

Fast Fashion: Economic Growth and Need for Sustainability - A Broad Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The fast fashion business is examined in this article, with a focus on its swift manufacturing cycles, supply chains prompted by the market, and significant effects on the environment and society. Due to its ability to provide inexpensive, on-trend apparel and shorten product lifecycles, fast fashion—a business model promoted by companies like Zara and H&M—has completely shifted the worldwide fashion industry. But there are additionally high expenses associated with this achievement. The sector raises ethical questions about working conditions in underdeveloped nations and plays a significant role in resource depletion, waste production, and environmental deterioration. The assessment highlights the increasing awareness of sustainability issues while examining the systems, such as global supply chains and just-in-time manufacturing, that drive the efficiency of fast fashion. The slow fashion movement, which promotes ethical production, lasting designs, and environmental stewardship, is contrasted with fast fashion in the paper as well. The necessity for sustainable alternatives is becoming increasingly important as the sector grows, which emphasizes the significance of shifting to more ethical production and consumption practices.

Keywords: Fast fashion, Key players, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Fashion is defined as an expression that becomes generally accepted over time by a group of individuals. It is distinguished by an array of marketing criteria, including limited predictability, high impulse purchase, shorter life cycle, and strong market demand volatility. Fast fashion, defined as affordable clothing lines based on upscale, high-end fashion trends, is by definition a quick-fix system that promotes disposability (Fletcher, 2008). Companies like H&M and Zara have slashed the six-month turnaround time from catwalk to customer to just a few weeks, with increased revenues to match (Tokatli, 2008). Fast cycles are what fast fashion businesses thrive on: quick prototyping, small quantities mixed with lots of diversity, more effective shipping and delivery, and goods that are displayed “floor ready” on hangers with price tags already on them (Skov, 2002). High street retailers

regularly explore new trends in the industry and make weekly purchases to promote new things and refill stock in an effort to keep customers coming back (Tokatli and Kizilgun, 2009). A new kind of seemingly contradictory mass exclusivity is the unintended consequence of such constant and quick turnover (Schrunk, 2004). Furthermore, reduced labor and manufacturing expenses translate into lower overall costs, which in turn translate into cheaper prices and higher volume. As a result of improved quality control, even companies like Zara, which formerly produced all of their goods in Europe, now outsource at least 13 per cent of their manufacturing to China and Turkey (Tokatli, 2008). It's true that fast fashion retailers have teams of in-house designers on staff; nonetheless, more striking designs translate into must-have looks that tempt customers to shell out full price immediately rather than waiting for the year-end reductions. Fast fashion retailers will even resort to using

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more expensive local labor and accelerated shipping methods in order to meet deadlines for deliveries. Future financial gains will eventually much exceed current expenses (Cachon and Swinney, 2011).

Fast fashion is typically viewed as an expedited business strategy with short product lifecycles, copycat (trickled-down) trends from the catwalk, and reasonably priced prices (Sparks, 1998). The two most successful brands in this market are the Swedish company H&M and the Spanish conglomerate Zara. Unlike high-end luxury fashion firms that only produce one or two collections year, they may turn a fashion idea into a fashion product in as little as two to three weeks, leading to up to 24 collections annually (Sydney, 2008). The idea of fast fashion transformed the fashion business in the first ten years of the twenty-first century, affecting even premium labels in terms of how frequently collections were released (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006).

In particular, young, middle-class female shoppers have found it easier to satisfy their desire for the newest fashion trends thanks to online purchasing sites. Retailers with a reputation for creating clothing items that are meant to be used for no more than ten times, including Zara, H&M, and Topshop, have been criticized by ethical shoppers for promoting “throwaway fashion” (Annamma *et al.*, 2012). In particular, young, middle-class female shoppers have found it easier to satisfy their need for the newest fashion trends thanks to online purchasing sites. Retailers with a reputation for creating clothing items that are meant to be used for no more than ten times, including Zara, H&M, and Topshop, have been criticized by ethical shoppers for promoting “throwaway fashion” (Annamma *et al.*, 2012). The globalized supply chain of fast fashion is a fundamental component of its business model. Fast fashion producers utilize a quick response strategy and supply chain network to promptly respond to evolving market trends and needs. This approach facilitates accurate market forecasting and timely information flow. Brands like Zara and H&M may plan their sourcing and logistics using this technique as close to the release date as feasible. Throughout the year, orders are placed and updated on a regular basis. Compared to typical stores’ pre-season ordering procedure, this is significantly different (Emberley, 1998; Moisander and Personen 2002). The globalized supply chain of fast fashion is a fundamental component of its business model. Fast fashion producers utilize a quick response strategy and supply chain network to promptly

respond to evolving market trends and needs. This approach facilitates accurate market forecasting and timely information flow. Brands like Zara and H&M may plan their sourcing and logistics using this technique as close to the release date as feasible. Throughout the year, orders are placed and updated on a regular basis. Compared to typical stores’ pre-season ordering procedure, this is significantly different (Emberley, 1998; Moisander and Personen, 2002).

The clothing industry has always relied heavily on labor and required minimal initial capital. Low entry barriers and standardized production for a mass market have also been characteristics of the sector (Taplin, 2014; 248). Given the availability of inexpensive, low-skill labor in developing nations, garment businesses’ increasing production shifts there should not have been shocking given the local climate. Globalization has grown during the last 20 years, bringing with it the outsourcing of production to emerging nations. The inexpensive labor, significant tax savings, and lax laws and regulations in underdeveloped countries are alluring to the garment industry. One of the biggest, if not the largest, manufacturing and consumption chains is found in the fashion business. The fashion business is the most labor-dependent sector of the economy, employing an estimated one in six people worldwide (Ross and Morgan, 2015).

Clothing businesses moved their production offshore, allowing prices to drop drastically and paving the way for the emergence of fast fashion. A subset of the clothing business known as “fast fashion” was created in Europe in response to the quickly shifting tastes of young women, who are primarily interested in following trends in fashion at a much lower price. Before fast fashion, stores had to order in bulk to satisfy the demand for the full season, which meant having a lot of inventory that needed to be stored. This frequently resulted in end-of-season markdowns and reductions because it did not offer enough time for consumer demand to be understood (Doeringer and Crean, 2005).

Fast fashion stores like Forever 21, Gap, H&M, TopShop, and Zara are able to profit from the constantly shifting trends in fashion because to their supply networks. A “streamlined system involving rapid design, production, distribution, and marketing” is the fast fashion model, according to Cohen (2011). Put differently, fast fashion stores are able to move a wider range of products in lower numbers through the chain. Fast fashion retailers upend the fashion pyramid (Fig. 1), giving consumers



Fig. 1 : The Fashion Pyramid

access to more unique products and fashion information at affordable prices. Veblen goods are commodities that “we desire more the higher their prices go because we hope this will show other people our wealth and status,” yet fast fashion has also affected this idea (Cline, 2012). Additionally, quick product cycles, consumer demand, and retailer production runs are guaranteed by fast fashion products. Like ready-made clothing previously did, the fast fashion model has proliferated to the point where it is now accepted as the standard in the industry. Following technical advancements, cheap, abundant cotton was the source of today’s fast-fashion clothing. Consumer behavior has changed and there is now more fashion differentiation as a result of demographic and socioeconomic shifts.

Recognizing the fast-fashion business:

The characteristic that sets fast fashion apart is its lack of a signature style; instead, it adapts constantly to the latest trends. Fast fashion is a selling strategy that releases new merchandise on a year-round basis at prices significantly lower than those of other fashion industry segments. There is fierce competition in the fast fashion industry, both between shops and between individual businesses. Networks connect many components of the business and the merchandise in every retailer. We refer to this as the supply chain. Lead time is the amount of time it takes for a product to go through the entire supply chain, including being purchased. This phrase and the idea of time sensitivity are very important.

The Consumers of Fast Fashion:

The analysis of global commodity or supply networks in the fast fashion sector primarily ignores the material culture that envelops this unique phenomena. The fast fashion industry has captured the attention of contemporary young women from many socioeconomic backgrounds. Technology probably has an impact on fast fashion customers’ purchasing habits and brand loyalty. Thanks to technology, shoppers can now find out a lot about the newest fashions and trends. Many fast fashion shoppers are drawn to high fashion and celebrity culture and want to purchase items that reflect these trends. The challenge is that these customers want to wear what they see celebrities or high-end runway trends wearing, but they are unable to buy these things.

Worldwide Supply Chains and Commodity Chains:

The three primary components of Global Commodity Chains (GCCs) are an input-output structure made up of a series of goods and services connected sequentially to value-added economic activities; territoriality, which denotes the location of raw material, production, export, and marketing networks; and a governance structure of power and authority relationships, which establishes the distribution and flow of financial, material, and human resources as well as economic surplus within the chain. (Appelbaum and Gereffi, 1994). According to Research and Markets, the worldwide fast fashion market is expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15.5% from \$122.98 billion in 2023 to \$142.06 billion in 2024.

Key Players and Market Value:

A few important firms control a large portion of the global fashion market thanks to creative business plans and distinctive brand identities. These businesses have not only become industry leaders in fashion retail, but they have also made major economic contributions to the sector. For example, H&M has a market worth of \$12.99 billion and a varied product selection and sustainability activities. In a similar vein, Zara, with its \$14.96 billion market value, is well-known for its fast fashion business strategy and effective supply chain management. Recognized for producing high-quality and functional clothing, Uniqlo is valued at \$9.64 billion on the market. These numbers show how much of an economic influence these businesses have in the fashion industry and how important a part they play in determining

customer preferences and market trends.

H&M: \$12.99 billion

Zara: \$14.96 billion

Uniqlo: \$9.64 billion (Legit, 2024).

Fast fashion and the future:

Given that many people prioritize their sense of style over environmental preservation, the amount of pollution produced directly by the textile and apparel industries is a challenge. Fast fashion has become a reality thanks to industrialization. There is reason to be concerned about the environment due to the rising garbage creation. The serious issue of pollution and clothes production has been greatly complicated by the fast fashion industry. Landfills are typically the last place that clothing ends up. The fast fashion business is a major cause of the depletion of natural resources. The use and manufacturing of textiles are growing, as is their impact on the environment, water and energy use, and climate. Global textile production and consumption have almost doubled in the last 20 years (Varley and Raffiq, 2004). Furthermore, it is anticipated that the global fashion market would grow from \$1.5 trillion in 2020 to roughly \$2.25 trillion in 2025. According to Research and Markets (2024), the worldwide fast fashion industry is expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15.5% from \$122.98 billion in 2023 to \$142.06 billion in 2024.

Because of this, there is a constant demand for fashion, thus it is not surprising to think of the fashion sector as one of the main causes of pollution. Global textile production and consumption have almost doubled in the last 20 years (Varley and Raffiq, 2004). Furthermore, it is anticipated that the global fashion market would grow from \$1.5 trillion in 2020 to roughly \$2.25 trillion in 2025. According to Research and Markets (2024), the worldwide fast fashion industry is expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15.5% from \$122.98 billion in 2023 to \$142.06 billion in 2024. Because of this, there is a constant demand for fashion, thus it is not surprising to think of the fashion sector as one of the main causes of pollution. Clothes is designed and manufactured for fast trend transitions through obsolescence and early disposal, allowing for a quick profit and producing a lot of trash, rather than considering how design and production may meet client preferences and sustainability (Jang *et al.*, 2012). Because of this business model, the fashion industry is among the most polluting in the world, ranking among the top three in

terms of pressure on land and water usage and among the top five in terms of greenhouse gas emissions and raw material use. Notably, the fashion business produces 92 million tons of textile waste yearly, 1.7 billion tons of CO₂ (almost 10% of global CO₂ emissions), and 79 billion cubic meters of water (about 20% of global water use). Natural catastrophes and their repercussions, including floods, droughts, storms, and sea level rise, are occurring more frequently as a result of the substantial global warming caused by carbon emissions (Yongjian, 2014).

In contrast to the fast fashion production paradigm, slow fashion focuses on improving sustainability, defending human rights, and strengthening communities (Fletcher, 2007). inspired the “slow food” movement, which promotes accountability in food production and consumption, to start the slow fashion movement. The slow fashion movement is made up of businesses that prioritize more environmentally friendly procedures and value high-quality products, artisanship, and responsible stewardship. As a result, they inadvertently support sustainability by employing organic, recycled, or more robust materials as well as more morally responsible sourcing and production methods. Additionally, compared to their peers in the fast fashion industry’s supply chain, the laborers who produce these clothes are paid more and have better working conditions. Finished clothing may be more expensive, but it lasts longer and has more classic designs that never go “out of style.” Slow fashion companies encourage sustainability in sourcing, production, and consumption by placing more of an emphasis on linking raw materials, designers, craftspeople, retailers, and consumers. But in a world where consumer demand is rising, mass-marketed, low-cost, knockoff designs present an obstacle for the slow fashion movement (Fletcher, 2007; Brewer, 2019).

Impact on the Environment:

Fast fashion has a huge and diverse negative influence on the environment. It degrades air and water quality and increases waste and greenhouse gas emissions significantly (Intech Open, 2023). The fashion business is the second most polluting sector of the economy after the oil industry, accounting for 20% of world wastewater and 8% of global carbon emissions. The industry’s reliance on resource-intensive techniques and encouragement of a high rate of garment consumption are the main causes of this startling degree of pollution (Bailey *et al.*, 2022). The fashion industry

has faced a great deal of criticism in recent years for its inadequate attention to social and environmental issues, which has brought the non-financial costs of fashion to the attention of the world public. The fashion industry has significant and widespread negative effects on the environment. For instance, the business generates 8–10% of worldwide CO₂ emissions, or 4-5 billion tonnes yearly, however estimates vary (Anonymous, 2018). Furthermore, there is a significant waste issue as a result of the quick production cycles of fast fashion. Since 2000, the amount of clothing produced has increased, and buyers are adopting a “throwaway” mentality as a result of retailers like Zara and H&M offering new designs every week. Large volumes of textile waste are produced as a result of this overproduction, most of which is burned or dumped in landfills, releasing toxic chemicals and greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The magnitude of the waste problem is highlighted by UNEP’s estimate that a truckload of textiles is disposed of or burned every second (Anonymous, 2022).

An outline of the fast-fashion sector from a macro perspective:

Fast fashion stores treat clothing like perishable food by introducing new items nearly every week and intentionally adjusting the availability of merchandise. This is sometimes referred to as “fast fashion retailers treat fashion as produce” in the popular press. Even though fast fashion clothing is meant to be worn less than ten times, young, predominately female consumers consider these items to be “must haves” because to their comparatively low pricing and manufactured scarcity (Birtwhistle and Moore, 2007). Environmental and social issues will inevitably arise in any industry that is built on a disposable mentality. For instance, fast fashion uses dangerous chemicals for manufacturing synthetic textiles, putting workers and the environment in peril. Furthermore, it is well known that quick fashion companies like Forever 21, which produces forty per cent of its products in a Los Angeles factory, pay their employees less than the minimum wage and without benefits or overtime (Lynch, 2009). The sections that follow demonstrate how fast fashion’s manufacturing, upkeep, and disposal have given rise to social and environmental issues.

Production:

The manufacturing of textiles demands a lot of resources. For instance, utilizing over 25% of all

insecticides worldwide, cotton, the material used to make most apparel, is the crop most dependent on pesticides. 55% of all pesticides used in India are used on the 5% of land that is used to grow cotton. A 1/3 pound of pesticide is needed to treat an average cotton t-shirt (Kennedy, 2016). Production-related issues with textiles have long been recognized. For instance, it’s estimated that the US textile mill business used 135 billion gallons of water (O Ecotextiles, 2010). The majority of this occurred in four states in the Southeast where the textile industry was centered, even though it accounted for only 1% of industrial water demand at the time. It is to be expected that US water use related to textiles has dropped over time given the decline in the US textile industry and improvements in water efficiency (Australia, with the world’s most efficient cotton industry, has doubled its water efficiency usage in the last 25 years). Nonetheless, there’s no denying that the textile sector in underdeveloped nations has used more water. For instance, 1.5 billion cubic meters of fresh water are used annually by textile industries in underdeveloped nations (Pensupa *et al.*, 2017).

Although synthetic fibers are produced in factories and don’t require water to grow textiles, the use of harmful chemicals in the production processes puts both workers and the environment in danger (Lynch, 2009). All textiles have an adverse effect on the environment during production, but the effects are amplified when synthetic fibers are used. Textiles are treated with almost all dyes, specialized compounds, and finishing agents in water baths. Water is used in a variety of fabric preparation procedures, including desizing, scouring, bleaching, and mercerizing. After most procedures, a thorough washing is performed to eliminate any remaining chemicals before proceeding to the next stage. Water used in milling processes is eventually recycled back into the environment, typically with little effort made to eliminate the pollutants. The chemicals found in wastewater, such as dyestuff, dispersants, leveling agents, soaping and dyeing agents, cationic and nonionic softeners, finishing chemicals, and a few other random substances, contaminate groundwater and endanger the health of people who use water downstream (O Ecotextiles, 2010).

Maintenance:

After being purchased, clothes also need to be taken care of; for instance, they should be tumble dried or dry cleaned. Dry cleaning uses perc, a hazardous chemical

that has been connected to central nervous system diseases and reproductive issues such as male infertility and miscarriage (MacEachern, 2008). Sixty percent of the energy used during the use phase is from clothes that are tumble dried. According to estimates (Fletcher, 2008), reducing the washing temperature and doing away with tumble drying and ironing would result in a product-related energy reduction of roughly 50%.

Disposal:

Clothes is disposed of frequently in the throw-away society that exists in the United States. This throw-away mentality is further encouraged by fast fashion's deliberate obsolescence. Approximately one-seventh of the 68 pounds of clothes that Americans throw away each year is recycled or reused, according to Hawley's (2006) report. Fabrics that wind up in landfills may mostly be recycled. Recycling ensures that the clothing won't deteriorate while subterranean and will instead be used more frequently. Fast fashion, however, largely uses non-biodegradable synthetic materials. Additionally, clothing made of natural materials, such as wool, breaks down but releases methane, which adds to global warming.

Additionally, a lot of customers donate their used clothing to nonprofit organizations like Oxfam, Salvation Army, and Goodwill. After sorting the donations, these retailers are able to sell roughly half of the products at their recycling locations. The remaining things are then baled and sold to textile dealers and brokers, or rag dealers. Over 1.25 million tons of post-consumer textile waste are diverted annually by the roughly 3000 companies that make up the worldwide recycling industry (Kennedy, 2016). Sorted clothing is compressed into 50 kg bales, whereas unsorted used clothing can be compressed into 500–1000 kg bales. Lower-grade discarded clothing is shipped to Africa and Asia, while higher-grade apparel is exported to Central America. However, the majority of Europe's recycled apparel is exported to Russia or Eastern Europe. Sub-Saharan nations import the most worn clothing worldwide, accounting for almost 25% of all exports of used goods. Additionally, a disproportionate amount of the volume—at least seven times more than men's—is made up of used women's clothing. For this reason, men's apparel in Tanzanian street marketplaces is four to five times more expensive than women's. The damage that the low-cost competition is causing to developing nations' budding textile sectors is one potential side effect of these cheap

imports. A lot of companies, especially fast fashion retailers, have developed various initiatives to increase awareness of textile recycling because they understand how important it is to decrease the amount of textile waste that ends up in landfills. For instance, Marks and Spencer and Oxfam partnered to provide customers a £5 voucher that may be used toward any purchase over £35 at Marks and Spencer in exchange for every bag of unwanted Marks and Spencer apparel that is donated to a charitable organization (Marks and Spencer, 2008). Additionally raising public awareness about textile and clothing recovery are fast fashion brands. For instance, H&M has launched a well-known awareness campaign called the "garment collecting program," in which they invite customers to donate their unwanted clothing to their nearby H&M stores so that it can be put to better use. Among the uses include resale, cleaning rags for oil or manufacturing enterprises, selling to "flocking" companies (where products are shred for use as fillers in roofing felts, vehicle insulation, and furniture cushioning), and turning materials into paper pulps from viscose, linen, and cotton. In addition to positive initiatives by corporations, governments all across the world are now paying close attention to these problems. For instance, the UK government has put in place efficient regional waste management plans. The UK has historically disposed of waste in landfills, raising a number of environmental issues. Thus, legislation establishing a landfill tax was passed (Keynote, 2007). In an effort to teach citizens how to reduce home trash, the government has also launched a number of initiatives (Waste Aware Scotland, 2007).

These methods have been effective in promoting efficient waste management in addition to raising public awareness. Customers are growing increasingly conscious of the different moral problems connected to fast fashion companies (Ertekin and Atik, 2015). They have been pressuring fast fashion businesses to provide more details about their sourcing and manufacturing practices, thereby drawing attention to their unethical practices. Some consumers are focusing more on quality and wearing trends as a result of these awareness initiatives, as opposed to regularly buying cheap current designs.

"Slow fashion," as opposed to "fast fashion," is the new idea, with customers emphasizing the purchase of fine pieces that are appropriate for multiple seasons. Despite its associated major environmental and social

challenges, the fast fashion sector may remain sustainable due to its affordability and aesthetic appeal, given the widespread demand for an attractive appearance. This chapter looks at the fast fashion industry from both the macro and micro viewpoints in an attempt to provide readers a better knowledge of it. On a smaller scale, fast fashion allows customers to express themselves freely by releasing new items nearly every week. When looking at fast fashion from a larger perspective, however, both the industry and the general public need to be aware that future generations' quality of life will be at risk due to the effects on the social and ecological contexts if fashion consumption continues to rise. Therefore, developing and marketing sustainable alternatives is essential to the long-term success of fast fashion.

Conclusion:

In summary, the fast fashion sector has revolutionized the retail fashion scene by bringing about notable shifts in production, consumer patterns, and market dynamics. Companies like Zara and H&M have been able to react quickly to evolving trends by shortening the product lifecycle through the use of rapid design and manufacturing procedures. As a result, fashion has become more approachable and democratic for a wider range of people. Nevertheless, there are significant social and environmental consequences associated with this expedited cycle. Fast fashion has a significant negative influence on the environment, leading to immense waste production, pollution, and resource depletion. These problems are made worse by the industry's reliance on synthetic fibers and dangerous chemicals, which puts ecosystems and public health at serious risk. In addition, the social ramifications—which are especially evident in labor-intensive production regions—include low salaries and abusive working conditions, raising ethical questions about the supply chain. The slow fashion movement promotes sustainability in response to these issues by placing a strong emphasis on environmental stewardship, ethical production, and high quality. Although this movement presents a more environmentally friendly option, it will have a difficult time competing with fast fashion's low cost and quick turnaround.

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