

Fast Fashion: The Trendiest Threat to Environmental Sustainability

Erika Frick

Each year, the fast fashion industry requires more than 98 million tons of non-renewable resources, as environmental justice advocate, Meital Mizrahi, reports (Mizrahi 3). The term “fast fashion” first appeared in the New York Times in the 1990s, characterizing Zara’s ability to get garments in a store within 15 days of the design stage. The term has evolved to describe the mass production of clothing by corporations in the same uniform and global manner as fast food chains (Mizrahi 1). Fast fashion feeds off the vigorous change in fashion trends within modern culture, discarding the “old” and importing the “new” in bulk. The overconsumption of clothes that has resulted from this has had drastic environmental implications which have recently come under mainstream scrutiny. Both producers and consumers of fast fashion companies have greatly contributed to the unsustainable practices of the fashion industry in the 21st century through the promotion of rapid trend cycles, unsustainable methods of production, and overall hesitance in approaching the issue of sustainability.

Promotion of Rapid Trend Cycles

The promotion of rapid trend cycles and the subsequent adaptation by the apparel industry has led to vigorous cycles of consumption and discarding that have reduced the average lifetime of a garment to less than a season, as a researcher at the London College of Fashion, Mila Burcikoca, reports (Burcikova 382). This has caused consumers to consume fashion trends faster and move on to the next style with the same vigor. This detrimental cycle has created a negative impact on the environment, reducing the amount of time garments are worn while increasing the number of clothes that are thrown away, which greatly contributes to the amount of pollution caused by the production of garments, as well as natural lands taken up by growing landfills.

Apparel companies are large proponents of this, enabling consumers to excessively buy through tactics aimed at accelerating styles. For example, sustainability advocate Cassandra Elrod, observes that fast-fashion retail stores like H&M and Zara receive near-daily shipments of new apparel to perpetuate the notion that styles are out of trend as quickly as they came in, prompting consumers to buy more products to keep up with relevancy (Elrod 578). Similarly, Abigail Beall, technology and environmental journalist for the New Science magazine notes that about 85% of all clothes thrown away end up in landfills, taking up space on precious natural lands, or burnt, emitting harmful pollutants into the atmosphere (Beall). This foreshadows a future of environmental degradation as the fast fashion industry continues to expand globally. Kozlowski’s and Beall’s articles work together to fully illustrate how the cycle of clothing trends is facilitated by brands as well as consumers, respectively, to deleteriously mark the environment through all stages of a garment’s life, from production to disposal.

Once clothes fall out of trend and out of favor with their purchasers, a large majority of pieces find the fate of irresponsible discarding. This is a huge contributor to the modern problem of global warming and pollution- and one that is largely ignored by the billions of international fast-fashion consumers.

Unsustainable Methods of Production

The declining merit of clothing manufacturing is indicative of the fashion industry's growing burden on the environment. Defending this, researcher and lecturer on sustainable fashion and environmental justice at Tel Aviv University, Meital Peleg Mizrahi, reports that the consumption of fast fashion involves oil for synthetic fiber production, emissions of 1.2 billion greenhouse gasses a year, and the generation of billions of tons of non-recyclable textile waste and massive fertilizer applications for the growth of cotton (Mizrahi 1156). Mizrahi's article reinforces the notion that production is a large source of fast fashion's negative environmental impact, necessitated by the aforementioned consumerism. In terms of unsustainability regarding the literal means of production, Sandra Niessen, a graduate of the University of Leiden with a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology, writes about the idea of "sacrifice zones": physical locations that are designated expendable for the sake of economic activity, which in regards to fashion largely entails the exportation of garments which are mass produced. In these zones, natural lands are converted into material farms and factory locations to fuel and satisfy large corporations' garment quotas (Leiden). The perceived expendability of this physical land enables fast fashion retailers to produce vast amounts of clothes using resources from an environment that is, to these large corporations, out of sight and out of mind, which keeps the issue of unsustainable fashion far from the minds of big-business fashion executives. Mizrahi and Leiden's findings collaborate to bolster the argument that the current method of supplying garments to storefronts is integrally weak and likely will not endure another 50 years of fashion trends before reaching either a resource or land-induced breaking point.

The waste from the physical production of clothing contributes greatly to the larger climate crisis, and without a more long-term oriented means of production, could significantly affect the status of the environment as a whole.

Hesitance in Approaching the Issue of Sustainability

The impact of the fashion industry on the global environment is undeniable and backed by strong statistics, yet the damage persists at an ever-increasing rate due to corporate and consumer hesitance to approach the issue of sustainability in fashion. In regards to internal industry stakeholders, author Kedron Thomas, an esteemed cultural anthropologist, writes in his article *Cultures of Sustainability in the Fashion Industry*, that the opinion from the fashion industry itself is largely split into two camps – Business managers (those involved with the sale and economics of clothing) and Designers (those involved with the creative and artistic conception of garments) (Thomas). Business managers largely regard the term "sustainability" concerning efficient resource management, while Designers interpret "sustainability" as a shift away from mass production and towards hands-on, artistically oriented craftsmanship. The Business Manager's approach and the Fashion Designer's approach to Sustainability are largely incompatible in taking actualized steps toward reducing the impact of the industry since Business Managers are only wanting to regulate a process that Fashion Designers want to entirely reinvent. Outside of the industry, Annamma Joy, a University of British Columbia Professor, interviewed young adults in Hong Kong and Canada about their stance on environmentalism and fashion. The results showed that while the participants were open to environmentalism in terms of more mainstream issues like food and recycling, most did not associate the word with the fashion industry, and if they did, took no action, choosing aesthetics over environmental implications (Joy).



Joy's article on consumer negligence of the fashion industry's impact would not be possible if not for the stakeholders within the industry's hesitance to prevent the problem as a unit (as shown in Thomas's paper), enabling the continuation of irresponsible consumerism. Industry proponents and fashion consumers inadvertently work together to prove fast fashion has become such a large and complex problem, that its solution seems ever complicated and less desirable to a consumer base used to getting all the garments they can handle, and an industry profiting accordingly.

Conclusion

Rapid trend cycles, flawed methods of production, and confusion within the industry and consumer base have enabled the unsustainability of the modern fashion industry. Like all sectors of the world economy, the fashion industry has begun to take note of public concern about climate change and the environmental impact of their production processes, while the consumer preferences of the younger generation are increasingly informed by social and environmental concerns (Alon 1158), and this is a trend which is foreseen to persist in the coming future to increase global awareness about the impact of the fast fashion industry. If consumers as well as key stakeholders within the fashion industry stand up for sustainability in closet curation, change can be made to protect the future of fashion and the planet.

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