

Forum: Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Issue: Addressing the Economic and Social Impacts of the Global Fast Fashion Industry

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Introduction

The fast fashion industry has transformed the way clothing is produced and consumed globally. By providing affordable, trendy apparel, fast fashion has made style accessible to a wide range of consumers. This contributes to economic growth and creates millions of jobs for individuals in production, retail, and logistics. However, beneath these benefits lie challenges and significant economic and social implications.

The industry faces backlash for poor labour practices as well as dire environmental consequences due to mass production and quick disposal. Workers often face low wages, unsafe working conditions, and limited labour rights as a result of affordable production sought by the industry. Additionally, the environment pays the price as the industry causes pollution and excessive waste. Fast fashion culture fosters unsustainable consumer behaviour, leading to overconsumption, which instigates overproduction and thus immorality and unsustainability.

It is essential to recognise both the benefits and detriments of the industry and address the challenges by shifting to sustainable practices; implementing a circular fashion model and promoting positive consumer behaviour, will in turn promote the address of the issue's root causes and mitigate its negative impacts.

Definition of Key Terms:

1. **Fast Fashion:** low-cost, trendy clothing that is rapidly produced by mass-market retailers in response to the latest trends.
2. **Circular fashion:** an approach aiming to extend the life cycle of clothing through practices like recycling, reusing, and regenerating materials, ensuring it's in a loop and minimizing waste.

3. **Overconsumption:** The excessive consumption of resources, exceeding what the planet can provide and leading to environmental degradation.
4. **Exploitation:** Unethical treatment of workers within the fashion industry, often seen in fast fashion production where labourers are subjected to low wages, long hours, and poor working conditions.
5. **Lean supply chain:** A way of production focused on minimizing waste within the supply chain while maximizing efficiency and productivity.
6. **Textile waste:** The waste generated from the production, consumption, and disposal of textiles
7. **Sweatshops:** Factories or workshops, especially in the clothing industry, where manual workers are employed at low wages for long hours and poor or illegal working conditions.
8. **Scope 1 emissions:** Direct greenhouse gas emissions that occur from sources owned or controlled by an organization
9. **Scope 2 emissions:** Scope 2 emissions are indirect emissions from electricity, steam, heating, and cooling consumed by the organization
10. **Scope 3 emissions:** Scope 3 emissions encompass all other indirect emissions that occur as a consequence of an organization's activities but are not included in scope 2.

Background Information

Cornerstones of fast fashion

The Industrial Revolution

In the early 1800s, people would have to either raise sheep or save enough money to buy wool. They'd then spin the wool themselves and hand sew clothes. It was a long and tedious process, driven by seasonal changes and growing pains.

The first sewing machine was invented in 1830. This simplified, expedited, and reduced the cost of clothing production. Clothes began to be manufactured in bulk in a variety of sizes rather than made to order. For the first time, clothes were worn for fashion rather than function.

Globalisation of manufacturing

By the 1960s, people started creating new trends, using clothes as a form of expression. To match this increasing demand, brands began outsourcing labour from countries to lower the production costs. Thus emerged sweatshops which began the takeover of low-quality mass produced clothes. Shopping became a hobby and a show of social status.

The term “fast fashion” was coined in 1990 when the New York Times published a piece about a new fashion retailer with a mission to transform a garment. It took only 15 days from ideation to sale.

Rise of retail giants

By the late 20th century, brands like Zara, H&M, and Forever 21 adopted lean supply chain management and just-in-time production methods, changing the industry. This allowed brands to quickly respond to changes in demand by enabling rapid design, production and delivery of new styles.

Impacts of fast fashion

Bridging socioeconomic gaps with fashion

Fast fashion catered to a much wider audience, allowing more people the luxury of wearing trendy clothes. This broke the divide between high fashion and everyday wear. It also allowed people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in fashion trends.

Economic growth

In the 1990s, the fashion industry soon became a major economic driver as it created jobs such as in retail, manufacturing, logistics and more. Due to this increase in employment, developing countries benefited as their economy was more productive.

Environmental strain

The industry produces approximately 100 billion clothing items, a 50% increase in the last 15 years to match the changes in demand. Unwanted clothing often ends up

in landfills, contributing to the 92 million tons of textile waste generated annually and globally.

The production of one cotton shirt requires approximately 2700 liters. This causes depletion of freshwater resources, alteration of ecosystems and leads to droughts in regions dependent on cotton farming.

The synthetic fibres, such as polyester and acrylic, commonly used in fashion release microplastics when washed. These microplastics cause damage to the aquatic marine ecosystems. Smaller fish ingest these microplastics, mistaking them for food. This blocks their digestive tracts and causes them to perish. Or these smaller fish get eaten by bigger fish, moving the microplastics up the food chain and ultimately on our plates.

The mismanagement of dyes into local water supplies impact local communities, affecting their health and quality of life. It similarly affects the marine ecosystems.

Culture shift

Fast fashion normalised mass production and consumption of clothes. This fostered a culture wherein trends change rapidly. Social media platforms further amplified this culture of disposable clothing, promoting constant novelty in ever-changing style and trends.

Rise in ethical concerns

Labour exploitation

The Rana Plaza collapse in 2012 Bangladesh highlighted the dangers faced by workers in this industry, where more than 1134 workers died and north of 2500 were injured. This incident brought global attention to how garment workers in developing countries often endure exploitative conditions, including low wages, long hours, and unsafe environments.

Environmental exploitation

The toll of fast fashion can be seen through multiple examples, one of the worst being the Aral Sea disaster, which highlights the damage that water-intensive cotton farming does. In the mid-20th century, river diversion for irrigation shrank the sea by over

90%, creating toxic dust storms, collapsing ecosystems, and devastating local livelihoods.

Current Situation

Government actions

Legislative actions on sustainability

Various countries have started to take initiative to reduce the negative environmental impacts of fast fashions through government action. Some examples include:

The European Commission approved a new circular economy action plan in March 2020. It is one of the key components of the European Green Deal. The EU's transition to a circular economy will demand pressure on natural resources while generating long-term growth and job opportunities

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is an initiative taken by governments all over the world. It is a policy strategy that holds producers accountable for the end-of-life consequences of their products. EPR enables proper collection and disposal of items after use by ensuring responsible manufacturing methods while encouraging waste reduction and inflicting a more positive impact on the environment.

Labour and human rights legislation

Similar to the adoption of sustainable practices through legislation, governments have incorporated policies protecting human rights and ethical labour practices in the fast fashion industry.

The Fashion Sustainability and Social Accountability Act was enacted in the United States to address the fashion industry's social and environmental issues. The bill proposed measures to ensure companies adhere to higher standards in terms of sustainability and labour practices.

Additionally, there have been several international trade policies, such as tariffs, supply chain policies, and trade agreements, that change how fashion brands operate as they increase pressure for ethical sourcing and production.

Consumer movements and changes in preference

Ethical fashion

Platforms like ThredUp and Depop, as well as clothing rental services, are becoming more popular, offering alternatives to new fast fashion. This is mainly due to consumers demanding transparency, ethical production, and sustainability.

The slow fashion movement emphasises transparency in supply chains, urging brands to disclose information about their production processes, labour practices, and environmental impact. This transparency fosters accountability and allows consumers to make informed choices. Further pushing consumers to make a shift to second-hand and circular economic clothes.

Social media movements and activism

Social media platforms play an integral role in changing trends and how information spreads. Influencers are using their platforms to promote sustainability and pressure fast fashion brands

An example of this is the #WhoMadeMyClothes campaign by the fashion revolution, which encouraged consumers to ask and question the background of where their clothes came from.

Corporate actions and industry changes

Corporate social responsibility initiatives

H&M has introduced a line of more sustainable products by recycling consumer clothing and using more environmentally friendly materials and manufacturing processes. Similarly, Zara plans to use more sustainable materials and reduce waste in its supply chain by 2025, in line with global sustainability trends.

Industry collaboration for change

Throughout the industry, there are several organisations working towards change in terms of a more ethical industry through collaboration with major stakeholders.

Textile Exchange is a non-profit that focuses on how the raw resources are farmed, sourced, and extracted from the earth, plants, and animals. Their goal is to reduce the emissions that come from these processes by 45% by 2030.

The Fashion Pact is a non-profit organisation forging a nature-positive, net-zero future for fashion through CEO-led collaboration. They work together as one to create meaningful, large-scale change to improve industry.

Global Movements and Pressure

Environmental advocacy and NGOs

There are various non-governmental organisations taking stand through initiatives and campaigns to raise awareness and call for change. Examples of this include:

Greenpeace launched the "Detox My Fashion" campaign to demand that companies stop using hazardous chemicals that pollute waterways in clothing production. All 80 companies that pledged to phase out these chemicals from their manufacturing processes by 2020 have made significant progress.

The Clean Clothes campaign aims to improve working conditions in the garment industry. They address a variety of issues, including fair wages, unsafe working conditions, a lack of job security, gender inequality, and more.

Technological advancements

Innovations in sustainable production

In the 21st century, the advancement of technology has allowed for more sustainable and just implementations. Brands are increasingly turning to recycled materials like PET bottles and post-consumer waste to reduce their reliance on fresh materials. Additionally, improved technologies, such as 3D knitting, enable more efficient production with less waste because they create garments directly from the yarn, resulting in minimal fabric scraps.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Shein

Shein is a prominent Chinese brand in the world of fast fashion, and as of 2022 it was named the largest fashion retailer with around 50% of the market share. It is extremely popular because of its diverse range of clothes and low prices, it operates mostly online. The low prices increase accessibility of clothes to financially restricted individuals. However the brand's model promotes overconsumption and excessive waste due to poor quality of clothes. Shein has also been caught in hot water for unethical labour practices including child labour, and minimum wage. It is also one of the brands with the largest carbon dioxide produced with emissions estimated at approximately 6.3 million tons.

Forever 21

Forever 21 is an especially popular brand in the US. It was founded in LA in 1984. It is a brand target for the younger population, with clothes that fit every season's new trend at low prices. While this has been beneficial for those trying to save money, the low prices are a result of unsustainable and unethical practices. The company reportedly overproduces clothing by 30-40%, resulting in unsold items that often end up discarded producing waste.

H&M

H&M is a Swedish fashion brand and remains one of the most popular clothing brands in the world with outlets in 74 countries. It's known for its up-to-date clothes and affordable prices. Recently, the brand has been making progress in terms of both sustainability and ethics with donation bins in various stores. H&M has set ambitious goals to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 56% by 2030 and reported a 22% reduction in Scope 3 emissions in 2023, but critics argue that more action is required compared to their size.

China

China is the world's top producer of fast fashion and accounts for 65% of global clothing production. Production is expected to increase by 5.2% between 2023 to 2027. China is the birthplace of various fast fashion brands like Shein. Many Chinese factories have been exposed for poor working conditions like long working hours and low wages.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh's economy thrives on garment exports. It generates \$55 billion annually for the country and employs over 5 million people. However, the industry continues to face challenges for workers as they earn \$25-75 a month, which is insufficient to make a living. Additionally, the political unrest after the expulsion of their prime minister has sparked protests and disrupted production and exports.

India

As concerns grow regarding Bangladesh's stability, India is emerging as an attractive alternative for U.S. apparel buyers. India's share of U.S. apparel imports has increased from 4% to 5.8% between 2013 and 2023, with exports reaching \$4.6 billion last year.

United States

The US is one of the biggest players in the world of fast fashion, with always having the new trends, and relatively affordable clothing consumers from all around the world are attracted to shopping there. However, markets are changing, so are costs and global warming, these are all things that the US needs to keep in mind.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

In March 2019, the UN founded the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, which focuses on stopping environmental and social practices that negatively impact our world in the fashion world and helps work towards specific UN targets. It includes collaboration among different UN bodies. From the production of raw materials, garments, accessories, and footwear to their distribution, consumption, and disposal, the organisation takes various steps to a more sustainable and just world. Sustainability for them is also a social issue, so improving worldwide working conditions with the environmental ones. Additionally, the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action, which began in 2018, works specifically towards fashion's impact on the climate. It involves stakeholders to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 by improving company transparency on the website and monetisation as well as supporting them to reach the goal. The UN has countless other initiatives regarding this, all working towards meeting the specific SDG targets.

- [UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion Launch, 14 March 2019](#)

- [High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development \(HLPF\), 10 July 2018](#)
- [Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action, 2018 \(UNEP\)](#)
- [UN Fashion and Lifestyle Network, 12 June 2013.](#)
- [The UN trade Alliance for Sustainable Fashion aims to halt environmentally and socially destructive practices in fashion.](#)
- [The HLPF \(high-level political forum on sustainable development\) event led to the establishment of a collaborative approach among various UN organisations focused on sustainable fashion.](#)
- [The Fashion Industry Charter promotes brand commitments to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.](#)
- [The Fashion and Lifestyle Network connects stakeholders to advance the SDGs through sustainable practices in fashion.](#)

Possible Solutions

Promoting sustainable brands

Supporting sustainable brands is a powerful way to positively influence the fashion industry. Sustainable brands focus on minimizing environmental impacts and ensuring fair labour practices. Important things to keep in mind are: classification of what exactly a sustainable brand is defined as, lots of small/local businesses are often more sustainable than industry giants, and one of the ways to promote them is to buy their products in attempts to spread awareness.

By doing this, consumers will reduce waste and pollution and promote fair wages. It is vital that everyone makes an informed choice during their purchase, and this can be done by educating people about these brands while advocating for them.

Circular fashion model

This would include solutions such as, but not limited to, designing products that last longer as well as can be recycled; this will reduce overall waste in the industry.

Another solution that leads to a circular fashion model is “take back” programs, where consumers can give clothes that they no longer need back to brands for donating and upcycling. Another way to do this is to open more thrift stores and second-hand markets to ensure that people of all financial statuses can afford clothes after the negative effects of fast fashion are eradicated.

Brand Transparency

Brand transparency is vital in any industry, especially fashion. It ensures that people actually know what they are buying, where exactly the money goes, what is in their product and what impact they are making. To ensure transparency, implementations would include actions such as but not limited to: maintaining communication with consumers through social media and consumer service, sharing stories about their values and journey and the people behind their product (this will not only help consumers but also brands paint themselves in a positive image), and utilizing tools that can be put into place in all countries to monitor these brands.

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Useful Links

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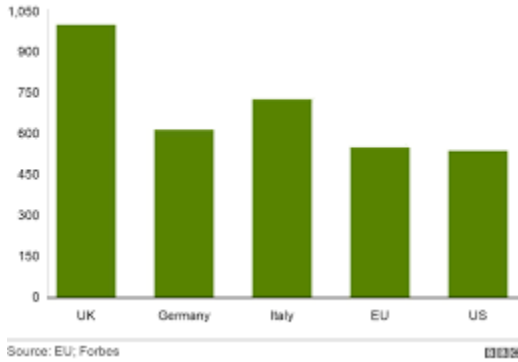
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- [Everything You Need to Know About Fast Fashion \(article by Vouge\)](#)
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Videos

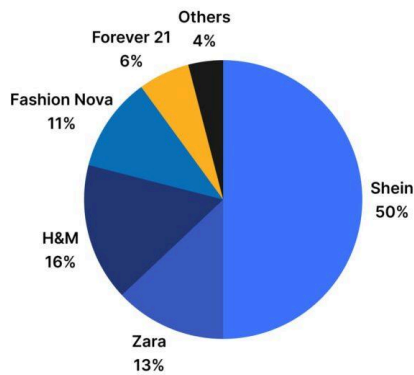
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- [The lies that sell fast fashion](#)
- [How fast fashion adds to the world's clothing waste problem \(Marketplace\)](#)
- [The life cycle of a t-shirt - Angel Chang](#)

Infographics

Annual spend on clothes per person (£)

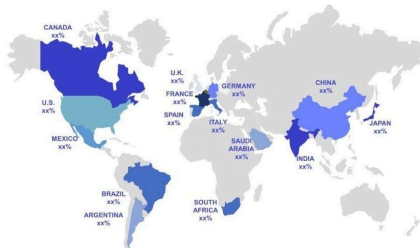


Leading Fast Fashion Brands As per Market Share

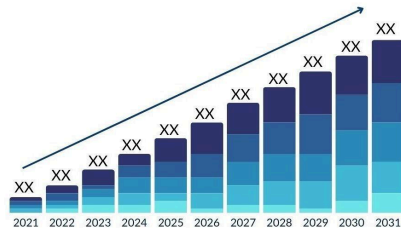


UNIFORM MARKET

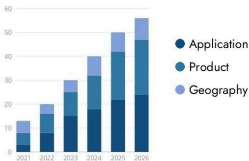
Global Fast Fashion Market Size and Scope



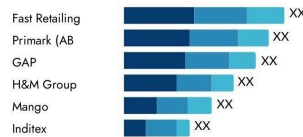
MARKET RESEARCH INTELLECT



Market Segmentation



Top Key Players



Regional Analysis



Source: www.marketresearchintellect.com

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