

Unraveling Fast Fashion: Toward A Sustainable And Ethical Future

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Abstract

Fast Fashion, a transformative phenomenon that emerged in the 1990s with pioneering brands like Zara, has reshaped the global fashion industry by delivering affordable, trend-driven apparel at an unprecedented pace. Yet, beneath its alluring facade lies a tapestry of profound environmental and ethical dilemmas. The relentless production cycles fueling this model have cultivated a culture of overconsumption, rendering Fast Fashion one of the foremost contributors to environmental degradation. Its repercussions span from excessive waste generation and water pollution to soaring greenhouse gas emissions and unsustainable resource exploitation.

This chapter delves into the intricate realities veiled by the glitz of Fast Fashion, unveiling its environmental, societal, and ethical ramifications. It explores the evolving regulatory and statutory frameworks aimed at mitigating its adverse impacts, the formidable challenges that obstruct the transition toward sustainable fashion, and the pressing need for systemic change. Furthermore, the author offers a compendium of actionable suggestions to foster an ethical and environmentally conscious paradigm. Through critical analysis and forward-thinking solutions, this chapter envisions a future where the fashion industry reconciles its creative brilliance with the imperatives of sustainability and ethical responsibility.

Key Words: *Fast Fashion, environmental degradation, ethical dilemmas, sustainability, regulatory frameworks, overconsumption, sustainable fashion, systemic change.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Basic human needs begin with physiological essentials, such as air, water, food, clothing, and shelter, which form the foundation for human survival. As these basic needs are met, humans progress to higher-level desires, including safety, health, family, property, and social belonging. This progression is continuous, as fulfilling one level of need creates a vacuum for higher aspirations. In modern society, these aspirations have evolved to become more artistic, creative, and centered on maintaining a unique identity.

As the global population grew exponentially from approximately 5 million in 5000 BC to 2 billion in 1927 and 8 billion in 2025, the demands for resources and goods have expanded accordingly. While humans have the capability to meet the rising needs of this growing population, the earth's finite resources—such as water, land, air, trees, and minerals—pose significant limitations. This finite nature of resources becomes particularly concerning in industries like fashion, which employs over 430 million people worldwide (11.9% of the global workforce) and contributes over \$1 trillion annually to the global economy.

Fast Fashion, a disruptive concept that emerged in the 1990s with Zara's arrival in New York, epitomizes the fashion industry's emphasis on rapid production, affordability, and trend-focused designs. However, this model fuels overconsumption and waste, contributing to environmental degradation, including water pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and labor exploitation. Despite its economic significance, Fast Fashion highlights the urgent need for sustainable practices to mitigate its profound societal and environmental impact.

2. What is Fast Fashion?

The term 'fast fashion' has gained significant prominence in contemporary discourse on fashion, sustainability, and environmental awareness. It refers to garments that are inexpensively produced and priced, often replicating the latest runway trends, and swiftly channeled into retail outlets to capitalize on fleeting fashion fads.

This business model derives its name from its hallmark characteristic: the accelerated pace of design, production, distribution, and marketing. Retailers employing this approach churn out vast quantities of diverse products, offering consumers an abundance of stylish options at remarkably low prices. The term ‘fast fashion’ was first coined by *The New York Times* in reference to Zara’s ambitious goal of reducing the journey of a garment—from the drawing board to the retail floor—to a mere 15 days.

Today, some of the most prominent purveyors of fast fashion include global giants such as Zara, UNIQLO, Forever 21, and H&M. These brands epitomize the model’s ethos of rapid innovation and accessibility, which, while revolutionizing the industry, also underscores the pressing need for sustainable alternatives.

3. The Shadowed Realities of Fast Fashion

An analysis by *Business Insider* reveals that the fashion industry is responsible for a staggering 10% of global carbon emissions—equivalent to the combined emissions of the entire European Union. This industry not only depletes water resources but also pollutes rivers and streams, contributing to the degradation of aquatic ecosystems. Alarming, 85% of all textiles produced end up in landfills each year. Even the simple act of washing synthetic garments releases approximately 500,000 tons of microfibers into the ocean annually, an amount comparable to 50 billion plastic bottles.

India, one of the largest textile producers globally, bears the brunt of these environmental repercussions. The nation’s textile hubs, such as Tiruppur in Tamil Nadu and Surat in Gujarat, are infamous for severe water pollution caused by untreated dyeing wastewater, which contaminates rivers and harms local communities dependent on these water sources.

The *Quantis International Report 2018* identifies three primary contributors to the fashion industry’s global pollution footprint: dyeing and finishing processes (36%), yarn preparation (28%), and fiber production (15%). These activities not only have a severe impact on freshwater withdrawal—particularly in water-stressed regions like Rajasthan and Maharashtra—but also deplete critical resources due to the energy-intensive manufacturing processes, which rely heavily on fossil fuels. Cotton cultivation, a cornerstone of India’s textile industry, further exacerbates these challenges, as it demands vast quantities of water and pesticide use, threatening both human health and biodiversity.

Sanganer, a town near Jaipur in Rajasthan, celebrated globally for its exquisite block printing, exemplifies the environmental toll of the textile industry. Renowned for its intricate floral and geometric designs, Sanganer’s block prints symbolize India’s rich cultural heritage. However, this craftsmanship comes at a steep environmental cost, threatening local ecosystems and the sustainability of the craft itself.

Once a tranquil town with vibrant cultural traditions, Sanganer has become a stark example of industrial pollution. The Dravyavati River, an artificial water source meant to revitalize the region, has been heavily polluted by untreated dye effluents and chemical-laden wastewater from the town’s numerous dyeing and printing units.

According to the *Rajasthan State Pollution Control Board (RSPCB)*, the dyeing industry in Sanganer generates approximately **50 million liters of wastewater daily**, much of which is discharged untreated into the Dravyavati River and nearby water bodies. This wastewater contains synthetic dyes, heavy metals, and other toxic chemicals, which not only pollute the water but also leach into the soil, contaminating groundwater. Studies reveal dangerously high levels of heavy metals like lead, chromium, and cadmium in local water sources, rendering them unfit for human consumption and agriculture.

This pollution has profound consequences for the local population. Farmers relying on these water sources for irrigation report declining crop yields and diminished soil fertility due to chemical contamination. Additionally, residents exposed to polluted water face increasing cases of skin diseases, respiratory problems, and other health concerns.

The environmental consequences are dire. According to the *UN Framework Convention on Climate Change*, emissions from textile manufacturing alone are expected to surge by an alarming 60% by 2030. This trajectory underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms in the industry.

Adding to the environmental toll is the concept of ‘lead time,’ which refers to the duration it takes for a product to journey from design to consumer purchase. By 2012, industry leader Zara had perfected its rapid-production model, creating and delivering a new garment in just two weeks. Competitors like Forever 21 achieved this in six weeks, and H&M in eight. This accelerated cycle has not only fueled consumerism but

also resulted in mountains of textile waste, overwhelming landfills and waste management systems in countries like India.

The sobering reality is that the fast fashion industry, while celebrated for its affordability and accessibility, exacts a monumental cost on the planet and its people—a cost that demands immediate and collective action.

4. Challenges of Fast Fashion that Hinder the Transition to Sustainable Fashion

Fast fashion, a model driven by rapid production and disposable clothing, has become a major contributor to environmental degradation worldwide. As brands produce cheap, trendy garments that quickly make their way from the runway to store shelves, the following environmental consequences are often overlooked:

4.1 Water Consumption and Pollution: One of the primary culprits of environmental harm in fast fashion is water consumption. The production of a single cotton shirt requires around 700 gallons of water, and creating a pair of jeans can consume up to 2,000 gallons. Meanwhile, the textile dyeing process is one of the largest contributors to water pollution globally. The runoff from dyeing contains harmful chemicals that often make their way into rivers and streams, causing long-term ecological damage. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) highlights that the textile industry is India's third-largest water polluter.

4.2 Chemical Use and Pollution: The widespread use of toxic chemicals in textile production, including dyes, finishes, and bleaches, poses a severe threat to both the environment and public health. These harmful substances seep into waterways, causing extensive contamination and posing serious risks to human health. According to CSE, the textile industry ranks as India's third-largest water polluter, with chemical usage being a primary contributor. The unchecked discharge of these chemicals devastates aquatic ecosystems and endangers the safety of water sources for surrounding communities, impacting agriculture and human consumption alike.

4.3 Micro plastics and Ocean Pollution: Fast fashion contributes significantly to ocean pollution through micro plastics. Synthetic fibers like polyester, nylon, and acrylic shed micro plastics when washed. These fibers are non-biodegradable and accumulate in oceans, where they pose a significant threat to marine life. According to a 2017 report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), 35% of micro plastics in the ocean come from the washing of synthetic textiles.

4.4 Waste Management: The textile industry in India generates a significant amount of waste, including fabric scraps, trimmings, and production by-products. Improper disposal of this textile waste contributes to environmental pollution, affecting landfills and waterways. According to the Ministry of Textiles, India produces approximately 2.5 million tons of textile waste annually. This waste, if not managed properly, poses a serious environmental threat, contaminating the land and water systems, and exacerbating the country's waste management challenges.

4.5 Exploitative Labor Practices: The textile industry in India is often associated with exploitative labor practices, including low wages, long working hours, and hazardous working conditions. A report by the India Committee of the Netherlands highlights that approximately 10-12 million children are engaged in child labor across various sectors in India, with a substantial number working in the textile and garment industry. These workers face unsafe environments, minimal pay, and lack of basic rights, reflecting the urgent need for reforms to protect vulnerable workers and improve industry standards.

4.6 Lack of Transparency: The textile industry in India is plagued by a significant lack of transparency in its supply chain, making it difficult to identify and address key environmental and social issues. A study by Fashion Revolution India reveals that a large number of textile companies in the country fail to disclose crucial information regarding their sourcing and production processes. This lack of transparency impedes consumers' ability to make informed purchasing decisions, as they remain unaware of the environmental and labor conditions behind the garments they buy.

4.7 Lack of Awareness: In India, a significant challenge to promoting sustainable fashion is the widespread lack of awareness among consumers regarding its importance and impact. According to a survey by Nielsen India, over 60% of Indian consumers prioritize price over sustainability when making purchasing decisions, largely due to budget constraints. This price sensitivity creates a major hurdle for sustainable fashion brands, which often face difficulty in competing with conventional, mass-market brands that offer cheaper, fast-fashion options. As a result, the demand for eco-friendly and ethically produced garments remains limited.

4.8 Low Availability of Sustainable Materials: In India, the availability of sustainable materials remains limited, which poses a significant challenge for fashion brands striving to adopt eco-friendly practices. According to the Textile and Apparel Industry of India Report 2023, only about 3-4% of the raw materials used in the Indian textile industry are sustainably sourced, with the majority of sustainable fibers, such as organic cotton or hemp, being imported. This reliance on imports drives up the cost of these materials, making them less accessible for small-scale and emerging sustainable fashion brands.

4.9 High Cost of Sustainable Production: One of the major barriers to the growth of sustainable fashion in India is the high cost of sustainable production. According to the Indian Textile Industry Report 2023, sustainable practices, such as using organic or natural dyes, fair wages for workers, and sourcing eco-friendly materials, can increase production costs by up to 30-40%. For small-scale entrepreneurs and emerging sustainable fashion brands, this increased cost makes it difficult to compete with larger, mass-market brands that rely on conventional, cost-cutting practices.

4.10 Lack of Government Support: In India, the absence of targeted government policies and initiatives for sustainable fashion presents a significant hurdle for the industry. Currently, there are no specific incentives or funding schemes that cater to the needs of sustainable fashion businesses. As reported by the Indian Fashion Industry Report 2023, despite the growing demand for eco-friendly and ethical products, entrepreneurs in the sustainable fashion sector struggle to access resources, funding, and support. This lack of government backing makes it challenging for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to invest in sustainable production practices or expand their operations, leaving them at a disadvantage compared to larger, conventional brands that benefit from more robust government policies and financial assistance.

5. Regulatory and Statutory Advances at Global Level

The fashion industry, particularly the Fast Fashion sector, has come under increasing scrutiny due to its significant environmental and social impacts. As awareness of these issues grows, regulatory and statutory measures at both global levels are being introduced to address the unsustainable practices associated with Fast Fashion.

5.1 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes goals such as responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and climate action (SDG 13), which are directly linked to addressing the negative impact of Fast Fashion. These goals encourage industries, including fashion, to adopt sustainable practices in manufacturing, waste management, and consumption patterns.

5.2 Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015)¹: While not specific to the fashion industry, the Paris Agreement set global climate targets, urging countries to take action against industries that contribute significantly to carbon emissions, such as Fast Fashion. The fashion sector is now under pressure to reduce its carbon footprint and adopt eco-friendly materials and practices to align with global climate targets.

5.3 Global Fashion Agenda (GFA)²: This non-profit organization, known for its "Circular Fashion System" initiative, works to foster sustainability within the fashion industry. Through its annual "Copenhagen Fashion Summit," the GFA has been instrumental in promoting sustainability standards and pushing for policy changes on global platforms.

5.4 OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has issued guidelines for businesses, encouraging transparency in sourcing materials and ensuring that supply chains are free from exploitation and environmental harm. These guidelines, though voluntary, have provided a framework for fashion brands to evaluate and improve their environmental and social practices.

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Fast fashion, characterized by rapid production cycles and disposable garments, has led to severe environmental and social consequences. From water consumption and pollution to exploitative labor practices, the fashion industry, especially fast fashion, has placed immense pressure on the planet's finite

¹ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

² <https://globalfashionagenda.org/>

resources. This model, while driving economic growth and meeting the growing demands for trendy, affordable clothing, is fundamentally unsustainable. The environmental toll, including significant contributions to global carbon emissions, micro plastic pollution, and waste accumulation, is alarming and requires immediate attention.

At the same time, the fashion industry remains a key economic sector globally, employing millions and contributing to GDP in numerous countries. Thus, a balance must be struck between economic growth and sustainability. The need for a transition to sustainable fashion practices is urgent, but it is equally essential to address the barriers that hinder this shift, such as high production costs, lack of awareness, and insufficient government support. The regulatory and statutory advances at both global and national levels provide a framework for driving change. While initiatives like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, and the Global Fashion Agenda promote sustainability in the industry, more concerted action is required.

Suggestions

6.1 Promotion of Circular Fashion Models: The life cycle of clothing is rapidly shrinking, not because products are becoming unusable, but because they quickly fall out of trend and are deemed outdated. This creates a dual challenge: the increasing demand for new products and a growing heap of waste as discarded garments accumulate. There is an urgent need to focus on recycling and repurposing what is no longer in use. A parallel industry should be developed to specifically reuse, recycle, and repair outdated yet still usable fast fashion products.

This approach should prioritize designing garments for longevity, encouraging repairs, and establishing garment take-back programs for recycling. By embracing sustainability, fashion brands can minimize their environmental impact and contribute to a more sustainable fashion ecosystem.

6.2 Adoption of Sustainable Materials: Brands should transition to sustainable and eco-friendly materials, such as organic cotton, hemp, and recycled fabrics, to reduce their environmental impact. Governments and industries can provide incentives to make these materials more accessible and affordable.

6.3 Consumer Awareness and Education: A strong advocacy and education program to sensitize the ill effects of the fast fashion based on unsustainable development should be embarked. As, fast fashion is not limited to young population i.e. Generation Z who are born between 1995-2009 but this has paved inroads in Gen Z, Gen X ; so campaign to educate should be so planned that it address each group distinctly. What may appeal to Gen X will not work for Gen Z so a strong campaign be involving all the impactful players such as Celebrity, influencer, leaders, social workers, RJ, media, music concerts, fashion shows, video games, educationist and so on so forth should be planned and implemented across the diverse domain which has effects over it excluding audience and followers.

6.4 Policy and Government Support: Government should regulate in two ways (a) to prohibit and (2) to promote. Industry that adversely impacting the environment should be forced to adopt the eco-friendly production process, control effluent water by putting water treat plants, use of material that is harmonious to the ecosystem. Impose high taxes on cheap technology, materials that is causing damage to environment. Technology up gradation should be incentivized by subsidies, tax free import and tax breaks or lower tax slabs for the industries which adopts eco-friendly production.

6.5 Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR): Governments can implement regulations that hold fashion brands accountable for the entire lifecycle of their products. Brands should be responsible for the collection and recycling of garments after use, helping to reduce waste.

6.6 CSR for Sustainability: A zero-emission mission is pronounced in a time bound manner and all stakeholders are involved and empowered for using their own resources. Corporate houses and industrialist involved in production of fast fashion items should be involved in designing a framework where each industry should reduce its wastage systematically and bring it to zero wastage in a specified timeframe. Under CSR, a certain portion of the profit or revenue of an industry/firm may be allowed to comply with this zero-emission mission of these industries. This will allow promote more creativity and industries to put more efforts on research and development and bring innovative practices in different ways.

In conclusion, while fast fashion has transformed the accessibility and consumption of clothing, its detrimental effects on the environment, human health, and socio-economic systems are undeniable. A unified

and dedicated effort from consumers, industries, and governments is essential to drive the shift toward a sustainable fashion ecosystem. By embracing innovative practices, raising awareness, and complying with regulatory frameworks, we can harmonize economic growth with environmental preservation and social equity, paving the way for a more sustainable and equitable future for both the planet and its inhabitants.