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Fast Fashion: Boon or Bane to the Environment?

RIYA SHAH¹

ABSTRACT

Today's generation is well averse to the concept of fast fashion, and they are the ones promoting it as well. The concept of fast fashion came into existence in the 1990s when consumer demand started changing rapidly. To cope with the rapidly changing demands fashion industry changed its techniques and started promoting the mass production of clothes with unsustainable practices. After aviation, the fashion sector accounts for 10% of global pollution. Fast fashion, which is based on low production costs, high consumer turnover, and relatively short garment lifespans, has contributed to the industry's continued success despite environmental concerns. This paper focuses on the hazardous impact of the fast fashion environment. Over 92 million tonnes of garbage and 1.5 trillion litres of water are created by the garment business. The researcher shows why the fashion industry needs to make some significant adjustments, such as reducing manufacturing and implementing sustainable practices across the supply chain, and why consumers should modify their behaviour by buying fewer garments and keeping them for a longer period of time. These changes highlight the importance of returning to slow' fashion, which limits and mitigates environmental repercussions to improve the long-term sustainability of the fashion supply chain.

Keywords: *Fast fashion, environment, sustainability, slow fashion, apparel industry.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The garment business is a major contributor to the global economy and society at large. It's one of the most interconnected sectors of the economy since most countries make parts for garments that are sold throughout the world². It has a long history of contributing to the modernisation of other sectors of the economy, making it one of the most important. Due to its cheap fixed costs and concentration on labour-intensive production, the expansion of textile exports has been among the main industrial strategies for nations climbing the industrialisation ladder.

Its ecological effect has grown as a result of recent technical developments in manufacturing,

¹ Author is a student at NMIMS School of Law, Mumbai, India.

² Kirsi Niinimäki et al., *The environmental price of fast fashion*, 1 NAT. REV. EARTH ENVIRON. 189–200 (2020), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9>.

social shifts in wealth, globalisation, and retail market shifts. A greater selection of natural, synthetic, and blended textiles is now available because to technological advancements in the quality of fibres³. Because of their high quality, adaptability, and longevity, these materials may be found almost everywhere. Fabric costs have decreased as a result of increased technical efficiency in production, making better quality fabrics more affordable than ever before. The rapid expansion of fast fashion may be directly attributed to this phenomenon. Fast fashion describes low-priced lines of apparel that imitate high-end styles as they emerge. Even though it epitomises unsustainable practices, fast fashion helps satisfy the deep-seated needs of young customers in the industrialised world for premium clothes. Fashion cycles are very rapid, with today's trends quickly replacing yesterday's, which have long since been discarded. Because to the aforementioned technical developments, there is no longer any pricey cloth with a few notable exceptions like silks, wools, and fur. However, the environmental concerns connected with cheap clothes remain disguised throughout the garment's lifespan, despite this shift being frequently celebrated as the "democratisation" of fashion since the current fashions are accessible to all classes of buyers. The environmental and social costs of producing textiles are diverse, ranging from the high-water consumption required to cultivate cotton to the dumping of untreated colours into local water supplies to the low salaries and unsafe working conditions endured by the industry's workforce. In addition, growing consumption patterns have led to the accumulation of millions of tonnes of textile waste in landfills and other uncontrolled locations. Much of this trash is sold in second hand clothes marketplaces, making it especially relevant to low and middle-income countries (LMICs). Developing and enforcing environmental and occupational safeguards to protect human health is frequently hindered in these LMICs due to a lack of assistance and resources. Fast fashion focuses on simplicity, efficacy, convenience, affordability, and accessibility to deliver modern consumers the newest catwalk fashion trends for a fraction of the price. Fast fashion is inexpensive and stylish. It drives the fashion industry to be faster and cheaper. Lower classes may blend with upper classes by dressing good on the cheap. Fast fashion may be a popular thing for today's world, but it always comes at cost. New clothes and shoes might make you feel euphoric. Consumers buy clothes they don't need because it's fun. Fast fashion has made consumers buy new garments to refresh their wardrobes. They lose garments quickly. The fashion business has been attacked for its detrimental environmental and societal repercussions against various 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

³ Md Zafar & Alam Bhuiyan, *FAST FASHION: MARKETING, RECYCLING AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES Related papers*, www.ijhssi.org.

(A) Research objectives

- To analyse the impact of fast fashion on environment.
- To understand the possible solutions in curbing the negative impacts of fast fashion on environment.

(B) Review of literature

Over the last two decades, when the fashion garment industry's borders began to grow, a lot has changed⁴. Since then, the fashion business has seen significant changes, including the decline of resulting from advances in industrialization, a greater frequency of seasonal changes in clothing, and structural⁵. Retailers have been pushed to prioritise cheap prices and high profit margins due to supply chain features. Freedom from rigidity in terms of design, quality, execution, and time to market. It's not only about getting to market quickly or creatively; marketing and funding also play a role. Investment as the primary factors that foster competitiveness in the garment manufacturing. Due to the intense competition in today's fashion industry and the ongoing need to "refresh" product ranges, many stores are gradually increasing the number of "seasons," or the intervals between complete product overhauls⁶. Retailers in the fashion industry are using the concept of "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow" to entice customers to make more frequent shop visits by stocking limited edition or seasonal collections of goods⁷. This means that the markdown process may be avoided, leading to larger profit margins and a shorter life cycle for fast-moving products⁸. Historically, "fashion" and "garments" were two different terms used by insiders in the business. "Fashion" clothing is aimed at a more affluent clientele and costs more than "garments," which are aimed at the general public⁹. The difference in cost was proportional not only to the originality of the garment's style but also to its overall quality. Various qualities of the cloth, including its fineness, colour, pattern, and kind, were used to rank its quality. Those high-priced threads were worth every penny. Fast fashion has

⁴ Anika Kozłowski, Michal Bardecki & Cory Searcy, *Environmental Impacts in the Fashion Industry: A Life-cycle and Stakeholder Framework.*, J. CORP. CITIZSH. 17–36 (2012), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=79191008&lang=pt-br&site=ehost-live>.

⁵ Katarzyna Bilinska-Reformat & Anna Dewalska-Opitek, *E-commerce as the predominant business model of fast fashion retailers in the era of global COVID 19 pandemics*, 192 *PROCEDIA COMPUT. SCI.* 2479–2490 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2021.09.017>.

⁶ Greg Peters, Mengyu Li & Manfred Lenzen, *The need to decelerate fast fashion in a hot climate - A global sustainability perspective on the garment industry*, 295 *J. CLEAN. PROD.* 126390 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.126390>.

⁷ Piera Centobelli et al., *Slowing the fast fashion industry: an all-round perspective*, *CURR. OPIN. GREEN SUSTAIN. CHEM.* 100684 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogsc.2022.100684>.

⁸ Luana Gomes de Oliveira, Felipe G. Miranda & Maria Amélia de Paula Dias, *Sustainable practices in slow and fast fashion stores: What does the customer perceive?*, 6 *CLEAN. ENG. TECHNOL.* (2022).

⁹ Lisa Mcneill & Rebecca Moore, *Sustainable fashion consumption and the fast fashion conundrum: Fashionable consumers and attitudes to sustainability in clothing choice*, 39 *INT. J. CONSUM. STUD.* 212–222 (2015).

revolutionized the garment and textile business and consumer behaviour forever. Before 1800, fashion was sluggish and local. Fast fashion makes garments cheaper and easier to create. Most buyers liked inexpensive, fashionable apparel¹⁰. Fast fashion is omnipresent, so it's hard to resist. Fast fashion is useful. We may easily update our outfit at a chain store or online. Fast fashion mass-produces inexpensive, stylish clothes. It speeds up fabric and apparel production and reduces expenses. Fast fashion makes trendy garments cheap for many impoverished shoppers¹¹. They have access to designer-inspired outfits. In the past 20 years, the fashion garment sector has seen dramatic change. Key tactics for maintaining a lucrative position in today's competitive fashion retail market are low costs and design, quality, and speed to market adaptability. The idea of "throwaway" or "quick fashion" has emerged in the fashion clothing business during the 1990s¹². In addition, customers choose fast fashion stores like Zara and H&M due to their wide product selections, low prices, and high degree of price-sensitivity. Clothes from the fast fashion industry are designed to be inexpensive and easily discarded in favour of brand-new items. It has far-reaching consequences, some of which are beneficial to society and others of which are devastating¹³. There are various reasons why fast fashion has become so widespread during the last two decades. In doing so, it satisfies the growing desire for fresh, on-trend garments at reasonable prices¹⁴. There has been a growing chorus of voices raising concerns about the fast fashion industry's disastrous effects on society and the environment. Overconsumption and excessive manufacture of low-quality garments have far-reaching effects. To boost profits and keep up with consumer demand, fast fashion companies and retailers are aiming for cheaper manufacturing costs¹⁵. Recently, the fashion industry embraced sustainable and ethical manufacturing. Many customers are hesitant to buy these things, which seems to contrast with 'quick fashion' aspirations. This research examines fashion buyers' views and behaviour toward sustainable and ethical goods¹⁶. The study applies the developmental theory model to the fashion industry and finds that consumers can be broken down into three categories: "Self" consumers who are focused on satisfying their own hedonic

¹⁰ Patrik Aspers & Frédéric Godart, *Sociology of fashion: Order and change*, 39 ANNU. REV. SOCIOL. 171–192 (2013).

¹¹ Kieran Breen, *Cleaning up fast fashion*, 166 RSA 34–37 (2020).

¹² Peng Shao & Hermann Lassleben, *Determinants of consumers' willingness to participate in fast fashion brands' used clothes recycling plans in an omnichannel retail environment*, 16 JOURNAL OF THEORETICAL AND APPLIED ELECTRONIC COMMERCE RESEARCH 3340–3355 (2021).

¹³ Yongjian Li et al., *Governance of sustainable supply chains in the fast fashion industry*, 32 EUR. MANAG. J. 823–836 (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2014.03.001>.

¹⁴ Vertica Bhardwaj & Ann Fairhurst, *Fast fashion: Response to changes in the fashion industry*, 20 INT. REV. RETAIL. DISTRIBUT. CONSUM. RES. 165–173 (2010).

¹⁵ Mcneill and Moore, *supra* note 8.

¹⁶ Bahareh Zamani, Gustav Sandin & Greg M. Peters, *Life cycle assessment of clothing libraries: can collaborative consumption reduce the environmental impact of fast fashion?*, 162 J. CLEAN. PROD. 1368–1375 (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.06.128>.

needs, "Social" consumers who care about establishing a positive image to others, and "Sacrifice" consumers who want to have a smaller environmental footprint. Different groups see rapid fashion differently, thus marketing sustainably made apparel to each group is different¹⁷. Hybrid organisations may revolutionise the textile and garment business by placing the needs of their shareholders, investors, employees, and communities ahead of the needs of their rivals¹⁸. Businesses that fall under the category of "hybrid organisations" tend to use sustainable and ethical practises in their day-to-day operations in an attempt to have a beneficial impact on society and the environment. Hybrid enterprises, which may be either for-profit or non-profit, or a mix of the two, integrate the idea that ethical business practises can be financially viable over time.

II. IS THE ENVIRONMENT SUFFERING FROM FAST FASHION?

The fashion industry is the world's second largest user of water since it requires large amounts of water all throughout the supply chain in order to function properly. When it comes to the textile and clothing sectors, cotton is by far the most important natural fibre. While some cotton is grown in rain-fed fields, the majority of it is irrigated, which can put a strain on the local water supply. The textile industry, from cotton crop irrigation to household laundry, consumes a lot of water. Even polyester, viscose, and other synthetics have high water demands during production. The production of 1 kilogramme of cotton requires around 11,000 gallons of freshwater, according to the Water Footprint Network. A garment weighing 250 grammes would require 2700 gallons of water to wash. The quantity of water required to produce one pair of jeans is equivalent to a person's daily needs for 2.5 years, as reported by CNBC. Pesticides and agrochemicals are cotton's biggest environmental consequences. Cotton pollutes the Aral Sea, Indus Delta, and Murray Darling River.¹⁹ Cotton farming causes soil erosion, water contamination from pesticides and fertilisers, and pollution. Fashion utilises enough water to fulfil 110 million people's hunger for a year. Freshwater consumption hasn't hit its global limit, but availability is unequal. North Africa and South Asia have near-permanent water stress. The apparel sector will consume enough freshwater to fill 32 million Olympic-size pools by 2030. China and India, the world's largest cotton growers, face considerable water stress. The fashion industry and cotton-growing nations may have to choose between cotton production and clean water. The apparel sector influences CO2 levels that are 20% over acceptable levels.

¹⁷ Tara Stringer, Gary Mortimer & Alice Ruth Payne, *Do ethical concerns and personal values influence the purchase intention of fast-fashion clothing?*, 24 J. FASH. MARK. MANAG. 99–120 (2020).

¹⁸ Liz Barnes & Gaynor Lea-Greenwood, *Fast fashion in the retail store environment*, 38 INT. J. RETAIL DISTRIB. MANAG. 760–772 (2010).

¹⁹ Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, *supra* note 13.

“The industry's CO2 emissions are expected to rise by more than 60% by 2030 to approximately 2.8 billion tonnes per year. The equivalent of 230 million passenger vehicles driven a year, assuming typical patterns.” Improving energy management in the fashion industry might save €67 billion, given several of its key manufacturing areas are vulnerable to climate change and rising sea levels. The biggest climatic consequences come from processing, garment consumption, and raw material production. Cotton requires fertilisers. It uses 4% of world nitrogen and phosphorus. Toxic pollutants released into streams also harm the ecosystem. Due to pollutants in the body, water pollution can cause cancer, acute disease, and other serious illnesses. If poor chemical management is eradicated, the Global Fashion Agenda predicts a €7 billion profit by 2030. The annual garbage produced by the business is predicted to increase by 60%, reaching 57 million tonnes by 2030. An estimated 148 million metric tonnes of clothing waste would be generated by the year 2030. Most high-end companies destroy their "deadstock" to keep their products scarce and their brands exclusive. Unsold cashmere suits and silk ties are among the products that the Stefano Ricci workshops in Tuscany wrap up at the end of each year and burn as waste in order to get a tax refund. Even beyond the high-end Italian fashion houses. It has been claimed that both H&M and Bestseller burn tonnes of unsold clothing every year.

III. DOES SUSTAINABLE FASHION HELP IN CURBING THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF FAST FASHION?

Sustainable fashion labels make clothes in a manner that is kind to both people and the planet, minimising their negative effects on the environment wherever they can. The final objective is a fully functional system with no negative environmental impact. A sustainable brand is one that cares about both its customers and the environment, prioritising high-quality construction and long-lasting details. Fast fashion labels don't care about producing high-quality items that will last a long time since they want you to keep buying more of their products. By limiting your clothes purchases to high-quality, environmentally friendly labels, you may save money and resources (also saving you money). There is far less strain on virgin resources when recycled fibres are used, and the ever-increasing waste management issue is also addressed. Sustainable companies, on the other hand, tend to rely on materials derived from natural or recycled textiles, which need negligible amounts of water, energy, fertilisers, or pesticides during production ²⁰. The majority of organic textiles are also biodegradable, including linen, hemp, and organic cotton. These eco-friendly textiles are great long-term options since they are

²⁰ Mcneill and Moore, *supra* note 8.

kind on the earth. The raw materials used may have a significant effect on the degree to which an item's production has an adverse effect on society and the environment. The designer may choose from a wide range of sustainable materials, including organic cotton, recycled polyester, and innovative eco-textiles like lyocell, which uses a closed-loop manufacturing process. Substituting materials other than cotton and polyester may help preserve biodiversity and lessen the strain on the ecosystems necessary for their production. Organic, fair trade, and other eco-textiles have recently made their way into the product ranges of several major retailers, including H&M, Zara, and Levi's. There are several technical advancements that might lessen the effects of further processing of fibres into textiles, but they all depend on the initial raw material used. Some of these methods include waterless dyeing, non-toxic dyes, digital printing, and nanotechnology coating advancements that lessen the need for, and frequency of, laundry by consumers. Alternative lightweight denim may be made by blending organic cotton with conventional cotton or cotton with lyocell. Using a lightweight material cuts down on drying time and shipping costs. Assessing impacts via stakeholder analysis may open up several doors for the business, minimise unfavourable effects on the environment and society, and boost profitability. If a natural fibre like cotton were utilised in the design process, the inventory phase would reveal the myriad of adverse effects on the environment and society, such as excessive water and chemical consumption, breaches of worker rights, health and safety concerns, and even child labour. The option to employ a fair-trade, organic fibre has the potential to increase the value of the product and the firm by reducing negative environmental consequences and promoting good social benefits. Companies may form partnerships with NGOs and other businesses that share their suppliers and factories, as H&M has done with the Better Cotton Initiative. By pooling resources, including incentives and long-term commitments, to suppliers and manufacturers, buyers and product creators may create long-lasting, mutually beneficial partnerships. Stakeholder identification over the life cycle, weighted by significance and perception, might reveal lucrative new avenues for growth for the organisation and its constituents.

IV. CONCLUSION

Fast fashion industry does harm the environment to a great extent. The emergence of sustainable fashion brands leads to insecurity among these fast fashion brands. In order to retain customers and ensure profit maximisation goal they misuse the trust of their customers by showcasing their interest towards contribution to the well-being of society and environment. H&M is widely criticised for its greenwashing methods. They put labels on clothes stating that the clothes have been partially made from recycled materials. Less unsustainable is not sustainable. Fashion

businesses can't have it both ways: they can't claim to be environmentally conscious while also fighting back against regulations designed to protect that mission. A company's lobbying activities should be made public, and the company should utilise its influence for good while working to design a regenerative business system. Mandatory stewardship reports that are more quantifiable, concise, in sync with planetary thresholds, and subject to yearly external audits would be a great way to show progress. Another measure to curb the impact of fast fashion industry is to introduce and increase the practice of hybrid organisation. Hybrid organisations may revolutionise how textile and apparel industries work by being accountable to employees and communities. Hybrid organisations are businesses that use sustainable and ethical practises as part of their business model to make a beneficial impact on society and the environment. Hybrid enterprises assume that ethical business practises may be profitable and sustainable. They assume business as usual (non-hybrid) is contradictory to long-term prosperity. Hybrids have emerged with customers who prioritise wellness, social justice, and ecological sustainability to combine humanitarianism's moral/ethical elements with commerce's revenue-seeking. Hybrid organizations are considered as a solution to the conventional non-profit versus for-profit dichotomy's lack of large-scale transformation. The creation of hybrid companies follows the awareness of social and environmental responsibility by conventional businesses. Hybrid organizations help communities while achieving business goals. Thus, helping to prevent future harm caused by conventional cotton production; in relying on fair trade certified production and distribution channels, and in working ethically with worker-owned cooperatives, the impact of fast fashion can be reduced.

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