Research Article

Indian Knowledge Systems for Sustainable Fashion: Alternatives to Fast Fashion and Consumerism

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ABSTRACT

Fast fashion's rapid production and consumerism-driven culture exacerbate environmental degradation, labor exploitation and resource depletion. In contrast, fashion practices rooted in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers a paradigm of "slow fashion" aligned with sustainability. This study employs thematic content analysis of three documentaries—Buy Now (2024), The Minimalists: Less Is Now (2021), and Sweatshops (2014–15)—to explore consumer psychology, socio-economic impacts, and ecological costs of fast fashion. Key scenes, such as bloggers witnessing sweatshop conditions in Sweatshops and marketing tactics exposed in Buy Now, reveal how fast fashion manipulates consumer behavior and perpetuates unethical practices. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), rooted in principles like Ṛta (cosmic harmony) and Dharma (ethical duty), offer sustainable alternatives through practices such as Khadi production, natural dyeing, and indigenous crafts like Chikankari and Kantha. These traditions promote slow fashion, ethical labor, and circular economies, countering fast fashion's excesses. By integrating IKS, the fashion industry can adopt locally rooted, environmentally sustainable, and socially equitable models, providing scalable solutions to global fast fashion challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion, characterized by rapid production of inexpensive, trend-driven clothing, fuels a culture of overconsumption, prioritizing affordability and novelty over sustainability (Joy et al., 2012). This model has severe environmental, social, and economic consequences. The fashion industry contributes 10% of global carbon emissions, surpassing international flights and maritime shipping combined (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017), and 20% of global wastewater pollution from dyeing processes (UNEP, 2019). Annually, 85% of textiles—approximately 92 million tons—are discarded into landfills (One Planet, 2021). In 2025, these figures have escalated, with global textile waste exceeding 100 million tons in some projections due to continued growth in fast fashion consumption. Labor exploitation, including low wages and unsafe conditions in developing countries, remains rampant (Ross, 2019). Synthetic fibers like polyester, comprising 60% of clothing production, generate significant carbon emissions and microplastic pollution, with washing synthetic garments releasing up to 700,000 microplastic fibers per load into oceans (Textile Exchange, 2020; Boucher & Friot, 2017). Cotton farming, though natural, consumes vast resources, with a single shirt requiring 2,700 liters of water (WWF, 2014). Furthermore, the industry's reliance on fossil fuels for production and transportation amplifies its climate impact, contributing to biodiversity loss and soil degradation in cotton-growing regions. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), encompassing traditional practices like handloom weaving, natural dyeing, and Gandhian principles of simplicity, offer sustainable alternatives to fast fashion's

disposable culture. Rooted in concepts like Ṛta (cosmic harmony) and Dharma (ethical duty), IKS promote slow fashion, ethical labor, and circular economies, aligning with global sustainability goals (Timane & Wandhe, 2024). These systems draw from ancient Vedic texts that emphasize balance with nature, such as the use of plant-based dyes and zero-waste techniques in textile creation, which minimize environmental harm while preserving cultural heritage. This paper analyzes fast fashion's impacts through documentary narratives and proposes IKS-based solutions to foster environmentally responsible and socially just fashion practices, highlighting how traditional wisdom can inform modern innovations for a more resilient industry.

OBJECTIVES

- To understand the drivers of fast fashion consumption.
- To analyze the environmental and social impacts of fast fashion.
- To explore IKS-based sustainable alternatives to fast fashion

Methodology

This qualitative study employs thematic content analysis to examine fast fashion, consumerism, and sustainability in three documentaries: Buy Now (2024), The Minimalists: Less Is Now (2021), and Sweatshops (2014–15). Selected via purposive sampling, these films were chosen for their accessibility on platforms like Netflix and YouTube, explicit focus on fast fashion and consumerism, and diverse perspectives on consumer psychology, labor exploitation, and sustainability. The sample size supports thematic saturation, prioritizing depth over statistical generalization (Krippendorff, 2018). The analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic framework: (1) familiarization through repeated viewings and note-taking, including transcribing key dialogues and visual elements; (2) generating initial codes for concepts like consumerism, exploitation, and sustainability, using software tools for organization where applicable; (3) organizing codes into themes by identifying patterns across the documentaries; (4) reviewing and refining themes through iterative discussions to ensure coherence; (5) defining themes such as "psychology of consumerism," "social consequences," and "environmental impacts," with sub-themes for nuanced analysis; and (6) reporting findings with illustrative examples, such as bloggers' emotional reactions to sweatshop conditions in Sweatshops or marketing tactics in Buy Now. To enhance rigor, inter-coder reliability was assessed by involving a second researcher for code validation. IKS-based solutions were explored through a literature review of traditional textile practices (e.g., Khadi, natural dyeing) and philosophies (e.g., Gandhian simplicity, Jugaad). These were integrated with documentary findings to propose culturally rooted, sustainable alternatives to fast fashion, emphasizing environmental ethics, social justice, and economic viability. This integration involved cross-referencing documentary critiques with IKS principles to identify synergies, such as how Dharma counters labor exploitation depicted in Sweatshops.
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DISCUSSION-THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DOCUMENTARY CONTENT

The documentaries *Buy Now*, *The Minimalists: Less Is Now*, and *Sweatshops* critique fast fashion's psychological, social, and environmental impacts. Key scenes, such as bloggers experiencing sweatshop conditions in *Sweatshops* or marketing strategies exposed in *Buy Now*, highlight consumerism's drivers and consequences. The analysis is structured under three themes: (1) Psychology of Consumerism, (2) Social Consequences of Fast Fashion, and (3) Environmental Impact of Overconsumption, with IKS proposed as a sustainable alternative.

The Psychology of Consumerism

The Role of Marketing and Media in Consumer Behavior

Buy Now (2024) exposes psychological tactics driving consumerism, featuring an AI character, Sasha, that illustrates corporate strategies like data mining and targeted ads to exploit emotions like FOMO and insecurity. Interviews with former Adidas and Amazon executives reveal how platforms optimize impulse buying. For instance, a scene shows how scarcity cues and influencer endorsements create artificial demand (Buy Now, 2024). These tactics are amplified in 2025, where AI-driven personalization has evolved to predict consumer desires with unprecedented accuracy, further entrenching overconsumption habits. The Minimalists: Less Is Now (2021) features Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus critiquing materialism, with former shopaholics describing dopamine-driven shopping habits leading to dissatisfaction (Kasser, 2002). Buy Now highlights planned obsolescence, citing Apple's removal of headphone jacks to force AirPod purchases, which last only about a year due to non-replaceable batteries (Buy Now, 2024). This obsolescence extends to fast fashion, where garments are designed to fail after minimal wears, encouraging repeated purchases.

Social Media and Influencer Culture in Consumerism

Social media amplifies consumerism, with influencers promoting fast fashion trends. Buy Now features Maren Costa, a former Amazon UX designer, explaining how algorithms target users with personalized ads, intensifying impulse buying. Scenes depict influencers creating artificial demand via "fast fashion hauls" (Buy

Now, 2024). The Minimalists critiques linking social status to ownership, with Millburn stating, "Consumerism is unfocused, misguided, and seductive" (2021). Sweatshops shows Norwegian influencers confronting fast fashion's ethical branding illusions, with emotional testimonials exposing exploitative practices masked by social media (2014). In the current digital landscape, platforms like Instagram and TikTok have escalated this through short-form videos that glorify hauls, often ignoring the hidden costs and perpetuating a cycle of validation through consumption.

The Instantaneous Nature of E-Commerce

E-commerce accelerates fast fashion consumption. Buy Now details Amazon's one-click shopping and same-day delivery, with former employees explaining how flash sales create urgency (2024). "Buy now, pay later" schemes reduce the psychological "pain of paying," fueling compulsive buying (Prelec & Loewenstein, 1998). The Minimalists likens online shopping's dopamine rush to gambling (Dittmar, 2008), while Sweatshops critiques AI-driven ads and limited-time offers that obscure supply chain ethics (2014). This immediacy has grown in 2025 with advancements in logistics, enabling even faster deliveries that further disconnect consumers from the production realities.

The Social Consequences of Fast Fashion

Labor Exploitation in the Global South

Sweatshops (2014–15) exposes fast fashion's reliance on low-cost labor, with bloggers meeting Sokty, a Cambodian worker earning $130 monthly for 11–13-hour shifts. A poignant scene shows a 19-year-old worker describing her mother's death from starvation, moving blogger Anniken to tears (Sweatshops, 2014). The documentary references the Rana Plaza disaster (2013), where 1,100 workers died, highlighting systemic negligence (Ross, 2017). Over 60% of Bangladeshi garment workers earn below a living wage (Ross, 2017). These issues persist in 2025, with reports indicating ongoing violations despite some regulatory efforts, as supply chains remain opaque and profit-driven.

Psychological and Economic Burden on Consumers

The Minimalists (2021) explores consumerism's toll on buyers, with former shopaholics describing debt and anxiety from trend-driven purchases. Nicodemus' "packing party" experiment reveals 80% of possessions are unnecessary, promoting minimalism to reduce financial stress (Dittmar, 2008). Buy Now highlights how social media "hauls" normalize wasteful consumption, pushing consumers into financial insecurity (2024). This burden is exacerbated by economic inequalities, where low-income consumers are trapped in cycles of cheap, disposable clothing that offers short-term affordability but long-term costs.

Social Justice Through IKS

IKS emphasizes ethical labor through Dharma, ensuring fair wages and safe conditions. Practices like Khadi production and cooperative models in Kutch and Banaras empower artisans, particularly women, fostering dignity and independence (Banerjee, 2019). Unlike sweatshops, IKS-based crafts like Chikankari and Kantha prioritize community welfare, offering a socially just alternative to fast fashion's exploitation.

The Environmental Impact of Over consumption

Sweatshops (2014) highlights textile waste, with 85% of clothing ending in landfills annually (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Buy Now shows visuals of discarded fast fashion choking Ghana's beaches, with Maren Costa noting Amazon's destruction of 130,000 items weekly (2024). Paul Polman emphasizes, "Away doesn't exist" (Buy Now, 2024), underscoring waste's persistence. Greenwashing is rampant, with Buy Now exposing recyclable logos on non-recyclable products and H&M's misleading clothing donation claims (2024). Beyond waste, fast fashion's environmental toll includes massive water consumption and pollution. Textile production uses about 79 trillion liters of water annually, with dyeing and finishing processes accounting for 20% of global industrial water pollution (UNEP, 2019). In 2025, this has intensified, particularly in water-stressed regions like India and Bangladesh, where rivers are contaminated with toxic chemicals from synthetic dyes. Carbon emissions from the industry remain at 10% of global totals, driven by energy-intensive manufacturing and long-distance shipping. Synthetic fibers release microplastics during washing, contributing to ocean pollution that affects marine life and enters the food chain (Boucher & Friot, 2017). Overconsumption exacerbates these issues, as the average consumer now buys 60% more clothing than 15 years ago, with garments worn fewer times before discard. Biodiversity loss from cotton monocultures and deforestation for viscose production further compounds the crisis, threatening ecosystems worldwide. The Minimalists (2021) indirectly critiques this by advocating for less consumption, showing how minimalism can reduce personal environmental footprints.

ALTERNATIVES TO FAST FASHION-THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

Theoretical Framework of IKS for Sustainability

IKS integrates environmental, social, and economic sustainability through principles like Ṛta (cosmic harmony), Pañcabhūta (five elements), Dharma (ethical duty), and Yajña Bhāva (selfless service) (Anaadi Foundation, 2025). Unlike linear consumption models, IKS promotes regenerative practices, aligning with Fletcher and Grose's (2012) sustainability pillars:

Environmental

Biodegradable materials (e.g., organic cotton, bamboo-based Lyocell) and closed-loop systems minimize waste.

Social

• Dharma ensures fair labor and community welfare.

Economic

• Durable, timeless designs foster local economies.

Traditional Indian Clothing Practices

Handloom crafts like Chikankari (intricate embroidery from Lucknow using natural threads), Kantha (upcycled quilting from Bengal), and Bandhani (tie-dye from Gujarat) use minimal mechanization, reducing carbon footprints (Sharma, 2019). Natural dyeing with indigo, turmeric, and pomegranate peels eliminates synthetic chemicals, aligning with UN sustainability goals and preventing water pollution (Mukherjee, 2021). Krishishastra's organic cotton farming reduces water and pesticide use, offering a model for sustainable production that conserves soil health and biodiversity. Additional practices include Phulkari embroidery from Punjab and Ajrakh block printing from Kutch, which incorporate zero-waste techniques by repurposing scraps into new designs.

Gandhian Simplicity, Swadeshi, and Jugaad

Gandhi's Khadi and Swadeshi movement promote decentralized production, reducing reliance on global supply chains (Bhattacharya, 2020). Jugaad fosters upcycling, seen in patchwork textiles and zero-waste designs (Rajagopal, 2021). These practices align with circular economy principles, minimizing waste and promoting sustainability by encouraging innovation with limited resources, such as transforming old saris into contemporary apparel.

Practical Applications of IKS

Modern Indian brands like Grassroot by Anita Dongre and Oshadi integrate IKS by using handlooms, natural dyes, and organic cotton. Doodlage upcycles over 100,000 meters of fabric, reducing landfill waste (Joshi, 2023). The Khadi industry, valued at ₹5,000 crore in 2022–23, employs 4.5 lakh artisans, demonstrating scalability (KVIC, 2023). Other brands such as No Nasties (using organic cotton and fair trade), The Summer House (timeless handwoven pieces), and Ka-Sha (upcycled luxury wear) exemplify IKS in action. Fabindia promotes traditional weaves like Ikat and Kalamkari, while Anokhi focuses on block printing with vegetable dyes. Global adoption could involve incentivizing eco-friendly textiles and transparent supply chains, with partnerships like the UN's Green Good Deeds campaign supporting such initiatives in India.

Conclusion

The documentaries reveal fast fashion's manipulation of consumer psychology, labor exploitation and environmental harm. IKS offers scalable solutions through Khadi, natural dyeing, and crafts like Chikankari, which reduce ecological footprints and promote ethical labor. Brands like Doodlage, Oshadi, and No Nasties demonstrate IKS's market viability, while Swadeshi principles cut emissions from global shipping. Policymakers can promote IKS through subsidies for sustainable textiles, consumer education on ethical fashion, and incentives for brands adopting circular models. International collaborations could export IKS practices, such as integrating Jugaad into global upcycling programs. Future research should explore IKS's global scalability, consumer perceptions of slow fashion, and policy frameworks to integrate traditional wisdom with modern innovations, including digital tools for traceability. This holistic approach could transform the industry, reduce its 10% carbon share and waste output while empower marginalized communities and preserving biodiversity for a sustainable, equitable future

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