

## Fast Fashion and its Effect on the Fashion Industry: An Ethical Debate

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### I. Introduction: History of the Fashion Industry & Emergence of Fast Fashion

With a value equivalent to three trillion dollars and a labor force of 3,384.1 million people worldwide, the fashion industry is an important factor in today's global economy (Vilaca<sup>1</sup>). To further understand the industry it is important to define its business. The fashion industry is a textile based market that's engaged in the designing, manufacturing, distribution, marketing, and retailing of all types of garments and accessories (Major<sup>2</sup>). The industry is an omnipresent commodity of modern society, shown in how it is responsible for two percent of the world's Gross Domestic Product (Swatski<sup>3</sup>). Yet with this influential position has come collective clothing behaviors that are socially accepted in societies at given times and in given situations (Phiamphongsant<sup>4</sup>). This behavior is known most commonly as fashion conformity and inspired the most recognizable fashion seen in stores today. This type of fashion is known as "ready-to-wear" clothing and was inspired by the idea of fashion as a means of creating and enforcing conformity (Yardley<sup>5</sup>).

Produced using standardized patterns and sizes, this type of clothing could be made quickly and efficiently using an assembly line of workers. As the industry evolved, so did this concept of "ready-to-wear" clothing. Soon reputable brands, such as Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren, began cultivating collections that could be mass produced and sold at large department stores such as Macy's or JCPenny. By widening the market of potential consumers and utilizing mass production to lower the costs of manufacturing, these brands began to effectively maximize their profits. With increased availability of "ready-to-wear-clothing", the 1920s-1950s witnessed an increase in fashion conformity. Yet in the 1960s this changed greatly. Adolescents began to reject conformist traditions of older generations, ushering in an age of ever-changing fashion trends with a primary focus on individualism and the expression of oneself (Idacavage<sup>6</sup>). In order to follow these flickering trends adolescents had to embrace clothing that could be produced as quickly as the trends came into play, often sacrificing quality for faster production rates. This prioritization of fast production rates marked the beginning of the fast fashion industry.

From its start the fast fashion industry grew at exponential rates in order to keep up with the growing adolescent population looking to indulge in unique, affordable, and trendy clothing. This growth is shown most heavily through the fast fashion industry's projected growth. The global fast fashion market is projected to reach 260,930 million U.S. dollars by the year 2028, a constant annual growth rate increase of three percent from 210,190 million U.S. dollars in 2021

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. John S. Major is a former associate professor of East Asian history at Dartmouth College and Director of the China Council of the Asia Society.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Swatski is an author for Fashinnovation.

<sup>4</sup> Thinada Phiamphongsant is an author educated at Thammasat University to receive her PhD and MSc. She has written two of her own scientific articles.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Yardley was the book critic for the Washington Post between the years 1981-2014

<sup>6</sup> Sara Idacavage is an educator, archivist, and writer who focuses on fashion history and material culture who is based in Brooklyn.

(MarketWatch<sup>7</sup>). To further understand the growth of the industry, it is important to understand why consumers gravitate towards fast fashion. As one might assume from the name, fast fashion is incredibly quick. With the click of a button, a person can purchase clothing that will arrive in a matter of days, without even having to get up from their computer. Another incentive to use fast fashion is the low cost of its products. Consumers are able to buy more for less, leading to greater gratification of shopping desires. This convenience and efficiency has contributed to the market domination of fast fashion in relation to the fashion industry, also fostering one important question. With that question being, how has the efficiency of fast fashion affected the ethicality of the industry?

## II. Changing of Consumer Behaviors

In recent years, fast fashion has greatly affected the cycle of trends and clothing seasons that were normalized and present in the fashion industry. Fast fashion brands, such as Zara and H&M, have opted for a cycle of fifty-two microtrends instead of the traditional seasonal cycle that's utilized by higher-end brands (VanDyke<sup>8</sup>). These microtrends provide exciting, new clothing that entices younger consumers. Fast fashion brands do this strategically, as consumers between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine have greater access to disposable income and credit (Gupta<sup>9</sup>). Meaning that they are more likely to spend their money on and buy into fast fashion trends more frequently. In addition to frequent variety, fast fashion brands sell their products at lower costs than competing brands, allowing people to buy more for less (Kupelian<sup>10</sup>). This frequent yet still cost-effective shopping leads to greater gratification of shopping desires for consumers, something high-end brands can't offer. Thus leading consumers to rely on fast fashion brands even more to satisfy their desires.

In order to produce and supply clothing for their fifty-two season cycle, fast fashion brands often prioritize quantity, cost, and speed over the quality of their products. This means that their clothing is mass produced using cheap materials, such as polyester, that degrade after just a few wears and get thrown away (Rauturier<sup>11</sup>). Due to the constant consumption and degradation of fast fashion products, consumers have begun to view their products as disposable (Monroe<sup>12</sup>). An idea that is supported by the statistics surrounding the amount of clothing American consumers throw away. The amount of clothes American consumers throw away has doubled in the past years, with each person generating around 75 pounds of textile waste, an increase of 750% since the 1960s (Monroe). To worsen the matter, only 14.7 percent of textiles are recycled while the other eighty-five percent end up in landfills or burned (Portela<sup>13</sup> & EPA<sup>14</sup>).

## III. Environmental Effects

As previously explained, fast fashion brands utilize cheap materials in order to cut down on production costs and maximize profits. These cheap materials are known as petrochemical

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<sup>7</sup> MarketWatch is a subsidiary of Dow Jones & Company, just like The Wall Street Journal, and is a website that provides financial information, business news, analysis, and stock market data.

<sup>8</sup> Elise VanDyke was the Digital Design and Marketing Intern for Women in Business Education in the summer of 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Shipra Gupta is an Associate Professor at the University of Illinois Springville.

<sup>10</sup> Katya Kupelian is a videographer and editor for Insider Journalist and Irene Kim is a Business Insider Journalist.

<sup>11</sup> Solene Rauturier is a freelance Content and Social Media Marketer with a focus on sustainability.

<sup>12</sup> Rachel Monroe is a contributing writer at The New Yorker, as well as being the author of one of the stimulus materials.

<sup>13</sup> Valentina Portela is a skilled writer, researcher, and content creator currently pursuing their masters in marketing intelligence.

<sup>14</sup> The EPA is the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

textiles and are made from non-renewable fossil fuels (Phadtare<sup>15</sup>). Easily recognizable names such as polyester, nylon, acrylic, spandex, and rayon are all types of petrochemical textiles that are preferred over organic, plant based fabrics due to their cheap cost and stronger structure (Phadtare). Burning the fossil fuels required to make these textiles is incredibly harmful to the environment as it releases carbon emissions into the atmosphere. Taking this into account the fashion industry is the world's second largest industrial polluter, responsible for ten percent of global pollution, including 1.2 billion pounds of carbon emissions (Clarke<sup>16</sup>). The lack of standardization pertaining to sustainability in the fast fashion market has not only increased air pollution, but also water pollution. The wastewater produced by the manufacturing of synthetic fabrics releases lead, arsenic, benzene, and other pollutants into water sources (Bandera<sup>17</sup>). While the wastewater produced by fabric treatments and dyeing is polluted with oil, phenol, pesticides, dyes, as well as heavy metals such as copper, mercury, and chromium (Bandera). In addition to these pollutants, 1.5 billion tonnes of microplastics bypass filtration systems and make their way into the world's oceans (Phadtare). These microplastics are most commonly created when synthetic fabrics are washed and some of their fibers separate (Steffen<sup>18</sup>). With only one load of laundry up to seven thousand microplastic fibers can separate themselves and begin their travel towards the sea (Steffen). A fact that not only puts into perspective the immediate degradation of fast fashion products, but also the immediate and detrimental environmental effects derived from the industry's products. Without adequate environmental safeguards, these chemicals can leak into waterways and pose massive health risks to farmers, workers, and their communities.

#### IV. Exploitation of Employees

In order to sustain production and pricing rates that continuously satisfy their customers, fast fashion companies take their production to developing countries where there is cheap labor and less regulations (Ross<sup>19</sup>). Once there, employees are overworked, underpaid, and forced to work in unsafe conditions in order to maximize the company's own profits. Fast fashion companies cut labor costs by paying garment workers wages that are drastically below the minimum wage line, with workers in India being paid as little as fifteen cents an hour (Wadud<sup>20</sup>). In addition to the low pay, garment workers in some countries are expected to work 10-16 hour days, six days a week and in unsafe conditions (Wadud). Since the garment industry grew so quickly in such a short span of time, many factories are housed in repurposed buildings that may be unsafe due to faulty wiring and structural weaknesses that become exacerbated by the heavy machinery needed in garment production (Wadud). The absence of safety regulations as well as cost cutting efforts comes at a price, highlighted in the numerous tragic garment factory disasters. With the deadliest of these being the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 (Ross). A preventable accident that took the lives of one thousand one hundred garment workers, and injured two thousand and five hundred more. Though tragic, this accident was not unexpected as safeguards on the building had expired and architectural engineers warned that the building should be condemned. Despite this, workers were forced to come in and exploited by having

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<sup>15</sup> Anuprita Phadtare is a researcher at Watershed Organization Trust.

<sup>16</sup> Rebekah Clarke is a credible author for The Carbon Literacy Project.

<sup>17</sup> Gerardo Bandera is a freelance writer and editor who is based in New York.

<sup>18</sup> Luana Steffen is a credible author employed by Intelligent Living.

<sup>19</sup> Emma Ross is a moderator for International Law and Policy Brief.

<sup>20</sup> Mushifque Wadud is an award winning news reporter and a doctoral researcher at University of Colorado Boulder.

their wages suspended if they refused (Ross). Another glaring issue in ethicality is the use of sexual and gender based violence towards garment workers, with 85% of garment workers being women and girls sexual harassment and gender-based violence is either ignored or perpetuated by managers as a means to exploit their workers (WRC<sup>21</sup>).

## V. Perceived Benefits of Fast Fashion: Counterargument & Rebuttal

Although highly unethical, there are some perceived benefits to the fast fashion industry. According to Simran Kalkat, a Federal Fiscal Intern and researcher at the University of California, fast fashion is much more affordable than other brands. This makes products available to a much wider range of consumers, especially those with less disposable income. This offers underprivileged consumers the opportunities their economically advantaged counterparts have always been able to indulge in, thus creating a more equally accessible industry. The fast fashion industry also contributes greatly to the global economy and employs over 300 million workers worldwide, creating jobs in the most under-developed countries (Assoune<sup>22</sup>).

Despite how these perceived benefits can be portrayed in a positive light, it is clear that behind them is the capitalistic greed and exploitation employed by the fast fashion industry. These jobs are exploitative and dangerous, trapping their workers instead of providing them with new opportunities for social mobility. In addition to this, the statistical consumption rates present in section two of this paper showcase how fast fashion is not being consumed by underprivileged people alone, but has become a source of frivolity and mindless consumption. Even disregarding all of this, the environmental effects the fast fashion industry has on the world are inexcusable and unjustifiable. Leading to show how the accessibility of fast fashion has negatively impacted the ethicality of the fashion industry as a whole.

## VI. Conclusion

The accessibility of fast fashion has become ingrained into society so much so that it will never truly disappear, but this does not mean efforts to mitigate its negative effects go to waste. Rising awareness towards the fast fashion industry's ethical issues and shortcomings is the first step that must be taken. In fact this step has already begun, according to the 2020 Conscious Fashion Report by LYST Insights<sup>23</sup>, searches for "vegan leather" increased by 69% year on year. While searches for organic cotton increased by 23% since November 2019 and searches for recycled plastics increased 35% from November 2020. Although this will not fix the issues alone, it is a good start and will hopefully be aided by the increasing amount of material recycling. Increasing material recycling will massively decrease the amount of garment and fabric waste produced by the fast fashion industry. Although this is a relatively new plan, Cathy T. Do's <sup>24</sup>research in "Neural sensitivity towards conflicting attitudes supports greater conformity to positive over negative influence in early adolescence." Supports the validity of this solution, if the idea of garment recycling towards adolescents is normalized, there will be an increase in these positive behaviors, as adolescents will be more willing to conform once they see the

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<sup>21</sup> The WRC is the Workers Rights Consortium. It conducts independent an in-depth investigations on factories producing for major brands.

<sup>22</sup> Alex Assoune is the founder, owner, and Chief Executive Officer of Panaprium, which is a global sustainable fashion brand that's digital.

<sup>23</sup> LYST Insights is a source for local and global fashion intelligence/data.

<sup>24</sup> Cathy T. Do is one of the authors of the stimulus materials.

positive benefits of their actions. Some limitations of this solution that must be taken into consideration. With one of those limitations being the fact that recycling alone won't erase all the waste the fast fashion industry produces, as many of the petrochemical textiles cannot be recycled (Phadtare). In addition to this, recycling is an expensive process that requires skilled workers. Though there are some limitations, there is time for this solution to be implemented and built upon, leaving it to be a viable option to ease the harmful effect fast fashion has on the ethicality of the fashion industry as well as the world.

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