
Assessing the Impact of Cheap and Fast Fashion Industry on Society, Environment and Sustainability: What Is the True Cost?

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ABSTRACT

Fast fashion is a rapidly growing industry that has a significant impact on the environment, with environmental degradation being one of its most concerning effects. This industry not only contributes to the deterioration of land, air, and water, but it also involves the exploitation of third-world countries, particularly in the production process and waste disposal. Due to a lack of proper regulatory methods and waste management systems, the disposal of fast fashion garments is polluting the planet. This study explores the effects of the fast fashion industry's rapid growth, focusing on its environmental consequences and its disproportionate impact on third-world nations. Additionally, it discusses potential interventions to reduce the growth of the fast fashion industry and mitigate its harmful effects. The role of India's traditional clothing practices is also examined, offering an alternative that could help reduce reliance on fast fashion trends. Ultimately, this paper seeks to highlight the urgent need for intervention and sustainable alternatives to combat the negative effects of fast fashion.

Keywords: Fast Fashion, Sustainable Development, Environmental Degradation, Fashion Industry, Global North-South.

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INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion is a rapid paced industry, a boon for many who cannot afford luxury brand fashion attire. However, this convenience comes with adverse effects by causing destruction, which can potentially harm our ecosystem. The destruction is already underway and without concerted efforts towards sustainability – Through the adoption of environmental friendly fibers and production methods it may be too late to reverse the damage that has been made. This article dwells on the concept of fast fashion and its environmental effects. Explaining the disadvantages

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of fast fashion, this article also attempts to explain the third-world problems and ignorance that happen because of fast fashion. Fast fashion has differential effects on each part of the world where as the capitalist enterprises continue to profit, and the consumers, among whom many consumes the product unaware of its harm as well as exploitation of third world countries. Lack of regulation on international level is a drawback that harms everyone. On the one hand, countries worldwide have been trying to reduce carbon emissions each year. Fashion industries contribute to 10% of carbon emissions, countries like France, United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden has implemented some regulatory measures for textile waste management. Collective measure is required to repair already caused damage. This article employs secondary research s to elucidate the impact of fast fashion on third world countries.

By advocating potential innovation technologies and better governance can lead to reconcile the damage caused by fast fashion industry as well as the further features of the industry can be altered to sustainable course, by adapting eco friendly production process the carbon emission as well as use of water in large scale can be limited and substituted with eco friendly production process. By regulating the production process with innovative technologies, improved sustainable and environmental practices can lead to development without affecting earth as Ecological Modernisation theory suggests. World system theory (Immanuel Wallenstein) elucidates how the core nations exploits the periphery nations, the fast fashion industry has been exploiting labours from the periphery nation's i.e. third world countries. By advantaging from the availability of cheap & unskilled labors the garments are produced at large scale and surpluses. Albeit benefiting from the low wage for instance the consequences the periphery nations face is huge, economically shoved to a stagnant position. Cultural hegemony as Gramsci highlights how people are hegemonised by the ideology of consuming fast fashion trendy garments to possess status & prestige, social media is used as one of the tools to drive people towards consumption-driven culture of fashion, the constant desire for newness, to showcase others what one have and to get accepted by fellow human are reason behind the growth of fast fashion industry.

Review of Literature

This systematic review highlights the negative environmental impacts of the fast fashion industry, focusing on water consumption, carbon emissions, and energy footprints. Key issues include the use phase of clothing, market saturation, and rising end-of-life textile waste. There is an

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increasing research interest in understanding these environmental effects. Also, the bibliographic analysis shows how the papers contribute to sustainable development and the impact of fast fashion countrywide (Kerrice Baily 2022). The fashion industry continues to grow even though it faces environmental impacts due to the rise of fast fashion, which depends on cheap manufacturing, frequent consumption, and quickly discarding clothing. The ecological effects of the textile and fashion chain are also identified, from manufacturing to consumption, chemical pollution, CO₂, water usage outflows and textile waste. Over 92 million tons of trash is produced, and 72 trillion liters of water are consumed yearly, (Kirsi Niinimaki et al. 2020). By catering to the desires of young adolescents and adults, this industry generates over 92 million tons of waste per year. It utilizes 79 trillion litres of water, with high social and environmental costs throughout the production cycle, (Shalini Rukhaya et al. 2021). The rapid turnover of styles leads to significant waste, impacting the second-hand market and recycling efforts, (Najmul Kadir Kaikobad et al. 2015). The fashion industry is one of the world's largest sectors, with a complex supply chain that includes design, raw material harvesting, production, and garment construction.

Fast fashion, characterized by short product life cycles and rapid style turnover, has become a decisive competitive force, prioritizing low costs and trendy designs over durability. This approach has led to a surge in consumption and waste, leaving a significant pollution footprint at every stage of the clothing life cycle. The industry's practices exploit natural and social environments, resulting in environmental and social degradation. In response, sustainable or ethical fashion seeks to address these issues, (Sudeshna Mukherjee 2015). Many teenagers aspire to engage with or emulate the glamorous fashion world with the rising popularity of events like Dime Box, fashion shows, and beauty pageants such as Miss India and Mr. World. However, the lifecycle of clothing significantly impacts our environment and ecosystems. As fashion brands compete to present the latest collections to boost profits and enhance their reputations, fast fashion has emerged as a major contributor to the global clothing waste crisis, (Pooja Garg 2019). This recent phenomenon has transformed the fashion industry, deeply intertwining it with environmental concerns. Second-hand clothes imports from the USA and European nations have significantly contributed to Ghana's pollution. Promoting positive behaviour among consumers about the disposal can be a significant intervention to control the environmental issues induced by second-hand fast fashion clothes, as outlined by (Richard Acquaye et al. 2023).

Fast fashion: A boon or boom

“Clothes are our initial and most basic tool of communication. They convey our social and economic status, occupation, ambition, and self-worth. They can empower us and imbue us with sensuality. They can reveal our respect or disregard for convention” Dana Thomas (Fashionopolis: The price of fast fashion and the future of clothes). To fit in with peers, it is decisive to carry on with the current trends that are followed by celebrities. Branded and fashionable attire worn by celebrities and runaway models are conspicuous, trendy, and expensive, perfect for weighting one’s wealth. Only a few people have resources and access to those high-end garments. Fast fashion provides a way to afford those fashion garments worn by celebrities and models. Fast fashion manufactures clothes to keep up with runaway trends and create an accessible situation for ordinary people. Clothes are produced at cheaper rates, rapidly manufactured on a large scale, and pumped into the market for inexpensive prices. Although people get clothes for the most affordable price and an opportunity to feel good, irreversible liabilities come with it. As mentioned, fast fashions are manufactured in a way that they fall or rip after a few uses; this pushes people into a consumer behaviour where they constantly need to buy clothes - buy, use, throw, and re-buy. This vicious cycle repeats. Traditional fashion collections offer three to four collections per year, while fast fashion offers up to fifty collections year on year. During summer most of the collections are rereleased annually. The current trends are mostly inspired and influenced by movies, music videos and all other information on social media. Creating a false demand among consumers indirectly influencing people to buy trendy attire to get accepted among peers and gain status and prestige, and by creating this new fashion ritual, the fast fashion industry is sustaining and infecting our world.

Fashion at What Cost

Environmental effects caused by fast fashion industry are growing all along with the growth of industry itself. Not only distressing land with hazardous substance, the industry also pollutes water and air. In fifteen years, the production of clothes has doubled, with a decline in the lifetime of clothes. The fast fashion industry has grown by 10.74% from last year, which sheds light on the alarming rate of growth. Statistics showing shocking revelations about the use and effect of fast fashion warn humans to be vigilant about their consumer habits. With the global

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north being one of the preponderances of fast fashion, the U.S. alone contributes to 81.51 lbs. of yearly waste.

Consuming for needs is replaced with consuming for wants and luxuries. This unsustainable practice is slowly adding up to carbon debt. Carbon emissions from the fast fashion industry holds 3rd rank in contributing to carbon emissions that is 10% a year. Report shows that 35% of micro plastic comes from fast fashion clothes' laundry. Waste from fast fashion clothes is not recycled and disposed of properly. Most of the U.S. population only wears clothes around 7-10 times before tossing as waste. These thrown clothes contribute to landfills and pollute water. Almost 70% of fast fashion clothes are produced from synthetic fibers like nylon, acrylic, and elastane, which contain micro plastic, leading to environmental impacts and several other health and fire hazards. Wastes from fast fashion clothes are not recycled and disposed of properly. Since the cost of production is cheap, the quality of the material used in the output is cheap, like formaldehyde, a volatile organic compound that leads to several health hazards if exposed longer.

The fast fashion industry consumes large amounts of water for production, 2nd most consumer of water, a non-renewable source. The wastewater is not managed rightly in many instances and in most cases; the water cannot be reused for other purposes. When properly not treated, they become water pollutants, polluting oceans, rivers, lakes, and other water bodies. This endangers the lives of marine and other living organisms that consume poorly treated water. Along with these, they need copious amounts of energy, primarily non-renewable energy, such as petrol for transportation, production, and manufacturing.

Does the world need luxury by compensating the life of other living beings, by risking the fertility of mother Earth and the life she carries on? Drawing a line between need and want and regulating consumer and production habits is crucial to achieving our goal of reducing carbon emissions. World do not need luxury, Humans are in crucial position to correct the mistakes that had made in the past, Being anthropocentric: Humans failed to see other living being.

Can India Escape the Trend?

Clothes produced in fast fashion are short-lived and manufactured to catch up with contemporary trends depending on trends. Social media being one of the main source to spread these trends. Historically, one trend has been followed throughout the decade. In contemporary society, trends

keep changing, giving rise to the need for constant clothes manufacturing and marketing. Social media and runaway fashion are among the leading causes of this. People buy clothes to highlight their wealth on social media. Such garments have zero use. Once worn, clothes are never worn again. People would often be ashamed to post a picture where they wear already worn clothes on a previous post.

India, one of developing countries is also moving towards the fast fashion trends. As the global platforms open and cultural changes happens. India is slo moving towards fast fashion trends. The fast fashion culture should be embraced with proper regulatory and management approaches. In the Indian culture, clothes are usually manufactured and purchased with a vision of extended use. India has a sustainable fashion culture, mostly encouraging fibres and cloth materials like cotton, khadi, silk, hemp, bamboo fabric, etc. These materials are used in clothes in India, which are skin friendly, environmental friendly, and manufactured sustainably without causing any trouble to the ecosystem or our land.

India has an ideology that contrasts the fast fashion industry, has labour-friendly policies, uses sustainable resources as mentioned above, recycles and reuses, and encourages handlooms and handicrafts. Year-over-year growth of fast fashion in India is 6% for the year 2023-24. One of the well-known fashion brands, Shein, 3 times larger than Indian fast fashion brands, is one of the leading fashion brands worldwide. India recycles almost 60% of its clothes, as the Ministry of Textiles mentioned. Additionally, the government also promotes a sustainable fashion life. If India can stand its point, it will be an example to other countries that encourage and indulge in fast fashion.

Concerns have arisen as GenZ's are primarily attracted to fast fashion garments because they are cheap and trendy. Having separate forums for GenZ cloth is an excellent example of the industry's growth in India. Additionally, we can witness the growth of fast fashion brands in India. Endangering traditional clothing production, many textile arts have slowly declined because of reduced demands as the population moves towards fast fashion. If India wants to escape the trend, sustainable fashion habits should be encouraged among the young population. Social media is one of the main reasons for promoting fast fashion brands; creating false demand and increasing desire leads to uncontrolled consumer behavior. With fast fashion garments coming into market traditional clothes are at risk of getting declined. India albeit having

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sustainable fashion culture because of fast fashion it is losing its sustainable practice. To sustain the trend and effects from fast fashion clothes, local manufacturers and producers should be encouraged to more trendy as well as environmental friendly clothes.

The Role of Social Media

Social media plays a crucial role in encouraging fast fashion brands and indirectly seeding the desire into individual consciousness through advertisements, music videos, celebrity posts, promotions, and movies. A normal person who wants to look like someone admired online can achieve this through fashion attire hence it is more affordable and achievable. Again, copying a celebrity can showcase ones status and wealth to gain social capital. Social capital is an essential aspect of society. Individuals attempt to earn this social capital throughout their lives. It is a shame if one repeats the same outfit already worn in a post, so they buy new. This again becomes a cycle. In a world where everyone is constantly influenced by what they see on social media, it is hard to control such consumer behavior. On the other hand, social media can be used as a social control to promote sustainable development among individuals by creating awareness campaigns, conducting workshops, debates, etc. These can slowly lead to sustainable consumer behavior.

Where are the third-world countries?

History repeats itself; the global north starts the deed, and the global south faces the consequences, like in any other situation where the global south faces the impacts of environmental degradation and effects because of the actions of the global north. In this situation, the global south is suffering. Third-world country like Bangladesh, along with some other East Asian countries like Thailand and Vietnam, become dumpsters for these Western countries. The worlds' largest fast fashion exporters are the US, Germany, and the UK, followed by Asian countries like China, Japan, and South Korea. Countries like India and Pakistan import these used clothes from above countries, which are being dumped in these countries and added to existing landfills and contaminations. This phenomenon was found to have a colonial power relation behind it.

Another critical issue arising from the global north-south situation is labour exploitation. It is a well-known and discussed area where well-established, cherished global fashion brands

exploit third-world workers to produce these fast-fashion clothes. Brands hold no responsibility over the labour and production process. Everything happens through an intermediary who exploits and unfairly treats the labour. It is one of many drawbacks of the fast fashion industry, where there are no ethics regarding human life. Since the brands do not want to hold any liabilities, workers at the bottom are paid the bare minimum. Even though fast fashion labour constitutes 75 million of the labour force, only 2% earn what it takes to live daily. These so-called, well-established brands have consistently ignored the cries of labour. Another dark side is child labour since most of the behind-the-production works are unregulated. Child labour in this industry is often encountered.

To Sustain

It is crucial to find an alternative to fast fashion clothes and slow down this industry's growth for sustainable growth and development. In the context of India, supporting Indian fabrics like cotton, khadi and Bamboo cloth will lead to environmentally friendly fabrics. Also, producing clothes that last an extended period is essential. Appropriate methods should be employed to regulate cloth wastes, as these fast fashion clothes have micro plastics that are unsuitable for mother earth and take time to degrade. In some instances, some materials will not degrade. In these situations, it is essential to have proper waste management. Reducing the import of used clothes from Western countries is crucial; reducing imports, encouraging recycling, and up cycling the used is a more environmentally friendly fashion practice. Reusing clothes should be encouraged, and the stereotype bounding reusing garments should be removed by awareness programmes.

Regulatory and management processes like segregating textile waste from regular degradable and bio-degradable waste should be administered worldwide, textile waste exports should be monitored, and consumption and production of fast fashion should be controlled and regulated. Single used clothes can be reused to reduce textile waste. Secluding textile waste from the rest of the waste is pivotal to reducing pollution through fast fashion garments. Consumer behavior should be altered; shopping for wants should be replaced with shopping for needs.

CONCLUSION

Fast fashion might be a boon to people who want to fit themselves in this modernized world, but it needs immediate attention and action for protecting environment. There needs to be strict

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regulations in this fast-growing fashion industry to protect and prevent further damage and regulate carbon emissions. A campaign is essential to controlling the influence on youngsters through awareness programmes. In many instances, people do not think about where all clothes they dump in the garbage end up. Unconsciously or consciously, every human is contributing to damaging our mother earth. Creating awareness about waste management of clothes is essential. Fast fashion brands should also be held liable for the exploitation of the labours from third world countries. Regulatory measures should be made in production, surplus and waste management. Also, adapting to an alternative environment-friendly clothing style should be appreciated. If efforts were made from all sides, society would undergo social change. Just like how we create trends in these fashion attire, such environmentally friendly attire can also be promoted as trends. Fast fashion might be a boon if regulated properly and produced sufficiently. Put forthing needs should be prioritized over wants.

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