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Fast Fashion: At What Cost?

Fiona Hall-Roulac
Dominican University of California

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Fast Fashion: At What Cost?

By: Fiona Hall-Roulac

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Fiona Hall- Roulac, Candidate Date 5/7/2015

Dr. Chase Clow, Chair Date 5/7/2015

Dr. Harlan Stelmach, Primary Thesis Advisor Date 5/7/15

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Abstract

Fashion has played a large role in society and the production of clothing has greatly changed for American consumers over the past hundred years. I will examine the notion of fast fashion and how these practices have changed how people shop and as a result how workers work. I will examine how some companies are creating transparency by showing their factories, actual prices of the goods, as well as focusing on small locally produced goods and the cost for Americans receiving low cost fast fashion goods. The 20th century marked the industrial revolution where clothing production greatly transformed. It marked a time where people could purchase clothes instead of making garments themselves. In 1911 the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire occurred which launched new mandates for workers, as well as limiting the amount of time children and women were allowed to work. Over one hundred years later the Savar factory collapse in Bangladesh took place and is now known to be the deadliest garment-factory disaster in history. I will compare and contrast the two fires, as well as look at the rights of workers that emerged as a result of these tragedies. This paper will also touch on the ethical implications of fast fashion and whether or not fast fashion is sustainable in the long run.

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Everlane: A Case Study

There are many popular t-shirt companies in the United States, even some that are made in American, such as American Apparel. It was however unheard of in the fashion space to discuss the cost of goods, labor, and markups to the consumer. Michael Preysman, a man with a career in venture capital, started his own brand Everlane in 2010. He did this given that he was frustrated with the lack of advancement in the retail industry coupled with a passion for fantastic design. He felt that customers had the right to know where their goods were coming from, as well as the costs associated with them. It was based on the premise that consumers should have the opportunity to realize the story behind each item.¹ What originally started as a t-shirt company has expanded to include handbags, jackets, and blouses. Currently the company is selling an estimated 30,000 t-shirts a month retailing between \$15 and \$30. To date there are over 120,000 customers and the company is backed by \$3,000,000 in venture capital. Everlane has chosen to specifically market to the “Whole Foods Set” given an interest in high quality and ethically sourced items. This was a perfect marketing tool by choosing a group of people who already were paying premium prices for high quality goods, it would not seem unreasonable at all to pay \$15 for a t-shirt that had been ethically produced. Obviously the company is onto something.²

Black Friday marks one of the largest days of sales for companies. On Black Friday of 2012 Everlane did something unheard of in the retail space. The company chose to be closed on Black Friday. Everlane did this in order to make a point regarding quality over quantity, as well as the impulsive tendencies of American consumers. For

¹ Brittany Shoot. “Chic, Cheap – And Honest.” *Entrepreneur*

² Tozzi J. Selling Ethical Fashion To The Whole Foods Set.” *Bloomberg Businessweek*

many companies Black Friday offers one of the largest days of shopping and as a result the companies make a great deal of money. Another thing that greatly differentiates Everlane from many other companies in the fashion space is that Everlane's business model is not focused exclusively on driving sales, instead focuses on attracting long-term customers. This is another way that Everlane is changing the retail game.³

Sales are very common for retail companies and many stores often are having sales of some sort. What differentiates Everlane from other traditional retailers is that items on the website do not go on sale. Everlane launched a bag called the Petra where to company ordered 1,000 bags and there was a waiting list of nearly 10,000 people to get the bag. The reason the company makes such small orders is to keep the costs manageable for the smaller sized company while avoiding merchandising markdowns, which leads to continuously being sold out of items. It is estimated by the founder Michael Preysman that in a traditional retail space by the time products reach the consumer they have been marked up an estimated 6 to 8 times that of the wholesale cost. According to the Everlane website the Petra bag along with many other items are marked up just twice the wholesale cost. Everlane has been able to clearly build a loyal customer basis by selling out of an item remarkably quickly and having a major waiting list for the item.

Everlane has not only found success with retail sales but with employees as well. Not only does Everlane's CEO have an interesting background in venture capital, the employees of Everlane have a diverse background coming from companies such as Yelp, American Apparel, and J.Crew. This shows that employees find Everlane an interesting

³ Tomio Geron. "Protesting Black Friday, Everlane Shuts Down For Day." *Forbes.Com*

and unique place to work and have left very successful companies to be a part of this company. Currently there are approximately 40 employees at the company. The company has found a great deal of press in magazines such as “Lucky”, “Los Angeles Time, as well as “GQ” and is something that millennials are intrigued greatly with. What is significant about this press is that it comes from fashion magazines, as well as well esteemed newspapers, which shows that not only people in the fashion industry but in the news industry as well find Everlane to be of interest. Everlane is a perfect example of the kind of company creating transparency. The company calls it “radical transparency” where customers are able to see all of the costs that are associated with the item being purchased. It is the philosophy of the company for customers to know the product costs and goes so far as to reveal it to the consumer what the true costs are as well as their markup. Given that the company is exclusively online it avoids the traditional expenses of brick-and-mortar retail businesses, such as rent, utilities, and other costs. The company chose to not markup the traditional retail way and instead passes the savings of not being a brick and mortar company onto the consumers.

Transparency is evident throughout the company’s website. The company spends months to find “the best factories around the world-the same very ones that produce your favorite designer labels” according to their website. Not only does the company visit the factory to originally develop relationships but also visits the factories multiple times to further relationships with the factory owners. Additionally they claim to “require stringent workplace compliancy paperwork.” Interestingly, the company focuses on country expertise in order to get the best quality goods at the best price. For example, leather, which Italy is well known for, is sourced from that country; Asia creates the

cashmere and other woven goods, while the United States manufactures the T-shirts.

Utilizing this business model has been successful for Everlane with revenue at \$12 million for 2013 with an expectation that it will triple the following year as well.⁴

The “radical transparency” is evident through each item on the website. Not only does the company display the “true cost” of an item, as well as materials, labor, and transport, it also shows what a traditional retailer would charge for the same shirt in comparison to Everlane’s price. For example, the women’s cotton v t-shirt is priced on Everlane’s website for \$15. Interestingly the cotton used, 100% Supima cotton, is grown in the United States and then shipped to the mill. Materials for the shirt cost \$3.84, labor accounts for \$3.30, while transport is only \$.11. That totals to a true cost of \$7.25, however Everlane rounded it down to \$7. The company claims that a traditional retailer would charge \$45 for the same tee shirt. On the website the Everlane tells the customer that the factory for the t-shirt is near downtown Los Angeles and owned by Mr. Kim who has over 30 years of experience in the garment industry. While the company fails to mention the exact factory name, a New York Times article profiling Everlane says the factory that produces the t-shirts and sweatshirts are located in Vernon, California. Everlane’s profile for the t-shirt and sweatshirt factory describes it by saying, “we were impressed by the workmanship here and the environment created for the factory workers. We visit this factory three times a week to check up on production and quality control pieces.” Clearly the environments for the workers, as well as the workmanship quality are paramount to the company. Without these visits the company would be unable to ensure that the factory employees and the craftsmanship are up to par. They are creating a

⁴ Brittany Shoot. “Chic, Cheap – And Honest.” *Entrepreneur*

change in the supply chain by having a constant presence at the factory to ensure quality control and further relationships with the factory owner as well as the workers.

As discussed earlier, the Petra bag was a major success for the company. In order to create the item the company used a consultant who worked with LVHM, the French luxury goods multinational conglomerate Moët Hennessey Louis Vuitton, to pinpoint four factories to create bags of the quality Everlane desired. Ultimately, the company went with a Venetian factory that manufactures for luxury global brands as well. Specific factory names are not disclosed as it could tarnish their reputation with their luxury brand counterparts. Openly Everlane places an importance on the quality of merchandise that customers receive and additionally the research the company does leads one to believe that the items purchased are of great quality.⁵ The company does not remain completely transparent by failing to mention the factory name and says the reason for doing so is in order to protect the factory's reputation. While this is an interesting argument, failing to do so does not live up to the company's motto of "radical transparency" and in order to be truly transparent I feel that it would be necessary to provide not only the name but also the location of each factory used. This would allow in my opinion for the company to be able to use the term "radical transparency" without any opposition regarding the level of transparency the company exhibits.

Not only does Everlane have a sense of social responsibility by ensuring the workers are treated well, the company also has a philanthropic side to it. Recently the company matched \$10,000 to be donated to the Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund, a fund

⁵ "Everlane's Take On Supply And Demand." *WWD: Women's Wear Daily* 206.131

that disperses money to the families of the victims of the Rana Plaza factory collapse.⁶ Clearly Everlane is not just concerned with the bottom line but also regarding social responsibility. Everlane is essentially going against these large factories with poor working conditions, as seen in Rana Plaza, and donating to the families of victims displays the humanitarian nature of the company.

Over the past few years the company has greatly expanded to offer a greater variety of products. In March of 2014 the company launched two styles of women's pants, a slouchy trouser as well as a slim trouser. For women the company offers various t-shirts, both heavyweight, cotton, as well as various neck styles. Also, the company sells tank tops, silk short and long sleeved blouses, as well as sweaters and sweatshirts. The company expanded to outerwear to include a trench coat. Accessories include leather tote bags, clutches, loafers, sandals, wallets, sweaters, belts, as well as weekender bags and backpacks. It is quite impressive that a company that launched only five years ago as a t-shirt company has expanded into a full-fledged brand. This just goes to show the success of the company as well as the true customers that Everlane has gained.

Not only have people with a background in business started companies to go against fast fashion brands there are also companies that celebrities are backing to do the same thing. While it is important to note that some people may question the sincerity of the celebrity's involvement, it appears that the companies chosen to discuss not only have a good mission, but also a genuine involvement by these celebrities.

⁶ Brittany Shoot. "Chic, Cheap – And Honest." *Entrepreneur* 42.9

What is Fast Fashion and the Implications Of It?

In order to grasp the significance of this issue having a definition of fast fashion is critical. It a term that is fairly new and refers to designs that move quickly from runways to stores, specifically those that are extremely low cost with a great deal of stores. In order to capture the latest trends the designs are often copied from high-end runways and diluted to these retail stores.⁷ The value proposition for fast fashion is the accessible price point with the companies aligning their operations and management systems to satisfy potential customers by keeping prices low and the styles of clothes up to date. Fast fashion firms do not release collections timed with specific seasons, and instead work item by item to release items and as a result items are updates weekly if not daily. This distinguishes fast fashion from the traditional seasonal model of retailers by releasing collections just twice a year, allowing fast fashion retailers the chance to have a much larger variety of products. The sped up production and bypassing the need to show collections to department stores differentiates fast fashion from traditional retailers. For a traditional retailer the design to distribution process takes 21 months, where for fast fashion firms the process is greatly expedited and only takes 4 months.⁸

While fast fashion is fairly new already here are giants in the fast fashion sphere. According to research by UCLA, the two online sources most associated with fast fashion are H&M and Zara. “Fashion and quality at the best price” is the business concept Swedish retailer H&M claims, the second largest retailer in terms of sales. Zara, part of Inditex with eight brands, has presence in 87 markets, 6,300 stores, making it the largest

⁷ Michael Angelo Cortex. “Fast Fashion Quadrangle: An Analysis.”

⁸ Felipe Caro and Victor Martinez-de-Albeniz. “How Fast Fashion Works: Can It Work For You, Too?”

retail apparel in terms of sales. Fast fashion firms have two things in common; one is that they are considered specialty retail stores with both an online and a brick and mortar presence. The second is that they target low-to-mid price range for those under 40.⁹ By pursuing a fairly large demographic at low-to-mid price range it allows for a great deal of potential customers.

Through this paper it will become apparent that there is an ethical question that will be raised through the discussion of the Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the Dhaka building collapse. While Americans search for low cost clothing items they may not necessarily think of the hidden costs associated with these low priced items. The hidden cost is the risk that the workers face by creating these garments so that Americans can pay a quarter of the price for a shirt that they would pay for an ethically sourced item, which furthers the American consumerist society. Low priced items allows for fast fashion customers to purchase more goods than ever before. The other ethical issue that is raised is should Americans even be purchasing these items, there is already a major consumerist society that defines America. Is this a thought that goes through the mind of the American consumer when they purchase these low cost goods? Would Americans still purchase these fast fashion items if they were aware that the workers who produced the items were treated unfairly?

It is now possible for Americans to pay less for clothing items than ever before. The rise in fast fashion companies in the United States, specifically Forever 21, H&M and Zara, have made it possible for Americans to pay much less for items than they had in the past. It is now possible to get a t-shirt for \$5, jeans for less than \$20 and a dress for

⁹ Felipe Caro and Victor Martinez-de-Albeniz. "Who's Fast Fashion and Who's Not."

\$20 as well. While Forever 21 is often regarded as the lowest price of the fast fashion companies, the prices at H&M and Zara are still relatively cheaper than many other traditional retailers such as Macy's and Nordstrom that may carry similar style of items as the fast fashion companies, at a higher price and often a higher quality. Ethical issues that surround the notion of fast fashion are both the working conditions for those who are creating these low cost goods, as well as that these items are furthering the consumerist and impulsive society of America.

There has been a backlash to some degree when it comes to fast fashion. Companies have emerged that are now either supporting local artisans, or are creating "transparent" companies where the customers are able to research the treatment of the factory workers and look at what the factories are like. This allows for the consumer to learn about exactly where their items come from before purchasing them while the same cannot be said for the fast fashion retailers. Success of these new companies is proof that the American consumer does in fact care about the quality of goods, as well as the experience of the workers who are producing these goods. If more companies like these are created it will show the industry that perhaps fast fashion is not the way to success and instead they may shift their minds towards more ethically produced garments. While at this time fast fashion and ethically produced garments are not mutually exclusive perhaps in the future they can be.

The Little Market: A Case Study

The Little Market differs from Everlane in a few ways. It is a company that was started by a celebrity, as well as one that focuses on artisans and producing authentic goods from their culture, predominately developing nations, as opposed to creating goods

that have been designed in America. This company was chosen to showcase how working with artisans internationally to produce goods to be sold to Americans is a legitimate and a successful business model. A prime example of a celebrity that has created a truly viable business through helping women and utilizing artisans is Lauren Conrad. This is not just a company where a celebrity slaps his or her name on the company, in fact both Lauren and her partner Hannah have spent a great deal of time working and researching to create the company. The company The Little Market was started by Lauren Conrad and her business partner Hannah Skvarla, a Human Rights Watch Member, to sell authentic, artisanal goods online. They source artisan cooperatives across the world to sell handmade goods on their online store. Lauren Conrad started as a celebrity on the MTV reality television show “Laguna Beach” then the spinoff show “The Hills” and today she is a fashion designer with her own company Paper Crown and a collection LC By Lauren Conrad available at Kohl’s. Hannah Skvarla has a great deal of experience traveling and working in the developing world with projects through CARE in Uganda, Landmine Survivors Network in Cambodia and Vietnam among others. In order to source products for The Little Market she traveled to artisans in Bolivia, Guatemala, Nepal, India, Mexico, Peru, and Morocco. Today the company is smaller than many other retail companies with a team of eight, according to their website.

The idea for The Little Market occurred on a trip to Africa with Lauren Conrad and Hannah Skvarla when they decided to create a project to focus on women. Lauren Conrad told *InStyle* magazine, “The concept is that we work with artisans all over the world, and we focus on women and we focus on areas where women face bigger challenges.” Purchases that consumers of The Little Market make are directly benefiting

these women and helping them to raise their standard of living. Given that these women often have small-scale production, are located in remote areas, or lack the technical support, these issues can be helped by working with The Little Market as opposed to attempting to sell their crafts independently. What the first world wants shapes the developing world and oftentimes those goods that are wanted in the first world are produced in developing nations. Additionally, Global Goods Partners helps the artisan groups by providing professional development in order to build the capacity of their production in a manner that is sustainable. Interestingly, The Little Market measures the success of the company through positive economic and social impact on the artisans as well as their communities. This is an entirely different business model from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory that employed various techniques to increase productivity and also put the workers in danger. Additionally, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory had no interest in supporting the workers, instead placed an importance exclusively on the bottom line and that ultimately led to the destruction of the company.

The mission of The Little Market is simple and direct; “our mission is to build sustainable partnerships with artisans around the world, by connecting them with customers through an online marketplace. We seek to empower women artisans to rise above poverty and support their families.” Countries that the company receives items from include Bolivia, Ethiopia, India, Nepal, and Ghana, among others. Similarly to companies discussed above, the company has received a great deal of press from *InStyle*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *Teen Vogue* among others. Perhaps the amount of press was a result of Lauren Conrad’s celebrity, however the success of the sustainability of the

business is not. Press in these publications help to validate to the fashion and business sets, also it marks a sign of approval from the fashion industry.

A video produced by the company shows Lauren Conrad and her business partners learning from the women who makes the candles for The Little Market as well as what the women do every day to create the products. What is important about this company is that it allows for women in developing nations to create sustainable businesses for themselves, while partnering with a company that allows for their products to be sold outside of the artisan's country. This allows for their businesses to be larger and possibly more successful than they could have been independently. Additionally this is a mutually beneficial partnership for the artisans and The Little Market. They are working together by creating products that customers for The Little Market will want while also remaining true to the artisan's craft.

What differentiates The Little Market from other retail startups is the variety of products the website sells. Accessories such as jewelry, journals, scarves, and wallets are sold. Also the company has a vast assortment of bags from cosmetic, to travel, and satchels. Additionally the company had expanded into home with items such as candles, blankets, trays, and trunks. The company has even gone into the children's space with items such as baby bibs, stuffed animals, and knitwear. A reason for such a vast diversity in product is to attract a wide customer base. The person who is purchasing stuffed animals is not necessarily the same customer who is purchasing clutches. This diversification is very smart because the company is not pigeonholing themselves into one category. Not only will the ethically conscious consumer shop from The Little Market, but the fashion conscious one will as well.

Not only are the products greatly diverse but also the items have a variety of price points. When one clicks on the link for a product the price of the item comes up along with a product description and most importantly information about the artisan group that produced the item. For example, The Little Market sells a Blue & White Felt Garland for \$10.00 that has been produced by Friends Handicrafts in Nepal. Friends Handicrafts not only trains but also employs female head-of-households to fight urban poverty through the art of felting. By working at Friends Handicrafts women are able to provide for their families. Also the company provides income generation programs and skills guidance for their artists. One of the website's highest priced items is the Overnight Bag, meant for traveling, that retails for \$240.00. This variety of price points allows for customers to choose items that are \$10 or under to over \$200. Also this allows for various types of customers to produce items at different price points, which is very important in a business. This item is handmade by Maya Traditions in Guatemala. In the highlands of Guatemala the nonprofit Maya Traditions helps indigenous women to access health care and formal education through weaving. Not only has the program helped to reach more than 500 families it also started to offer literacy workshops in 2013 and now offers two weekly literacy trainings.

Another imperative aspect of the company is that all items are fair trade. According to the World Fair Trade Organization under the Charter of Fair Trade Principles, "Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trade conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – particularly in the South. Fair Trade

Organizations, backed by consumers, are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.” There are specific components of free trade that are important to review: there is no forced or child labor, commitment to economic empowerment for women, non-discrimination, gender equality, as well as safe working conditions.¹⁰ These things go directly against the Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the Dhaka building collapse, which will be discussed later, by offering safe working conditions, no forced or child labor, as well as the commitment to economic empowerment.

Fair trade creates a vast array of opportunities for producers of goods. Across 70 countries there are more than 1.4 million Fair trade workers and famers. Just in 2004 alone, there was an increase by over 80% for the market for fair trade merchandise. From over 400 companies and 30,000 retailers fair trade goods are available. The purchase of fair trade items allows for the consumer to vote with their dollars for a more just and equitable world. Fair trade allows people to use their money to vastly improve the lives of people from various countries around the world. Not only do fair trade goods allow for people to improve the lives of others around the world, it allows consumers to purchase unique items that cannot be found at a fashion company such as Forever 21. The diversity of products provides a new opportunity for customers, while most importantly creating jobs for the artisans.¹¹

A new way to purchase items through The Little Market has helped to greatly increase the potential customers. Recently The Little Market created another way for customers to purchase goods that they want. It introduced a wedding and gift registry.

¹⁰ “Our Values” – The Little Market. *The Little Market Our Values*.

¹¹ “Our Values” – The Little Market. *The Little Market Our Values*.

This is beneficial because people who were not aware of The Little Market before are able to find and learn about it through the couple's registry. Additionally, this helps with more sales for the artisans that work with The Little Market. The Little Market partnered with MyRegistry.com while allows for customers to select items directly through the website to be added to a registry. Why this was more beneficial than The Little Market creating their own wedding registry is that it allows them to utilize another website's system and does not force them to have to create the backend for a registry on their website which would be time consuming and costly as well. Additionally, this will greatly help increase the size of the business.

Preserve: A Case Study

Another company, also launched by a celebrity, focuses on artisanal goods. The rational behind choosing to highlight this company in the paper is that it is a company based in America and works at this point exclusively with American artisans. Given that this company works with American artisans it showcases the fact that selling made in America goods is successful and potentially a long-term business. Founded by actress Blake Lively in 2014 the website aims to highlight "made in America" goods. Similar to The Little Market, Preserve partners with artisans, however unlike The Little Market, all of the artisans are in the United States. While the company notes that they eventually hope to partner with Central America their current focus is on the United States. While the company clearly notes that it is in fact a for profit company, they are making strides to help improves lives. Their first goal is to donate within the United States and it is for 5,000 meals for children, 2,700 sweatshirts for children, as well as 2,000 blankets. The company has partnered with Covenant House to help and protect homeless youths. This

for profit company is making strides to better the lives of Americans, primarily marginalized children. Having a philanthropic model to the company lines up with creating a better world for individuals.

Another differentiating factor between Preserve and The Little Market is that Preserve's price points are higher. This is because Preserve sells items such as coats, travel bags as well as food and home items. While The Little Market's customer is most likely a woman, Preserve offers a men's section as well as kids and baby, home, taste and accessory section. Having such a wide variety of items allows for Preserve to be a one-stop shop for customers. They are able to purchase a winter coat, but also a yoga mat as well as dill pickles. Being a one-stop shop for consumers is smart because it allows for them to find all things in one spot.

Having the founder of Preserve be Blake Lively, a well-known and popular celebrity, has been greatly beneficial for the company. A women's item that has been very popular on Preserve is a trench coat that Blake Lively was seen recently wearing. This coat is handmade in New York City by fashion designer Lindsey Thornburg and is made of Pendleton wool retailing for \$1,350. One the bottom of the webpage for this coat there is a biography for Lindsey Thornburg discussing her background in design as well as her inspiration behind her collection. A commitment to quality, as well as local community is something that both Preserve and artisan Lindsey Thornburg seem to take to heart. The coat described above is one of the most expensive items on the Preserve website. Not only does the website sell aspirational pieces, which further the notion of Americans consuming a great deal of goods, it also sells items that are much more reasonable in price. For example, savory ketchup by the brand Molonay Tubildeborst is

sold on Preserve for \$7. While \$7 for a bottle of ketchup may sound pricier than a Heinz bottle of ketchup it is handmade and made in the United States. Chef Nick Coe, from Los Angeles, created the ketchup using recipes from the early 1800's and the ketchup he creates is different from the traditional Heinz bottle. His ketchup is more savory than sweet and uses a variety of spices. What is important about this is that Preserve is aiming to focus on smaller batch artisanal goods instead of items that can be purchased at big box retailers. This allows for consumers to choose items that are not found at other stores and to also help artisans that are creating items that are different from the traditional goods seen in large companies.

Shirtwaist Factory Fire

In order to understand why the companies discussed above came about it is necessary to have a grasp on production of goods for Americans in the 20th century. The Shirtwaist Factory Fire highlighted the problems that workers faced when producing a high number of goods to please the American consumer. New York is known for many things, one of them being the garment district. One of New York's most infamous factories was started by Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, both of whom immigrated to the United States from Russia. The men met in the New York garment industry and they would soon start a partnership together and be known as New York's "Shirtwaist Kings". While Harris was the tailor with experience in immigrant sweatshops and popular fashions and designers, Blanck focused on the business side of the factory.¹² This allowed for each of them to focus on their skills while creating a profitable business.

¹² "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks,

A new garment helped the men obtain great success. The shirtwaist, a new item for the twentieth century, became popular with the expanding New York City women workers. It differed from the traditional Victorian style bodice because it was more liberating and roomier for women. Blanck traveled to various stores and potential buyers that would carry the shirtwaist taking on the role of the salesman, while Harris knew how to execute the garment to be cost effective, as well as the machinery necessary to do so. New technology at the time, the mechanical sewing machines, increased production astronomically with them being five times faster than sewing machines that were operated by a foot pedal.¹³

Given the newfound success of the company it was possible for them to expand. Blanck and Harris moved the company to the Asch building in 1902 located in Greenwich Village. To decrease chatter among the workers and grow efficiency Harris designed the layout of the sewing floor. Given the success of the company in 1906 the company also expanded to the eight floor of the building. As a result of the accomplishment of the business both Blanck and Harris were able to live more lavish lifestyles and they moved to brownstones on the Upper West Side from confined apartments located on the Lower East Side. They were so prosperous that they were able to open additional shirtwaist factories in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. It is evident that these men were able to take advantage of the shirtwaist trend and create a business from the shirtwaist.¹⁴

Success for the men and the company continued. The year 1908 marked an important year for Blanck and Harris. It marked the \$1 million sale mark with Blanck and

¹³ "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks,

¹⁴ "Triangle Fire and the ILGWU." *Cornell University*.

Harris purchasing an additional floor of the Asch building. Over 1,000 shirtwaists were produced a day, making the Triangle Factory the leading manufacturer of blouses in New York. The factory still was forced to compete with over 11,000 other textile manufactures in New York City. To maintain their profit level it was necessary to produce the largest quantity by making the cheapest shirtwaist. The simple economics of an increase in production leads to a decrease in cost came in to play. Workers were forced to become even more efficient and had to work many hours in exchange for poor pay. Precautions to increase productivity were placed on the workers, such as having a foreman monitor the workers, predominately female immigrants, during their shifts as well as checking their bags as they left the factory. The secondary exit to the factory was locked as another safeguard against theft. All of these measures were put into place due to Blanck and Harris's concern regarding efficiency.¹⁵

The women working in the factory were increasingly dissatisfied with their poor working conditions. Finally as a result of discontent the shirtwaist workers went on a strike in November of 1909 and it even continued into 1910. To "solve" the issue of the strike Blanck and Harris hired private policemen to cause disarray and beat the picketers. Clearly it is evident that the concern for the workers was not at the forefront of their business model, while the bottom line was. From the strike productivity started hurting profits. Blanck and Harris were concerned not only about the decrease in profits but also of the workers banding together and unionizing which they thought would decrease their control over the level of productivity. Finally an agreement was made between Blanck, Harris and the workers for higher wages and shorter shifts. Workers worked thirteen-hour

¹⁵ "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks

days with a lunch break lasting only half an hour, resulting in \$6 a week salary.

Approximately 700 people were employed by Blanck and Harris, primarily women ranging from 15 to 23 years old.¹⁶ This seemed to solve the problem for Blanck and Harris.

The issues between the workers and owners were just starting. Thirteen months after the strike ended, the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire occurred on March 25, 1911. It transpired at 4:45 in the afternoon by a person dropping a cigarette on a pile of rubbish on the eighth floor of the factory and the rubbish caught on fire. Both Blanck and Harris were able to escape by being warned about the fire on a phone and the eighth floor workers escaped through the stairs. The women working in the factory on the ninth floor at the time became aware of the fire due to the smoke and went to the exit door that was locked. The doors led to different parts of the floor and opened the wrong way. In an attempt to push open the door, women piled and fell on top of each other trying to use their weight to force the door open. Even though the fire department arrived quickly, the ladders only went to the sixth floor and the women were on ninth floor of the building. Nets that were used to catch the women while they jumped out the building broke and the women plummeted to their death. In the fire there were 146 women killed. The workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory were young immigrants, mainly of Italian and Jewish descent.¹⁷

Prior to 9/11 the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire was considered to be the worst workplace disaster. To maintain their image as a reputable manufacturer the owners started an advertising campaign. Beyond that they went so far as to have reporters from

¹⁶ "Sweatshops and Strikes Before 1911." *Cornell University*.

¹⁷ "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks,

the *New York Times* defend to the public that the men had taken every precaution necessary regarding the factory fire. Clearly the owners were concerned with their reputation and had a great deal to lose given that they were the largest producer of shirtwaists in New York City. Not only was their reputation on the line, but their business as well.

Shirtwaist Factory Fire Trial

As a result of the tragedy the public was up in arms and major changes in the fashion industry would happen as a result of the accident. It was imperative to the public that the owners to be held accountable for the deaths of the factory workers and as a result public outrage persisted. On April 11, 1911 the owners were indicted on manslaughter in the first and second degree for seven counts. In order to avoid potential jail time, the owners not only paid the \$25,000 bail but also hired Max Staur, one of the most expensive lawyers in New York at the time. The trial began in December of 1911 and only took three weeks. It was argued that if the door had been left open the workers would have been able to escape and the tragedy could have been prevented. It was the argument of the prosecution that unlocked doors would have resulted in the workers surviving. Additionally the locked door violated section 80 of the Labor Code mandate. After hearing testimonies from over one hundred witnesses Blanck and Harris were acquitted of all of the charges against them because the jury felt that the prosecution was unable to prove the owners knew the doors were locked at the time of the fire. It took less than two hours for the jury to deliberate. Shockingly as a result of the fire, Blanck and Harris ended up profiting \$400 per victim, collected \$60,000 more in insurance than the fire actually cost them. Each worker received just a week's worth of wages from Blanck

and Harris. Blanck and Harris paid each of the victim's families in the fire a week of wages as a settlement.

It was necessary after the court case ended to rebuild the company. The owners faced challenges like getting sued in 1912 due to the fact that the company was unable to pay a water bill of \$206, as well as having revenue from the business be used to pay off the expensive lawyer that Blanck and Harris hired. Even after these struggles the Triangle Shirtwaist Company moved to larger location in 1913. Trouble still followed them when a factory inspection found hazardous conditions similar to the Shirtwaist Factory location where the fire was. The largest irony the company faced was when they were caught sewing fake Consumer's League labels in the garments, labels that indicated the garment had been manufactured in safe working conditions.¹⁸ Given all of these issues it is not surprising that 1918 marked the closing of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company as a result of the fire which resulted in many people not wanting to purchase items, getting sued, as well as passing along fraudulent goods.

How the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Changed Workers' Rights

Undoubtedly the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire was terribly, however as a result of the fire many changes were made regarding laws for factory safety. Union movements in the United States grew as a result of the fire as well. Additionally municipal codes were amended to incorporate safety precautions.¹⁹ The results of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire helped to create the basis of many modern labor laws that are in place today.

¹⁸ "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks

¹⁹ Florence Denmark Janet Sigal. *Violence Against Girls And Women: International Perspectives*. (2013).

At the Metropolitan Opera House a major meeting occurred where a petition was generated to create an investigative commission, which would become the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, created June 30, 1911. The commission was given permission to investigate fire hazards, in addition to conditions in factories that negatively affected the welfare of workers. From reports from the Commission there were many bills passed regarding child labor and hour limitations, as well as fire prevention. In less than three years the commission passed 36 laws. Interestingly this period of time after the fire was known as the “golden era of remedial factory legislation.”²⁰

Another integral issue that was addressed in legislation was the amount of hours that workers were allowed to work. In a *New York Times* article from October 1912, there was discussion regarding shorter factory hours as an amendment to the State labor laws that were made after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. The law allowed for boys and women to be employed overtime one hour a day as long as the total hours that week do not reach over fifty-four. Additionally, factories could employ women for ten-hour shifts for five days if the factory does not keep the women at work for longer than four hours on the sixth working day. Also, it was completely prohibited that women and children work seven days a week. Perhaps most importantly women and boys cannot work over fifty-four hours in a week.²¹

²⁰ “Shorter Factory Hours: Law Forbids Working Women and Boys More than 54 Hours a Week.” *PBS*. *PBS*,

²¹ “*PBS*. Shorter Factory Hours: Law Forbids Working Women and Boys More than 54 Hours a Week.”

While these laws may seem unrealistic to people today they did in fact pave a way for workers to work more realistic shifts, while not facing dangerous working conditions. Without these laws it is unknown as to what working conditions would be like in America today. These laws provided a framework for employees and workers, while creating safer working environment. Safer working conditions greatly helped the conditions of factory workers, mainly immigrant women who most likely would have been too afraid to speak up regarding poor working conditions.

Bangladesh Background

The Rana Plaza factory collapse has been compared to the Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Similarly to the Shirtwaist Factory Fire the damage was immense, however the factory collapse was fairly recent. It was included in this paper in order to showcase that factory standards perhaps have not changed as much in the past one hundred years as one would expect. In order to truly understand the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh it is necessary to examine how the country became the garment exporter that it is today. The 1980s marked the beginning of Bangladesh becoming a powerhouse exporter through various government methods. An emphasis was put on economic growth via FDI (foreign direct investment) as well as exports and the creation of EPZs (export processing zones). These things helped to open up Bangladesh to the rest of the world as a potential importer for other countries. Additionally the government allowed for duty-free imports on raw garment materials and machinery. These proved as further signs to other countries that Bangladesh was ready, willing and able to export garments. Agriculture had been the previous method for poor Bangladeshis to make a living, however many faced issues with

agriculture to make ends meet due to an increase in the costs of fertilizer and powers. It appeared that working in the garment industry could be the next method of survival.

With the creation of factories the factory owners were very smart and chose to tap into a previously ignored labor force, rural women. Prior to the 1980s, outside of the cities in Muslim areas women would do agricultural work that was predominantly indoors as supplemental income to the husband's income. For women who had had very little prior work opportunities the chance to have a job that was paid marked a major opportunity for them. As Martha Chen expert on Bangladesh at the Harvard Kennedy School said, "It was a classic situation of having all this surplus labor in rural areas. You had this huge pool of women who'd never done paid work, so they were willing to work for nothing. There was an extraordinary setup for it."²² These women had no knowledge of what appropriate working conditions looked like and what fair treatment of workers meant.

Rana Plaza Factory Collapse

After a fire as large as the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire it would be expected that a factory disaster of that magnitude would never happen again. A little more than 100 years after the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire occurred a major factory collapse occurred in the capital of Bangladesh, the Dhaka Area known as Rana Plaza. This collapse occurred on April 24, 2013 where over one thousand people died, 1,133 children, men and women in total, along with over 800 children left orphaned, as well as over 2,500 people injured. This factory collapse has been regarded as the most deadly garment industry disaster.²³

²² Dave Jamieson . "How Bangladesh Garment Industry Traded Workplace Safety For Jobs." *The Huffington Post*.

²³ Dolly Jones. "How The World Has Changed Since Rana Plaza." (2014)

It is believed that one of the reasons that the factory collapsed was due to the fact that the garment industry had grown substantially in the past twenty years and that it is impossible for the government to not only monitor but to also enforce safety standards in the workplace. Additionally it is key to note that the government has chosen to look the other way with regards to issues such as poorly built and illegally run factories, major mistreatment of workers as well as extremely low pay. Given these issues, Bangladesh is attractive to retailers and clothing brands that are international, predominately fast fashion firms. The country lacks strict enforcement of health, labor laws, as well as safety.

The investigation shows that not only security guards, but managers as well, alerted the workers that the fire was in fact part of a normal fire drill when the fire occurred. Unfortunately the location of the factory, in a narrow alleyway, made it so that firefighters could not reach the flames, according to a police investigation. Again, this mirrors the Shirtwaist Factory Fire with the employees being improperly warned as well as the fire departments facing issues.

The country Bangladesh is the second largest garment industry in the world, after China. Bangladesh provides a great deal of clothing for Western retailers, fast fashion companies in particular. Primarily Europe and the United States are the importers of these goods from Bangladesh. This industry in Bangladesh employs over 4 million Bangladeshis. \$20 billion is the amount of money that Bangladesh makes as a garment exporter however the Rana Plaza factory failed to have emergency exits. These all point back to the problem of there being a thirst for cheaper goods, and how poverty has risen from this desire with unlivable wages for the poor workers.

Punishment for Factory in Bangladesh

The significance of this is that it marks the first time that the country has prosecuted factory owners in the garment industry. On December 22 the police filed homicide charges for thirteen individuals, as well as the six people who fled. A year after the Bangladesh fire occurred a Bangladesh court issued arrest warrants for four employees and two garment factory owners. Owner Delwar Hossain and his wife Mahmauda Akter are among some of those who faced arrest warrants.

Refayet Ullah, the mayor Savar, was suspended due to his involvement in granting the permits for building the Rana Plaza. His office had allowed Sohel Rana, the businessman behind Rana Plaza, to construct the Plaza without the mandatory safety permits from the municipal body of Dhaka. Additionally Sohel Rana has been arrested as well. Sohel Rana, a prominent man, had many other buildings in the area and had been built with the local council permission, however this time he did not wait for the permit given the extended amount of time it takes to go through the council to get the permits issued.²⁴

Strides To Improve Working Conditions in “Global South”

In the Global South it is a very difficult place for workers to work. The issues that workers face include environments with uncontained contaminants, unsafe buildings, low wages, as well as long working hours. For over twenty-nine years Bangladesh fortunately has had the Bangladesh’s National Garment Workers’ Federation working to help create both a fair living wage as well as decent working conditions for Bangladeshi garment workers. This organization plays a major role helping push pro-worker legislation as well

²⁴ Syed Al- Mahmood. “Mayor Suspended In Disaster’s Wake.” (2013)

as protecting workers while negotiations take place with profit-driven stakeholders. In 2011 the organization helped create the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Agreement. This proposed that a team would be created of inspectors who were entirely independent to ensure working environments were safe. Major manufactures denied wanting to partake in it given the amount of capital needed to fund such a venture. After the Savar collapse these factories are reconsidering. Companies such as Mango, H&M, Primark and Matalan have already signed the agreement due to a great deal of public stress. H&M, Mango, Primark, and Matalan are all fast fashion companies. Additionally Inditex, the company that owns Zara, signed the agreement as well.²⁵

Bangalore marks a major factory area in Bangladesh. In the city of Bangalore there are 500,000 garment works and nearly 90 percent of them are women. Issues that these workers face are poor health care, impossible quotas the workers are expected to make, anti-union employers, as well as a variety of responsibilities these women must deal with outside of their job, such as caring for their families. All of these things make it hard for the workers to get together and organize a union.

Resources, however small, are present for these women. Interestingly an NGO named Nunnade was started as a micro-savings organization yet has transformed and works to empower women regarding workplace rights, as well as functions like a union would. Organizations such as these help to empower women to find a voice, however it is necessary for them to receive more help to ensure that these women receive fair

²⁵ Josephine D'Allant. "Five Ways to Improve Working Conditions in the Global South." *The Huffington Post*.

working conditions as well as a living wage. Without these things it seems it could be possible for another incident like the Savar Fire mirrored in the future.²⁶

Fashion: How Sustainable Is It?

Everlane emerged to fill a void in American fashion, a company that is well priced, offers information regarding the factories where the goods were produced, as well as pricing information. It shook up the industry and did something that had never done before. This can be regarded as a major change in the American consumer culture, encouraging people to purchase fewer goods but of higher quality, as well as the chance for people to know the true prices of goods. I argue that Everlane's core competency has the potential to drastically change how customers shop and how companies produce goods. Everlane is essentially challenging other firms to do what they are doing, displaying the true cost of goods and markups which had previously never been done. If others shift to this direction it will allow for customers to be better aware regarding the true cost of goods and make a conscious decision as to whether or not they want to encourage a company that is doing this. While it remains to be seen as to whether other firms will be able to do what Everlane does it opens the dialogue between consumers and companies, which had not existed before. Whether or not Everlane is sustainable long term is hard to predict, however so far their success indicates that the company has the potential to become a full fledged successful brand with an international presence.

The sustainability of fast fashion is also something that must be considered. How long can fast fashion last with the amount of goods that are being produced, as well as the poor wages those workers earn? It is my belief that fast fashion will remain as long as

²⁶ Josephine D'Allant. "Five Ways to Improve Working Conditions in the Global South." *The Huffington Post*.

there are customers who are purchasing from these firms and at this moment it appears as if fast fashion is not going anywhere in the near future. Additionally as long as the labor is cheap enough for these firms they will remain successful because by paying the workers low salaries it allows the firms to charge very little while still making money. Another aspect that has kept fast fashion sustainable up until this point has been the price of raw materials. If the prices of these raw materials increase, in turn it will force the firms to charge more for their products. It is my belief that there are great deal of variables when considering the sustainability of fast fashion and if one variable shifts it will in turn greatly change fast fashion, primarily the price point which I believe is the most attractive aspect of fast fashion items.

While the companies as discussed above are making strides to improve the quality of goods that Americans are receiving, while at the same time making them feel better about their purchases, is it really a step in the right direction? America is known for being a consumerist society with people always wanting to have the hot new item. Fast fashion has fueled that craving for Americans because people are able to purchase a new trend at a low price, seemingly a win-win situation. However, I argue this is not the case. While these people are purchasing low cost goods, ultimately they will be tossed aside as soon as the next hot new item comes into the stores. When will this pattern stop? It appears as if the companies discussed earlier are attempting to create products that we ultimately have more of an attachment to due to the ethical production means. These companies are still furthering the notion of the American consumer purchasing a great deal of goods. While it is undoubtedly better to purchase goods that people are making a living wage producing, these still are things that ultimately we do not need. Is it necessary to purchase

a \$15 t-shirt because it was made in America, or gourmet ketchup, or even a hand woven bag? No it is not, however these companies are all successful by doing just that. They have found a niche market, consumers who want to care, however at the end of the day these people are still in fact purchasing more and more goods. Will these new boutique online retailers become the next fast fashion for American consumers? Only time will tell.

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