

Fast Fashion & Sustainability: The Clothes that Change the World

Individuals of all social classes strive to be up-to-date with all of the newest fashion trends regardless of financial mobility. Brands are aware of this, and for this reason, they take inspiration from a wide array of sources. The goal of this is to regularly appeal to mass amounts of people at a time. Since the top luxury brands are in control of what is in season, they are steadily relying on factors outside of fashion to dictate the theme of whatever trend they decide to push forth. These outside factors may include politics, social justice, and technology.

There have been many discussions about the topic of global warming and other environmental crises. Prominent fashion companies are typically part of any discussion that relates to the environment. Many of their practices account for large amounts of environmental waste. For example 17–20% of estimated industrial water pollution comes from textile dyeing and treatment, and 4% of global landfills are filled with clothing and textiles (Muthu, and Gardetti, 2020: 10). These prominent fashion brands have responded to the criticisms they face about their pollution with the mantra of sustainability. With sustainability in mind, companies are trying to monitor their environmental impact, use more sustainable materials and reduce resource use throughout their products' life cycle.

The fashion industry has aimed to capitalize on current environmental crises by turning them into trends and using them to appeal mostly to youth. The respect that comes with being considered an environmentally conscious young person can be connected to the notion that environmental issues are usually directed at youth. From the perspective of a brand, the stance of being environmentally conscious is mainly used to emotionally entice people. If someone believes that they are potentially saving the planet then they may be willing to spend larger amounts of money on any given product.

In 2011, the ethical market in the UK was worth £47.2bn, with ethical personal products including clothing and cosmetics being the fastest growing sectors. The sales of ethical clothing peaked at £177m in 2010 (up from only £5m in 2000) and second-hand clothing to £330 million in 2011 (Co-operative Bank Ethical Consumerism Report 2012).

Popular brands like Nike have launched extensive campaigns and clothing lines based solely on sustainability. High fashion brands like Mango and John Lewis have launched multiple recycling initiatives to pave the way for more sustainable fashion industry: reuse of dropped-off old clothes to create new products and sales of secondhand clothes (Preuss 2021). The attribute of being able to view these advertisements on television screens and cellphones mainly belongs to the middle and upper class.

Class and financial stability play a large part in a consumer's ability to buy sustainable clothes. Sustainable clothing is more expensive than regular clothing and that could serve as a deterrent for a consumer that does not have the drive to be more sustainable. From a pricing perspective, there is no reason why the average working consumer would choose sustainable clothing over regular clothing. However, (Lundblad and Davies, 2016) note that there is a correlation between a product's price and the consumer's perceived value of that product. Consumers tend to convince themselves that since they spent more money on a product, the product must be of higher quality.

As prominent fashion brands have sought to become more sustainable, small independent brands have begun rapidly popping up mainly in South, South East, and East Asia. These brands operate under the term known as "fast fashion". Fast fashion first emerged in the late 1990s as a way of characterizing the quick changes in fashion and consumption that some companies were adopting (Muthu, 2019: 1). These fast fashion brands replicate the designs of luxury clothing

brands and then mass-produce these designs at low cost. The individuals who work in the factories are often placed in suboptimal conditions and paid poorly. With the emergence of e-commerce, fast fashion has become particularly profitable, and it is a rapidly growing industry despite the large amounts of environmental pollution that it generates.

Much controversy arises when entering the realm of fast fashion. As e-commerce grows, fast fashion grows as well. It is easier than ever to buy products online even when these products are coming from different continents. The practice of fast fashion has put a heavy strain upon the environment but even with all the damage it does, the business model is not slowing down anytime soon. According to (Business Wire, 2021) The global fast fashion market is expected to grow from \$25.09 billion in 2020 to \$30.58 billion in 2021. The growth is mainly due to the companies resuming their operations and adapting to the new normal while recovering from the COVID-19 impact. Amongst the youth, there is no real stigma around purchasing these goods. (Research & Markets, 2021) states that factors that could hinder the growth of the fast fashion market in the future include increasing transparency of poor working conditions, negative environmental impact, and counterfeit products.

Environmentalists and governments around the world are hoping that the expansion of fast fashion slowly halts as the pandemic comes to an end. That is a lot to ask for because even as the pandemic ends, e-commerce is still growing rapidly by the day. Fast-fashion chains in Europe have grown faster than the retail fashion industry as a whole (Joy, 2012: 276). If this type of growth manifests within North America then we could be faced with an even greater environmental crisis. Each government has a large role to play in the global implementation of

sustainable fashion. How the various nations respond will be the determining factor in relation to the long-term success of fast fashion.

The trends of sustainability and fast fashion are neck and neck at the moment. No one can tell a consumer how to spend their money, but it is important that consumers become educated upon even the most trivial matters of life. Something as small as deciding what t-shirt to buy comes with global implications.

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