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**Author: Helen Powell**

**Spirals, Spikes and Spinning Wheels: Temporal models challenging the sustainability agenda in relation to fast fashion consumption.**

**Abstract:**

Fast fashion has become a subject of interest to politicians as they grapple with the development of a sustainability strategy. To date the agenda has largely been informed by an examination of production methodologies and techniques documenting the rapid turnover of trends, the speed and efficiency of the production process and the lack of socially cohesive labour practices this consistently engenders. Whilst governments seek to raise awareness and begin to generate initiatives to tackle the environmental fall out of fast fashion, this paper turns its attention to the temporal patterns of consumer behaviour and why such a high percentage of what we buy is readily discarded soon after point of purchase. All stages in this linear model of consumption, it is argued, are shaped by a very specific relationship to time that ultimately informs our buying habits. Utilising the work of the philosopher A.N. Whitehead and adopting a more psychosocial approach to fashion consumption, this paper recognises that even when purposefully seeking to consume sustainably, a greater need to align our use of time with a results-driven mind set locates the acquisition of something new as a highly achievable goal. As a consequence, rather than positioning the rationale for fashion purchases in the context of conspicuous consumption and emulation, here it functions to mitigate a lack of temporal control in other areas of our lives. In response, it is proposed that any successful attempts at tackling the problems associated with fast fashion must also seek to understand the temporal dynamics of consumption. For whilst governments’ attention is turned to ways to reduce the environmental impact associated with the production of clothing, increasing consumer demand derived from ‘neophilia’ (Booker, 1970) will negate and indeed overturn any successes achieved. The conclusion will therefore suggest that promotional culture has a duty to explore ways in which it might engender greater emotional attachments to what we own. Future research into brand messaging, exploring the consequences of placing emphasis on quality over quantity and a subsequent potential deepening of a sense of brand loyalty, is also recommended as a way forward.

**Keywords**: circular economy; fast fashion; temporality; Whitehead; sustainability; consumption; selfies.

This paper emerges as a response to increased global attention towards climate change whereby greenhouse gas emissions are a product of a distinctly extractive economy. However, as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2019) has noted, whilst emphasis has been placed on addressing the “transition to renewable energy, complemented by energy efficiency” this does not tackle the remaining 45% of emissions that come from the production of everyday items including clothing. In February 2019 a House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee reported its findings in *Fixing Fashion: Clothing Consumption and Sustainability* and highlighted the excessive waste arising out of a business model that is aimed at consumers who want to change their wardrobe on a regular, trend driven basis, which is offered to them at pocket money prices and made from single fibre materials that cannot be recycled. The report concluded that ‘the fashion industry has marked its own homework for too long’ and that a ‘new economic model for fashion’ is required (2019: 3). During Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s first PMQs in the House of Commons he was forced to respond to Mary Creagh (Wakefield, Labour) on the issue of fast fashion. Specifically, how he would address the impact the reality TV show *Love Island* was having on the consumption of cheap beachwear being sold on the High Street for £1 (Hansard, 2019). From charities to lobbying bodies a consensus arises around the failings of the temporally shortening linear model of clothing consumption centred on buy-own-discard. However, such approaches fail to consider the consumer’s rationale to engage with fast fashion in this way and therefore subsequently deny attention to the oxygen that fuels its perpetuation.

Adopting a psychosocial approach to understanding the systemic relationship between consumption and temporality, ‘the changing aspect of cyclical repetition’ (Adam, 2013: 34), opens up new approaches in engaging with the challenges of a sustainability agenda. A psychosocial perspective on why we buy is useful as it sits at the intersection and is formed out of the inter-relationship of the self and society. It recognizes that our choices, behaviours and emotions, rational and irrational, are always shaped and responsive to broader societal interests and pressures. Specifically, through an examination of three moments of consumer experience which here are given a visual identity, the spiral, the spike and the spinning wheel, so the inter-relationship of how we feel and why we buy can begin to be explored. Drawing on the work of Kate Fletcher (2012: 230) this paper recognises that in order to address sustainability in the fashion industry a shift is required beyond paying attention to the quest for more durable materials towards the “deep inner space of the wardrobe” and specifically how the concept of durability should also focus on the “user-object relationship” (236). Furthermore, the building of longer-term material relationships produces in the digital age a sense of metaphysical temporal discord whereby an overarching sense of presentism is coupled with the constant seeking out of both the new and its early adoption. This is present through our engagement with fast fashion and yet paradoxically where at the exact point of purchase, both the currency of the moment and the item itself has already become outdated. As Fletcher argues (2012: 225) rarely do we buy due to the improved functionality of a garment over something we already own: rather we buy “to make visible our identity both as an individual and part of larger social groups within a particular place and time”. Identity is characterised by instability and flux. If what we buy is seemingly a representation of who we are in that moment, or who we would like to be, then the relationship of the self to material culture is always somewhat fleeting and transient.

Fast fashion describes an accelerated business model evolved since the 1980s. To keep costs down, production is heavily decentralised making regulation difficult to implement. Increased competition impacts both the wages paid and the environmental consequences of using ever cheaper fabrics and notions. Fast fashion positions clothing as FMCGs (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) or disposables, with little emotional attachment engendered between the owner and what is owned due to the short temporal life spans spent together. Functioning out of the introduction of the micro-season in an attempt to increase more regular purchases, clothing lives in the ‘now’ with regular updates to a wardrobe financially managed by constant discounts and sales. Hubbub, a charity campaigning on environmental issues, used their online satirical magazine *Faux* (2017) to ask the question ‘How fast can we go?’ It was suggested, only somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that in the future we may reach a stage whereby fast fashion will move so quickly in the turn to new trends that ‘clothes will be on the shop floors for less than one day’ with leading brands introducing ‘use-by dates’ so you know exactly for how long the item remains on trend.

The relationship between fashion and temporality was first documented by Georg Simmel in his analysis of the modern metropolis. Simmel (1904) cites the rise of modern fashion as inextricably linked to the culture of the city and its critical ingredients of a money economy and social mobility. Fashion, for Simmel, therefore becomes a game of imitation and differentiation, with styles abandoned by an upper class as soon as they become ubiquitous lower down the class stratum. In this way fashion is always in a state of becoming, it ‘always occupies the dividing-line between the past and the future, and consequently conveys a stronger feeling of the present at least while it is at its height than most other phenomenon’ (Carter, 2003: 303). Thorstein Veblen ([1899]1994) also mapped the relationship between conspicuous consumption as an indicator of social position, with the defining of a ‘leisure class’ as those who were able to ‘waste’ both ‘time and effort’ and the goods themselves in the quest for social standing (1994: 53). Veblen extends his analysis by introducing the term ‘conspicuous waste’ (ibid.: 62) which arises via emulation, using goods to signal status which are then discarded when acquired by the lower classes. This is most acute, he discerns, in relation to fashion due to its consistency of being on display and how it cultivates a turn to evidencing ‘innovations’ that simply in reality are nothing more than ‘a pretence’ (ibid.: 108). The history of consumer behaviour has consistently noted derivations of these drivers of conspicuous consumption and emulation, with fashion signifiers shifting from status in an era of mass consumption to becoming a more neo-liberal, individualised tool in the project of identity construction (Giddens, 1991). Against this backdrop advertising thrives in a culture of obsolescence fuelled by ‘the technologies of ephemerality, novelty and permanent seduction’ (Lipovetsky, 2005: 36). Under such conditions a particular temporal dynamic takes hold; one with the present as its dominant mode, fuelled by a culture of instantaneity and cultivated by life on the small screen. In terms of our consumer practices, and where time replaces space as the principal framework in which choice is made, so we enter into the cult of the new, or ‘neophilia’ as coined by Booker (1970). Here the pressures of time are forced upon us and as a result we consume out of a misalignment between actions and achievements: we feel we must consistently evidence a return on investment for time spent and consumption easily meets this need.

Affiliated to this shifting discourse underpinning reasons to consume are our diurnal experiences of time in the digital age. Industrialisation brought with it a standardised notion of time, utilised to regulate both production and transportation (Thompson, [1967] 1991). The appeal of time of the clock ‘lay in the fact that it engendered precision whilst denying interpretation’ (Powell, 2012: 115). Consequently, its ubiquitous representation through the clock of public life and the watch of personal possession brought a shared experience of time through its naturalisation (Adam, 2003: 62). Furthermore, argued Debord (1995), the move away from cyclical to linear time heralded by industrialisation brought about a new temporal sensibility, one predicated by a sense of its irreversible nature and its ‘metamorphosis into the time of things, because the weapon that had ensured its victory was, precisely, the mass production of objects in accordance with the laws of the commodity’ (Debord, 1995: 142). As a result, time itself is commodified, adopting a quantified edge rather than a qualitative dimension. The shift from analogue to digital opens up a new temporal architecture with discrete sensibilities and affectual consequences. One key dimension is the turn to data and metrics: with greater emphasis placed on the mapping of productivity and results achieved. Across all spheres of life this produces a culture of judgement and a fundamental sense of lack and underperformance in terms of daily accomplishments. Under such a sense of temporal pressure fashion consumption can be positioned as a purposeful response: a ‘fast’ means to document an output in a short space of time. How we may begin to map the relationship between this particular heightened temporal sensibility and the rise of the appeal of fast fashion can be informed by the graphic artist Vahram Muratyan. In his book *About Time: A visual memoir around the clock* (2014) Muratyan documents his travels across four continents and multiple time zones, exploring the ways in which we spend time. Drawing on this work and through the crafting and utilisation of three unique visual metaphors of consumer temporal experiences, this paper will consider the moment of consumption and how it is often entered into, not in response to either wants or needs, but rather as a tool to manage an overwhelming sense of time pressure in all its varying dimensions.

**Model 1: The Temporal Spiral – Selfies, Instagram and the Pressures of Sharing**

Barbara Harrison (2004) explores the role of photography in people’s everyday lives, examining what is worthy of documenting and what is not. Essential to this activity is a particular temporal dimension with specific reference to the constitution of the family album which functions as both ‘an act of faith in the future…(and)…an act of recognition of the past’ (Holland in Harrison, 2004: 25). For Harrison the construction of the family album is of interest in that it uses the past to address a particular audience of the future: the narrative is forward-facing rather than speaking to the here and now. This sits in sharp contrast to the selfie culture that dominates contemporary platforms such as Instagram. Here a culture of immediacy dominates with a real time shift from production to circulation and filters helping in the crafting of acceptability. The sharing of the image across a network is integral to cultural and technological changes in self-representation, ‘deeply personal but culturally informed processes of using signs to express ourselves’ (Tiidenberg, 2018: 23). Couldry (in Tiidenberg, 2018: 63) introduces the term ‘presencing’ to describe a series of mediated actions to push information about ourselves into public circulation. When portrait photography first emerged the rarity of it saw people dress for the occasion: a record of a family at its best. Indeed, ‘certainly class differences were far less visible in such pictures than they were in everyday life. Shopkeepers, minor officials and small traders all took themselves and their children to pose stiffly in their best clothes’ (Wells, 2001: 130). For such records always carry a degree of judgement (Bourdieu, [1965] 1996). And whilst the roots of this entanglement of judgement and appearance has a history, it is now endemic to online culture and made recognisable through the signification system of ‘likes’. To be more than noticed, to sustain a public presence requires novelty, difference and high degrees of performativity. Indeed, ‘we learn to see ourselves photographically; to regard oneself as attractive is, precisely, to judge that one would look good in a photograph’ (Sontag, 1979: 85).

Associated with the notion of ‘presencing’ is the collapse of all sense of geographical distance, availability and traditional notions of public and private space. Within the world of the ‘app’ and in particular Instagram, so new temporal models evolve. The first of which this paper will now consider: namely the spiral. Instagram sees the return of the stereotype, or rather the stereotypical image, a pose, part of a networked performance of which fashion is an integral part. Instagram operates in a new temporal space as it is both the fusion of work and leisure with acceptance coming through engagement in a game of economies of display with the aim of engendering followers. One significant consequence of life online, Scott (2015: 95) argues, is that ‘time is not lost in the ways it used to be’ as all traces of our past lives live on. Indeed, he continues, all can be brought into the ‘world of the known and the searchable’ (ibid.: 206). As result the selfie functions as a point of comparison: between a current and former self and against the broader digital community. The crafting of the self as an online brand positions clothes as props and markers of change in this journey of ongoing transformation, making any sense of repetition anathema.

This notion of a constantly evolving sense of self online can be explored in its temporal dimensions through the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). In Whitehead’s ‘process philosophy’, the relationship between a more scientific objective time and a more personal subjective sense of time shaped by a distinctly experiential dimension comes under scrutiny. Time itself is seen by Whitehead as a product of process and where the subject does not create time but indeed is created by it through a process of becoming. Therefore, what we think of as the ‘now’ is indeed part of a continuum of time that has a distinctive spatial dimension: a looping spiral that looks back as it looks forward in the creation of the present moment. That is to say, who we are is not fixed but rather constituted by processes. Critical to this notion of process is the relationship as Whitehead sees it between the formerly discrete tripartite temporal categories of past, present and future. Through a phenomenon he refers to as ‘prehension’ so ‘an occasion of experience is an activity, analysable with modes of functioning which justly constitute its process of becoming’ (Whitehead, 1933: 176). Consequently, the present actually takes shape in the past and allows for continuity through the transferring of information through the process. In this way Whitehead introduces a distinctly qualitative rather than quantitative dimension to the study of time, opening up what may be defined as temporality. Rather than a linear model of time, comprised of discrete categories, all moments are inextricably linked, passing data on from its own existence and reinstating this but also adding to it in the next. This qualitative difference shifts the model of time away from the linearity of time’s arrow to a spiral, as the past is always co-present in the present. Past, present and future are no longer independent dimensions but inter-dependent, contemporaneous pasts, presents and futures. ‘Each moment of experience confesses itself to be in transition between two worlds, the immediate past and the immediate future’ (Whitehead, 1933: 192). Embodying Whitehead’s (1933) notion of ‘prehension’ so we conceptualise a subject caught up in a process of change through duration itself, whereby the past is a moment of affect in the present.

If we apply the notion of ‘prehension’ (Whitehead, 1933) to the phenomena of selfie taking, we can begin to identify with an idea of a self-shaped by becoming, of constant evolution moment by moment. Taking his cue from nature, Whitehead (1920: 47) challenges time as a linear succession and posits instead one based on an overlapping series of transitions. He poses the question ‘is there only one temporal series’ one in which ‘the past is gone and the future is not yet?’(ibid.:48) He responds in the negative articulating that ‘the passage of nature leaves nothing between the past and the future. What we perceive as present is the vivid fringe of memory tinged with anticipation’ (ibid.). When applied to selfie culture, every moment of change comes out of the memory of what has gone before and the cultural pressure for a future point of difference. Heightened by digital interactivity constituted out of the connectivity of creating and being created (Barker, 2012), the selfie itself functions as the data to make this process happen. The negative impact of this process on a sustainability agenda are evident. That as a self in time, we are never satisfied by how we present ourselves to the world. Fast fashion functions as an index of who we are in that moment and as a consequence almost immediately positions us as out of date. Traces from the past act as reference points for the need to develop an improved future self and clothing becomes an integral and easily accessible resource. Such a heightened sense of self-awareness in the correlation of identity to clothing is encapsulated in headlines in the British press indicating that ‘One in six young people won’t wear an outfit again if its been seen on social media’ (Bownan, 2017). This also explains the success of online fast fashion retailers such as Boohoo whose half year profits in September 2019 were up 83% (Jahshan, 2019). Green (2015) in the *Independent* highlights young women’s fear of ‘overexposure’ or ‘tagaphobia’ recognising all digital interactions leave a fashion trace. To share is to be seen and this constant visibility requires avoidance of the digital fashion faux pas, namely being seen in the same outfit twice.

**Model 2: The Temporal Spike – The Quest to be Sustainable**

Entering into the world of eBay psychically offers an avenue of redemption in challenging the linear model of cradle to grave consumption. Indeed, in 2016 its President and Chief Executive Officer, Devin Wenig, located eBay as thriving in a commercial environment where ‘consumers are seeing the benefit of secondary markets as a driver of sustainability’ (Canadean, 2016). Once the dominant element of the platform, now only 20% of profit comes from the auction division and is largely populated by clothing (ibid.). On first investigation, it applies the principles of a more sustainable economic model whereby that which is no longer needed by one person is offered up to another at a fair price determined by the laws of the auction. In practice, it centres on gamification and through a second temporal model, defined here as the temporal spike, fails to actually ameliorate waste levels but rather exacerbates the problem through mental and physical offloading. The gamification of consumption is not new. Historically the auction has presided across a wide range of contexts. However once transferred to an online setting, it produces a more immersive experience: one in which both success and failure lead to the same outcomes. All auctions on eBay are framed in the context of temporal parameters and the affect generated centres on a counting down to a designated moment in time. Once an item has been identified as registering an interest with a potential buyer a relationship is automatically cultivated, not with the item itself but with the immanent ticking clock that signifies both the path to ownership and the beating of all competition. Reminders punctuate our day and function as additional temporal indicators, directing us to actions that is the need to bid, to raise our bid or positioning us in the overall race to success. These notifications contribute to a temporal architecture that is already complex and holds the diurnal together, online and offline. The closer the countdown to the bid so it starts to impact our overall emotional wellbeing. As Hoffman (2011: 2013) articulates: ‘Our transactions with time affect us as crucially as any of the more familiar forces of say, ideology or identity, and they have profound consequences for the quality of our lives and the deep processes of subjectivity’. Such emotions are heightened in the final two minutes of the bidding process. When we bid on eBay we are psychosocially acutely aware of being in time. The tension in those final moments remind us that we are alive in time, linked to anonymous others by a unified sense of participation. That there is only one item available cultivates and heightens the temporal framework of the auction. In the closing moments the anticipation reaches a crescendo: to win feels so close that the future almost bleeds into the present. An early study indicated that two-thirds of bids take place in the final 30 minutes and 50% plus of final bids are submitted after 90% of the auction duration has passed (Bajari and Hortacsu, 2003: 332). To lose now is more than just a reference to the item in question. Rather a temporal investment over the past nine days of the auction is also at stake. Two outcomes are only ever possible: but it is interesting that whilst the short-term emotions of winning and losing are very different, the overall long-term affect remains constant. To lose is to be reminded of the Deleuzean time image: crystalline, anti-linear, multi-faceted (Deleuze, 1989). The present moment of loss refracts: shaped and informed by a series of past activities which it looks back on and indeed from which this moment has derived. However, to win is not an endpoint in itself. ‘Like an itch that can never be scratched, the covetous search for the ultimate expression of self as mediated through manufactured objects appears to be endless’ (Chapman, 2009: 30).

The sociologist Colin Campbell (1987) explored the emotive responses engendered by advertising, situating their evident manifestation in the context of the establishment of a consumer quest. Campbell examined how advertising laid the groundwork for an emotional attachment to the world of goods, signifying a fantasy world that could counter any sense of ‘lack’ in the lived experience. Once such desires to own took hold, the quest takes place, reaching an emotional spike at the moment of possession. Framed in the context of ‘modern hedonism’ (Campbell, 1987: 77) pleasure is derived not from a sense of encountering the extraordinary but rather from a sense of longing brought about through the mixing of ‘pleasures of fantasy with those of reality’ (Campbell, 1987: 85). However, this emotional high is often short lived as once devoid of the fantasy element a jarring can occur between the desired and the actual, leading to an immediate lack of fulfilment at the point of ownership. Campbell (1987) points to an endless cycle of desires and disappointments, spikes in the emotional landscape that are fuelled by promotional culture forever establishing new expectations that frequently fail to live up to the hype. Furthermore, as Chapman (2009: 36) argued twenty years later, the quest is now compressed into a consistent series of spikes as e-commerce shortens the length and frequency of the quest itself. And so the consumer’s life on eBay continues; driven by an endless cycle of imaginative mental interplay prompted by local promotion, frantic biding, the euphoria or spike of winning and the disappointment of receivership, coupled with re-posting. All roads lead to the same outcome: an eternal return of wanting and having aligned to temporal conquest, coupled at the outset with frequent disappointment.

**Model 3: The Temporal Spinning Wheel – Challenges to the Circular Economy**

The circular economy model has its roots in attempts to manage poverty and scarcity and it is therefore interesting to map its contemporary iteration as a coping mechanism in a culture of abundance and saturation. It is characterised by the premise that everything is re-used, nothing is wasted and is the antithesis of the dominant icon of landfill that encapsulates a turn to the disposable. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation defines it on the basis of three principles: design out waste and pollution; keep products and materials in use; and to regenerate natural systems (www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org). It sits in opposition to a linear economy and derives its essence from the philosophical and ethical underpinning that ‘value is a mutable social relation and not an inherent characteristic of things themselves’ (Reno in Thompson, 2017: vii). Such a premise emanates out of a shifting perception of what we discard: increasingly less dependent on objects’ ability to fail to perform a specific function and more to do with social pressures and practices that ‘conspire to remove them from circulation and consideration’ (ibid.: viii). So why is the circular economy struggling to take hold on our imaginations specifically in relation to fashion consumption?

Du Gay (1997) introduced us to a ‘circuit of culture’ whereby the traditional links of production to consumption in a linear manner are broken down and instead emphasis is placed on a series of connections that exist between these two points and the various players in the life of the object rather than a single owner. The ability of the object to extend its life beyond the first point of sale weakens in relation to the circular economy as it is no longer serviced by mainstream advertising to represent its symbolic value. As a result, the notion of a circular economy is to a degree an emotional crutch, an offloading device for mistakes, disappointments and parting trends. Even through upcycling where waste is positioned as a resource, so ultimately it sends more and more items into circulation. It is a spinning wheel soon to come off its axis as it fails to cope with the amount of content caught up in its rotations. For as Campbell (1987: 86) argued, even as we become disillusioned by individual purchases this does not stop us consuming as ‘the dream will be carried forward and attached to some new object of desire’. That which is left behind needs a place to go. Like a motorway that manages the burden of the ever-expanding weight of traffic by increasing the number of lanes, so this pseudo-circular economy plays with the semantics of second-hand garnering all that is vintage, pre-loved, upcycled and refashioned. Therefore, it can be identified that what the circular economy provides in practice is evidence that ‘individuals do not so much seek satisfaction from products, as pleasure from the self-illusory experiences which they construct from their associated meanings’ (Campbell, 1987: 89). Once the illusion quickly fades, so does the original appeal of the item in question and waste becomes ‘symptomatic of failed relationships’ (Chapman, 2009: 20).

This paper has argued that while the fashion industry seeks to reduce its environmental impact, consumer practices mediated by our particular relationship to temporality continually challenge any gains made through an insatiable appetite for wanting more garments. A turn towards a more circular economy is proposed as one solution. However, despite initiatives to reduce waste through the introduction of new fibres made from recycled materials or repurposing existing garments, this still leads to more garments coming into circulation. In essence, a temporal solution is proposed that has two inextricably linked dimensions: on the one hand, the supply chain must be slowed down and secondly, brands must begin to adopt a promotional strategy that shifts its emphasis from volume to value. Future research is required into how advertising has the potential to play a significant part in the turn to a slower economy with specific reference to the use of promotional discourse as a space to re-explore our relationship to clothing, specifically in conjunction with identity construction. Promotion that has the potential to slow down the pace of interaction between consumers and the world of goods simultaneously aligns to new retail experiences which allow consumers to spend time with the brand in a more meaningful way. We have reached an imbalance between what we want now without considering its impact ecologically on the future. This must be addressed. Research on the relationship between the affective dimensions of temporality in relation to clothing consumption and how that can be mediated more effectively through fashion promotion is one potential way forward.

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**Author Address:** School of Arts and Creative Industries, London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London. SE1 0AA.

**Author Email Address**: [Powellh4@lsbu.ac.uk](mailto:Powellh4@lsbu.ac.uk)

**Author biography**: Helen Powell is Course Director of Creative Advertising at London South Bank University. Her research and publications sit at the intersection of promotional culture and consumer behaviour with specific reference to the temporal dimensions of this relationship. Having formerly worked in the advertising industry, she is currently researching how brand messaging can encourage a more sustainable ethos through revised workings of the concept of brand loyalty.

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