

Sustainable Fashion—Rationale and Policies

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Sustainable fashion refers to efforts to minimize the fashion industry's adverse environmental and social impacts. This entry describes the industry's entire production chain: from polyester production, cotton growth and wasteful fashion consumption patterns to landfilling, where so many clothes end up. The entry characterizes the drivers behind the industry's poor record regarding sustainability and employee exploitation, as well as new policies around the world designed to improve the industry's performance. These include the Australian Modern Slavery law, the French law prohibiting the destruction of textile surpluses and the New York Fashion Sustainability and Social Accountability Act.

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Introduction and History

There is a symbiotic relationship between clothes and fashion. Clothes are a tangible manifestation of fashion—but they are not the same thing. While clothing is defined as a “garment, body cover and uniform ^[1]”, that is, a concrete object with a functional purpose, fashion is “the example and manner accepted at a particular time and place—in the form of clothing, furniture and so on” ^{[1][2]}. There is a natural flow between fashion and clothing: the form of clothing is designed first, making it the immediate expression of fashion. While clothing constitutes a technical item that covers the body, fashion relies on social norms. By its very definition, fashion changes frequently. Fashion historian Christopher Bravard describes its ephemeral nature in his definition of fashion: “Clothing designed primarily for the quality of its expression and decoration, and is closely related to the short-term demand of the market” ^[3].

This division between clothing and fashion is relatively new. In the professional literature, there are debates about the date of the emergence of *fashion* as a concept separate from *clothing* ^[4]. Despite the controversy, however, there is widespread agreement among fashion historians about two matters: *local dress* has always relied on tradition, as opposed to *fashion* which depends on peoples' autonomous choices which tend to change frequently ^{[2][3]}. Secondly, the rise of pre-made clothes in the 1960s constitutes the watershed line for mass fashion, that is, a uniform and global fashion produced by corporations, in which the pace of trend reversal is extremely fast, and the rise of “fast fashion” as the dominant production model in the global fashion market ^[5].

The term “fast fashion” first appeared in the *New York Times* in the 1990s when characterizing *Zara*, the Spanish clothing chain's ability to have a garment in a store within fifteen days of the design stage. *Fast fashion* connotes the mass-produced clothing by huge corporations in the same, uniform and global manner as fast food chains ^{[5][6]}. Other prominent examples of fast fashion corporations include *H&M*, *Uniqlo*, *TopShop*, *Primark* and *SHEIN*. These companies' profit model relies on slashing production costs along with as wide and fast a distribution capacity as possible. Speed refers both to the rate at which fashion items arrive from the runway to the consumer as well as the short-term use by consumers ^{[7][8][9]}. As corporate competition continues to escalate, fashion companies respond by producing even more frequent collections, far beyond the traditional “seasonal” lines. Spurred by saturation advertisement, consumer response has been characterized as: “see now—buy now” ^[10]. Following ephemeral consumer preferences ever more closely, retail outlets have been known to change stock and add new items on a weekly basis ^[11]. Public expectations have evolved accordingly: consumers come to expect to dress fashionably at little expense. As a result, spending levels for clothing have actually decreased even as demand has risen dramatically. Fast fashion constitutes a natural, commercial response to these new market dynamics ^[10]. It is important to emphasize many times, corporate policies to maximize cut in production costs lead to violation of workers' rights and contamination of the environment. In fact, the fast fashion industry is now considered one of the most polluting industries in the world ^[9].

The Rise of Fast Fashion

The beginning of the fast fashion model can be traced to the 1950s, when the world of clothing began to gain momentum. Following incipient globalization processes, which involved trans boundary trade and production facilities. These paralleled the improvement of clothing production technology ^[12]. For the first time, the concept of ‘fashion’ was assimilated into the differentiation strategy of clothing brands.

Later, in the 1980s, there was a growing interest in fashion trends and widespread industrialization of the fashion market along with the emergence of global media and the rise of the post-Fordist, mass production economy, which is

characterized by high product turnover and an emphasis on aesthetics and branding ^[13]. Industrialization allows for a significant reduction in terms of prices due to the shortening of global supply chains. These conditions combined to develop the present competitive trade model of fast fashion ^[9].

Along with shortened supply chains and improved production technologies, marketing strategies have also changed. Among the dramatic transitions that took place over the past thirty years is the increase in the number of collections per year in leading clothing corporations: from 2 to 4 in the 1980s, through 8 during the 1990s, to 52 collections and beyond per year, today ^[14]. Another important change is a separation between a brand's image with the associated product and actual product production. According to this approach, the importance of clothes production is negligible relative to the image of the fashion brand. The production of clothes can therefore be outsourced and subcontracted ^[15]. The lenient environmental regulation and low salaries of workers found in developing countries have drawn many fast fashion companies to move their clothing production far away from corporate headquarters. Indeed, in recent decades most fast fashion companies have relocated clothing production to developing countries, where they enjoy inexpensive labor and easier environmental legislation ^[16].

This model is reflected in the extraordinary statistic that 97.5% of clothing sold in the United States are currently imported ^[17]. Transfer of clothing production to developing countries, based on cheap labor, made it possible to significantly lower clothing prices, resulting in the formation of fast fashion ^[18]. An asymmetrical hierarchy between production workers and corporations is also one of the characteristics of the post-Fordist economy. The expansion of European fast fashion chains, in particular, has outpaced the rapid growth in the global retail fashion industry employs some 300 million workers ^[19]. The economic advantages of the fast fashion model have been confirmed empirically: one study estimates that profit margins for traditional fashion retailers only reach 7 percent while the fast-fashion competitors average a far more lucrative 16 percent return ^[11]. Global brands dominate the industry. An assessment by international consultants, McKinsey, Deloitte Group and BCG (Boston Consulting Group) reports that fast fashion companies operate in an ever changing, increasingly competitive, uncertain environments, characterized, creating an increasingly concentrated market ^[10].

These changes are often positively described as a "democratization of the fashion", Thanks to the rise of ready-made clothes, produced in industrial production, the strengthening of mass communication and the dynamism of the modern lifestyle, for the first time it is possible for more and more people, particular in western countries, to purchase fashionable clothes at relatively affordable prices. This constitutes implying a positive process in which the purchasing power of consumers in the field of fashion is enhanced ^[19]. Ostensibly, it can be argued that the reduction in the prices of clothes, has led to an increase in the quantity of clothes sold and the quantity clothes in the possession of the consumers, improving the condition of global consumers. At the same time, the increase in the production and consumption of ready-made clothes has a number of negative environmental consequences.

Environmental Implications of Fast Fashion

Research consistently corroborates the magnitude of the pollution produced by fashion companies, ranking it second among polluting industries ^[20]. Each year, the fashion industry requires more than 98 million tons of non-renewable resources ^[10]. This involves oil utilized in synthetic fiber production and massive fertilizer applications to produce cotton, contributing a quarter of the world's polluting chemicals ^[9], emitting 1.2 billion greenhouse gases a year, producing 20–35% of the micro-plastics found in the sea ^[7], generating billions of tons of non-recyclable textile waste and 1.5 million tons of waste ^[20]. Fashion producers have been ranked as the second largest source of freshwater pollution ^{[21][22][23]}. The growth in fiber production, in particular cotton, is associated with the steady rise in the use of pesticides, with adverse ecological consequences manifested in ecosystems and farm worker health ^{[20][24]}.

There are four major categories of factors to which the adverse environmental impact of the fashion industry are generally attributed: 1. Resource inefficiency (materials and energy consumed and lost); 2. Wasted Ephemeral products lifecycles (artificially short lifecycles); 3. Wasted Waste due to overproduction capabilities (unused or idle products); and 4. Wasted Wasteful embedded values (unrecovered components, materials and energy from disposed products) ^[25]. Fast fashion is highly linear in its design, antithetical to the circular production model which constitutes a sustainable more for manufacturing goods in a world that will continue to face increasing scarcity ^[25]. It should be emphasized that carbon emissions, water pollution and soil destruction associated with the clothing industries, such as burying and burning clothes at the end of use, tend to occur in poor countries in the global South, while most clothes are purchased in the West ^[9].

There are no signs that the adverse environmental impact caused by the fashion industry are starting to improve. In fact, projections suggest that by 2030, the industry is expected to use 35% more fiber-growing space ^[26]. This will compromise 115 million acres that could be used as habitat for protecting biodiversity or farmlands for growing food. The wisdom of this expansion has been challenged, inter alia, because world simply does not need so many clothes. One assessment reports that there at present there are already enough garments available to keep all the humans dressed for 50 years ^[8]. A comprehensive review of the academic literature on the environmental hazards associated with fast fashion identifies two contrasting perspectives that have emerged to address them, involving *pragmatic change* versus *radical change* ^[24].

Social Implications of Fast Fashion

The fashion industry's balance sheet is also embedded with environmental injustice. A typical Western consumer holds in his closet a prodigious amount of clothes. The result is that over 20% of the clothes in her possession is never being worn and a textile waste in the US alone is burned at a continuous rate of one truck per minute ^{[27][28]}. One out of five workers is under nine years of age. The wages earned by the vast majority (98%) of people employed in clothing production are insufficient to feed a family ^[29]. In addition to being the second most polluting industry, parallel assessments suggest that, after the mobile telephone production, fashion is the second most exploitive industry in the world. ^[29]. Another category of damage caused by the fast fashion model is the decline in the perceived value of clothing details among consumers. Because clothes have become so inexpensive and wardrobes so readily replaced, there is a drop in the public's appreciation for high quality and lasting clothing. The saturation of advertising, and its aggressive utilization by social media, undermines the ability of presenting an alternative approach to wearing and purchasing clothes. The expectation of ever lower prices erodes the ability to offer a better and fairer alternative.

Advertising companies play a critical part in the growth and success of fast fashion companies. The fast fashion industry is based on short product cycles, which require high and steady consumer demand. This can only be maintained through aggressive advertising ^[30]. Between 1979 and 1998, total spending on advertising by fashion corporations in the United States increased by billions of dollars ^[15]. Its advertising budget then doubled between 2000 and 2010. Today, most designers' decisions in fast fashion chains are dictated by the advertising department ^[31]. Corporations like ZARA, H&M and New Look are famous for adopting a strategy of constantly renewing their product range with trend-oriented fashion styles, along with a huge investment of capital in advertising and social media, and the ultra-fast fashion company SHEIN, which bases its sales and advertising strategy on "social network influencers", uploads about 5000 new models to the website every day. In general, 'social commerce', or social media utilization to facilitate online purchases of products, is one of the main trends in developing e-commerce in particular, and a major growing trend in the fashion world as a whole ^[10].

In this context one must distinguish between fast fashion and ultra-fast fashion. the term "fast fashion" refers to low-cost clothing collections that emulate luxury fashion products. Fast fashion allows many young consumers to attain their repressed aspirations to have access to luxury fashion ^[11]. Ultra-fast fashion is represented by websites such as Boohoo, Supernova and SHEIN. Today, they have emerged as the most profitable fashion sales websites in the US, which dominate with twenty-eight percent of the American fashion market. Ultra-fast fashion also relies on social networks such as Instagram and Tik Tok, along with social network influencers to induce consumer demand, both in the context of the "design line" and in general in the context of marketing strategies.

Technology Increases Consumption of Excess Fashion

Technology also plays a significant role in the consumption associated with fast fashion. The Internet, with its emphasis on social networks, allows consumers ongoing access to massive amounts of information on the latest trends and styles. Many fast fashion consumers are fascinated by celebrity culture and the high-end, custom-fitted *haute couture*, where clothes are produced by hand from start to finish. These consumers aspire to buy the kinds of clothes that celebrities wear—clothes that they admire on televised, high fashion runway shows. Informed by aggressive advertising campaigns, they wish to purchase them immediately. Typically, however, their budgets are unable to afford such items. As a result, they compromise on "cheap" or low-quality items that can be found in fast fashion lines ^[32].

The fashion industry continues to be transformed by online platforms. Many fashion companies have replaced the growth strategy from expanding with geographical channels and expanding the chain of stores to destroying a digital presence—both in the context of online sales and in the context of increasing the presence in social media. Making significant investments in Information and Communications Technology and the digitalization of the value chain have become critical components of the fashion industry's economic strategy ^[10].

Another effect of social networks is the shortening of wear time, both in terms of duration and the number of uses of a garment. Many social network users indicate that they do not want to be seen attending two different events with the same outfit. In a culture where individuals constantly record their activities, active social media participants make enormous efforts to diversify their appearances when photographed. Many even indicate that they buy clothes specifically for photo shoots but, in fact, do not use them other than for posting online ^[33].

Moreover, a 2016 study in Europe found that teenagers aged 13–18 spend at least three hours a day on social media. In 2018 and 2019, McKinsey and the BoF Fashion Survey evaluated how consumers attain their information. Their findings confirmed that mobile data traffic had become more significant than desktop traffic. "Millennial consumers" process information on their smartphones for more than three hours every day ^[34]. Due to its convenience, the centrality of smart phones to commercial transactions and mobile payments is growing rapidly. As consumers every year discover the convenience of using their mobile phones for shopping ^[10]. Other studies examined the impact of social networks, including business pages and sponsored advertising, on fashion consumption. They assessed the overt preference of teens and found that the impact of social networks is far greater than 21%, and most often occurs subconsciously. A global PWC survey found that social networks are the first source of inspiration for teens to purchase various products ^[35].

[36]. A full 49% of consumers aged 18–34 indicate that they shop according to the recommendations of network influencers, a figure that climbs to 67% in the field of fashion [37].

Another technological aspect informing fast fashion consumption is online commerce. During the last decade, with the penetration of smartphones, the volume of online commerce in all categories of consumption increased to unprecedented levels. A study conducted in 28 different countries [38] found that 71% of consumers purchase clothes from a mobile phone while performing other tasks; a third of them do so at least once a week, and sometimes even several times a day. Another a study by ComScore [39] about mobile shopping conducted in five key European countries found that buying clothes and accessories was the leading, single buying category.

Purchasing online through mobile phones has a number of unique elements to consider: First, online shopping is characterized by blurring physical boundaries making it possible anywhere, anytime. Targeted online advertisements offer purchases according to the customer's preferences, as revealed from his smartphone [40]. The time lag between the moment of purchase and the receipt of the product creates a psychological illusion that the money is not really wasted [41].

In addition, the fact that it is not possible to measure or feel the garment before purchasing, often leads to buying items that often are not the right size, or do not look as seen on the website. Once they clothes arrive, frequently they do not meet the buyer's expectations. The result is a significant increase in the amount of new clothing being shipped to thrift stores, recycling and landfill facilities without ever being worn [7][8][42]. This is reflected in a steady increase in textile waste. The past sixty years have witnessed an 800% rise in the generation and burial of textile waste. At the same time, a mere 1 percent of discarded textiles have been recycled [9].

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