

The Bridge Between Fast Fashion and Sustainable Fashion

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## *Introduction*

How many of you come across advertisements for your favorite brands on social media or are inspired to buy an outfit that an influencer posted in? The age of social media has caused us to obsess over what we look like and how we dress. It also encourages us to browse online whenever an advertisement pops up, and sooner than later an hour has passed. The fashion industry is the world's third largest manufacturing industry, but it is also among the world's most polluting (Brewer). "The global fashion industry is valued at \$2.4 trillion and is growing at 5.5%, but the fast fashion sector has delivered growth at four times that rate since 2014" (Stringer). Fast fashion has taken over the fashion industry in the last decade and has caused so much clothing to go to waste.

As we will see, nearly 12 million tons of clothing are discarded annually, three-fourths of it ending up in landfills (Brewer). Growing up in a developed country, we have the privilege of being able to afford new clothes every season or even more often than that. These privileges blind us and cause us to forget about the effects it has on our surroundings. Every time a factory manufactures a new piece of clothing more and more pollution is being released into the air or water. "The global fashion industry accounts for 10% of the world's carbon emissions and produced an estimated 1.2 billion tons of greenhouse gas emissions in 2015" (Brewer).

In the past few years, many companies have started to stress sustainability. This transition is not something that happens overnight, and consumers need to be willing to support this movement. Sustainable fashion is not only focused on the environment, but it also includes the community and everyone else involved in making the products. Consumers need to back up their word with actions and become more aware of sustainable products. Sustainable fashion and fast

fashion are trending simultaneously, but there needs to be a compromise to overturn the negative impact of fast fashion on the environment.

### ***Fast Fashion***

Fast fashion can be defined as “low-cost clothing collections that mimic current luxury fashion trends” (Joy). This concept has been around for a long time but has started trending in the past decade or so. The uprise in this way of life can partially be attributed to social media. Being able to easily access current trends around the world and see what others are wearing on social media has made people obsessed with self-image and social connectivity (Brewer). Fast fashion is also referred to as “McFashion” because it provides instant gratification. People are able to satisfy their fashion needs almost immediately in today’s world.

This trend has several benefits, which is why it is so popular, but it also has its downsides. Fast fashion is attractive to consumers because it allows people to buy “luxury” styles and trends at an affordable price. Companies that fall into the fast fashion category are always manufacturing new clothes and coming up with new styles, so customers can buy new clothes every season to match what is trending. The clothes are cheaply manufactured, so businesses can sell their merchandise at a lower price. With things being priced cheaper, customers can buy more clothes for the same price of one piece of luxury clothing. This is appealing to people; therefore, companies gain customer loyalty.

Although it is nice that people who cannot afford more expensive clothing have access to similar items, there is limited room for creativity and individuality with fast fashion. Clothing can say a lot about someone’s personality and important qualities they have, but when everyone dresses the same it is hard to read and differentiate people. It is difficult for people to stand out

and be themselves because people want to conform to society's trends. Since dressing differently is not as common, when someone does decide to dress their own style, those people are considered outcasts because they stick out of the crowd (Brewer). "Fast fashion replaces exclusivity, glamour, originality, and luxury with "massclusivity" and planned spontaneity" (Joy). The term "massclusivity" refers to exclusive or premium products created for mass markets. Companies market these items as rare and special, but they really are not as uncommon as they seem because the average person can afford them. Most exclusive products are purchased by the wealthier class because they are more expensive, but "massclusivity" changes this buying habit by making the products available to the middle-class as well.

Fast fashion contributes to a larger issue referred to as throw-away culture. When people go through their closets or conduct their yearly spring cleaning, they usually end up throwing away the majority, if not all, of those clothes. Very rarely do people take the time to bring their old clothes to a donation location or secondhand clothing store. "According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 11.9 million tons of clothing and footwear were discarded in 2015, of which 8.2 million tons ended up in landfills" (Brewer). Companies in the fashion industry are also accused of disposing excessive amounts of clothing. Whether it is at the end of the season or before new shipments come in, most companies, especially luxury brands, just throw away the unsold merchandise. This is such a waste of clothing in perfectly good condition that could be reused somewhere else or donated to those that cannot afford new clothes.

The fashion industry is among the world's most polluting. Not only does it create high levels of pollution, but it also uses a lot of raw materials and produces a large amount of waste (Brewer). These levels of pollution and waste are due to fast fashion practices. The fast fashion industry produces "over 92 million tons of waste per year and 79 trillion liters of water are

consumed” (Niinimäki). The statistics are increasing due to the acceleration of manufacturing to meet the high demands of consumers. Throughout the supply chain, there is some form of water, material, chemical, or energy usage, which leads to waste, especially in textile manufacturing. Most of the clothes consumers buy end up being incinerated, landfilled, or exported to developing countries when they could easily be repurposed or recycled (Niinimäki).

Fast fashion companies are often associated with poor labor practices. They are notorious for dangerous working conditions, child labor, and unfair wages. Factory workers work “12-to-14-hour days, seven days a week with occasional mandatory 20 hour shifts and get paid around 13 to 18 cents an hour” (Taplin). Retailers search for manufacturers where input costs are low, and productivity is high, and unfortunately most of those factories are overseas. Garment factories are very common in Asia where there have been many incidents that could have been avoided if companies were enforcing proper standards in the factories. Rana Plaza, in Bangladesh, is one of the most notable occurring in 2013. Over 1,000 people died because the multi-story factory collapsed. Sadly, this is just one case among many others in the recent past. First of all, the factories are not being inspected regularly, so most of the time they do not meet the safety standards. The foundation or walls could have cracks, but they are just left to grow for years and years until the building finally gives out. Also, too many people, supplies, and equipment are jammed into a confined space. The floors of the buildings can only hold a certain amount of weight, which is why floors caving in and collapsing is one of the common causes of these disasters. Although child labor is illegal, many factories do not comply to this law. “It is estimated that there are still 7 million child workers” (Taplin). Fast fashion is all about speed and efficiency, so many corners are cut to follow this model of production. Factory owners are more concerned about themselves and maximizing profits because they are not the ones working

on the floor. Many consumers have expressed concern over this issue, so retailers are working to implement code of conducts throughout the supply chain. Consumer and company concern has prompted interest in sustainable fashion.

### ***Sustainable Fashion***

Sustainable fashion, also known as eco-fashion, is more than just protecting the environment; it includes respect for people, the community, and its supply chain (Joy). Preserving our resources is crucial, but the way the employees are being treated is just as important. Sustainable companies focus on limiting the amount of pollution they are creating and making sure working conditions are safe and humane. In the fashion industry, there are so many working parts, so it is hard to see through all the processes and align them with ethical standards. This is a newer movement that companies are starting to adopt, so within the next several years consumers will see the slow transition to sustainable practices.

It is in companies' long-term interest to revise their practices to be more sustainable. Companies can streamline certain processes to create less pollution or even invest in more efficient machinery. Sustainability emphasizes doing the right thing, which is more ethical. Businesses that follow ethical standards treat their workers the right way and provide safe working conditions for their employees. It is very apparent when a business does not stick to these standards. Being transparent with what goes on behind the scenes makes consumers more comfortable with buying from companies. It seems sketchy when companies try to cover certain information because people want to support brands that are honest to their customers.

Not only can sustainability change the fashion industry, but it can also benefit consumers because it makes them put more thought into their purchases. Sustainability and quality

complement each other because to be more sustainable consumers should buy clothes that are of higher quality. They want these products to last them years rather than a few wears. Once people adapt to a more sustainable way of life, it will help them in the future because their closets will be less cluttered. People will be buying less but more valuable clothes. With fast fashion, people are buying new clothes every week to only wear less than a handful of times, so their closets are overwhelmingly full. Putting more thought and consideration into purchases will prevent consumers from buying unnecessary items. Although this way of production seems more favorable, fast fashion is making it hard to fully implement because fast fashion is already established and has been around for a longer time. Since fast fashion has been around longer, consumers are in that mindset, and it is hard to change their habits when they have been in a groove for so long. People also find sustainable products less fashionable and trendy, so they do not want to spend money on something that they will not wear. Companies need to advocate for their sustainable fashion lines and find a way to meet their consumer needs at the same time.

### ***Bridge Between Fast Fashion and Sustainability***

Fast fashion and sustainability are not frequently seen together because many of their values clash. Since fast fashion is still trending and sustainability is becoming bigger, companies need to find a way to fulfill both standards. Fast fashion is more marketable to consumers because of its convenience even though some of them have recognized its negative impact on the environment. Once businesses roll out their sustainability plans and establish a positive reputation for sustainable products, consumers will not hesitate about buying their merchandise. Eco-fashion is affordable and fashionable, so companies should follow this movement because consumers will only invest in their products if they are stylish and see its value. Fast fashion

companies produce clothing that is trending at that point in time, so their clothes are in high demand. If companies with sustainable practices and materials made the same clothing, consumers will be more likely to purchase those because they are clothes that people want to wear and are socially acceptable.

Despite many industries already shifting towards sustainability, consumers find it difficult to fully accept sustainable goods and practices (McNeill). The sustainability movement in the fashion industry is very similar to the slow food movement. Slow fashion “asks consumers to question established practices, and worldviews, questioning the economic models underpinning fashion production and consumption” (McNeill). Like the slow food movement, consumers are urged to veer away from fast fashion buying habits and to take the time to look into quality clothing that they will own for several years. On top of that, consumers should also spend time researching the company and their production process from raw materials to the finished product.

There are three categories that consumers fall into: ‘self’ consumers, ‘social’ consumers, and ‘sacrifice’ consumers. In today’s culture, the majority of consumers fall into the first two categories. As mentioned previously, people are more concerned with fulfilling their pleasures in the present moment and their social image. The slow fashion movement aims to transform people into ‘sacrifice’ consumers, who care about their impact on the world. It is not easy to do so and takes work by the companies to nurture their customers’ mindsets over time. The industry heavily relies on consumers, so in the long-term companies will only be able to keep up with the sustainable nature if consumers buy the products. An increasing number of consumers supposedly are concerned about unethical behavior, but this is not reflected in their actions (McNeill).



There is a strong support for change in this industry because companies are not being the most efficient and environmentally friendly as they can. People talk about how badly the fashion industry is killing nature, but to put it into perspective, it consumes more energy than aviation and shipping combined. Sustainable fashion practices are becoming more common in the supply chains, but the transition is not as successful as the industry wants it to be. The good news is that there are ways to reduce the impact fashion has on the climate. A big change that manufacturers are making is using recycled or more natural materials rather than using raw materials or synthetic materials. This is going to be a major step towards sustainability because companies will be resourcing from clothes that are already in circulation rather than consuming more raw materials. Companies are also trying to find an alternative to the synthetic fabrics and materials they usually work with because fibers like polyester have double the carbon footprint compared to clothes made from cotton. Cotton still has its disadvantages, but it is better than the man-made fibers. Some companies have come up with the idea of using waste from wood, fruit, and other natural sources to create materials, while others are researching more environmentally sustainable ways to dye fabric or more easily decomposable materials. There are several brands that are already onboard with this movement, which are touched upon below.

### ***Companies That are Slowing Down and Going Green***

Many name brands are releasing their sustainability plans for the next several years. Some of these companies include TOMS, Forever 21, Nike, Lululemon, and Gucci. TOMS was an early leader and remains a model for others. TOMS is a company that has prioritized sustainability and giving back since the beginning. They say, “A thriving humanity means a thriving planet” (Toms). The company is committed to leaving a positive impact on their

customers, employees, and the environment. Last year, they published a plan to implement sustainable practices over the next five years. They have agreed to adopt more earth-friendly processes and materials. TOMS also said they want to use more recycled resources for packaging. On top of the environment aspect, TOMS takes corporate social responsibility very seriously. They make sure their employees are being treated fairly in good working conditions. To ensure these standards are being upheld, they are part of the Fair Labor Association and have outside auditors. The company also holds certifications and works with associations that set a high standard for ethical and environmental responsibility.

Several other companies are also making good strides. Recently, Forever 21 and Nike have launched sustainable products. Forever 21 with Purpose is a new eco-friendly collection. Right now, they only sell jewelry made of recycled metals, but this jewelry collection can open doors to new opportunities in the future. It is great that a company like Forever 21 is transitioning towards sustainable practices because they are a fast fashion company. This shows that brands can still sell trendy clothes and accessories at an affordable price while still being environmentally cautious. Nike is also another company that has begun to relaunch products made from recycled materials. According to Nike, “apparel labeled ‘sustainable materials’ is made with at least 50% recycled content, and shoes with the same label are made with at least 20% recycled content by weight” (Nike). This is a step in the right direction towards 100% sustainable products. Consumers have the option to buy the more sustainable version of popular products at around the same price. Lululemon is another company that is working towards sustainability. “By 2025, they will achieve at least 75% sustainable materials for their products – including fibers that recycled, renewable, regenerative, sourced responsibly, or some combination thereof, and and/or are manufactured using low-resource processes” (Lululemon).

Nylon is the most common material found in their products because it is moisture wicking and offers that athletic clothing material feel. This material is not biodegradable and damages the planet, so they have partnered with another company to produce nylon made from plants.

Incorporating this material into the manufacturing process is simple and can be done almost immediately. Most new materials take a long time to be introduced because new products need to be designed, and manufacturers need to learn how to use it. Along with this project, Lululemon has many other initiatives to create better products.

In addition to the many strategies just mentioned, two specific practices are worth noticing. The rental fashion market is expected to do really well in the coming years. "The global fashion rental market is projected to exceed \$2.5 billion by 2023" (Better Meets Reality). With sustainability and recycled clothing becoming more popular, companies are predicting that more people will rent clothes instead of partaking in standard fast fashion practices. This trend is healthier for the environment because the clothes are being reused. If a consumer does not see a long-term use for a piece of clothing, they have the ability to go onto one of the rental sites and rent it for a certain period of time. Rent the Runway is the most well-known clothing rental service. The company is known for its wedding dresses and other more formal attire, but people can rent all different pieces of clothing ranging from outerwear to accessories. There are a few other companies in this sector, but they anticipate a huge growth spurt within the next few years.

Another strategy is buy-back programs. Companies, such as Lululemon, Patagonia, and H&M, have implemented buy-back programs. H&M is another fast fashion company that has adopted the slow fashion movement. Participating stores have disposal locations where customers can drop off old, unwanted clothes to be recycled. For each bag of clothing a customer donates, they receive a 15% discount voucher to use at H&M. This is a great way to

promote recycling and utilizing clothes as a resource not trash (Brooks). Lululemon and Patagonia have similar programs. These companies give customers the ability to bring back into the store or mail back old clothes from that specific brand to get store credit towards new clothes. The brands take the clothes they buy back and refurbish them and resell them at a discounted price. Buy back programs are very beneficial because most consumers do not mind purchasing secondhand clothes, especially if they are still in great condition. These unwanted clothes would have ended up at the dump if people did not sell them back to the company, and the companies are generous enough to offer an incentive. There are other retailers that partake in programs like this, but those are just a few name brands that stood out.

There is a lot of work that needs to be done. One sector of the industry that seems to lag behind is high end fashion. Luxury brands are accused the most when it comes to the careless disposal of unsold merchandise. High end brands like Louis Vuitton, Burberry, and Gucci are known to burn unsold products because they do not want unauthorized retailers getting hold of them. This practice is very wasteful because thousands and thousands of products that could have been recycled and used to make new products are incinerated. Since sustainability has become more prevalent, luxury brands have listened to consumers and are working towards a sustainable future. Gucci is one of the companies that unveiled a sustainability plan starting in 2018. The plan has three pillars: environment, humanity, and new models. The company wants to show consumers that they care about the environment and set a good example for luxury retail. They also value their employees and the people that support their brand. Luxury retail has not been great in terms of ethics and sustainability, but Gucci has shown people that they are making an effort to be better.

### *A Two-Way Street*

The fashion industry is headed in the right direction, but it is going to take time in order to see a visible transition to sustainability. Fast fashion is a setback for sustainability practices because companies have to figure out how they can keep up with demand while adhering to these new standards. Consumers are too self-involved and always need to please others, which is why fast fashion is so popular. Social media plays a large role in this way of life because people's lives are more public than ever, so everyone thinks they need to look like an influencer. In order to fit in, people think they need to match the current trends, but that is not true. People lack uniqueness in their sense of style and embrace this idea of "massclusivity". Sustainable fashion does not wipe out the idea of fast fashion. In a way, it improves fast fashion practices to become more environmentally friendly and ethical. Fast fashion often comes with poor and inhumane working conditions. Merchandise from fast fashion brands is usually made overseas, and those countries have different labor laws. Because the products are manufactured at a lower cost, manufacturing companies pay the workers at a low rate so that they can still make a profit.

Currently, the fashion industry is one of the top polluting industries, but the coexistence of fast fashion and sustainability can change this statistic. By switching over to recycled materials and natural fibers, the industry can decrease its carbon footprint over the next several years. Taking these little steps can add up in the long-run and make a huge impact on the climate. Companies should not give up if their sustainability plans or practices are not going as planned right away. They need to give it time so that consumers have an opportunity to adapt to these changes. Consumers are very important in the fashion industry because they have the buying power to determine how successful a company is. Studies have shown that consumers care about the environmental impact and whether companies are sustainable, but they do not

show this concern in their buying habits. If companies advertise and promote their sustainable products, consumers will be more likely to buy them because the company is showing interest, so the product must be worth it. Over the next several years, many more fashion companies are going to shift towards sustainability, and the industry will see a change in consumer spending behaviors.

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