

Fast Fashion, Vast Impacts

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Among the world's top polluters, the fashion industry ranks fourth, right behind big oil, the transportation that uses said oil, and agricultural emissions (Omondi, 2021). The fashion industry has had a well-deserved spotlight on it because of not only its environmental dangers, but also its direct effects on human life. The term fast fashion was first coined by the *New York Times* back in 1990, but today it has become something of a buzzword as the global warming crisis continues to challenge world leaders. Thus, it is an understatement to conclude that the current state of the industry is incredibly problematic and needs to be addressed. Legislators need to get involved in making sure these brands are being held accountable for the ecological damage they are causing. In turn, this will ultimately end up raising consumer awareness concerning the sustainability of their clothing. Regulation needs to happen because the current trajectory of the fashion industry is incredibly alarming.

As it stands in today's digital atmosphere, the speed of the fashion cycle along with overproduction and overconsumption is too much to be sustainable. According to economists Palm et al. (2012), the issue results from the following condundrum:

Decision-makers in today's fashion and textile industry increasingly recognize that they face global-scale sustainability challenges. The sector has become a sizable global industry, but increased production and consumption have accelerated material throughputs and increased disposal and waste, contributing to environmental changes at planetary scale. (p.2)

The authors of the excerpt highlight how the increase in textile production and waste has, quite predictably, significantly increased the amount of pollution the industry is contributing to the environment. The fashion cycle must be slowed down, because if the increase of waste continues

to progress at its current rate, it could be detrimental to the planet. Industry leaders are aware of this, yet they choose to do little to nothing about it (Duong, 2021). This is a liberty they simply should not have. These brands need to be held accountable for the damages they are causing before it is too late.

The pollution of the fashion industry affects every part of the environment. Excess waste from production affects the quality of the air, soil, and water. Due to the quickened trend cycle, brands are producing more excess waste now than ever before. In an article published by EcoWatch in November of 2021, author Tiffany Duong informs readers about the growing dunes in the Atacama Desert of Chile. However, these aren't sand dunes—they're piles of retail clothing that hadn't sold. Although initially intended for resale in Latin America, Duong (2021) writes, "Up to 59,000 tons of clothes that can't be sold in the U.S. or Europe end up at the Iquique port in the Alto Hospicio free zone in northern Chile each year... but only 20,000 tons actually make their way around the continent. What doesn't get sold in Santiago or smuggled and shipped to other countries stays in the free zone. It's no one's responsibility to clean up and no one will pay the necessary tariffs to take it away." The various dyes and toxins within the fabric makes the textile waste non-biodegradable. This is nothing short of an ecological nightmare. It is difficult for the people living in first world countries to see the damage done by these industries, but it is most definitely happening. The consequences of these actions may be hidden in the meantime, but it is just that—hidden. Dumping leftover clothing in the desert is only a temporary solution; it gets it out of the way, but it does not eliminate the problem. This clothing is still going to sit and disrupt the environment for hundreds of years. Once it finally does degrade, the toxins and other chemicals in the fabric will still pollute the soil it was dumped on. This resulting pollution is why the issue of overproduction needs to be addressed. Companies should not be allowed to

take advantage of smaller countries like this. Yes, donating tens of thousands of new clothing to the less fortunate is a good solution for overproduction, but what about the other 3/5ths that are currently sitting in the Atacama desert? This unsold clothing wasn't profitable for them, so is it beyond reason to ask that they don't manufacture an unsustainable amount of clothing?

As previously mentioned, the pollution isn't only limited to contaminating the soil, but also the water. Dr. Rita Kant (2011), an assistant professor at the University Institute of Fashion Technology, published an article titled "Textile Dyeing Industry an Environmental Hazard." In their work, Kant writes, "17 to 20 percent of industrial water pollution comes from textile dyeing and finishing treatment given to fabric. Some 72 toxic chemicals have been identified in water solely from textile dyeing, 30 of which cannot be removed" (p.2). In textile dyeing alone, water consumption for dyeing various textile materials can use 30 - 50 liters per kg of cloth depending on the type of dye used (Kent, 2011, p.2). In more comprehensible terms, it can take over 500 gallons of water to dye the fabric used to cover one sofa. This water waste does not include the large quantities of water required to clean the fabric material in the first place. Water is a critical resource not only for humans, but all living creatures on earth. It goes without saying that this is a resource that must be protected, even at the expense of large corporations that could afford to spend the extra money to keep the planet safe.

The impact of these high waste emissions is nothing short of an ecological disaster. But how does this polluted environment harm humans? Millions of people around the world are living in third world countries that are being exploited as sources for cheap manual labor. In Kanpur, India, the town is located along the river Ganga, which serves as the "lifeline" for over 800 million Hindus in North India (Morgan, 2020). Despite being a crucial resource for so many people, the river is being polluted by the local tanneries. This doesn't only impact the rivers, but

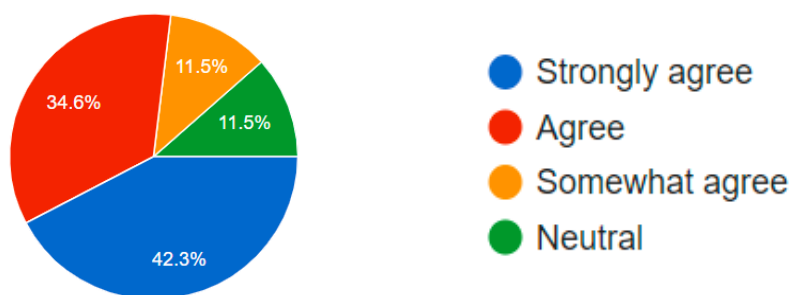
also the soil the polluted water seeps into. As a result of people drinking this polluted water, and consuming crops grown in contaminated soil, the health of millions has become compromised. Local Rakesh Jaiswal outlines how there are many skin conditions, cancers, and stomach ailments impacting the citizens of these towns. If the companies sourcing their labor in these small countries had been responsible, and properly handled their products' wastewater, these people would be able to lead healthier lives.

Jaundice is a disease seen a lot throughout North India as a result of drinking water polluted with the chemical chromium, which causes locals to have a weakened liver. Thus, their blood quality is also weakened. The illness affects the skin and mucus of the body. Families suffer from financial hardships as well as physical hardships as described by a local interviewed for the documentary *The True Cost*, "My daughter is suffering from jaundice, every year people in every other house in this region suffer from this illness. Even my wife had jaundice... All our savings are used to treat the diseases" (Morgan, 2020). Millions of people struggle every year to provide for their families and to treat their illnesses while also putting food on the table- the very food that made them fall ill in the first place. Unfortunately, due to the low wages combined with the destroyed food quality, there is very little these households can do. These poor people have fallen victim to ill-regulated capitalism.

Fast fashion has cost the environment, people's health, and even lives. As previously stated, in order to maximize profit, many companies outsource labor in cheaper countries, thus exploiting laborers. This negligence not only has the power to ruin lives, but also take them. In 2014, an eight story garment factory collapsed, killing over 1,000 workers inside. Countless more were injured. To make matters worse, the tragic accident hadn't come out of nowhere, as factory owners had chosen to ignore both the workers' worries about the cracks in the building

and an order from the government to evacuate. (Morgan, 2020). Americans, as well as consumers across the developed world, enjoy unusually cheap clothing and accessories. The rest of the real cost of these items was already paid for by hundreds of millions of lives. Despite 2014 having three out of the four of the worst tragedies in fashion history, the following year had been the industry's most profitable one ever (Morgan, 2020). While unethical, these practices are frequently not illegal, which is precisely why there needs to be legal reform to prevent these large scale crimes against human life.

It seems evident that these companies need to be stopped. Regulations need to be introduced, and consumers need to be made aware of what exactly is going on. But even if it was, would that make an impact? Do people care? In a survey I recently conducted, a questionnaire was sent to 26 people using convenience sampling. The recipients varied in age and gender with over 65% between the ages of 17-20, as well as 50% female, 34.6% male, and 15.4% non-binary. The following graph visualizes the responses of all participants when asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “I feel that the government should make it easier for consumers to purchase clothing in a sustainable way.” None of the 26 respondents selected that they disagreed with the statement to any extent.



Participants overwhelmingly agreed that there should be government intervention when it comes to the ongoing challenge of environmental stability in the textile industry. It is evident that

today's young people—who are often associated with being the progressive generation—want information to be made available so they can make more informed decisions when purchasing. They want to know that these large corporations are being held accountable for what they do.

Despite the detriments caused by the fashion industry, regulating it may be difficult because fashion is so deeply intertwined with human culture. One could argue that the fashion industry should be left alone because of this matter. As author Edward Jaw Whetmore (1995) outlines in his book *Mediamerica/Mediaworld*, “Popular culture represents a common denominator, something that cuts across most economic, social and educational barriers.” Fashion is an organic outcome of human evolution. Because it serves as a catalyst for human expression, regulating the fashion industry could be perceived as creatively restrictive, or even an impediment on human freedom. However, one could also use the same logic as Whetmore (1995) to claim that the safety of the planet is also something of a common denominator, cutting across the boundaries of conflict and differences. Additionally, how can people celebrate culture and self-expression when doing so endangers the availability of the very resources used to achieve it? The cycle is damaging to everyone.

One could argue that it is the government's responsibility to protect the fashion industry because fashion is an outlet for self-expression, which includes political expression. Using clothing as a means of making a political statement is an important part of any society. One can look back to the mid 1960s, when high school students wore black armbands to school to protest against the Vietnam War, only to be suspended until they returned without said armbands. This would lead to *Tinker v. Des Moines*, where in a 7 to 2 vote the Supreme Court ruled that the clothing an American citizen wears is protected under the First Amendment (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012). Even in current times, consumers are bombarded with graphic tee-shirts

and other attire advertising one's political beliefs. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the intervention of the government to make the fashion industry more sustainable is within the best interest of protecting Americans' constitutional rights.

It is undeniable that fashion is an important part of society, and that is precisely why it must be defended through reform. The fashion industry is contributing to the destruction of the planet's water, air, and soil. Large companies should not be allowed to sell us four dollar t-shirts at the expense of the environment and millions of people around the world. The industry has taken lives, and people want change. This is why the current environmental regulations in place are insufficient. Legislators need to target the fast fashion industry to make sure wastewater and textile waste are mitigated. The United States should look towards similar legislation being explored across the globe. For the health and well-being of the planet and everything living on it.

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