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A Fast Fix for Fast Fashion

The rise of consumerism and social media addiction in the 21st century caused an inevitable major change in our buying and spending habits. Generation Z, or Gen-Z for short, is the main contributor to the quick rise and fall of trends and fads that no other generation seems to keep up with. These trends can include aesthetics, design, and most importantly, fashion trends. According to The Guardian, “One in three young women, the biggest segment of consumers, consider garments worn once or twice to be old.” (2019) Influencer culture has designed a world where recycling an outfit more than twice on their social media is frowned upon, and everyone is expected to keep up with these major figures in media to stay on trend. Factors such as the ones mentioned above have caused the rise of fast fashion websites such as Shein, PrettyLittleThing, Forever 21, and many more. Unfortunately, these companies are cutting corners to keep up with the ever-changing trends in our society such as not paying workers a livable wage, providing inhumane working conditions, and utilizing dangerous fabrics and materials that not only harm the environment but the consumer. Some consumers may swear fast fashion is the only option they have in terms of buying clothes that fit their style and budget, but many other alternatives are not talked about enough. The overconsumption of fast fashion and its subsequent mass disposal into our ecosystem should not simply be attributed to people not being able to afford sustainable clothing. Instead, to tackle the deadly consequences of fast fashion, we must educate

the consumers on the harmful impacts buying these clothes can cause and offer some reasonable alternatives.

One of the most urgent changes we need to make to continue to live on a habitable planet is reducing harmful emissions from fast fashion dynasties which are causing global warming and climate change at alarming rates. The numerous negative effects of this industry on the environment are recorded in an academic journal from Nature.com published in April 2020:

The industry produces 8-10% of global CO₂ emissions (4-5 billion tonnes annually). The fashion industry is also a major consumer of water (79 trillion litres per year), responsible for ~20% of industrial water pollution from textile treatment and dyeing, contributes ~35% (190,000 tonnes per year) of oceanic primary microplastic pollution and produces vast quantities of textile waste (>92 million tonnes per year), much of which ends up in landfill or is burnt, including unsold product. (P. 189)

The fashion industry as a whole is not the most environmentally conscious but this is unavoidable considering how diverse and influential fashion brands are in our day-to-day lives. However, there is an important distinction to be made between sustainable fashion brands and fast fashion in terms of their respective business practices. One example of a sustainable clothing brand making earth-friendly choices is Patagonia. Their company has created a concept called the “Earth Tax” which means Patagonia takes 1% of all their sales and puts that money towards saving the planet through environmental nonprofits. On the other hand, fast fashion brands such as Fashion Nova had factory workers, “being paid illegally low wages and working in poor conditions.” (New York Times, 2019) Facts such as those should turn consumers away from purchasing from these brands, but they are not mentioned as often as they should be. When these facts are brought up, they are drowned out by all the pseudo-positives of fast fashion such as accessibility and affordability which is only worsened by influencers promoting these products to an audience of millions.

As mentioned above, fast fashion is not only deadly for the planet, but we as consumers are also put at risk. Additionally, there are numerous health code violations from the biggest names in fast fashion because of their abhorrent working conditions and lack of care for their workers to even provide them with a living wage. This is unfortunately not a rare occurrence in the fast fashion industry. For the clothes to be provided to consumers at a too-good-to-be-true price there is either a cut on workers pay or a cut on the price of the materials used to make their clothing. Most of the time, however, both consumers and workers pay the price for these companies' excess financial gain through the form of hazardous, shoddy clothing material and what is essentially modern-day slavery for women and children in 3rd world countries who have no other job options.

One of the more intriguing effects of fast fashion is how different socioeconomic classes consume and react to the concept of fast fashion. At the height of the COVID-19 mass quarantine during Spring 2020, there was an emerging trend of online shopping and "hauls" being posted on the social media app TikTok. Many of these videos would have hundreds of thousands of likes, with some posts raking in millions. So, naturally, everyone was participating in these shopping habits and posting them online for the chance to become temporarily famous on TikTok. This led to people posting hauls for shock value where they would purchase at least 500 dollars of clothes and dump the giant package on the ground. Of course, this kind of shock-value posting was only possible for higher-income consumers who could purchase what was essentially a new wardrobe through these fast fashion websites. More sustainable fashion brands equate to a higher price tag, so the amount of clothing available for people to reasonably purchase for the same amount of money was tripled or even quadrupled with the increasing availability of fast fashion. This hypothesis is backed up by numbers provided by Daxue

Consulting which reported that “During COVID-19, while most American fashion brands’ sales experienced a decline of 20%, the Chinese fashion brand’s sales continued to soar up to triple digits. The lockdown period also allowed many of Shein’s targeted consumers to spend more time browsing the web and shopping online.” (2022)

The effects of fast fashion and social media activity go hand in hand, especially when Shein uses influencer marketing to promote their products to all audiences. Influencer marketing is extremely successful and has caused Shein to be one of the most popular clothing brands in the world. Daxue’s report also utilized information from a company called Airnow Data which recorded that, “In 2021 Shein’s mobile app has exceeded 7 million monthly active users in the US alone. According to Jing Daily, on TikTok, the hashtag #Shein has garnered over 6.2 billion views.” (2022) Fast fashion companies such as Shein tuning into their audience and creating a large following on the internet makes their power on the digital consumer even more daunting. Even more upsetting is the fact that these consumers are more likely to not research these websites and blindly purchase the product due to the power of influencer marketing, their young age, and their lack of knowledge on the topic of fast fashion as a whole.

Critics of this argument may posit the fact that there is no true replacement for the convenience and price of fast fashion retailers. The unique and trendy styles offered on these websites are not likely to be offered at a local thrift store within the same month the style came into fashion. However, not being on trend all the time is not necessarily an insult, and it should not be considered that way. Yes, being able to own a similar outfit to your favorite celebrity might be a confidence booster and/or a form of self-expression, but that does not mean it is truly justified or ethical considering the current state of our environment and economy. Reasonable alternatives to fast fashion go far beyond thrifting. Resale platforms such as Mercari, Depop, and

Poshmark are rapidly growing in popularity and accessibility. An article from Forbes about secondhand fashion can contribute to this rapid growth, “According to a recent report by ThredUp, the U.S. secondhand fashion market is expected to more than triple in value in the next 10 years – from US\$28 billion in 2019 to US\$80 billion in 2029.” (Forbes, 2021) These platforms offer current styles at a fraction of the price and reduce your carbon footprint by being able to purchase a pre-loved item. There is even a luxury resale market for those seeking the designer aesthetic at a more affordable cost without having to rely on cheap, counterfeit products that are made unethically and illegally. Not only do consumers benefit from secondhand retail, but they can also sell and upcycle their old clothing for profit instead of letting it go to waste.

Unfortunately, implementing these alternatives to a target audience of Gen-Z teenage women with short attention spans and high social media use is easier said than done. Another article from Forbes confirms this in their article about Marketing to Millennials vs. Gen-Z, “It’s common knowledge that consumer attention spans are dwindling. The average attention span of a millennial is a whopping 12 seconds—and for Gen Zers, that number is an even more disappointing 8 seconds.” (Forbes, 2017) However, despite the decrease in attention span throughout generations, there is still a high population of people who want to help fight against fast fashion and shop more sustainably. According to Statista’s study in March of this year, “35% of customers in the United States reported that they would be willing to pay significantly more money for clothing that is either biodegradable, recyclable or sustainably produced.” (Statista, 2022) Percentages as high as those should not be ignored, especially when obvious progress is being made towards the slow fashion movement. An idea to implement sustainable fashion into consumer’s heads is to market those products as if they were from a fast fashion brand. Influencer marketing can be used for all types of products, but if more sustainable brands were

being worn by internet icons it is almost guaranteed there would be more traction in a new era of fashion. Additionally, making individuality in fashion a more frequent habit will stop the constant cycle of two-week fashion trends from polluting the fashion world and make fast fashion brands work with less-trend material.

There are a copious amount of benefits to be reaped from reducing fast fashion intake and making the switch to sustainable fashion. A study conducted by Andrew Brooks into fashion and sustainability uncovered that solutions to creating a more sustainable fashion industry, “may already be present in existing technologies, for example, a shift to wool clothing to avoid the hazards of microfiber release from polyester clothing such as fleece jackets, the development of sustainable design solutions to production problems, or the creative use of garments. Social changes such as reducing the motivation and expectation to consume new synthetic clothing can also alleviate environmental degradation.” (Brooks, 2017) If anything is more important than ourselves, it is protecting the world we live in. Reducing our carbon footprint and emissions as a whole will make life on Earth healthier and happier. Slower fashion production also promotes the fair treatment of workers and offers livable wages at the very least, which will more than likely be implemented when fast fashion brands step up their game in terms of ethics.

In conclusion, the fight against the fast fashion industry is far from over and there are reasonable ways to help out. Alternatives such as thrifting, secondhand retail, and selling clothes of your own to reduce waste are simple solutions that make a bigger difference in the long run than one may expect. Not only would the adoption of sustainable fashion save the environment, but it would save the mental and physical health of fast fashion workers and their families through the promotion of livable wages for employees. The benefits of researching ethical brands

and putting more responsibility on the consumers' end lead to a lifetime of improvements in our quality of life, society, and the clothing on our backs.

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