 😂' (Video: How to Shop Sustainably).

Activism has been described as entailing competition over gaining support of the wider society, to gain further interest in their objective, with a main target of introducing non-activists to their objective (Kutlaca et al., 2020). Alternatively, within this research, this competitive nature to activism was instead identified as negative interactions between users, as to who could dismantle the others points and objectives the most. Particularly, activists often gained self-induced superiority over non-activists by describing them as less intelligent, seen through the word choices of 'dense', 'PLT girlies', and 'perfect example of why luxury companies get away with it'. By putting-down this group of TikTok users' the activists could feel superiority and thus a 'better activist' and more morally correct for their comments. Through doing this, the activists could be distancing themselves to create distinctiveness between themselves and the fast fashion consumers, which could marginalise a community from being involved in the sustainability movement (Kutlaca et al., 2020).

6.4. Inter-twining Community & Competition on TikTok

Within academic research there has been a prevalent separation of the theme of competition and community in both online and offline settings. However, following Li's et al. (2017) work that intertwined the two themes, community and competition were observed in the TikTok research material to also be heavily entangled. Particularly, competition was observed within communities and inter-community, causing a notable effect to young people's behaviour in the context of consumption patterns and activism involvement. Therefore, the themes of community and competition will be explored as intertwining concepts, through the lens of this research's TikTok material, allowing context to be created for the wider discussion of young people in the sustainable fashion movement in offline settings.

Competition within communities was predominantly observed surrounding the research materials' Fast Fashion TikToks. For example, the 'Shein Haul' and 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' were identified to be primarily engaged with by a community who have become dedicated and absorbed by fast fashion brands and creators, who have become 'influential leaders' in the community (Li et al., 2017). Influential leaders, such as the creators of the 'Shein Haul' and 'Cool Girl Trends 2024' video, who spoke about products that they or others should purchase, amounted large engagement from TikTok users. The popularity of content and creators that discuss consumption and what is the correct purchasing, has therefore formed 'consumer communities' (Burns, 2019; Kwayu et al., 2017). Through exposure to the consumer communities' users can become encapsulated in proving themselves, by purchasing enough or owning the correct things (Kwayu et al., 2017; Burns, 2019; Park & Li, 2023). Additionally, through a user proving themselves they can gain superiority in the community, levelling themselves to become 'influential leaders' in the community (Li et al., 2017; Feng et al., 2023; Lee & Eastin, 2020). The need to gain superiority, through competing with others, can be observed through the normalised 'bragging' on the site, seen through comments such as 'I have so much clothes but I don't wear any of them 😭' and 'I'm a compulsive buyer, okay?' (Jin et al., 2020; Feng et al., 2023). Therefore, the fundamental desire to have status within communities, motivates users to participate in competition that is against other users in their consumer communities (Aggarwal et al., 2011; Anderson & Hildreth, 2016; Kwayu et al., 2017; Burns, 2019).

Furthermore, consumer communities can revolve around an influential leader that are brands, that can use this idea of competition within their engaged community as a marketing tactic for increase their businesses sales (Li et al., 2017; Aggarwal et al., 2011; Park & Li, 2023). This can be illustrated by the 'Shein code' exchange, as discussed Shein has a large user base who are well-established, positively engaged and dedicated to the brand (Sollwedel & Bak's; 2023; FORTAYMedia, 2023). Nevertheless, Shein has been identified to use the gamification of consumption, by Shein promoting competition, to achieve the highest levels of discounts for use on Shein products. Through doing this, the brand makes the high level of consumption that users are exposed to on TikTok, through content such as haul and trend videos, as obtainable through the achieving of high discounts (Thorpe, 2023; Park 7 Li, 2023). By gaining discounts consumers can purchase more for their money, and therefore promote their superiority in consumer communities by consuming more. Thus, users feel a sense of need to participate in the community competition, if they want to continue purchasing at the rate of others from the Shein site, to feel included in the community (Thornton, 2023).

Alternatively, competition that occurred between communities was predominantly identified in the sustainable fashion TikTok research material. The communities who competed between each other could be identified as sustainable fashion activists and fast fashion consumers. The competition between these two communities often orientated around proving they were superior in morals and intelligence, as seen in the argumentative discussions in the comment sections of the 'Frustration with a Survey Result' and 'Campaign Against Pretty Little Thing' TikTok videos This intercommunity interaction creates a negative mobilization and negative interaction, with Kumar et al., (2018) identifying that these interactions lead to an 'attacker vs defender' mindset. These interactions between communities and users have been identified in research to be caused by a desire to elevate their status within their respective community, creating further competition between the communities to 'beat' other users in their argumentative discussions (Kumar et al., 2018). This competition may lead to discrimination, seen through the comments of 'are they [survey respondents]…. Okay?', 'Imagine not having the mental capacity to understand the point from that comment 😂😂😂', 'you lot aren't smart enough to understand that he used that show to build a platform and educate fast fashion buyers to shop sustainably…' (Video: Frustration with a Survey Result). Through these comments, those who purchase fast fashion are being described as less intelligent and morally

incorrect, creating further tensions between the group. This also further promotes the attacker vs defender narrative and hence need to participate in these unproductive discussions to promote their superiority in the community (Crenshaw, 1991; Kumar et al., 2018; Ghita et al., 2016). Therefore, these unproductive discussions could further marginalise groups from the opposing community, pushing users further into the extremes of a consumer or activist community (Kutlaca et al., 2020).

However, academic work such as Ghita et al., (2016) suggests that competition arises between activism communities, and it cannot be said with certainty what communities, or if in one at all, the commenting users are. Therefore, alternatively this moral competition could instead by occurring between the activism communities, instead of between the fast and sustainable fashion communities. Comments that could illustrate internal competition, due to activism differences, include 'I don't think blaming consumer for an issue which should be directed towards these billionaire companies is appropriate.' (Video: Frustration with a Survey Result), 'Calling resellers poachers is so aggressive. If we are going to move to thrift/second hand as an option for more people, they are providing a service' (Video: How To Shop Sustainably) and 'Babes if I wash them cold there is still bacteria and I will need aggressive soaps and that harms the environment more I guess' (Video: How To Shop Sustainably). These comments display users' disliking and disagreeing with the educational messages being discussed in the videos. As discussed by Ghita et al., (2016) these comments by other activists can create an ideal standard for what an activist should be, creating a competition and desire for activists to achieve and attain the high activist standard. The desire to meet an ideal activist standard, to appease the wider activist community, can be seen in the 'How To Shop Sustainably' video where the creator felt a desire to take multiple social-economic empathetic points to make the creators' How To guide on shopping sustainably. This included 'and, even those may not be inclusive depending on your body type, big and tall guys, curvy girls, really tall or really short people have an extremely hard time shopping in a thrift store' and 'but I also know that a $45 t-shirt just isn't realistic for everyone, so at the very least shop at brands who are at least striving to lessen their environmental impact'. From this sympathetic approach taken to varying socio-economic circumstances, the post was met with multiple comments of praise for the creator and thus their activist points.

6.5. Depiction of Young People in Offline Society

It is apparent that users on TikTok must navigate a complex system of competition both within their communities and intercommunity. TikTok users' must navigate and participate in these competitions to feel a stronger sense of belonging to their respective communities, with Baumeister & Leary (1995) identifying that 'human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments'. Therefore, this fundamental desire to feel belonging, was identified to be 'one of the most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available to understand human nature' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Hence, highly motivating TikTok users to participate in trends and competition to achieve their interpersonal attachment to virtual places (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hello Partner, 2021). An additional reason for participating in community competition is it allows a user to elevate their status, closer to the content creators otherwise known as influential leaders (Crenshaw, 1991; Kumar et al., 2018; Ghita et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017). Also, described as a fundamental motive, the desire for people to receive respect and status from others, is highly motivational in society (Anderson & Hildreth, 2016). Therefore, users can become highly motivated to feel a belonging and status created through this system, that can thus push them further into the extremes of their community, to be seen as either a fast fashion consumer or a sustainable fashion activist (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Anderson & Hildreth, 2016; Kutlaca et al., 2020). Users being pushed further into their respective communities can be demonstrated through the unproductive discussions where users are unable to find common ground in their conversations.

Nevertheless, on TikTok users may not have to actively engage through comments and unproductive discussions, to be pushed by TikTok into the extremes of either community. Through likes, watching the entirety of videos, and geographical locations, TikTok places young people into echo chambers, where they can become exposed to the normality of this competition and community, subconsciously placing the burden on themselves to feel belonging into either community (Jiang et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2023). This exposure and subconscious burden represent the phenomena in wider society, where these burdens are a social norm (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Anderson & Hildreth, 2016).

Therefore, through the analysis of the TikTok research material, a larger number of users could be identified to be caught up in specifically the fast fashion consumer community on TikTok.

A larger community could be identified due the higher-level of engagement surrounding consumption-promoting content, with the fast fashion research material TikTok videos amounting on average over 3 million views per post compared to the average 460,000 views on the sustainable fashion TikTok videos. In the wider context of TikTok this average disparity between popularity on fast and sustainable fashion posts is also present, shown through the 16 million posts under #haul compared to 828,400 under the #SustainableFashion (TikTok, N.D; TikTok, N.D.). The popularity of the fast fashion content, predominantly revolving around consumption, such as haul and seasonal trend videos, has created a strong community that has further promoted the normalisation of over-consumption, behavioural traits of addiction, enabling behaviours, and desensitisation to fast fashion practises. Alongside this, users must navigate the marketing strategy and behavioural instinct of 'competition', between users and intercommunity, to be superior and become more influential, through consuming on trend and the most, meaning users do not feel they belong in this community without participating.

Nonetheless, these concepts are not specific to TikTok and illustrate a wider theme offline, of the normalisation of over-consumption in society, and the concepts and pressures at play that people feel they need to achieve (Stuart et al., 2020). The normalisation of over-consumption in offline society can be demonstrated by a report in 2023 that found fashion's effort to become 'more sustainable' by reducing their carbon impact by 12% has been cancelled out by a 13% rise in textiles consumed, and an expected increase of consumption equal to more 500 billion t-shirts between 2019 and 2030 (Algamal, 2019; House of Commons Environmental Aduit Committee, 2019; Guardian, 2023). This illustrates that the normalisation of over-consumption, and pressures at play, is a wider problem than the age group of young people, and therefore villainising specifically the younger generations is unproductive in the sustainable fashion narrative, deterring productive conversations on sustainability in wider society.

Moreover, those observed to be influential leaders and strong activists for sustainable consumption and brands, were found to be competing within their community and intercommunity from pressure to achieve this 'hero' status (Bobel, 2007; Ghita et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2018). This can be seen through their high engagement with posts, their desire to be socio-economic sympathetic to all groups, alongside the unproductive comments in the comment section that often-found activists commenting on the intelligence of fast fashion

consumers. This smaller group of users advocating for sustainability, illustrates a wider theme in society, that activism is a smaller phenomenon than over-consumption, which can be illustrated by the recent YouGov study that showed 29% of participants felt tackling climate change was a top-three priority in the UK a lesser popular choice than the economy (65%), health (42%), and immigration and asylum (36%) (University of Bristol, 2023; Kazazis, 2024). Hence, Climate change activism has been identified to never have regained it's 2019 peak, with the research claiming that climate activism is one of the most exclusive domains, that are disconnected from wider society (Taylor, Watts & Bartlett, 2019; University of Bristol, 2023; Lamberti, 2023; Kazazis, 2024). With many activists resisting the name of being an 'activist' due to the pressure of high standards of being completely dedicated to the cause and wider stigmatisation of 'activism' (Bobel, 2007; Kazazis, 2024).

Therefore, in the wider context of young people as heroes or villains in the sustainable fashion narrative offline, it is imperative not to view young people as good or bad people. Instead, this research highlights how young people must navigate a complex field of community and competition on TikTok. Through the concept of community, on TikTok the user can become caught up in a plea to belong and be accepted in the virtual place. Thus, users often feel as though they must participate in the competition to achieve the fundamental human desire to feel a sense of belonging and superiority in their respective communities (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Anderson & Hildreth, 2016). Thus, this could illustrate a wider phenomenon in society, and therefore removing other age groups from the discussion creates an unproductive and unreasonable expectation on young people.

6.6. Conclusion

In conclusion, within academic research there was a predominant separation of themes of community and competition, looking at either concept in the context of consumption behaviours or involvement with activism. However, through works such as Li et al., 2018, community and competition were shown to be heavily intertwined, shown through Li et al. 2018 observation of competition occurring within communities and inter-community. Both themes, and their inter-connected nature, were also consistently identified across the collected TikTok research material. Particularly, competition between communities' members

was heavily observed within the fast fashion community, and inter-community competition identified between the fast fashion consumers and sustainable fashion activist communities.

Consequently, the investigation of this competition, both within communities and inter-community, helped to inform the research of the complex system young people must navigate to feel the fundamental desires of belonging and status within their online communities (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Anderson & Hildreth, 2016). These fundamental desires created increased pressure for young people to participate in popular actions of their community, such as the consumption of fashion micro-trends or political activism styles to achieve 'hero' activist status. A neglect to participate in the collective actions of their online community, can cease their feeling of belonging to their chosen online community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Anderson & Hildreth, 2016).

The fundamental desire to feel belonging and status within communities was identified to be a wider phenomenon that could also be identified in offline society, which was additionally observed to not be specific to the age group of young people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Anderson & Hildreth, 2016; Bobel, 2007; Ghita et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2018). These themes in wider offline society can be illustrated through the large popularity of partaking in the normalisation of over-consumption and an exclusive smaller community who are advocating for the sustainable fashion movement (University of Bristol, 2023; Kazazis, 2024; Algamal, 2019; House of Commons Environmental Aduit Committee, 2019; Guardian, 2023).

Therefore, this analysis, through the lens of community and competition, helped to highlight the complex navigation young people undertake in everyday life to feel the fundamental desires to feel belonging and status. However, these trends were identified to be not specific to young people and the online social media setting. Hence, removing other age groups from the discussion, places undue pressure and expectation onto young people. Thus, removing the contradicting ideal of young people as either good or bad in their portrayal, across wider society, academia, and media, would develop a more positive and productive discussion of sustainability.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1. Recapitulation of the Research Background & Methods

Through the exploration of academic literature, it was identified that there were two contradicting binary depictions of young people in the narrative of sustainability in the fashion industry (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Hume, 2010; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; Ziesemer et al., 2021). Specifically, these portrayals depicted young people as either hedonistic consumers, who are villains halting the progression of sustainability through self-centred consumption practises, or sustainability savours, the predicted heroes through being innovators in creating solutions for the wicked problem of sustainability in the fashion industry (Collins & Hitchings, 2012; Collins, 2019; Hume, 2010; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; Ziesemer et al., 2021). However, this binary portrayal of young people did not effectively capture the complexity of human behaviour. Therefore, this highlighted the need to further explore the depiction of young people to successfully illustrate their behaviour and engagement towards sustainability in the fashion industry, to create productive discussions on the sustainability movement.

Therefore, the following research questions were created to explore the topic:

Research Question 1: To what extent does TikTok show young people as over consumers of fashion?

Research Question 2: What methods of activism do young people adopt on TikTok?

Research Question 3: Does addressing young people's consumption and activism through a lens of 'community' and 'competition' complicate the 'saviour' and 'villain' binary?

To explore these portrayals of young people, and thus inform the research questions, the under-utilised social media platform TikTok, described as a site creating a large cultural impact within its young user demographic, was selected for use (Becker, N.D.; Song, 2021; Kanthawala et al., 2022; TikTok 2022). TikTok's under-utilisation and exponential growth in user popularity since its 2018 launch date, with approximately 38.5% of its users being aged between 18 to 24, highlighted that a new insight could be provided into the discussion of young people's portrayal in the sustainable fashion movement (Becker, N.D.; Kanthawala et al., 2022; Olvera et al., 2023; Ceci, 2024; Dunn, 2024).

Therefore, through the exploration of TikTok, ten videos were chosen to inform the research questions, six of which were identified to focus their content on sustainable fashion and four on fast fashion. Comment sections of the videos also provided valuable information for analysis.

7.2. Key Discussion Findings

Size and Activity of Consumer and Activist Communities

From analysis of the TikTok research material, it was identified there was a larger quantity of users who were a part of a community who interacted with fast fashion content. The larger community surrounding fast fashion content can be exemplified through the average 3 million views, 376,150 likes, and 13,550 shares, that was noted per post. Comparatively, sustainable fashion content had on average of 461,167 views, 64,050 likes, and 1076 shares per post, illustrating a large disparity between the quantity of users who are exposed and engage to the differing content of fast and sustainable fashion on TikTok.

Nevertheless, although a larger community was identified surrounding fast fashion content, users who were exposed to sustainable fashion content were observed to be more active in their engagement to the post. The active nature of users involved in the sustainable fashion community can be exhibited through the on average one comment per 1,204 views occurring compared to fast fashion content that on average received a comment per every 1,848 views. Additionally, viewers were more likely to positively engage with sustainable fashion content, observed in the average likability of the post. On sustainable fashion posts, an average of one like occurred per 7 views, in contrast to fast fashion content that received one like per 9 views. Hence, despite there being a larger quantity of users exposed to fast fashion content; it was observed that users were more likely to be actively engaging with sustainable fashion content.

Young People as Over-consumers, on TikTok

Furthermore, themes of the normalisation of over-consumption and behavioural traits of addiction were consistently identified, in relation to fast fashion TikTok videos. Thus, it was identified that users had a strong desire to regularly mass-consume in an irrational, impaired, and risky manner. These behaviours were encouraged through a number of sources on TikTok, including: the posting of consumption-promoting content, such as haul and seasonal trend

videos, enabling behaviours, by content creators and in the comment sections of posts, the gamification of over-consumption, through the marketing tactics of fast fashion companies, and echo chambers, that overexposes users to specific styles of content due to TikTok's algorithmic technology.

Therefore, through exposure to these sources, that promotes the normalisation of over-consumption and behavioural traits of addiction, users became vulnerable to competition and pressure to participate. Particularly, in the context of fast fashion consumption this competitive behaviour manifested into competitive consumption, an action of competing with other users to own as much as possible or to obtain specific clothing items to fit proposed microtrends for seasonal windows. Through participation in competitive consumption, users were able to gain or maintain superiority in the fast fashion community.

Nevertheless, these observations were observed to not be specific to online environments and show a wider trend in offline society, that is consistent across all age groups. Exemplified through the expected increase in consumption between 2019 to 2030 that is equal to 500 billion t-shirts (Algamal, 2019; House of Commons Environmental Aduit Committee, 2019; Guardian, 2023).

Young People as Activists, on TikTok

Moreover, the smaller yet active community advocating for sustainability in the fashion industry were identified to be using both traditional and a newfound activism style that was routed in emotions, including humour and frustration. The traditional and comedic styles of activism were observed to be met with a more positive engagement from the wider TikTok community. Positive engagement from users included questions on how they could further their sustainability in terms of knowledge and consumption behaviours, alongside comments noting relatability and praise to the post. The positive interactions with this style of activism, illustrated an interest and willingness from TikTok users to learn and advocate for a more sustainable fashion industry.

Nevertheless, significant negative reactions and discussions were identified across a range of activism material, identified predominantly on posts that included frustration towards fast fashion consumers, beloved brands or influential leaders, and wider society's lack-of-education on sustainability. These discussions often led to the marginalisation of users,

through comments that criticised and condescended fast fashion consumers education levels. Often these discussions did not have a resolution and were observed to be unproductive in producing rational conversations on sustainability in the fashion industry.

Thus, these unproductive conversations were identified to be competition occurring inter-community, between fast fashion consumers and sustainable fashion activists. This competition manifested itself as users partaking in elevating their status within their community, by negatively discussing the opposing community to prove their moral or opinion superiority.

These unproductive conversations were observed to push people further into the extremes of their community, exemplified through the 'Hurry Shein Workers' TikTok video and comment section. The content of this video and comment section displayed users were aware of the unethical and exploitative harm of Shein; however, insensitive and desensitised jokes were still made, at Shein worker's expense, where users placed the need for their purchased items from the site over showing care for exploited workers. Hence, this content and users' interaction with the post, illustrated the extremes of a community users can be exposed to and partake in on TikTok, that in this instance strongly contradicted the sustainability movement.

Evaluating the Binary Depiction of Young People

Consistently themes of community and competition were observed within the TikTok research material. These concepts, that are often separated in academic literature, were observed in the TikTok research material to be heavily intertwined, alike to observations made in Li et al. (2017) work. Particularly, competition was identified between users in the fast fashion community, and mostly inter-community between fast fashion consumers and sustainability activists. These competitive interactions were observed to affect both consumption behaviours and activism engagement.

Users were appreciated to take part in the competition between community members and inter-community, due to fundamental desires that influences human behaviours (Baumeister & Leary, 1996; Hello Partner, 2021). These far-reaching motivations include the desire to feel a sense of belonging, to create inter-personal attachments to others, and superiority, to elevate status and receive respect (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hello Partner, 2021; Crenshaw,

1991; Kumar et al., 2018; Ghita et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017; Anderson & Hildreth, 2016). Through the strong desire to achieve these feelings users become willing to participate in competition, such as competition consumption and competitive discussions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hello Partner, 2021; Crenshaw, 1991; Kumar et al., 2018; Ghita et al., 2016; Li et al., 2017; Anderson & Hildreth, 2016; Kutlaca et al., 2020).

Therefore, the consistent observation of community and competition, and the intertwining nature of the themes affecting consumption behaviours and activism engagement, highlighted the complex navigation young people must take in everyday offline life. Thus, it highlighted that it is imperative to not view young people as binary in their behaviours as it removes the multi-faceted navigation, they must make in their everyday lives, to feel the fundamental desires of belonging and superiority in society. Desires that were shown to not be specific to young people but hyperbolised for the younger age group due to their usage of social media, that perpetuates these aspirations to them with every scroll.

7.3. Implications of the Research Findings

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the portrayal of young people in the sustainability movement and how the conversations on the wicked problem of sustainability in the fashion industry can become more productive. The implications of this research for wider academia follows.

Viewing Clothing Items as Possessions

Particularly, this research highlighted that there has been a movement away from young people purchasing specific clothing to show-off and adorn the body, despite prior academia stating over-consumption is a product of wanting to own the right things (Burns, 2019). Instead, through the TikTok research material it was observed that over-consumption of clothing was acquired with the goal of boasting the quantity of clothing items. Hence, through the boasting of these clothing items, through content such as haul videos, there has been a notable increase in importance for owning any clothing items elevating each possessions status, as each possession is deemed as important in showing their ability to participate in the system of mass overconsumption culture.

It was interesting to observe this movement of elevating each individual clothing items purchase with products that are relative low cost. Exemplified through the identified boasting of over-consumption from relative low-cost fashion brands such as Shein and second-hand stores, for example charity shops. The relative low cost of these items could be perpetuating the normalisation of over-consumption, as this lifestyle of consistent consumption becomes achievable and feasible for many in wider society. However, it was intriguing observing the contrasting dynamic of low-monetary worth and lack of durable clothing items. Here we see clothing no longer merely being viewed as acquisition, but increasingly as a possession to highlight the purchaser's superiority in being able to participate in the wider system of overconsumption.

Understanding and Desensitisation to the Geographical Story of Clothing

Offline society is often criticized for being naïve, taking-for-granted, or turning a blind eye to the geographical story of clothing, from origin through the supply chain to acquisition (Crew, 2008). However, the TikTok research material highlighted that many TikTok users understood the unethical supply chain of many brands within the fast fashion industry. This was shown through the 'Hurry Shein Workers' TikTok video and comments, where multiple 'jokes' were made on the exploitation of workers in the Shein supply chain. Additionally, they placed the fast delivery of their Shein parcel over the conditions of workers, asking them to work faster to allow for them to receive their orders quicker. Therefore, this post illustrated user's education on the exploitation occurring within the fast fashion industry; however, the desensitisation and moral proximity to these practices has meant users cannot empathise to these workers, meaning they place their own consumption over others labour conditions.

Evolving Activism Styles on Social Media

Furthermore, in contradiction to the current definition of 'traditional' activism, the TikTok research material demonstrated that everyday digital activism has evolved and differs across social media platforms. Particularly, on TikTok humour was used as an activist style and gained popularity and positive engagement from, with users on the site. Hence, when trying to identify activism on social media sites, researchers should look further than the traditional-based activism, commonly identified, and investigate the individual social media and how activism presents itself on that specific social media network. Additionally, in discussing

activism sources on social media and the dissemination of sustainability information to social media users, it is imperative to understand the evolving new and productive activism styles that promote positive engagement and learning to the wider community.

The Navigation of Community and Competition

Moreover, this research also explored the intertwining concepts of community and competition to provide a new lens into the context of young people's behaviours. Before this research's discussion, the concepts of community and competition had often been separated to explore consumption behaviours or activism engagement. However, following Li et al. (2017) it was identified that competition can often be identified within communities and inter-community. Through analysis, it was observed that the fundamental desires to feel belonging and superiority within a community, persuaded users to participate in competition both within their community and inter-community.

The analysis highlighted that through relating the themes, of community and competition, it was instrumental in understanding the complex navigation wider society must undertake in their consumption behaviours and activism engagement to feel the fundamental feelings of human behaviour to be accepted in a community setting. Thus, investigating further research with this understanding, of how the concepts can become intertwined, could be beneficial in understanding human behaviour more effectively.

7.4. Further Research

As TikTok is an under-utilised platform in research, despite young people being described as digital first and the exponential growth of the app, there is many avenues that could be taken to create valuable insights into the sustainability movement and wider behavioural insights of young people in this space. Increasing research through netnography, specifically on social media applications, is pivotal, particularly when investigating the everyday lives of this digital first generation. Their ongoing digital interactions, shape their daily lives, through consumption behaviours, activism engagement, and news consumption, thus, to truly grasp their experiences we must recognise and engage with this space. Therefore, increased

research of young people through netnography would be of great benefit to informing our understanding of young people in academia.

Additionally, it would be extremely valuable to continue investigating all aspects of sustainability and user engagement on the platform, due to the highly influential nature of the platform in informing the everyday behaviours of its users. Particularly, to develop the discussion on the role of young people in the sustainable fashion movement, it would be interesting to understand this portrayal through the lens of gender, compared to the broader approach, of all younger people, taken in this research.

This proposition has additionally been made due to the common 'feminine stereotype' accounted to sustainability and fashion, meaning the wicked problem of sustainability has often been coined a 'feminist issue' (Fashion Revolution, 2015; MATTER, N.D; Gazzola et al., 2020). Hence, women and girls have commonly been identified as disproportionally affected by the issues of sustainability, often meaning their nurturing and empathetic role in society leads them to take more responsibility in the sustainability narrative (Moosa & Tuana, 2014; Horton, 2020; Economist Impact, 2022). Therefore, through investigating TikTok, it would be fascinating to understand how women and girls present themselves in the wicked problem of sustainability, compared to men and boys, to continue developing our understanding of young people and their interactions alongside feelings towards the sustainability movement.

If found to be a recurrent theme, it would also be interesting to investigate through the concepts of competition and community, understanding if this too disproportionally affects women and girls and how genders are differently affected by these themes in the context of sustainability and the fashion industry.

Additionally, there is further scope to understand how companies are marketing on the site, and how they are using it to manufacture trends, such as Shein Hauls, to tapping into the sustainability echo chambers of TikTok.

7.5. Final Reflections

In conclusion, this research illustrated that the binary depiction of young people as either heroes or villains in the sustainable fashion movement did not effectively portray the reality of young people's behaviour. Instead, it neglected the wider navigation young people take in everyday life that informs their consumption behaviours and activism engagement.

It was also importantly noted that observations made on TikTok often illustrated a theme in wider society, that could not be limited to young people. And, displayed wider pressures and normalisations that have occurred in society to create human behaviours we noted in young people, such as the fundamental desires to feel belonging and superiority.

Therefore, as there continues to be discussions on the sustainability of the fashion industry, it is imperative to not place undue emphasis on the villainization or heroic status of young people. Instead, an evaluation of societal norms and behaviours should be made, to create accountabilities for all, to develop a more positive and productive discussion on the movement towards sustainability in the fashion industry. However, it should also be noted that company's responsibility should not be disregarded as integral when trying to move towards sustainability, as they are the main culprits of creating environmental and ethical destruction.

Chapter 8: Appendix

Intext Operator Searches:

An Intext Operator search can highlight slang, and buzzwords used on the TikTok site. To generate this the following search was done using Google:

site: http://tiktok.com intext: <insert topic>

In the <insert topic> related themes to the research project were inputted, including the words of fashion, brand names, and sustainability.

Through doing the intext search, Google showed results from TikTok of videos and video descriptors that used or were related to the topic searched. This highlighted certain slang that is used on the site and provided indications of what phrases needed to be used on searching TikTok. These phrases, descriptors, and slang were noted.

Site Operator Searches:

Once slang and phrases used on TikTok, relating to fast and sustainable fashion, were understood they needed to be translated into hashtags to generate searches on the Discovery Page of TikTok. Site Operator searches were completed using the following search, on Google:

site: tiktok.com/tag <insert topic>

When completing these searches hashtags are highlighted that use the word inserted into the above search. The search also generates the popularity and uses of the hashtags. Therefore, hashtags were noted that were deemed to be able to provide valuable insight into the research topic.

Chapter 9: References

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475

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