

Ethical Implications of the Fashion Industry

Ciara Flood

Dr. Rober & Dr. Loris

Abstract

The Fashion industry has been around since the beginning of human civilization. In the earliest societies clothing and fashion have always been a driving source of culture and identity. Beginning with clothing made of animal skins and vegetation in ancient times, ranging to the textiles and technologies we have today, fashion has existed since the existence of human kind. Daily, humans are subconsciously participating in the fashion industry by simply picking out an outfit for the day. The fashion industry starts at raw materials and exists until the disposal of clothes. It is a cycle that is constantly repeating and has and always will be present in society. Fashion is a driving force in the culture and identity of both a whole society and an individual person. Clothing is used to express both individualization and can be a uniting force. It is used to represent unity and discipline in uniforms. It is a symbol for ceremony and religion with wedding dresses and Papal vestments. It is used to show personality and self expression.

Throughout history however the production and development of the fashion industry has grown exponentially resulting in huge missteps and implications. Following the transition to ready to wear clothing, which was a shift in the way clothing was produced from made to wear to ready to wear, issues began to emerge within the industry. The industrial revolution allowed clothing to be mass produced and since then the apparel and textile industry is now the fourth largest in the World. With this huge success though there has been extreme oversights in all steps and departments of the apparel world. From the design, to production, to transportation, then finally the consumption and disposal of clothing; all individuals involved are feeling the consequences. There are various ethical concerns such as labor exploitation, global environmental pollution and increased consumerism present throughout all stages of the fashion industry.

History of Fashion Industry

The earliest transition in history to modern fashion models began during the industrial revolution. Prior to this movement clothing was made from hand weaving or sewing materials into fabrics and eventually full garments. But during the 1800's the inventions of textile machines and implementation of factories began a whole new age of fashion. Ready to wear garments became the new normal which meant that clothing could be mass produced in a range of sizes as opposed to the previously made to order garments. Initially this revolution in fashion made clothing more accessible to middle and upper class individuals with the opportunity to more easily purchase new clothes. On the other hand lower class individuals were still unable to easily participate in the purchasing pattern and were left to still make their own clothes.

This remained the reality for a large portion of the 20th century however, in the 1960's a shift began with attitude towards clothing and fashion. Trends began to be cycled through at an alarming speed and as a result cheaper clothes began heavily in demand. With trends beginning to become shorter as opposed to buying pieces that were meant to last forever, consumers began to purchase items and wear them for a shorter time before they went 'out of style'. This whole movement could be thought to have started in an age of media and accessibility. Celebrities and fashion trends were visible everywhere. Consumers follow these statements and style choices made by people they looked up to. Since then, the production and consumption of clothing has taken a dangerous turn with the availability and inexpensiveness of trendy clothing. Many companies began to emerge that were extremely attractive to consumers for their inexpensive and rapid production of new trending styles. This phenomenon became known widely as fast fashion and is a dangerous consumer mindset being encouraged by companies to cycle through trendy pieces faster and dispose of clothing after limited uses.

Globally the fashion industry is responsible for huge economic outputs and financial success for many countries. Specifically in the United States the apparel industry creates millions of jobs and economic success. Fashion is a 2.8 trillion dollar global industry, in the United States alone consumers spent almost \$380 billion in 2017 on apparel and footwear. (Bishop 2018) With the rapidization of trends and new consumer attitudes towards clothing and fashion, these purchases have become normalized as essential in our society. Having the newest and most clothing is embedded into the culture of modern society. In 2018 in the U.S. the industry employed 1.8 million people. There are countless opportunities for employment within fashion varying from manufacturing, design, retail and transportation. The industry is so complex with unique job opportunities and creative freedom. Jobs in the field assist in diminishing national unemployment rates in various levels of income. Fashion designers represent the highest level of education and payment and are the focal point of the workforce behind apparel, earning an average annual income of \$78,870. Additionally the apparel manufacturing industry creates approximately 123,000 jobs nationally. The manufacturing section of fashion alone holds job opportunities such as textile machine operators, sewing machine operators, pattern makers, advertising specialists and marketing research analysts. While the largest portion of fashion employment in the United States comes from the retail sector which is responsible for 1.4 million individual jobs in retail locations. Quite evidently the United States relies heavily on the fashion industry for national employment and economic success.

In 2017, New York City's fashion industry employed 4.6 percent of the total private-sector workforce and generated more than \$11.3 billion in wages and \$3.2 billion in tax revenue. New York Fashion Week had a greater annual economic impact (\$600 million) than the Super Bowl (\$347 million) and generated more income than its rivals London, Paris, and Milan,

combined (Bishop 2018). While these economic statistics prove how much the fashion industry has given to the United States economy, with the surge of success comes a demand of time and resources with many ethical concerns being commonly overlooked.

Fast Fashion

While clothing and apparel used to be purchased for occasion and longevity, media and accessibility cause a shift in consumer mindset and behavior. The term 'fast fashion' itself can be defined as trendy and inexpensive apparel that follows popular styles and fashions inspired by luxury designers and celebrity culture. Trends in fashion have transitioned from lasting for three to five years to now some microtrends lasting as little as a couple of months or weeks. Major retailers who implement these mini trends are able to produce new collections and trends every couple of weeks by manufacturing cheaply made clothing in unethical practices.

Many huge brands we know today as leaders in the fashion industry such as Shein, Zara and H&M are the biggest culprits of the unethical production of wasteful clothing. Fashion brands had a way of keeping up with the demand for inexpensive clothing by outsourcing labor to lower income countries with cheaper labor regulations. These brands were being used by celebrities and influential presences and there was a shift in attitude over mixing high and lower end items to create fashion. The rapid success of these companies today is associated with the money saving moves they made that have caused them to lead unethical business practices. The rise of fast fashion gained another surge in 2005, when the World Trade Organisation eliminated the quota system of outsourcing abroad. While fast fashion is typically thought of as a more casual and affordable brand even luxury brands have implemented faster trend cycles with releasing six collections per year as opposed to the old normal of two to three collections per year. The increased use of social media have allowed the industry to grow even more and thrive

even in the unstable times during and following the Covid-19 pandemic. The proliferation of media and photos have allowed consumers to take fashion inspiration from everyday street styles and influencers and not solely the runway or fashion trend proposals. However this adaptation and evolution of purchasing has led to huge missteps in all aspects of the fashion industry.

Labor Exploitation

The first huge ethical implication being faced in the fashion industry is the unfair work conditions and labor exploitation. With the demand and consumption of fashion being so heightened there is a surplus of demand that cannot be supplied without harming those involved. The global textile supply chain employs 40 million workers globally with a majority of these workers being from Low Middle Income Countries.

In the 20th century there were issues in the United States regarding labor laws in factories and retail. Workers were being underpaid, overworked and treated unfairly. Ethical protections for workers in the retail industry vastly improved in the United States following a national tragedy affecting laborers in the garment industry. The Triangle Shirtwaist factory of 1911, where 146 individuals died and 78 more were injured after the owners of the company locked the fire escape doors and the workers were trapped inside of the burning building. Following this tragedy there became strict labor laws for workers in the U.S that required higher pay and fair working conditions. While this improved the treatment of fashion garment workers for a while companies began to outsource to lower income countries for cheaper faster production output. Sweatshops and inhumane work conditions were being tremendously diminished in the United States while huge corporations were simply looking for their next strategy to maintain cheap labor and higher productivity.

Fashion companies began heavily outsourcing labor and production to Low and Middle Income countries, most predominantly; China and Bangladesh. Long hours, low wages, labor abuse and child labor have been looked at in these countries in garment factories. Low and Middle Income countries produce 90% of the clothing produced and safety standards and occupational hazards in these countries are not enforced due to the lack of organizational management and poor political infrastructure. (Bick 2018). Sweatshop labor in these countries has become normalized and even seen with children in these sweatshop conditions. With little political structure in these countries and families requiring economic opportunity of any kind children are unwittingly forced into these factories. In many cases the wage of these employees is based on the amount of items they make as opposed to an hourly wage to ensure heightened production speeds and encourage these workers to stay for inhumane amounts of time.

There are health concerns also being questioned in both the LMIC workers' lives and the models and fashion industry products. In China and Bangladesh the labor of these individuals is becoming a risk also to their physical health. In addition to the physical exhaustion from inhumane hours working in these textile mills there are proven long term health effects from being overworked in these manufacturing facilities. The result is a multitude of occupational hazards, including respiratory hazards due to poor ventilation such as cotton dust and synthetic air particulates, and musculoskeletal hazards from repetitive motion tasks. These health hazards are such that prompted the creation of textile labor unions in the United States and the United Kingdom in the early 1900's. However not much is being done to protect the wellbeing and lives of laborers in LMICs. Reports of life-threatening conditions due to labor include damage to endocrine function, lung disease and cancer, and reproductive and fetal complications. In accordance with long term side effects of these conditions there is also the obvious threat of

technical accidents and fatalities that occur from working with such dangerous textile equipment. International disasters, such as the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse which killed 1134 Bangladeshi workers, are stark reminders of the health hazards faced by garment workers. These disasters, however, have not demonstrably changed safety standards for workers in LMICs.

Environmental Pollution

However, at the same time, the fashion industry, specifically fast fashion brands, also generates huge waste and pressures on the environment. The environmental impacts of the fashion industry alone should be the reason for these corporations to be held ethically responsible. More than \$500 billion is lost worldwide every year due to clothing underutilisation and the lack of recycling. It is projected that by 2030 global apparel consumption will rise from 62 billion tons today to 102 billion tons. (Zhang 2021). This amplified consumption is just adding to the waste of garments seen worldwide today. Globally and specifically in the Low Middle Income Countries producing the large amounts of clothing, there is tons and tons of waste that is built up causing loss of land in these areas.

In the United States consumers dispose of 80 pounds of clothing and Textiles annually making up approximately 5 % of the country's landfill space. These garments when not being disposed of in the United States are being transported back to countries such as China and Bangladesh totaling to \$700 million dollars worth of clothing in the year 2007. In addition second hand clothing being transported back to these LMIC are being compressed into 1000 pound bales of garments that are just being added to landfills in these countries (Bick 2018). Moreover, wastes generated by fashion products, such as textiles, chemicals, and dyes, impose environmental damages and climate change pressures. In the current one sided globalized supply chain, fashion products' carbon footprint is one of the largest, creating even more greenhouse

gasses than aviation and shipping industries combined because almost all fashion products are outsourced and transported internationally. It is estimated that, if the full lifecycle of clothing is considered, the fashion industry is responsible for 3.3 billion tons or 10% of global CO₂ emissions and 20% of global waste streams. Environmental concerns include any hazardous impact of the fashion industry on the world by “being the second largest polluter of the planet after oil”(Lee 2020).

The large volumes of clothing production lead to higher disposal rates, and consequently high levels of waste, which in turn amplifies the challenge of scarcity of natural resources (Ozdamar-Ertekin 2016). The production of apparel has huge adverse effects on water pollution. 20,000 liters of water are required to produce one kilogram of cotton and the textiles are overall responsible for 17 to 20% of global industrial water pollution. These pollutants such as dyes and chemicals being produced from fashion production are additionally harmful to aquatic wildlife and harmful to human health (Brewer 2019). In addition, the current speed of fashion systems encourages consumers to buy lower-quality clothing made of artificial fibers and harmful dyes that have significant negative environmental footprints. These unnatural fibers and materials are not able to be decomposed naturally or at an acceptable pace, taking up to 200 years to fully decompose into the earth. Polyester, which is one of the most popular fabrics used in clothing production, is a synthetic fiber which takes up to 800-1000 years to decompose naturally. In addition to the environmental pollution issues outlined above, the fashion industry has also been accused of animal rights violations, and of causing harm to many endangered species. Throughout history, animal-based materials such as wool, hides, fur, and leather have been used as clothing and accessories. As well as the harmful effects pollutants have to wildlife both on land and in water.

Consumer Behavior and Overconsumption

While many consumers specifically in recent years have been made aware of potential negative effects to both the environment and the wellbeing of fashion workers, there is still a lack of empathy action taken by individuals to help reduce the effects. Companies use marketing and advertisements to encourage the cycling of clothing in people's closets. And in an age of materialism people want as many items at the least price possible. And in an age of materialism people want as many items at the least price possible. Most purchasers of fast fashion products and brands are aware of the unethical production or environmental impacts they have however the affordability and ease of fast fashion overweighs even the consumers ethical decisions. There are ethical issues throughout all stages of the fashion industry, from global legal mistrust, to corporate accountability to consumer responsibility. There is a shift that needs to be made to appreciate clothing and fashion without depleting the social and environmental wellbeing of society.

Whilst it seems fashion companies and production are the most to blame in this ethical dilemma of the fashion industry, consumers hold a large amount of responsibility and oversight. Most consumers and purchasers of fast fashion and copious amounts of clothing are aware of the issues present in the industry. However psychologically the natural behavior of consumers in an environment states that a lower price of an item leads to a higher demand and the higher price of an economic purchase leads to lower demand. In particular in the fashion industry this explains consumers' attraction towards cheap easily available clothing provided by fast fashion companies. Additionally it is a natural psychological need for humans to satisfy their ego which can be interpreted by the possession of value. Having clothing and at an accessible price feeds into humans' underlying craving for status and symbol. In our society having material items is a

huge portion of self identity and love. Consumer behavior shows that individuals crave what is popular and praised which in this case is the trending styles and fashions being offered by clothing corporations. Marketers and companies know the psychology behind purchasing behavior and will feed into humans basic wants and needs by promoting these brands with attractive qualities. Many companies even will falsely greenwash marketing campaigns by making false or broad claims about being sustainable to influence consumers when they still are huge culprits of unethical fashion (Zhang 2021).

However in much recent times there has been a shift towards accountability and sustainable practices with many small businesses implementing safe labor laws. In addition, consumers are actually showing efforts to do their part in stopping the ethical fashion crisis worldwide. Accountability is becoming more prevalent in society and any individuals with followings or an influence are being held responsible for the purchase choices they are making. There has been an upsurge in thrifting and reusing clothing and the significance of a more minimal closet. In addition to sustainable and small businesses promoting safe and ethical fashion practices.

Conclusions

In conclusion there are several ethical concerns such as labor exploitation, environmental impacts and increased consumerism in the fashion industry globally. As mentioned there are large oversights and implications throughout all aspects of the fashion industry. From consumer level to the corporations themselves not holding these concerns to high enough standards. There are huge issues in the labor force and production of clothing in addition to the waste and pollution that the industry is creating. However moving forward there are positive steps being taken towards an ethical and sustainable future that will hopefully improve the industry as a

whole. This means making progress in corporate and labor laws to hold companies accountable. In addition to holding consumers themselves more responsible for their actions and purchasing behavior. Fashion and clothing has been a huge part of culture and identity since the start of human civilization and will continue to be an integral part of human life. It is essential that we take steps in the right direction and change the industry while we still have the chance.

Works Cited

Bick, Rachel, et al. "The Global Environmental Injustice of Fast Fashion." *Environmental Health*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7>.

Bishop, Margaret L. "Fabscrap: Scaling Operations for Greater Impact in Reducing Fashion Industry Waste." *Bloomsbury Fashion Business Cases*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474208765.0013>.

Brewer, Mark K. "Slow Fashion in a Fast Fashion World: Promoting Sustainability and Responsibility." *Laws*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2019, p. 24., <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws8040024>.

Lundblad, Louise, and Iain A. Davies. "The Values and Motivations behind Sustainable Fashion Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2015, pp. 149–162., <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1559>.

Mrad, Mona, et al. "Brand Addiction in the Contexts of Luxury and Fast-Fashion Brands." *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, vol. 55, 2020, p. 102089., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102089>.

Son, Jihyeong, and Young-A Lee. "Effects of Fast Fashion Brands' Sustainability Practices on Brand Equity Formation." 2015, https://doi.org/10.31274/itaa_proceedings-180814-120.

Zamani, Bahareh, et al. "Life Cycle Assessment of Clothing Libraries: Can Collaborative Consumption Reduce the Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion?" *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol. 162, 2017, pp. 1368–1375., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.06.128>.

Zhang, Bo, et al. "Consumer Attitude towards Sustainability of Fast Fashion Products in the UK." *Sustainability*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2021, p. 1646., <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041646>.