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ENGL 2010

Final Research Paper

17 Apr 2024

The Cost of Clothing Overconsumption

Sustainability, fast fashion, and the environment are all concepts that have become well-known by consumers over recent years, especially through the internet and news. “Sustainability” is often a buzz-word used in headlines and captions to spark interest, and fast fashion companies like Shein and H&M have become the topic of videos, articles, and stories about the quickly-made garment industry and the effect that it has on people and the environment. Fast fashion refers to clothing that is manufactured quickly and at a low-cost, so it can then be sold at low cost. There are many concerns about the manufacturing of fast-fashion apparel, and about the waste created by the number of clothing items thrown out each year that end up in landfills, since cheaply-made apparel is shown to not last. Fast fashion and the environment is often seen as a difficult subject to produce a “right” answer for-which is why it’s important to talk about. Big corporations aren’t likely to stop producing clothing and waste, and fast fashion doesn’t need to be ruled out entirely, but rather needs to be controlled or better produced in order to lower negative environmental impact. If consumers can grow to understand the impact that the overconsumption of fast fashion has on the environment, and learn about limiting consumption, how to lengthen the lifespan of clothing items, and how to best dispose of articles of clothing in order to keep them from filling landfills, society can become less-dependent on the convenience of low-cost consumerism. In turn, workers, consumers, and the environment will be greatly benefitted.

Understanding the history of fast fashion and understanding the growth of this industry is imperative to understanding the impact that it has on the environment. Fashion and garment manufacturing is one of the most important industries globally with a global value represented “1.65 percent of the world’s GDP” (Pouillard and Dubé-Sénécal). Fashion and clothing are highly interrelated concepts, but are not the same thing. Clothing refers to a concrete garment—a physical item with functional purpose—while fashion refers to a way of dress or behavior that is “favored at any one time or place” (“Fashion Definition & Meaning”). Clothes are a “tangible manifestation of fashion,” as fashion is frequently changing as social norms and trends evolve (Peleg Mizrachi and Tal). Fashion is a deep part of international and global history, and has been present in all stages of history. All people wear clothes for basic protection, modesty, or comfort, but fashion and dress also demonstrate a person's age, gender, social status, occupation and place in the world, signifying who they are – or perhaps how they want to appear” throughout history (Shrimpton). Shrimpton illustrates that throughout all of history, dress has impacted how a person is perceived and how one expresses themselves.

Fashion is “inextricably woven with time,” as its inspiration comes from emerging trends and constantly-changing styles (Brewer). Fashion constantly “[influences] the form and development of all types of clothes” (Shrimpton). Trends are ephemeral, so fast fashion was a concept invented for companies to keep up with trend cycles that so quickly come and go. Fast fashion production can be first-traced to the 1950s, when the concept of fashion was integrated into businesses’ sales strategies. Fast fashion began to be more mass-produced in the 1980s when trends were at a new height of desirability, and consumers gained interest in aesthetics and branding (Peleg Mizrachi and Tal). The fast fashion model of “production, distribution, and marketing” has especially grown and thrived in the last ten years (Brewer). In the article “Slow

Fashion in a Fast Fashion World: Promoting Sustainability and Responsibility” by Mark K. Brewer, he talks about the trend cycle and how it has changed over time to become a much faster process. Fashion began as an integral part of society that was valued-but not easily accessible. When fashion and trend pieces became accessible to all and fast-fashion was born as an ever-evolving and constantly growing industry, sustainability was disregarded and profit, efficiency, and consumers were placed above the environment. The paradox of fashion is that consumers have an “insatiable desire” to have the most exclusive pieces, which requires the fashion industry to be constantly evolving to satisfy all consumers, which results in a loss of exclusivity (Brewer). Fashion is about expression, and is “a multifaceted subject with human agency at its core” (Pouillard and Dubé-Sénécal). Fashion is about exclusivity, and individuality. Consumers want pieces of clothing that allow them to express themselves, which is why businesses capitalize on producing mass amounts of clothing in different patterns, styles, shapes, and sizes. People strive for exclusivity and personal identity, but the paradox of fashion illustrates that exclusivity is ultimately lost in the production of fast fashion clothing. Fast fashion is produced quickly and manufactured in large quantities that are cheaply made, and resultantly have short life cycles. In turn, consumers are constantly buying new items of clothing and continuously feeding the production and consumption life cycle. Because of this, the environment is impacted by materials and emissions from manufacturing, waste from idle goods that were overproduced, and landfills are quickly filled with items of clothing that don’t last.

Fashion is among the world’s “most polluting industries” and has a significant environmental impact in many different areas (Peleg Mizrachi and Tal). In “Sustainable Fashion—Rationale and Policies” by Meital Peleg Mizrachi and Alon Tal, research is provided on the short life cycle of fast fashion, as they address four main environmental impacts of fast

fashion: resource depletion, short product life cycles, waste due to unused products, and waste from disposed products (Peleg Mizrachi and Tal). One major area of environmental impact is in regards to resources depleted and high emissions. Fast fashion production requires massive amounts of resources, and it's suggested that "17-20% of global industrial water pollution" is from the textile industry (Brewer). One kilogram of cotton requires 20,000 liters of water to be produced. The textile industry produces large amounts of industrial waste as well, and industrial waste water often contains high levels of dangerous dyes and other chemicals (Brewer). 10% of the world's carbon emissions come from production and the supply chain of the fashion industry, and the production of fibers and textiles produced about 1.2 billion tons of greenhouse gas emissions in 2015 (Brewer). The manufacturing process, along with other steps in the fast fashion industry, heavily depletes resources and produces high amounts of emissions, which are detrimental to the environment.

Along with resources and emissions produced from manufacturing, manufacturing in the fast fashion industry also provides a high level of risk and harm for workers in the industry. Harsh conditions in the textile industry have been the cause of advocating for improved working conditions and workers' rights in the global textile supply chain (Brewer). In April of 2013, an eight-story building in Bangladesh collapsed and resulted in the death of 1134 people and the injury of about 2500 others. The day prior to the collapse, surrounding businesses were closed due to warnings regarding the building's integrity. Factory managers ignored such warnings and ordered garment workers to "report for work or their pay would be docked" (Brewer). This event illustrates the disregard for workers' rights and safety that was present in Bangladesh at the time, and that can be seen in many similar circumstances and factories. "Sweatshops" have been used heavily by American businesses as ways to profit, and businesses resultantly have profited from

child labor and the overall suppression of labor rights (Marcketti and Kardova). Profit-based competition between companies has led many companies to source and produce their products at the lowest possible cost, striving to be as cost-effective as possible. In turn, manufacturing of fashion was majorly offshored from North America and Europe to countries with lower costs of production. Countries with lower production costs like India, China, and Bangladesh often have different labor laws, or labor rights that are suppressed and unrecognized. Workers are resultantly affected negatively, and the drive for low-cost, quick production is the source of the direct negative impact on employees in the fashion industry.

A major negative impact of the fast fashion production cycle is the resultantly short life cycles of garments produced. The fast fashion industry “leads to shorter practical service lives for garments” (Zamani et al.). A short life cycle means that clothing items that come from fast fashion production have a low ability to last, and are often worn-out quickly. The garments are made low-cost, and are thus low-quality. Because fast fashion garments have a short life cycle, they are generally disposed of and discarded very quickly after purchasing, and become waste much faster than they should.

Disposed clothing items fill landfills and result in high textile waste. An article in the *Journal of Cleaner Production* states “the practical service life of clothes...is short, well below the technical service life” (Zamani et al.). This means that the length of time that an item is worn and used for-the practical service life-is far shorter than the technical service life-how long an item could be used for. This illustrates that fast fashion produced clothing is often discarded long before it’s worn-out and necessitates being thrown out (Zamani et al.). The Environmental Protection Agency provides estimates that “11.9 million tons of clothing and footwear were discarded in 2015, of which 8.2 million tons ended up in landfills” (Brewer). Discarded clothing

has grown over the past sixty years and there has been an “800% rise in the generation and burial of textile waste. At the same time, a mere 1 percent of discarded textiles have been recycled” (Peleg Mizrachi and Tal). These statistics are eye-opening and clearly illustrate the mass production of garments and resultantly the vast amount of waste due to discarded clothing. Clothing items are generally disposed of by either an individual who has purchased the item and is discarding it, or by a business. Businesses often dispose of clothing items that have not sold, and throw away “large quantities of new merchandise” (Brewer). This produces high waste, and also raises concern regarding the ethics of companies taking new, unsold merchandise to landfills, rather than donating it.

Clothing and textile waste fills landfills, and often ends up polluting oceans. Scientists estimate that microfibers-synthetic fiber used in clothing, upholstery, and other products- makeup “85% of human-made debris on ocean shorelines” (Brewer). Polyester is the most commonly used fiber, “accounting for 55 percent of all fiber consumption,” and it is not biodegradable (Marcketti and Karpova). Polyester accounts for a high amount of fibers that are produced and discarded and cannot biodegrade, resulting in polyester fibers and microplastics being present for a long amount of time. A large amount of textile waste and microfibers do not decompose over time, and pollute soils, rivers, and oceans (Marcketti and Karpova). It’s apparent through the vast quantities of waste and pollution that something needs to be changed in regards to the fast fashion industry.

Change is necessary in the fast fashion industry in regard to sustainability and the environment. The novel *The Dangers of Fashion: Towards Ethical and Sustainable Solutions* specifically discusses repurposing and reusing clothing items in order to lengthen their lifespan, then how to best dispose of clothing items in order to keep them from filling landfills. One of the

most effective ways to minimize the negative environmental impact of clothing is to keep our outfits in active use for a longer amount of time. Extending the life of product use is the “single most significant environmental action one can take in relation to fashion” (Peleg Mizrachi and Tal). If fashion is treated as an investment, and new clothing is purchased less frequently, negative impact is lowered in a largely impactful way (Marcketti and Karpova). Businesses should place a great importance on producing products that can be easily repaired and repurposed, as it reduces their environmental impact, and will benefit them socially in regards to business (Chouinard). Patagonia, a leading outdoor brand, states that “without a healthy environment there are no shareholders, no employees, no customers, and no business” (Chouinard). Researchers of fast fashion provide information that thoroughly illustrates the need for change in the fashion industry, and that it is possible.

In contrast, the argument is often made that low-income individuals and families depend highly on fast fashion for affordable clothing and products for their families. Low income families understandably cannot always afford clothing that is high-quality, as it often comes with a higher price point. Brands like Walmart and Old Navy provide affordable clothing to people and families that aren't able to spend considerable amounts of money on long-lasting clothing. The issue with fast fashion is not that low-income families rely on it, it's the overconsumption of other individuals in regards to fast fashion. Low-income families are often not over-buying and spending large amounts of money on fast fashion products. They spend what they need to in order to acquire the products and items that they need to support themselves or their families. The negative environmental impact of fast fashion is much more due to overconsumption and overproduction of ever changing trend-cycles, and isn't related to individuals who require low-cost options. Overconsumption is so common in culture today, and often people say that

“consumerism has made Americans too materialistic” (Masci). It’s estimated that more than two-thirds of the economy is dependent on the buying and selling of goods (Masci). The average consumer of the fast-fashion business Shein is 35 years of age, with an annual salary around \$65,000 (“Shein: How Old Are The Shoppers”). This data illustrates that the average consumer of fast fashion likely is not a low income individual that’s dependent on low-cost options, but is rather an individual who believes “the aesthetics of the garments [are] more important than comfort and sustainability” (“Shein: How Old Are The Shoppers”). The human issue with the fast-fashion industry is tied to overconsumption, and low-income shoppers are not the root of overconsumption.

Consumers need to focus on limiting consumption of fast fashion apparel, in order to lower environmental impact caused by manufacturing, waste from over-producing products, and waste from products with short life-cycles that overflow landfills. Fast fashion garments have short life cycles and are produced in large quantities cheaply and quickly in factories with harmful working conditions, and manufactured in large quantities. Because of this, the environment is impacted by resource depletion and carbon emissions from manufacturing, waste from overproduced idle goods, and landfills are constantly filled with clothing items that don’t last. The environment and the lack of sustainability within the fast fashion industry can be a difficult subject to broach, as there isn’t only one answer for change. This is why it’s necessary to have those conversations and strive for more sustainable practices in personal and business life. Fast fashion isn’t going to stop production overnight, but it does need to change in order to lower negative environmental impact. Consumers should make an environmentally-conscious effort to reduce consumption, repurpose items, and advocate for change within companies that can result in greater sustainability and reduce the negative impact that fashion has on the environment.

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