

Forum: Environmental Committee

Issue: Measures to address the environmental impacts of fast fashion

Student Officer: Ikhee Lee

Position: President

Introduction

Fast fashion is the pinnacle of productive efficiency and ethical violations in the 21st century. While the business model has made fashion more accessible to millions across the world, it has also led to significant environmental issues. Unlike traditional fashion industries, the fast fashion industry is characterized by excessively high rates of production and short product life cycles, resulting in a range of adverse consequences, including textile waste, excessive water consumption, and increased greenhouse gas emissions. The practice has become increasingly popular in an era where consumers are quick to turn to the most convenient and budget-friendly fashion options; various fashion leaders, such as Zara, Shein, and H&M, have adopted the practice due to its lucrative nature. However, the environmental costs significantly outweigh short-term corporate benefits. According to a report by the Copenhagen Fashion Summit, 92 million tons of garments are discarded in landfills annually. In addition, according to State of Matter, the fast fashion industry is attributable to 20% of global water waste. The environmental impacts of fast fashion extend beyond waste. According to a 2020 analysis by the European Environment Agency, textile purchases in the EU generated approximately 270 kg of Carbon Dioxide emissions per capita. Many fast fashion items are made from synthetic fibers, such as polyester, which are derived from fossil fuels and require lengthy periods for decomposition. Besides this, the production processes involved in fast fashion, most notably dyeing and finishing, often pollute waterways with toxic chemicals, threatening aquatic ecosystems and human health. Moreover, the fast fashion industry often relies on labor-intensive practices in developing countries, where ethical concerns about worker exploitation and unsafe working conditions are rampant. An article by the International Law and Policy Brief describes how many garment workers in Asia work up to 112 hours a week and are paid below the living wage. This report provides an overview of the history of fast fashion, the major parties involved in the matter, and potential solutions that target the root causes of the issue, ultimately mitigating the negative environmental impacts. As a major cause of various environmental hazards, minimizing and reforming fast fashion should be a top priority for nations.

Definition of Key Terms

Fast Fashion

Fast fashion refers to the business model of mass-producing low-priced, low-quality clothing that mimics high fashion trends. Such goods move rapidly along the supply chain, relying on quick turnovers, frequent new production releases, and the ability to replicate trends utilizing consumer data. The business model is a major contributor to various environmental issues, including climate change, environmental degradation, and resource depletion.

Overproduction

Overproduction refers to the production of unnecessary goods and services beyond existing levels of consumer demand. The phenomenon is categorized into two types of overproductions: early and quantitative. Early overproduction refers to the pre-emptive production of goods and services. Quantitative overproduction refers to the production of goods and services beyond market demand in the status quo.

See-Now-Buy-Now (SNBN)

See-Now-Buy-Now refers to the business strategy where retailers enable customers to buy fashion products as soon as they are revealed, eliminating the period between media releases and traditional retail rollout.

Sustainable Fashion

Sustainable fashion is the combination of design, production, and consumption approaches that prioritize environmental protection and social equity. The approach aims to minimize the environmental impact of the fashion industry while ensuring fair wages and safe working conditions for laborers. Some common methods employed within the sustainable fashion industry include the usage of eco-friendly materials, waste reduction, and transparency of business practices.

Carbon Footprint

Carbon Footprint refers to the total amount of greenhouse gases (GHG), particularly carbon dioxide (CO₂), emitted directly or indirectly by an individual, entity, event, or product throughout its lifecycle. It is commonly expressed in terms of CO₂ equivalents (CO₂e). The metric is especially relevant to the issue of fast fashion as it is a significant contributor to excess global greenhouse gas emissions, adversely affecting the environment through climate change and air pollution.

Climate Change

Climate Change refers to significant and long-term changes in temperature, precipitation, and different weather patterns. It encompasses both natural variations in climate over geological time scales and alterations caused by human activities, particularly the emission of greenhouse gases. Fast fashion is a major cause of high greenhouse gas emissions, ultimately exacerbating climate change.

Planned Obsolescence

Planned Obsolescence is a business practice where products are deliberately designed and manufactured to become obsolete in the short to mid-term or with features that will become outdated, leading consumers to replace them sooner than they might otherwise choose to. This approach is commonly used in the fast fashion industry, where businesses aim to increase consumer demand by driving repeat purchases, creating high quantities of waste and other adverse environmental impacts.

Water Pollution

Water Pollution refers to the contamination of water bodies by harmful substances or pollutants. The washing of synthetic clothing products releases high quantities of microplastics and other harmful substances, leading to the degradation of water quality and the environment.

Ultra-Fast Fashion

Ultra-Fast Fashion refers to an even more accelerated version of fast fashion where clothing is produced at an extremely rapid pace, often within a matter of days or weeks.

Background

Early manifestations of fast fashion

The term ‘fast fashion’ is undoubtedly the brainchild of 21st-century industry specialists. However, the fundamental concept is rooted far beyond modern-day mass production mechanisms. Before the Industrial Revolution, clothing was primarily made to order by tailors and dressmakers. This meant slower production rates and higher costs, making clothing a more considered purchase. Clothing, specifically high-quality clothing, was a symbol of luxury and wealth. This would all change with Eli Whitney’s cotton gin during The Industrial Revolution. Similarly, the popularization of various industrial production methods would lead to increased waste and water usage; giant water wheels were often installed beside factories. Inadequate regulatory standards translated to increased freedom for firms to utilize hazardous chemicals in production and dump waste material into the environment. All of the above exacerbated environmental damage and was the beginning of exponential growth in Carbon Dioxide emissions and water pollution.

The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution is known for breaking the mold of conventional fashion production methods and fundamentally transforming the fashion industry by introducing mechanization and innovative manufacturing processes. With the advent of technologies such as the spinning jenny, power loom, and sewing machine, textile production shifted from manual craftsmanship to large-scale factory operations. Speed and efficiency in the fashion industry skyrocketed, and clothing became more accessible to the masses. The rise of large-scale factories enabled the mass production of garments, ultimately leading to the establishment of a consumer culture centered around affordable fashion. Consequently, the Industrial Revolution laid the groundwork for the modern fashion industry and fast fashion trends.

Beginnings of youth culture

As consumer sentiment and global economies began to recover in a post-World War II world, spending patterns also saw drastic changes, paving the way for a new era of youth culture. The emergence of youth culture in the mid-20th century marked a significant shift in societal norms and values and, most importantly, the role of fashion in the livelihood of young people. As post-war economic prosperity swept across Western countries, young people began to assert their identities and express their individuality through distinctive styles that broke away from traditional fashion trends. Movements such as the Beat Generation in the 1950s, the counterculture of the 1960s, and the punk rock scene of the 1970s introduced rebellious aesthetics that challenged the status quo. This is commonly known for being the first formal manifestation of modern trends. The youth now led fashion consumption, and brands began to recognize the importance of appealing to younger consumers.

The unprecedented rise of fast fashion

Fast fashion as we know it today is mainly the product clothing conglomerates that were able to successfully integrate different stages of the supply chain into a quick-response manufacturing system. These systems were first developed by Spanish retailer Zara and spread throughout the globe, enabling firms to respond to trend changes in a timelier manner. Simultaneously, youth culture became even more prominent with the rise of social media and networking services. The combination of factors sets the stage for firms to maximize productive efficiency and create as many new styles as possible in an effort to appeal to rapidly changing consumer tastes and preferences. As a result, a large proportion of clothing is often left unsold and disposed of in landfills. These trends created a society where waste and pollution plague the 21st century. As mentioned in the introduction, textile purchases in the EU generated approximately 270 kg of Carbon Dioxide emissions per capita. Worsening climate change and health risks from widespread pollution have consequentially resulted in legislators putting greater importance on resolving the environmental impacts of fast fashion.

Major Parties Involved

China

China is the epitome of mass production and rapidly changing trends. The nation plays a pivotal role in the fast fashion industry as the largest producer, consumer, and exporter of textiles. The country is known for its highly efficient manufacturing infrastructure that enables fast fashion brands to produce garments at an unprecedented scale and speed. Many prominent fast fashion retailers, including Zara, H&M, and Forever 21, rely heavily on Chinese manufacturers to meet their demands for trendy, affordable clothing. An article by Good on You estimates that 65% of the world's clothing is produced by China. This staggering statistic is also the cause of inconceivably high levels of greenhouse gases being released from Chinese factories, intensifying climate change and other environmental issues.

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

The United Nations Environment Programme is a subdivision of the United Nations responsible for environmental issues, providing advice to various nations and helping coordinate adequate responses. Although the entity does not directly engage in resolving the impacts of fast fashion, the UNEP is known for crafting articles and publishing statistics on the matter. In addition to this, the UNEP created the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion in 2019, aiming to foster collaboration between different UN agencies to identify gaps in existing solutions and present findings to promote government responses.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

A common approach taken by legislators and organizations in mitigating the environmental impacts of fast fashion is the creation of certification and standards for firms. A prime example of this is the OEKO-TEX STeP certification. Sustainable textile certifications, like OEKO-TEX, address the issue of harmful chemical usage in textile production lines and promote social responsibility. These certificates ensure that the garment supply chain of a company meets established environmental and social standards. Consumers and manufacturers are then able to make more informed choices about the sourcing of raw materials and the extent to which certain textiles are harmful to the consumer and the environment. Similar to OEKO-TEX is the Bluesign certification, a standard that helps producers establish sustainable production lines. Being one of the strictest standards in the industry, the firm partners with various brands, manufacturers, and chemical suppliers to create safer workplaces and textile products that have a lessened negative environmental impact. The European Union (EU) has taken similar measures to promote sustainable textile management. New regulations, such as the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation and waste shipments regulation, aim to make textile producers responsible for the costs of waste management and different environmental consequences. However, such measures fail to address the systematic issues of overproduction and consumption. Consumers are not incentivized to purchase certificated products, and for producers, the costs associated with receiving certification outweigh private benefits.

An attempt by consumers to resolve the issue of fast fashion is through movements. Movements such as the slow fashion movement and anti-consumerism movements both promote a similar notion: consumers need to reduce clothing consumption, choose higher-quality garments, and value craftsmanship. They are successful in spreading awareness about the negative consequences of fast fashion and helping consumers make more informed consumption choices. However, like certification systems, they have not reached mainstream adoption and do not tackle existing consequences, including high carbon footprints and climate change.

Possible Solutions

- One possible solution to address the environmental impacts of fast fashion is the implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) legislation. In essence, Extended Producer Responsibility is a policy approach that holds producers accountable for the environmental impact of their products from design to end-of-life management. Some core principles of EPR that nations could adopt include the internalization of end-of-life costs, the promotion of sustainable design in the fashion industry, and corporate transparency and accountability. A form of this could be the implementation of mandatory fees,

where producers are required to pay a fee based on the quantity of clothing produced. Such fees could then be reallocated to recycling programs and environmental protection organizations. This approach tackles the fundamental problems of the textile industry: a system where most business models are reliant on high volumes of new products and the incorporation of planned obsolescence. The linear business model is a direct cause of high waste in the fast fashion industry, and addressing this issue would disincentivize wasteful production practices. Similarly, governments could incentivize firms to establish take-back schemes through subsidies or tax breaks. A take-back scheme is where firms encourage consumers to send products or materials that have reached the end of their useful life. Such measures would drastically increase recycling in the textile industry, reducing the quantity of goods that are disposed of in landfills.

- Another possible solution to address the environmental impacts of fast fashion is ensuring the transparency and accountability of production and distribution processes. A significant roadblock for consumers and legislators in the fast fashion industry is a lack of transparency and information failure, where individuals are unable to make informed consumption choices. Consumers who are aware of the environmental consequences and human rights violations that occur in fast fashion supply chains are more likely to change their spending patterns to one that resorts to more ethical practices. Governments could aid the situation by mandating that brands disclose information about their supply chain, including factory locations, supplier names, and processing facilities. Alongside this, a standardized reporting framework would ensure consistency and comparability across brands. Environmental impact transparency is also crucial. Mandating disclosure of environmental performance data, such as water usage, waste management, and carbon footprint, would make firms more cautious about environmentally hazardous practices and human rights violations.

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Appendix or Appendices

- I. www.investopedia.com/terms/f/fast-fashion.asp (Investopedia)

This website provides an overview of fast fashion, including its benefits, drawbacks, and different industry leaders. The article is an excellent introduction for those unfamiliar with the issue of fast fashion.

- II. <https://studentbriefs.law.gwu.edu/ilpb/2021/10/28/fast-fashion-getting-faster-a-look-at-the-unethical-labor-practices-sustaining-a-growing-industry/> (International Law and Policy Brief)

This website provides an overview for delegates wishing to develop an understanding of the issue of fast fashion from a global perspective. The article also contains a wide range of useful statistics, including textile consumption, labor malpractices, and environmental consequences.