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Fast Fashion and its Impact on the Environment

The fashion industry is influential all around the world. Fashion is a way that people can express themselves, be creative, and connect with people. Many people also rely on fashion to make a living, whether it be working in a retail store, a corporate office, or a factory. Everyone across the supply chain is affected by fashion, from cotton farmers to everyday shoppers. In an industry full of positives, it can be difficult to spot flaws at the surface level. Like most industries, fashion is a business, focused primarily on making money. While this is good for corporations, it is extremely harmful to the environment and underpaid workers. The fast fashion business model, though profitable and easy for corporations, is very harmful to the world by negatively affecting the environment and many people's quality of life.

Fast fashion is the process of copying high-fashion trends and mass-producing them at a very low cost. For example, a jacket seen in a fashion show would be copied, mass produced in factories, and shipped out to stores around the world to be purchased at a fraction of the designer price. Since new items are so inexpensive to produce, brands often release many collections of clothing for one season, that are all only sold for a short amount of time. "The rising consumption and efficiency in production of fashion products has, in turn, driven the price of clothing very low" (Niinimaki). Products that are not purchased are taken off the racks within weeks of their release and thrown away. Fast fashion is a very profitable business model that thrives off of consumer behaviors. People want the newest fashions being worn on runways and by celebrities, but they don't want to pay the high end price. Stores like H&M and Forever 21 sell these styles for a very affordable price, so shoppers turn to them to always have the latest

styles on a budget. Fashion companies become a revolving door for new styles, with new collections constantly coming in and the existing ones taken off the floor.

Though ethically questionable, fast fashion is very profitable and beneficial from a business point of view. Fast fashion stays alive because the business model is beneficial to large companies, they can sell a mass amount of product for an affordable price, since they can produce it for next to nothing. By using the fast fashion business model, companies are able to capture all of the latest consumer trends for a minimal cost. “This business model has been hugely successful, evidenced by its sustained growth, outperformance of more traditional fashion retail and market entry of new players such as online retailers, who can offer more agility and faster delivery of new products more frequently” (Niinimaki). Sourcing unethically and cheaply made products causes a company to have a very quick turnaround rate of the products on the sales floor, resulting in more sales.

While good for business, fast fashion is extremely harmful to the environment. The fashion industry is one of the leading causes of pollution. This is because of the use of non-renewable sources in factories. Fast fashion depletes non-renewable sources, by emitting greenhouse gases and using massive amounts of non-renewable energy and water. Clothes are made with manmade fabrics that are harmful to produce, both for the environment and for human health. “The manufacture of polyester and other synthetic fabrics is an energy-intensive process requiring large amounts of crude oil and releasing emissions including volatile organic compounds, particulate matter, and acid gases such as hydrogen chloride, all of which can cause or aggravate respiratory disease” (Waste Couture). Affecting human health is a very negative aspect of fast fashion. The creation of manmade synthetic materials harm the environment, specifically the Earth’s water supply. “Volatile monomers, solvents, and other by-products of polyester production are emitted in the wastewater from polyester manufacturing plants” (Waste Couture). These textile factories poison water in waste pools, which also poisons the surrounding air, nature, and other bodies of water.

In addition to air and water pollution, fast fashion is also a massive producer of waste in landfills. Clothes are so cheap that repairs are not needed, and clothing is seen as disposable. “The volume of clothing Americans throw away each year has doubled in the last 20 years, from 7 million to 14 million tons” (Brown). In stores, clothes that are “out of style” are thrown away. Instead of donating to thrift stores and other second hand stores, most unbought clothes are destroyed and thrown away, contributing to the world’s excessive landfills. In a study done in 2018 by the Environmental Protection Agency, 17 million tons of textile waste was thrown into the world’s landfills. This is a significant problem because “textiles can take up to 200 years to decompose in landfills” (Brown). A shocking 84% of clothing ends up in landfills, and with long decomposition times, the world’s landfills continue to be filled with clothes.

Fast fashion is also harmful to workers all along the supply chain. It is extremely unethical due to the unfair treatment of its workers in factories and textile mills. Employees in factories are severely underpaid. They are paid unfair wages, often given wages that are far less than liveable. In manufacturing countries such as Bangladesh, workers are paid no more than legal minimum wage, which “represents between half to a fifth of the living wage” (Sustain Your Style). Corporations take advantage of people in poverty by saying that ‘this job is better than no job’. However, people who work these jobs work in terrible conditions, and do not make enough to live at the bare minimum. Along with the mistreatment of adults, child labor is not uncommon for companies that outsource their production. Child labor is legal in many countries, and since it is so cheap, companies often jump at the opportunity. Adults and children alike work in sweatshop conditions, often getting injured or sick because of work conditions. Big corporations do not care about the treatment of the people overseas who make their products, as long as production is cheap.

Inditex is a huge contributor to fast fashion. Inditex is a Spanish-based apparel company who owns a few brands, most notably, Zara. Zara, a clothing company marketing to women aged twenty-four to thirty-five, thrives on quick turnaround of products. Zara uses the quick

nature of the fashion industry to their advantage, with the ability to have brand new items designed and available for purchase in stores in just six weeks. This causes the brand to have extremely quick turnover times for inventory, with “twelve inventory turns per year compared to three to four per year for competitors” (SCM Globe). While competitors place inventory orders once a month, Zara orders twice a week, kicking factory scheduling to an all time high. The ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ culture in their stores drives mindless purchases from their consumers, as most products are on and off shelves within two weeks. This consumer behavior is what makes Zara a successful company. The clothes are so cheap to make in factories, that prices are set by market demand instead of manufacturing cost. On average, shoppers visit Zara seventeen times per year, instead of the usual three times per year for other stores. Zara is able to set prices based on what their consumers are willing to spend, and they end up selling eighty percent of their merchandise at full price. This business model works very well for Zara and Inditex. They make a great profit and are able to maintain an ever-growing customer base, but they actually do a lot of harm. The amount of product constantly being created means that factories must use more resources, and produce more waste. A company that creates new lines less often will still produce factory waste, but significantly less than Zara. Since new products are introduced so often, old products in stores do not get a chance to be marked down and sold at a lower price. Instead, these unsold products are destroyed and thrown away. Unable to be worn anymore, these textiles are thrown in landfills, only to be replaced by a new set of clothes that will experience the same fate. Though Zara is the most prominent example of fast fashion, many companies practice this model as well, all having the same negative effects on the environment.

As the world moves more towards sustainability, many brands are choosing to offer sustainably made clothing in order to stay relevant. Higher end brands are more likely to move to becoming fully sustainable. It is much more expensive to produce clothing ethically, so lower price stores are usually unethically made, as their target market might not be able to afford

sustainably made clothes. As more research is done, more inexpensive ways to make sustainable clothing are being discovered, and more brands are making it a goal to be fully sustainable. For example, Adidas has a goal to be committed to full sustainability by 2024. In 2021, “Adidas will use more than sixty percent recycled polyester” (Adidas). Adidas is an extremely well known brand, and they are taking steps to be fully sustainable. Already, consumers can purchase fashion-forward sneakers made out of fully recycled materials. These shoes, made out of plastic and other materials found in the oceans, have a very low carbon footprint, making them an excellent choice for Adidas consumers. Adidas is making real steps in becoming fully sustainable, and are committed to stick to these plans. Many brands, though steps are being taken, are being called out for being “performative” in their journeys to become ethical. H&M, a known fast fashion brand, has released a new line of recycled clothes. Complete with different marketing and grey tags, H&M seems to be doing everything right with this new line. This new line, while made sustainably out of recycled textiles, is destroyed and thrown in landfills just like all the other lines. H&M wants to preserve their image, so instead of donating unsold product to second hand stores or to the homeless, they destroy items and throw them away. No matter how sustainably an item is made, it is still causing harm if it is thrown in a landfill at the end of its shelf life. Becoming fully ethical is very difficult for company to do, so unless it is one of their top brand values, most companies do not go past the first few steps.

The issues created by fast fashion will not be easily fixed, since the industry has a large hold over society. However, one fix for fast fashion is the idea of “slow” fashion. This reaction to fast fashion includes movements for stopping excessive production of product, the trend of consumption without reason, and irresponsible supply chains. “Slow” fashion calls for companies that respect the environment and people’s lives. In 2014, the UN launched the Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, which recognizes fast fashion as a environmental threat and “contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals” (UN Fashion Alliance). This alliance was a

significant step in the right direction for the slow fashion movement. Having the UN recognize the issue as legitimate allows for plans to be made in the slowing down of the fashion industry. Currently, the Alliance is working to spread knowledge on the issues plaguing the environment, and advocate for workers all over the world. There is progress being made on all levels, however, because there are ways that people at home can be more sustainable. An article written by Earth.org reveals that second-hand shopping sites, such as ThredUp and Poshmark, are easy and cost-effective ways to shop more sustainably. On these sites, people can upload their unwanted clothes, and sell them to others who will wear them. Although selling lightly-used clothing does not do much to reduce the amount of textiles in landfills, shopping second-hand is a good way to get new clothes without supporting fast fashion companies. Steps can be made on all levels to try to combat this environmentally threatening problem, but it is up to the big corporations to decide whether or not to make a change.

Fast fashion is a big environmental burden that is good for a company's profits, but terrible for the planet and the people who work in factories. By raising awareness for the unethical and non-sustainable practices used in fast fashion, the consumers and companies should be able to take steps to a more ethical business model.

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