

FAST FASHION: THE TRENDY ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER

ENG W270: FIRST PLACE

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The world of fashion retail is a multi-billion-dollar industry, and with the introduction of e-commerce and social media marketing the fashion industry has had growth in leaps and bounds. The ease of quick and impulse purchases leads to high demands for more clothing design options, higher quantities at low costs from consumers and has created a new trend, fast fashion. However, with the increase in fashion consumerism comes many problems, one being the clothing produced as fast fashions are manufactured in developing countries and “most of the clothes... Americans buy today are made in distant countries, ... by underpaid people working in sweatshop conditions” (Weisser, pg 170). The fashion industry takes advantage of cheap labor where there are few labor laws and regulations. Though the fashion industry does exploit these communities, I will only be addressing how the increase in fashion consumption is creating a huge environmental cataclysm.

The fashion industry alone creates 10% of the world’s total carbon emissions every year, and uses at least 1.5 trillion gallons of water annually, which causes global pollution in the form of chemical waste to microplastics (Guardian, 2020). It will take a global effort of individual responsibility to large corporate environmental commitments to combat the environmental destruction that the fashion industry causes, encouragement of its linear economy, and irresponsible consumerism to create a movement towards a more sustainable fashion industry.

Fast fashion is a term used by the clothing industry where clothing is produced rapidly, using cheap labor, at high volumes, for low prices, and with cheap textiles and materials. These clothes are

typically trendy at the time and use designs from fashion shows and events. It is the second most polluting industry, right behind the oil industry. The fashion industry used to be broken down into 4 seasons; spring, summer, fall, and winter. Due to the rise of fast fashions, there are now 52 microseasons, meaning there are new clothing items released for consumers to purchase every week, and the average consumer only deems these clothing items trendy for an average of 5 weeks, and then they are ready to be discarded (Medium, 2018).

With the rise of fast fashion and textile waste, we are seeing an increase in water pollution. Lax environmental laws and regulations in these developing countries leads to unregulated and less strict guidelines on what to do with the waste created by manufacturing textiles to produce fast fashions; “the wastewater [from textile production] is going out into freshwater streams and polluting the rivers that people are fishing from [and] living from” (Guardian, 2022). When synthetic fibers are washed, the microplastics from the fibers are cast out of the textile and released into the water. The contamination from textile wastewater is a serious health risk to the surrounding communities in the developing countries where the clothing factories are based. The fashion industry uses an estimated 93 billion metric tons of clean water each year. Even natural textiles such as cotton use an incredible amount of water. One kilogram of cotton to make a pair of jeans uses roughly 7,500-10,000 liters of water. In comparison, this is the amount of water a person would drink over the course of 10 years. Additionally, “Cotton production also requires pesticides and insecticides, which pollute the soil; runoff from fertilized cotton fields [carries excess] nutrients to water bodies, causing eutrophication and algal blooms” (Columbia Climate School, 2021). Moreover, 72 toxic chemicals have been found in the water used in textile dyeing and it contributes to roughly 17 to 20 percent of industrial global water pollution. An estimated 70 million tons of trees are cut down to create wood pulp used to produce synthetic textiles like rayon and

viscose. It is also estimated that the number of trees cut down to produce synthetic textiles will double by the year 2034, contributing to deforestation. According to the Climate School at Columbia University, their carbon footprint is huge: "The fashion industry produces 1.2 million metric tons of CO₂ each year, according to a MacArthur Foundation study. In 2018, it resulted in more greenhouse gas emissions than the carbon produced by France, Germany, and the UK all together" (Columbia Climate School, 2021). Further, the industry continues to use non-renewable resources: "Polyester, which is [plastic] made from fossil fuels, is used for about 65 percent of all clothing, and consumes 70 million barrels of oil each year. In addition, the fashion industry uses large amounts of fossil fuel-based plastic for packaging and hangers" (Columbia Climate School, 2021).

In 2015, a legally binding international treaty on climate change called the Paris Agreement was signed, and in 2016 it was put into effect; "its goal is to limit global warming to well below 2, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels" (UNFCCC, 2022). After the Paris Agreement was enacted, several different industries enacted their own regulations to combat greenhouse gas emissions within their own sectors, including the fashion industry. To combat the climate change that the fashion industry has been contributing to, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and with collaboration of different fashion industry stakeholders, in 2018 the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action was created: "The charter recognizes that current patterns of production within the fashion industry are incompatible with meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and aims, by 2050, for the global fashion industry to be carbon neutral. The charter includes the target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the fashion industry by 30 percent by 2030 and is an indication that leaders within the industry understand the urgency of acting on climate change and are committed to investing resources into developing

and implementing solutions” (Marcketti & Karpova, 2020). There are two strategies that the fashion industry can carry out to reduce their greenhouse emissions. One would be to invest and use more energy efficient production processes, technology, and equipment in closed loop manufacturing. Advancing the way synthetic textiles are produced could also have a significant impact on CO2 emissions (Petty, 2021). The other is to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels by exploring and acting upon using renewable energy sources such as solar and wind.

However, the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action recognizes that the fashion industry not only needs to switch to closed loop manufacturing and switch to renewable energy sources, but also needs to change the industry all together. They are committed to shifting towards a circular economy vs a linear economy. A circular economy is “an industrial system that is restorative or regenerative by intention and design. It replaces the end-of-life concept with restoration, shifts towards the use of renewable energy, eliminates the use of toxic chemicals, which impair reuse, and aims for the elimination of waste through the superior design of materials, products, systems and business models” (Marcketti & Karpova, pg 81). The fashion industry has a responsibility to combat climate change and reduce their carbon emissions.

The fashion industry, as it is today, is a linear economy. A linear economy is “where raw materials are collected and transformed into products that consumers use until discarding them as waste, with no concern for their ecological footprint and consequences” (Santander, 2021). The only way that the fashion industry can be carbon neutral is by resourcing responsibly and switching to a circular economy: “Production that has as little impact as possible on the environment by leaving less of a footprint. To make it sustainable, it must follow these three principles: reduce, reuse, recycle” (Santander, 2021).

An estimated 12.5% of major brands and fashion companies have signed the commitment to start the integration of circular fashion

into their companies. For example, the clothing company Levi, Strauss & Company agreed to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in all their facilities by at least 90%. They have also committed to reducing their entire supply chain's emissions by 40% by 2025. Additionally, H&M has committed to implementing a circular production model as well as fully operating on renewable energy by 2040 (Action for the Climate Emergency, 2022). Only 12.5% have made the commitment, and one cannot wait to see this number grow as the process becomes more streamlined and technologies start evolving thus starting the encouragement of all companies within the fashion industry to adopt circular fashion.

Circular fashion involves reusing and repurposing textiles as well. If we can make fashion sustainable, it must start at the top, which is the fashion designers and developers. Fashion designers have a lot of input when it comes to determining what materials are to be used for their designs. When Lei Shen & Muhammad Hussnain Sethi surveyed recent fashion school graduates, they set out to find if sustainable or circular fashions were a part of their education. They found that 92% of the schools' young designers knew of fast fashion, circular economy, and textile sustainability. 58% did not know the difference between recycling and upcycling, and 67% knew details about sustainability, while 83% did not know what it took to be a sustainable fashion designer. Further, surveyors said they had not taken any classes that pertained to learning sustainable fashion, but a few did mention they had a few assignments related to the topic (Shen & Sethi, 2021). This was incredible and disheartening to find that the most influenceable fashion industry workers were not even given the opportunity in their education to learn about sustainable and circular fashions.

In an echoing research paper written by Noël Palomo-Lovinski and Kim Hahn, their conclusion was that "a majority of consumers do not understand what fast fashion is, it is difficult to present the case

that sustainability must be the new standard for all fashion retailers and manufacturers in order to be competitive. The results [...] suggest that there is a major disconnect between fashion brands that seek to become sustainable, and consumers who do not understand why they should care” (Lovinski & Hahn, pg 24). Their conclusions are parallel to my findings in my personal survey that I conducted; see Appendix A.

In my survey I asked a variety of questions regarding fast fashions and consumer perceptions via my Instagram page on stories, which has 7k followers. Out of that base, I had between 125-250 responders for each question. A lot of my followers are spenders and like nice things, so I am not surprised by the outcomes. Most of them have not bothered to see if who they are buying their clothing from has sustainable practices, and I do get the impression that they would like clothing items that are sustainably made and of decent quality, however, they do not want to bother to take the time to research the company to find out if they have sustainable practices or pay the price for that.

A solution to consumers “caring” that their clothing is coming from circular fashion, using sustainable textiles, or business is using renewable energy is to be an informed consumer. There needs to be a movement where fast fashion will no longer be tolerated and will no longer be the norm. Fighting against the mainstream fashion trends and taking the opportunity to educate and encourage those around you will result in more of a movement than waiting for the fashion industry to act and get their ducks in a row. The informed consumer will responsibly put their money where they deem appropriate, which will not be going to companies who have not yet addressed their net zero carbon emissions standards or practices.

We can start by being a responsible consumer and reusing, recycling, and repairing our clothing. If we get a hole in our jeans, we need to educate ourselves on how to repair those holes instead of throwing them away. As a mother, I have repaired many knee holes

from jeans for my young children, and it is super easy to do with a simple knee patch that you can purchase from your local hobby or fabric store; even Walmart has them. We can also make sure we donate clothes to reputable centers or organizations when we do have clothes that are no longer needed instead of throwing them away, where they will end up in a landfill and take over 200 years to deteriorate. There are even companies that you can send in your clothing items, no matter how damaged, and they will ensure that your items are given to companies that reuse or recycle the textiles, thus keeping the circular economy going.

It is so important for us to take climate change seriously. There are so many contributing factors to the greenhouse carbon emissions crisis and there are so many wonderful people coming at this problem head on and really making a difference. If we can just inform in the slightest the effects of what fast fashion does to the environment, I think we will start to see more responsible consumerism. My observations are that our younger generations are being educated on the effects of climate change and are making huge strides to try and reverse it. I see huge trends in shopping at secondhand stores, repairing used clothes, buying quality items so they last longer, etc. Those that, “embrace sustainability in the fullest sense – as an environmental, social, economic, and political ideal – we’re at a crossroads in our civilization. There are two paths to take: continue with business as usual, ignore the science of climate change, and pretend that our economic system isn’t on life support or remake and redefine our society along the lines of sustainability” (Weisser, pg 25). It will take a huge movement and effort among people across all disciplines and walks of life to make a significant impact. There cannot be reliance on one specific solution; there must be responsibility and action on everyone’s part to reverse the ill effects of climate change. ■

APPENDIX A

Social facts for my questions are:

- 77% are aged 25-44, and 23% are aged 18-24 & 45-54.
- 97% of respondents were women
- 95% are US (United States) based, 5% of respondents were from Canada
- I also want to make note, the follower audience on my Instagram page are consumers that are more likely to make quick decisions and purchases, so they would be more inclined to purchase fast fashions.

1- How much do you spend on clothes for yourself per month?

- 0-\$25 - 11%
- \$25-\$50 - 17%
- \$50-\$150 - 27%
- >\$150 - 45%

2- Where do you shop for the majority of your personal clothing purchases?

- Secondhand Stores - 3%
- Amazon - 11%
- Brick and Mortar Stores - 19%
- Social Media Ads and/or "Influencers" - 67%

3- Have you ever heard of the term "Fast Fashion"?

- Yes - 93%
- No - 7%

- 4- If you have heard of “Fast Fashion”, does it affect your purchasing habits?
 - Yes - 12%
 - No - 88%

- 5- Have you ever spent time researching clothing companies to see if they are sourcing their materials sustainably?
 - Yes - 4%
 - No - 96%

- 6- Are you interested in shopping sustainably for clothes?
 - Yes - 65%
 - No - 35%

- 7- Would you pay more for clothes if you knew they were made sustainably and ethically?
 - Yes - 47%
 - No - 53%

- 8- When it comes to your clothing purchases, are you at all concerned with quality over quantity?
 - Yes - 84%
 - No - 16%

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