

# "Fast" and "Slow" Fashions as seen through the Millennial Mindset

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## Abstract

The term “slow fashion” was coined by Kate Fletcher to counter the growing trend of the “fast fashion” industry. In recent years, the clothing industry has been dominated by fast fashion that has spurred overconsumption whereby people buy more than they need.

This study aims to develop a critical-creative thinking framework based on the understandings and insights of how Millennials view apparel consumption. Lynda Grose and Kate Fletcher’s chapter “Transforming Fashion Product” from their book *Fashion & Sustainability: Design for Change* (2012) provided useful information regarding the fashion process, helping to reveal new patterns to frame how participants of this study view apparel consumption. This research investigated the way in which consumers viewed material, consumer care, and disposal of their clothing.

In order to understand the Millennial mindset with regard to apparel consumption, responses were collected from over a hundred Millennials through an online survey (Phase One), where they discussed their reasons for placing themselves along a scale from slow to fast fashion. The findings uncovered a new group of consumers, the undecided+exploring, who identified with both slow and fast fashion. Valuable insights extracted from the survey informed the development of a research toolkit for a series of participatory workshops (Phase Two) with the goal to construct a conceptual model of Millennial apparel consumption.

Further understanding of slow fashion, as seen through the Millennial mindset, will inspire and guide designers, manufacturers, and consumers to make more sustainable decision when developing, selling, and buying clothing items.

*Keywords: Slow Fashion, Fast Fashion, Sustainability, Millennial Generation, Apparel Industry*

With a population of 80 million, the Millennial population, born as early as 1977 (Fromm & Garton, 2013) and as late as 2004 (Horovitz, 2012), is one of the leading forces in consumer spending in the United States (Fromm & Gardon, 2013). Millennials are one of the largest populations to shop at fast fashion brick and mortar retail stores including Zara, H&M, and Topshop (Kestenbaum, 2017), and online at sites like Amazon.com and Nordstrom where sales have increased (Rey, 2017). Millennials spend \$600 billion on clothes each year, but their rationale and decision-making processes are rarely studied or understood (Kestenbaum, 2017). While innovation in clothing production speed in the fast-fashion sector has decreased the price of clothing and made it accessible to most of the population, it has also created a throw away

economy where inexpensive clothing products can be easily discarded (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013).

In recent years, the slow fashion movement has taken shape across the world (Blair, 2015). With internet access and social media, Millennials are becoming more aware of fast fashion's wasteful supply chain (Mak, 2016). Slow fashion is not completely the opposite of the fast fashion movement. They both deal with the fashion cycles but slow fashion focuses more on longevity (Fletcher, 2008, p. 175). Slow fashion has become prevalent amongst fashion industry leaders and researchers alike because it encourages a clear understanding of the materials, labor, care, and repurposing of clothing items (Fletcher & Grose, 2012). Instead of a just-in-time production process (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013), slow fashion encourages consumers to hold on to clothing items longer and repair their clothing items when need be.

With the growth of both the fast and slow fashion industries, there is a group of Millennial who do not identify with only one fashion style, these consumers are called the undecided+exploring. This group of consumers exist between fast and slow fashion as they share attributes of both fashion styles. These Millennials grew up buying fast fashion products that were inexpensive and plentiful (Mak, 2016), and still do. Yet, they are aware of more sustainable, slower approaches to fashion and the value of higher quality items versus cheap clothing bought at major fast retailers. They choose to explore by adjusting their style; mixing and matching clothing items by combining slower, higher quality items like jackets, jeans, and shoes with faster ones like t-shirts, swimwear, and socks.

## **Literature Review**

### **Transforming Fashion Product**

Lynda Grose and Kate Fletcher's (2012) book *Fashion & Sustainability: Design for Change* was used to develop a framework upon which to base the current and ideal clothing journeys of apparel to be used in participatory workshops with Millennials. Fletcher and Grose stress the importance of looking at aspects of the cycle of clothing production and consumption in order to positively affect change towards a more sustainable future reflecting a way of thinking which sees each part of the fashion industry's products, systems, and practice as a whole fashion cycle that has to undergo improvement and not just a few isolated parts (2012, p. 11). They pose a critical question: "Are there principles and metrics we can agree upon that are key to a world that is not only sustained, but also actually restored? Second, with these shared principles, can we create a framework for change that guides business activities in the fashion industry, a framework that is practical, scientific, and economic?" (Fletcher & Grose, 2012, p. 4). Fletcher and Grose have used their Transforming Fashion Product concepts (Materials, Processes, Distribution, Consumer Care, Disposal) to explore "opportunities for improving fashion products" (2012, p.11). This research focused on the examinations of how Millennial buy, use, and discard clothing. Participants were not particularly or directly asked in the survey portion to discuss their knowledge of clothing products construction or distribution.

### **Deep Metaphors**

This study (Phase Two: participatory workshops) utilized Gerald and Lindsay Zaltman's

metaphors from their book *Marketing Metaphoria: What Deep Metaphors Reveal about the Minds of Consumers* (2008) as a viewing lens to reveal Millennials' rational and emotional states of mind on fast and slow fashions. Deep Metaphors as described by the Zaltmans are "enduring ways of perceiving things, making sense of what we encounter, and guiding our subsequent actions" (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008, p. xv). The seven deep metaphors are: 1) balance, "how justice, equilibrium, and the interplay of elements affect consumer thinking"; 2) connection, "how the need to relate to oneself and others affects consumer thinking"; 3) container, "how inclusion, exclusion, and other boundaries affect consumer thinking"; 4) control, "how the sense of mastery, vulnerability, and well-being affects consumer thinking"; 5) journey "how the meeting of past, present, and future affect consumer thinking"; 6) resource, "how acquisitions and their consequences affect consumer thinking", and 7) transformation, "how changes in substance and circumstances affect consumer thinking" (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008, p. x). While the context of the Zaltmans' Deep Metaphors were geared towards marketing, the seven universals metaphors was used in this research to better understand the thinking of Millennials' with regard to fast and slow fashions.

## **Research Methods**

The research utilized both quantitative and qualitative research methods (Sandelowski, 2011). The quantitative data were collected from online surveys of over 100 respondents from all generational groups including Boomers, Gen-z, and Millennials. Gathering data from all generational groups was done for the purpose of examining the differences between Millennial consumption habits and those of other generational groups. The qualitative data were collected via participatory workshops.

### **Phase One: Survey**

The survey invitation was sent out online, with an emphasis on identifying participants that are part of the Millennial generation. The format of the survey consisted of closed, open, and dichotomous questions, as well a slider scale (Law, n.d.) that was used to understand where participants viewed themselves in terms of fast or slow fashion data.

Participants were asked about their clothes shopping and washing habits. Questions included: What's the average amount you spend on clothing items? Where do you currently buy most of your clothes? How often do you shop for new clothes? How often do you wash your clothes? What do you do with your old clothes when you're done using them? A slider scale was used to see where participants perceived themselves to be on a scale from one – signifying slow fashion to five –signifying fast fashion. Participants were then asked to write down three attributes (short phrases) that described their perceived position (i.e., where they positioned themselves in the scope of fast and slow fashion).

The open-ended questions asked participants, based on their positioning from the slider scale question, to provide a brief statement describing why they placed themselves where they did. The data from the survey helped identify patterns amongst the different Millennial apparel consumers. The survey was also utilized as a recruitment tool for Millennials who would be willing to participate in the second phase of the ongoing research, the participatory workshops.

## Discussion

This research looked to identify the decision-making habits of Millennial clothing shoppers who identify as either fast or slow fashion consumer to develop a critical-creative thinking framework based on the understandings and insights of how they view apparel consumption.

The preliminary findings of this study were analyzed from primary and secondary data, scans of popular culture, and publications related to fast and slow fashion. The preliminary analysis of the data showed similar patterns of consumption tendencies and rationale for purchasing clothing items relative to past studies, particularly Watson & Yan's *An Exploratory Study of The Decision Processes of Fast Versus Slow Fashion Consumers* (2013). Watson & Yan found similar patterns in fast fashion consumers that seek out trendy and lower quality clothing items, which leads the consumer to dispose of or donate their clothing item at higher rate. They also state that slow fashion consumers generally hold on to their clothing items longer because their shopping tendencies are not based on trends, but rather quality (p. 149).

The following section looks at ways in which Millennials view material, consumer care, and the disposal of their clothes. Please note: test of statistical significance between group differences are underway now and are not reported in this paper. When looking at materials, fast fashion consumers were willing to compromise quality to get a lower price, while slow consumers were the opposite. Slow fashion consumers were willing to spend more in order to buy clothes they felt would last longer and didn't represent a "trendy" style. They also wanted "timeless" articles of clothing of higher quality, while younger fast fashion consumers would rather buy cheaper clothes they don't expect to last a long period of time

In terms of consumer care, fewer fast fashion consumers had their clothes repaired or altered by a tailor than did slow fashion consumer: the percentage of fast fashion consumers was 28% and slow fashion was 39.6%. Altering clothes to fit better can encourage Millennials to hold on to them longer, while repairing them can keep articles of clothing out of the landfill. However, only 25% of the undecided+exploring consumers would repair or alter their clothes.

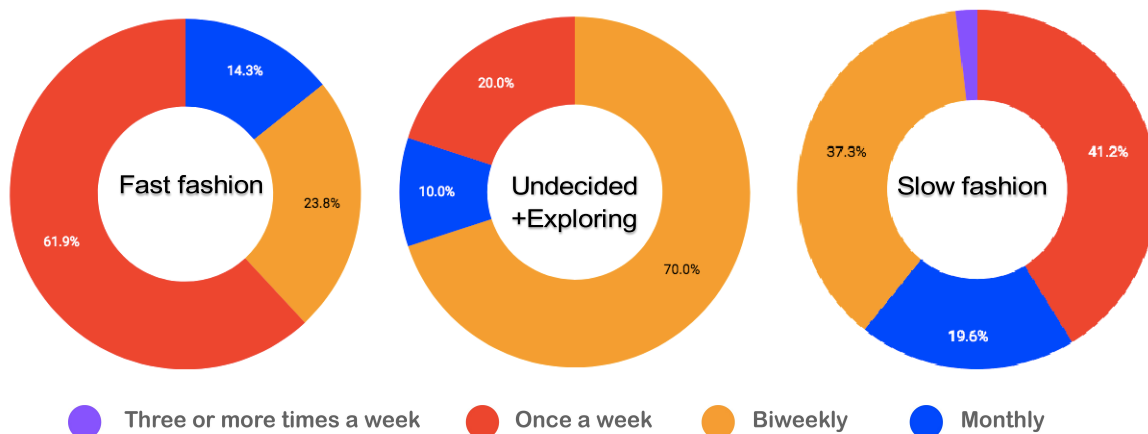


Figure 1: The frequency of washes for fast, undecided+exploring, and slow fashion Millennials

The number of wash cycles an item of clothing is put through in its life cycle greatly compromises the integrity of the fabric, breaking down the fibers, and accounting for most of the carbon footprint of clothing (Levi's, 2015). When it came to washing their clothes, 61.9% of fast fashion consumers washed their clothes once a week, slow fashion consumers 41.2%, and undecided+exploring consumers washed theirs 20%. Slow fashion consumers had a highest percentage of monthly washes (19.6%) than fast fashion (14.3%), and undecided+exploring (10%) consumers (Figure 1).

When it comes to disposal, Millennials that identify as fast fashion consumers differ from the other two groups of Millennials. Fast fashion Millennials mentioned throwing their clothes away (3.4%), while slow fashion Millennials didn't even select it as an answer (0%). Though, fast fashion Millennials were more likely to donate their clothes (79.3%) than slow fashion Millennials (66.7%), but slow fashion Millennials nearly doubled the fast fashion Millennials in terms of selling their clothes at consignment (26.7 % vs 13.8%).

The findings from this study identified that most fast fashion consumers appear to be mostly male (51.2%), while women accounted for 46.3%, and people associated as gender fluid or gender queer made up 2.4 %. These fast fashion Millennials often shop for clothing items while keeping their expenditure low. They value the ability to buy inexpensive clothing items, especially since they do not seem to be concerned with owning an article of clothing for a very long time. This group doesn't necessarily feel guilty for their overconsumption of inexpensive clothing items because they are more interested in following trends than dressing in a timeless manner. The practice of over laundering is more prevalent amongst these Millennials, therefore increasing their carbon footprint by consuming more natural resources such as water and energy (Levi's, 2015).

Unlike fast fashion consumers, undecided+exploring Millennials are playing both sides of the field so to speak. This group consists of Millennials in the middle of their age group, 90% are 30 years and younger. They occasionally dabble at buying cheap clothing items from fast-fashion stores but tend to hold on to the clothes for longer periods of time. They are aware slow fashion brands that emphasize product quality and longevity, but they either can't afford these slow fashion brands or they are more interested in the satisfaction of having trendy and in style. They occasional repair or alter their clothing items and are more likely to buy from consignments stores. These undecided+exploring consumers are both attracted to cheap fast fashion and also invested in slow fashion clothing that lasts longer.

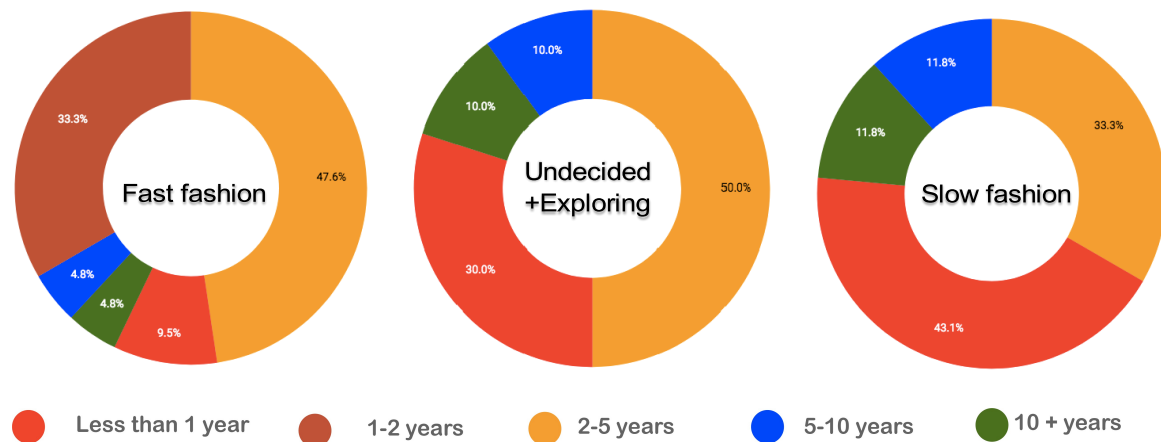


Figure 2: The amount of time Millennials hold on to clothing items

Slow fashion consumers tend to be older Millennials who spend more money on their clothing. 11.8% of this group of Millennials said they would hold on to their clothing items for 5 to 10 years while only 4.8% of fast fashion Millennials would for this amount of time. 10% of the undecided+exploring consumers said they would keep their clothing items for over 10 years (Figure 2). Slow fashion Millennials not only value quality over style, they are willing to pay more for it. Participant # 1 wrote, “As I have gotten older, quality clothes are more important to me because it is my hard-earned money and I do not want to buy clothes or shoes again in a month.” In the survey, there were no Millennials who identified themselves as fast fashion consumers that spent more than \$200 on a clothing item.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this research is looking at the ways in which Millennials buy and care for their clothing items and whether they identified as fast or slow fashions consumers. Elements of Fletcher & Grose’s “Transforming Fashion Products” concepts (2012) provide this study with a conceptual framework for understanding the current fashion cycle, from materials, processes, distribution, consumer care, to disposal. Although this research specifically studied slow and fast fashion consumers, a third category of fashion consumer, the undecided+exploring, emerged from the findings. This consumer type is not considered either fast or slow, but rather a group that resides in between the two. They are aware of fast and slow fashions and can decide what avenue to go down. These undecided+exploring consumers are going through physical and economic transformations as they mature.

The preliminary findings from the research revealed characteristics of fast, undecided+exploring, and slow fashion consumers, presenting slow fashion Millennials as more interested in higher quality, long-lasting clothing items and not obsessing over trends. Both donated all their old clothes, while 4.8% of fast fashion consumers stated that they occasionally throw clothes away. The fast fashion consumers were more interested in temporary fashion that does not have to stand the test of time.

As more fast fashion consumers become aware of slow fashion as it grows in popularity, they

will likely go through the undecided+exploring state. As they start to transition to a slower state, they can start to look for higher quality new or used clothing items while minimizing their energy and water consumption when caring for their clothes. More research and data collection can help to understand the transitional state of fast and undecided+exploring Millennials.

Valuable insights extracted from the survey informed the development of a research toolkit for a series of participatory workshops (Phase Two) with the goal of constructing a conceptual model for the final analysis. The findings will support the development of a critical-creative framework that will inspire and guide designers, manufacturers, and consumers to make more sustainable decision when developing, selling, and buying clothing items.

## Next Steps

The Phase Two research process for this study is still in progress. Three participatory workshops have been conducted and two additional sessions are scheduled for completion in a few weeks. The following descriptions present the research toolkit, process, and preliminary outcomes from the first two workshops.

The first exercise (Figure 3) consisted of a preliminary positioning, where participants were asked to mark on a line where they currently see themselves in terms of fast or slow fashion. Each participant was asked to mark their perceived location on a sheet that read FAST on the left side and SLOW on the right side with a line connecting the two ends.



Figure 3: Preliminary Positioning Exercise, visual summary of preliminary workshop data

Then the participants were asked to work together on creating a current journey map (Figure 4) for a clothing item utilizing the Transforming Fashion Product concept (Fletcher & Grose, 2012). The five steps listed in the journey consist of: Materials, Processes, Distribution, Consumer Care, and Disposal. Fletcher & Grose state that in order for change to be possible and to find solutions, people must understand the current process and what it can be. The participants used toolkits consisting of visual materials that were provided to them to help them be able to communicate and reveal their thoughts and perceptions.

## MAPPING THE CURRENT JOURNEY

### JOURNEY MAP OF T-SHIRT ( CURRENT )

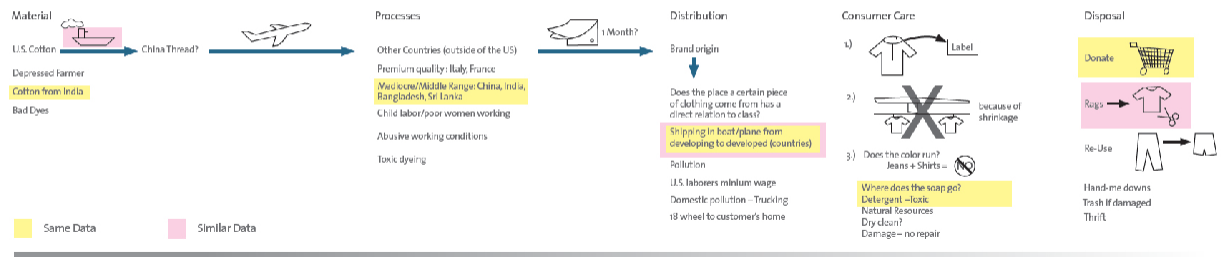


Figure 4: Current Journey Map of a Clothing Item, visual summary of preliminary workshop data

Gerald and Lindsay Zaltman's "Deep Metaphors" was used as a viewing lens to reveal Millennials' rational and emotional states of mind on sustainable fashion. The seven Deep Metaphors—Balance, Transformation, Journey, Container, Connection, Resource, and Control—are universal drivers of human behavior that shape what people think, hear, say, and do (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008). Participants were presented with the seven metaphors and a brief description of each on seven posters. They were asked to fill the posters (Figure 5) with visual and written statements regarding fast or slow fashion. The toolkit included visual materials to help participants to express what they were thinking and feeling, they worked simultaneously on different metaphors.

## CHARTING DEEP METAPHORS

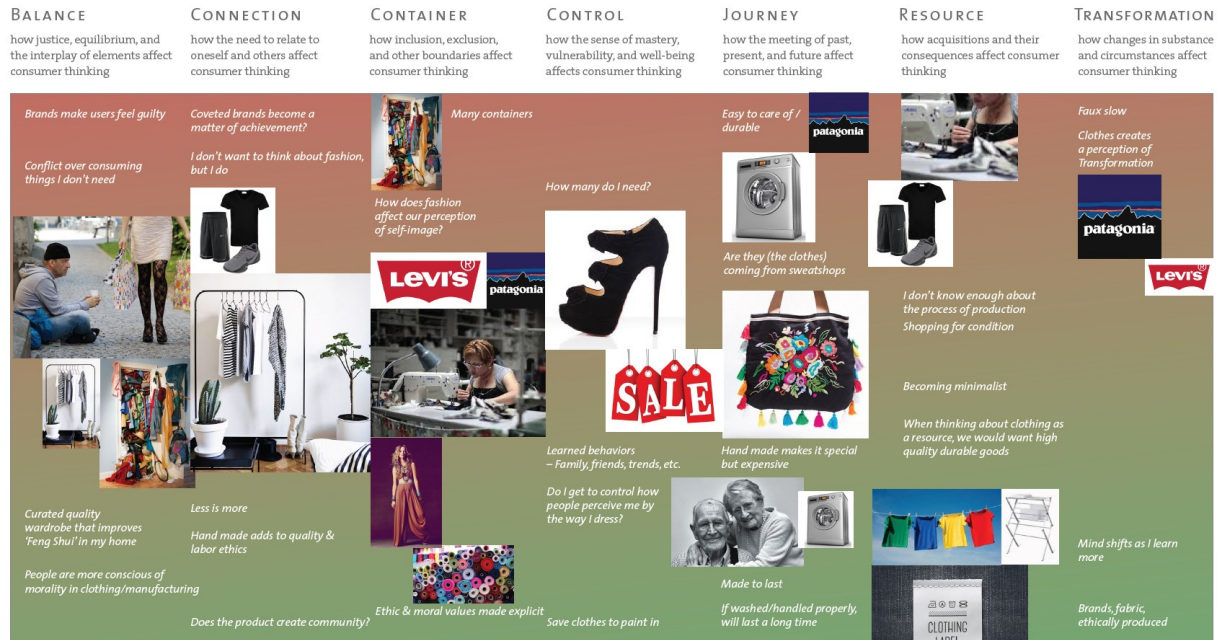


Figure 5: Deep Metaphor Exercise, visual summary of preliminary workshop data

After discussing their shopping habits, the Millennials focused on the clothing journey of

apparel. They were asked to envision the ideal journey (Figure 6) of a future clothing product utilizing Fletcher and Grose's Transforming Fashion Product concepts. This second mapping exercise allowed the participants to take their shared knowledge and collaborate on a more sustainable and transparent journey map for a clothing product.

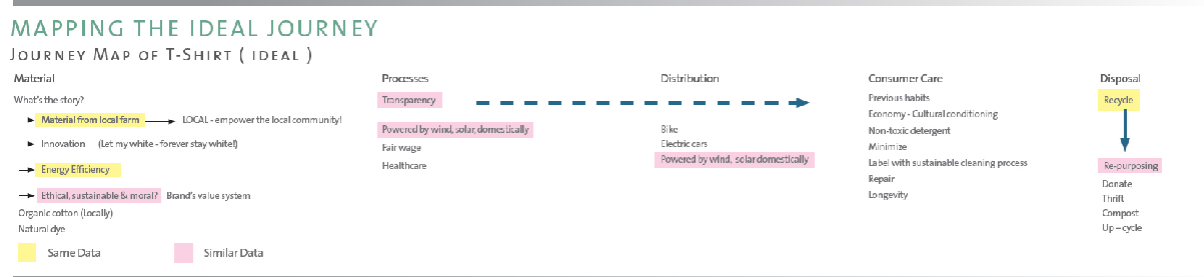


Figure 6: The Ideal Journey of a Clothing Item, visual summary of preliminary workshop data

To conclude the participatory workshops, participants were asked to again mark on the line where they saw themselves at the end of the session (Figure 7). This was used to document any changes in perception from the beginning of the session to the end.

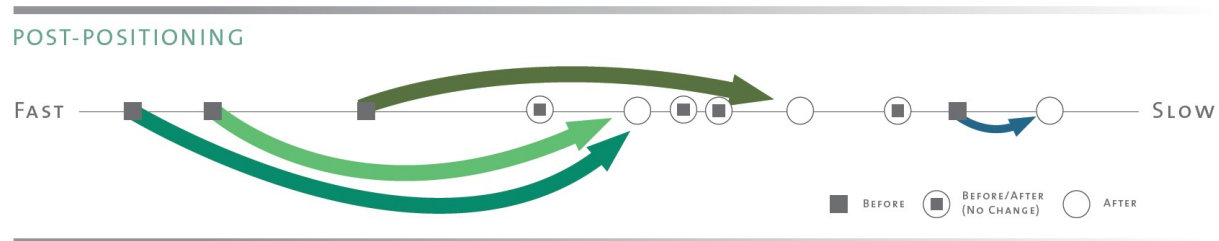


Figure 7: Post-Positioning Exercise, visual summary of preliminary workshop data

The author will summarize various aspects of fast and slow fashions mindsets through the viewing lens of selected Deep Metaphors with collages made up of photographs, illustrations, narratives, quotes, visual and written definitions. The final outcomes of this study could be applied to identify new mindsets for educating and inspiring responsible approaches in the apparel industry by encouraging people embrace slow and sustainable fashions.

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## **Author Biography**

Abel Hernández

Hernández's Master's thesis research investigates the subconscious and deeper understanding behind the decision-making process Millennials go through when purchasing, using, caring, and discarding their clothing products. He is particularly interested in "slow fashion", a term coined by Kate Fletcher in 2007, that counters the growing trend of the "fast fashion" industry. In recent years, the clothing industry has been dominated by fast-fashion that has spurred overconsumption where people buy more than they need, which has created a throwaway mentality. The aim of his research is to develop a critical-creative thinking framework based on the understandings and insights of how Millennials view apparel consumption.