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**You Need This: Global Fast Fashion, Environment, and Consumption Culture**

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[ABSTRACT]

In looking at how global production of clothing has increased and shifted, we see the impacts in places like workers rights, environmental issues and cultural consumption. Although vastly different, through examination we will see how all are intrinsically linked. We have reached a truly global economy, and even when threatened with negative consequences of mass consumption in our daily lives, the road to actual change in the fashion industry becomes harder in time due to our dependency on the industry as a whole.

*Keywords:* Fast fashion, environment, workers rights, capitalism, consumers, global south

### **You Need This**

Our current state of the planet's environment has seen many milestones in the past century. Some things that we can't stop are booming populations, increasing temperatures throughout the planet, and shrinking resources that cannot be replenished. Although many people don't know how they can create a positive impact on the environment on an individual level, selecting where we buy clothes is an often overlooked stance. Fast fashion is a term that has been recently used more and more to describe the fashion industry's constant push to consumers for fashionable new clothes at an insanely cheap price, of which we rarely question the true origins of the clothing. I'd like to explore how fast fashion has altered the way and rate in which we purchase clothing through advertising, how greenwashing is both helpful and how it can be detrimental, and how workers rights are impacted by fashion brands and their need for revenue. Fast fashion is a very complicated industry, and it doesn't just limit the problems to production of textiles and clothing, but how businesses choose to operate and how consumers impact the very market that we sometimes loathe.

Fast fashion has a stranglehold on social media in that we see advertising constantly, even when we aren't really paying attention. Scrolling through a standard social media site like Instagram, you might see an actual ad for a clothing brand touting new products every month, or special "drops" once a week urging you to put a reminder on your calendar so you don't miss out. These ads will casually pop up right into whatever you're doing, and visually they have an uncanny ability to look like something your friends would post creating more room for engagement. Social media has created a cycle of consumerism that not only do we expose ourselves to unwittingly on a daily or hourly basis, but can deeply affect our desire and need to purchase clothing constantly. Clothing companies create micro trends at a quickened pace these days, and as Journalist and author, Lucy Siegle states "Instead of 2 seasons a year, we practically have 52 seasons a year. So, we have something new coming in every week and fast

fashion has created this so it can essentially shift more product” (Morgan et al., *The True Cost*, 5:44). Micro trends are very effective for companies that have high production rates because they utilize platforms that people check obsessively all day long, and the more exposure we have to the visual of something that looks chic or trendy will have even more appeal through the course of a day or many days. Many of the fast fashion trends seem to focus more on girls and women in western culture with access to social media. Part of this exists because these companies are taking a page from the book of need created by celebrities and influencers alike, knowing we are heavily influenced by these people and want to look, dress and act like these people. No market is safe either, and there are more and more brands that are accessible based on ownership type, size ranges, business ethics, sourcing, and types of clothing (Brewster et al., 2022). Although fast fashion still seems to target women in a way that feels highly sexual and almost offensive, the urge to buy is like an itch that has to be scratched - all limited edition. I've lost minutes of my day watching influencers unbox things online knowing they will wear it once, cash their check and the outfit will be out of style within the week. Brands that have exploded in the last decade like Fashion Nova and Shein, are constantly pushing new products on Instagram and Snapchat and you can see that from just following one of their brand ambassadors or any influencer. These types of cheap brands have a very short shelf life, which won't see many wears because their customers will have moved onto the next trend, but it doesn't really matter because there will be something new and exciting by the end of next week. Even if these throwaway fashion brands focused on making less micro trends and wanted to do better for the planet and their workers by creating items that carried more legacy and value for all parties. It seems that looking at the current state of the fashion industry, these micro trends are carrying bigger companies through mid-seasons lulls. One might find it hard to imagine not seeing social media posts and advertisements daily pushing questionable brands that carry only made in China clothing with no information online about their production practices.

The visual appeal of having new clothing constantly also plays into how we interact with our peers and the world through social media, and it creates an even bigger desire to tell people you got whatever item for very cheap. The idea of being liked and noticed on social media is literally baked into its bones, and people hyper focus on that alone in the realm of social media. All that matters is how on trend it is and how much you got it for and where they can buy it. It is commonplace now to see people posing for photos on social media and tagging the clothing brand that is paying them to wear those clothes. Buying new clothing is a privilege not all of the world even has, but the market for new clothing is so saturated that many people are able to afford these items even if it's on credit (Joy et al., 2012, p 275). So, now we have brands focusing on women and girls, as well as people who buy at a lower price point - these companies are desperate to sell so they can make it to the next micro trend. There are some nice looking brands out there, and they make their websites and social media accounts look a certain way to keep the pace with American style brands and buying styles, but we don't see everything on there that we'd like. Some consumers want to make sure they actually aren't purchasing from a company that is directly polluting the environment can be very important for many, but there are also companies that are accused of 'greenwashing' in that they will tell consumers that their items are x% post-consumer recycled, etc. but that will only be a half truth and it can feel impossible to find the truth about brands no matter how deep you dig. As it stands now, almost "82 pounds of clothing waste per year for each American" (Morgan et al., 2015, 40:49) is produced each year, which honestly feels conservative especially with consumption during the pandemic. This includes items we donate to charity, but are not usable or sellable, and end up in the landfill. The marketed idea of green fashion can be quite popular in theory, but younger consumers have a hard time finding it appealing and actually fashionable (Joy et al., 2012, p 280). Although not all green washing is doing the world a ton of good, fashion brands have an ethical obligation to explore better options to produce clothing and

become more amenable to recycling textiles that won't damage the environment further.

Although there are plenty of brands to select from, only the ones that can pay for advertising all over social media and major websites will get people's attention. Smaller brands, and likely greener brands, may not have the budget to become a household name. Most can't even keep up with how micro trend focused fashion is right now. In some cases it seems like companies have a stronger desire to commodify recycling even when what they are doing isn't what we think they are doing. In other words, using tons of harmful chemicals to break down a garment in order to make it into something else isn't exactly what we want to think of when we think eco-friendly. Companies want to sell the idea to us, so we'll support their company and buy more and more of their products (Lee et al., 2012) and take our attention away from smaller brands that are actually not polluting the planet. The common theme with many brands that is fairly obvious, and it's that they have to make money and revenue is valued over a lot of other things that should be more important if not the most important. Not that all companies are out to get us and have no desire to create a better world for the future, it's important to question the ethics behind each brand and question what they are doing. Most people don't want to know that their jeans were created in a sweatshop, and if you knew ahead of time you could change your decision and opt for a brand that is maybe a little more but has ethical standards that are out in the open and made locally. At this point in time it feels impossible to do away with the companies who are making all these clothes as they provide life sustaining jobs to communities that need it desperately. If it all went away one day it's hard to imagine what that reality would look like for millions of people in those economies. Clothing companies have it within their ability to reformat not only how their products are made, but how we buy them and what we choose to do with them. Not all clothes need to be made with one season or even one micro season in mind.

When it comes to longevity of textiles and clothings, fast fashion brands are near-sighted and only focus on the present and pushing out every micro trend imaginable. Before fast fashion began to take over the fashion markets, we used to have heritage items that could even be locally sourced and manufactured to places close to home, or items that are made to both last longer and are typically made with more care in production (Joy et al., 2012, p 292). Although they come at a higher cost, it feels nominal when comparing how much money people hemorrhage buying things they will wear once and then throw away. Some companies are looking at ways to mitigate the environmental impact and keep costs down for consumers by offering deadstock items, which are unused textiles and pre-consumer waste from the manufacturing process (Niinimäki et al., 2020, p. 195). Although this is one simple and effective way, the end goal is for the brand to profit off of the consumer through greenwashing more or less. The company still produced the textiles in a way that may not have been environmentally friendly, but you're persuaded to see it as a green move by them not sending it to a landfill. Feels almost like a psychological tactic, and many of us fall prey to this sort of corporate behavior. Companies like Suay in Los Angeles, have been focused on repairing and reusing textiles that we love and offer a way to turn them into something else that can be used as a heritage item like a quilt or nice jacket (Cernansky, 2022). They also purchase dead stock textiles and produce their own line of products that is completely done in house and at no cost to the environment. Deadstock is a wonderful way to use up as much as possible before creating brand new waste, but companies that are bigger don't want to focus on last season's textiles and they are ready to move on. It's based on their own design calendars that they don't want to use and that's truly unfortunate that they cannot figure out a way to use dead stock in its entirety. Then it comes to repair and replacing and how it fits into big companies and their products. It is rare for big brand companies to repair their items or replace something that has broken simply because the costs are too much and most brands are focused on you buying



something new, at cost. Not fixing something from 10 seasons ago. Patagonia is one of the main big brands that is consistently in fashion news because it challenges many norms within the industry. Their most famous one though is their commitment to the planet and creating a positive conversation around both adaptive reuse of their garments, as well as repairing well-loved garments (Michel et al., 2019, p. 174) for your own use and to pass on as a heritage piece for your family. At this point though, no matter how you look at this aspect of fashion, even being green will be impacted based on a company's bottom line and the need for more and more revenue. The solution for fashion brands' consistent waste isn't for smaller brands to figure out adaptive reuse for them.

Not all companies are created equal and even brands we deem as "good" in our minds could also be involved in practices we might not appreciate - price point often feels like a tell-tale sign of questionable practices. How do they make their clothes so cheap and where are they making up the difference? One also has to wonder how fashion brands and manufacturers adhere to rights and regulations where they are made, but it's hard for the common consumer to get that far to even see the working conditions of people working in the factories. Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) is a concept created by the UN Guiding Principles in 2011 as a way to get companies to focus more on human rights of the workers producing their goods (Nolan, 2022, p 3) rather than their bottom line. This includes during production of textiles and products, as well as the post-production aspect. It has become increasingly difficult since 2011 to really hone in companies to protect the rights of the environment, their consumers and their workers since the work being done is so spread out globally (Nolan, 2022, p 6). Having this type of reach is extremely dangerous, as one company can outsource to another and just because one company adheres to a high level of ethics does not mean another one will too. For large production companies they are very numbers focused and want to be able to produce a certain amount to turn a profit. This equates to low wages, low overhead and long hours. Skimping on

the first two will have a higher rate of return for most companies, but the cost is really to the worker and the conditions they are subjected to. Overall, workers should not be seen as pawns or even expendable, but as stakeholders with meaningful contributions that not only help their own wellbeing, but their colleagues and set precedent for many future generations. As a consumer, we rarely look at brands and try to find out the true origin of an item that says “recycled” or even if it’s labeled 100% cotton. We don’t actually understand what goes into the production part, so even if the brand touts one thing, it could have been produced with tons of chemicals or even non-GMO seeds and we really have no way to know. Companies that produce these goods have an obligation to their company that hires them, and that is to produce products at a low cost, so it can be very competitive and this is when the rights of the environment, and the production workers are taken less into consideration (Niinimäk et al., 2020, p 192). After the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 (Thomas, 2018) this was a moment in time to shift our focus from revenue to the value of people and their lives. Most of the victims in this garment building’s collapse were women who were barely making enough to survive, but had no choice but to work in these unsafe conditions. After they survived, what happens then? They can’t go back to that factory, so they will find a new one if they are even able to still work, and the cycle continues. In order to protect workers, and specifically women, more needs to be done to ensure their safety during the life cycle of a garment. In this specific case, the safety of the building that collapsed had been brought up as a safety concern and the owner chose to have the workers push through to make quota, and workers had to make money. These workers aren’t protected by a labor union and don’t have insurance or savings as a backup. This preventable accident ruined so many lives that day, but it did one major thing and it was to expose these horrific practices and norms to the world. Since many textile and garment factories are not in the United States it’s very easy to forget things like this happen with some of our favorite brands and we may not even notice.

For many of us, we feel very helpless when it comes to ethical practices of purchasing clothing and textiles. Even if we read the labels and try to do as much research as we can, there doesn't feel like a guaranteed way to know that our favorite brand isn't doing something questionable and sometimes it feels almost better to not know. We are at a pivotal point in time where there is no choice but to change the way we act as consumers, both for the sake of actual people making our products we buy but also for the environment. Even if we feel like boycotting one brand won't do anything to make a point, over time we can work together as consumers to demand better for what we buy. Social media has given consumers an opportunity also to monitor workers rights and see how people protest in other countries demanding better conditions for working and keeping companies more accountable for their actions. It's very odd to be able to use the same tool for good, as well as an advertising machine. Although it can feel small, fast fashion impacts our lives daily in ways we can't actually see in real time. We have such limited resources in the world and it has become increasingly important for us to make impactful change.

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