



## The Social and Environmental Impacts of Fast Fashion

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1. What would happen to our world if we started to produce fashion ethically? We would see significant, positive changes in the social and environmental aspects of our world. Fast fashion is a mass-production business model that can be defined as quickly making poor quality, standardized clothing with cheap labor in order to make the highest profit margin for a company. Currently, most fashion companies use forced labor and practice bad environmental habits, directly or indirectly, to constantly produce new fashion styles.
2. Women and children would no longer work in fashion sweatshops, more workers would be paid a living wage for their efforts, air and water pollution would decrease, significantly fewer microplastics would be released into our water systems, and 92 million tons of clothing would be spared from landfills each year (Sinisalo 10). Massive corporations would be forced to pivot towards ethical and sustainable practices and follow through with them, instead of producing misleading advertisements and not creating any change. All of these unethical impacts are effects of fast fashion.
3. Sometimes, individuals have trouble understanding how fast fashion and the waste it produces envelops our world and thus does nothing to stop it from occurring. This is demonstrated in my primary source material. In a survey I conducted entitled “East-Coast Fashion Habits Survey,” I captured a range of information on the topic of fast fashion. Respondents provided numerous points on what brands they purchase from, the frequency of their purchases, and if they research brands before purchasing. As demonstrated in Figure 1, 51 percent of east coast college students purchase new clothing twice a year, with 28 percent purchasing once a month

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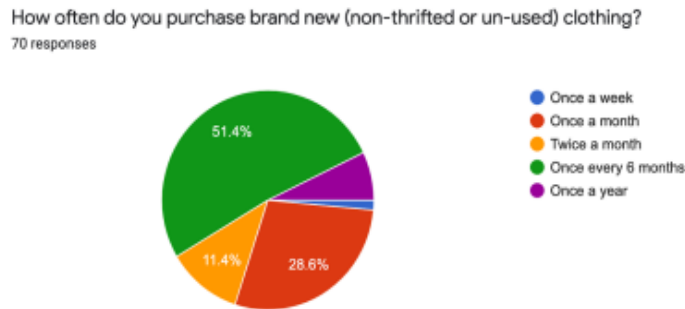
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(Fig. 1). If one of those demographics chose to make more ethical and sustainable choices when purchasing, the United States east coast could significantly decrease the amount of subsequent fashion waste per year by 25 to 50 percent for the young adult age group.



4.

Fig. 1. Pie chart showing whether or not east coast college students research brands before purchasing from them; Sammie Boyer, “East-Coast Fashion Habits Survey,” April 6, 2022

5. It is also important to note that nearly 50 percent of east coast college students do not research brands before purchasing from them (Fig. 2), thus making it more likely they purchase from an unethical brand because they are not informed. With the young adult demographic purchasing the most fashion of all age groups, it is important that someone informs these consumers of the indirect choices they are making. If east coast college students were more educated on the detrimental impacts of fast fashion, one would hope they would choose to purchase from more socially and environmentally ethical brands.



Fig. 2. Pie chart showing whether or not east coast college students research brands before purchasing from them; Sammie Boyer, “East-Coast Fashion Habits Survey,” April 6, 2022

6. The social and environmental impacts of fast fashion are equally detrimental to the world, and both impacts are intertwined. Consumers of changing fashion trends must begin to purchase second-hand clothing, fashion from more ethical and sustainable brands, and stand up to corporations who advertise that clothing is disposable by finding ways to support humane and environmentally ethical brands to curb the negative impacts of the fashion industry on the world.

### **Social Impacts of Fast Fashion**

7. The social impacts of fast fashion are extremely detrimental to garment workers across the world. Mainstream fashion brands, no matter where they are located, use materials that have been produced with coerced labor or use coerced labor directly. Researcher Ian Taplin defines coerced labor as labor that one does with little to no compensation for the work they have done, and sometimes includes threats of violence if they do not comply. An estimated 7 million child workers exist in our world today (76). In my survey, I found that many college students shop from the same fashion brands, such as Nike, American Eagle, Old Navy, Zara, Target, and Shein, but all of these brands have a detrimental social impact. The most significant correlations for Nike were related to the use of child labor in developing countries, which attracted “the greatest amount of negative media attention” (Islam 142). It has also been proven that the brand Zara has been actively involved in the use of child labor, as discovered in 2011 (Shabir 1025). Due to the scale of

negative media attention, Nike and Zara created advertisements focused on environmental ethics which muted the impacts the media had on consumers. Their cover-up shows the severity and truthfulness of the allegations. Choosing the cover-up, instead of addressing the issue head-on, means that Nike and Zara did not create company-wide change in the use of child labor. It can be concluded that if Nike and Zara covered up their unethical social practices, other corporations have done the same. This practice of covering up child and coerced labor is detrimental to our world because it does not allow consumers to make educated decisions to prevent the support of unethical corporations, and thus may be hurting laborers by monetarily supporting the unethical behavior of companies. Coerced and child labor is unacceptable, and consumers need to be correctly informed of company actions to prevent supporting them.

8. Another aspect of fast fashion that consumers should consider is how the garment workers are compensated. In Taplin's studies, he found that many fashion laborers are not paid a living wage and most are paid below minimum wage. In many clothing manufacturing countries, such as Bangladesh, 85 percent of workers are young women who work fourteen-hour days with no breaks and are still paid below minimum wage (76). To get these women to work in textile factories, factory owners scare them by describing what will happen if they do not. Many women's families are threatened and believe that their only other option is to choose prostitution to make a living, and by not paying women at least minimum wage, it does not allow them to make their lives better for themselves and their families. It inhibits them from getting an education or starting businesses, and not only does the factory owner keep the wealth for himself, but it only aids their society in marginalizing young women. If large fashion corporations, such as Nike and Zara, chose to directly pay their garment workers instead of factory owners, and paid them a living wage specific to their country, they would help stop dangerous scare tactics and thus produce happier and more productive workers. Consumers must begin to only purchase from brands that pay a living wage to their garment workers and have emotionally and physically safe work environments.
9. Another detrimental social effect is the number of deaths from

working in fashion factories. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, “workers in textile mills died at an earlier age than the mean age for workers in other occupations” (Duff and Johnson 566). One-third of the deaths in England in 1839 were from textile jobs and female power-loom weavers typically died in their early twenties (Duff and Johnson 565). In Bangladesh in 2013, over 1,000 people died in a single factory collapse incident. Most deaths are due to fire related incidents, but the real culprit is the arrogance of factory owners who are only concerned with making money and not with keeping the factory conditions safe (Taplin 72). Although these deaths are tragic, why should we care as a society? We should care about these deaths because they are one hundred percent preventable. Buildings collapse due to lack of structural upkeep, as well as floors caving in from the presence of excess fabric waste on production floors. Fires occur due to no safety regulations and can sometimes be accelerated by excess materials that have not been properly disposed of. It can be concluded that the implementation of stricter factory regulations and incentivizing factory owners to execute them would decrease this problem significantly. Fashion companies have the power to force these changes because they have the capital and influence to do so. By making their factories safer, fashion companies establish credibility at the factory location and with consumers as caring and responsible businesses, thus making them more money in the long run. Human beings should not allow other human beings to die just for the sake of money; the top priority should be the safety of the garment workers.

### **Environmental Impacts of Fast Fashion**

10. The environmental impacts of fast fashion are extremely harmful to our global ecosystem. Fashion takes an extreme amount of water to produce. The water is polluted during production, and it is normally not treated in countries that are outsourced to make our fashion goods. This means that major waterways are being polluted with brackish water every day, which is what the garment workers end up consuming. It is estimated that 20 percent of all industrial water pollution annually is due to fast fashion (Thomas 2). If customers chose to not purchase fast fashion, annual water pollution would decrease dramatically, thus lessening the amount of polluted water the garment workers and inhabitants of that area drink. Not only do humans have to consume this water, but

plants and animals do as well. Crops and animals become sick when consuming brackish water, which thus prevents them from being healthy to consume by humans. When water is contaminated, it affects the entire ecosystem of that region. Consumers need to stop purchasing fast fashion to decrease the amount of brackish water people are forced to ingest.

11. Gas emissions impact the entire world, due to their ability to race across countries from a gust of wind, and the fashion industry is a prime culprit of emitting these contaminants into the atmosphere. The fashion industry produces approximately 10 percent of global emissions per year and uses a fourth of all chemicals produced worldwide (Thomas 2). Sometimes when garments are thrown away they are incinerated, which only adds to emissions (Sinisalo 10). Emissions can be seen but they can also be invisible. Each day, we are inhaling pollutants that could have originated anywhere across the globe. This means that the fashion industry needs to decrease the amount of emissions it is producing, because the effects of respiratory disease, increased wildfires, and extreme weather can be seen everywhere. We are unknowingly inhaling air that is damaging our bodies and our world, so choosing to only support companies that have low gas emissions is critical to curbing these negative effects.
12. In addition to brackish water and gas emissions, our world is being polluted by the materials that do not get used during fashion production. Millions of tons of waste is produced from excess fabric and material clippings alone. Many countries do not have established landfills to 'dispose' the materials in, although landfills just hold, not dissolve, trash. This causes waste to be stored within the fashion factories, thus creating a safety hazard. Researcher Camilla Sinisalo describes that the fashion industry produces 92 million tons of waste per year. The creation of new fashion styles prompts consumers to throw away their current clothing (10). Most garments are not made with organic materials, and consist of microplastics that can not decompose. All countries do not have the means to dispose of the clothing effectively, to include their microplastics, especially manufacturing countries with little to no infrastructure. This means that the garments and microplastics are contaminating water sources and soil that is used to grow food. Due to the lack of environmental consciousness, human beings are

consuming microplastics from fashion daily. The fashion industry, with the necessary encouragement of consumers, needs to pivot to organic materials so humans do not have to consume microplastics and the materials can decompose over time. Companies should begin to reduce their excess, unnecessary waste to slow the impacts of polluted water, gas emissions, and safety hazards. Consumers must begin to purchase second-hand clothing and clothing that is produced with organic materials in order to reduce the strain the fast fashion industry has on landfills and water systems.

### **Interconnected Impacts of Fast Fashion**

13. The global society has created a culture of disposability by constantly producing new fashion items. New items means new styles, which means purchasing new clothes whenever they are released. That results in no room in our closets which forces us to throw away the items we no longer desire because our society tells us to no longer desire them. It also means poorly made goods to keep up with the speed and amount of new styles so we throw away the clothes we purchase because they break after two wears. Fast fashion brands must use cheap materials, which typically mean inorganic, to keep costs low due to the frequency of new styles. They also must use cheap, either child or coerced, labor for the same reason. All of these aspects produce more waste, pollution, poorly made goods which elicit more frequent purchases and thus more money spent, and unsafe environments for laborers. This culture of disposability must be immediately halted, which consumers can achieve by no longer purchasing from brands that use the fast fashion model of business and pivot to supporting brands that use ethical materials and labor.
14. The lack of sources mentioned in this section is due to the lack of scholarship that connects the social and environmental impacts of fast fashion. Researchers argue that fast fashion either has a social or an environmental impact, but I argue that argument is incorrect because it does not tell the whole story. Using cheap labor means factories can afford to be open more hours in a day, which means using more electricity. Electricity often requires burning gas or oil, and burning fossil fuels produces emissions. The garment workers inhale those emissions for longer than usual due to their long hours, thus making them sick as well as exhausted, decreasing productivity.

Less productivity means daily quotas are not met, which means working overtime, and the cycle continues. This example clearly illustrates how humans and the environment are interdependent and how fast fashion is not a sustainable, or efficient, business practice.

15. Both the social and environmental impacts of fast fashion are intertwined so intensely, that it would be inappropriate to address them as two separate issues, as other researchers do. The environment impacts humans in the form of weather, water, and health while humans impact the environment through changing it with their actions. Human implications can be seen through towering landfills, polluted water, sick animals and plants, smoggy air, and extreme weather patterns. Humans damage the environment, which causes ecological disaster. Ecological disaster causes sickness and death for humans. In order to change the impacts that fast fashion will have on our world and society from today into the future, consumers need to stop supporting fast fashion companies and call for change. By supporting brands that choose ethical labor and organic materials, we can stop the detrimental impacts fast fashion has on the world.



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