**Fast Fashion Hurting the Planet
and Becoming More
Sustainable**
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Fast Fashion Hurting the Planet

Abstract

Although fast fashion makes clothing very accessible and affordable it is also hurting the environment. Something we don't think about often is how the things we do every day can affect the planet. Fashion is one of the leading industries polluting the environment and we should come together to make it more sustainable.

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Fashion can be traced back all the way to the 17th century when Charles Fredrick Worth first sewed his name into garments. Since then we have seen tremendous growth and innovation year after year within the fashion industry in many different ways. We have made it easier to transport around the globe, create new trends and wear a variety of clothes in our everyday lives. Although these are all incredible feats that make our living much easier there are unfortunately severe consequences to these actions. Fast fashion is rapidly causing a negative impact on our planet and we need to work together in order to slow down or negate these negative effects. Fashion companies all around the globe should switch to a more sustainable way of producing clothing. While most companies are mostly looking at profits, there are many ways to keep or increase revenue while simultaneously lending a hand to the environment. Major amounts of pollution are caused by the fashion industry and by choosing sustainability you are helping lower everyone's carbon footprint.

There are several different variables and industries that contribute to the pollution affecting the planet but some would find it very surprising that the fashion industry is one of the leading causes. The fashion industry is responsible for 10% of humanity's carbon emissions and 20% of wastewater. "Every year a half a million tons of plastic microfibers are dumped into the ocean, the equivalent of 50 billion plastic bottles. The danger? Microfibers cannot be extracted from the water and they can spread throughout the food chain" (MacArthur). This goes to show that the rapid pace of fashion can even have an effect on the food we eat and how it can potentially be irreversible. If we do not stay mindful of all the ways fashion can have a negative impact, then in the future we may see the fashion industry as a whole start to slowly decline. Water is also heavily used in the making of many clothing items and creates huge amounts of wastewater. For example, a piece of clothing that we may take for granted in our day-to-day lives

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is a pair of jeans. Jeans are a huge fashion staple and we see someone wearing a pair every single day. However, according to figures from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "it takes 3,781 liters of water to make a pair of jeans, from the production of the cotton to the delivery of the final product to the store. That equates to the emission of around 33.4 kilograms of carbon equivalent." Some people may look at these numbers and say it's just one pair of jeans but if so then they wouldn't be looking at the bigger picture. It is estimated that over a billion pairs of jeans are made each year which would mean that in a single year there is over 3.34^{10} kilograms of carbon being emitted from the jeans industry alone.

Another way that fashion was an effect on the environment is with the material used to make the clothing. Statistics from the Ellen MacArthur foundation showed that out of the total fiber used for clothing, 87% of it ends up being incinerated or disposed of in a landfill. 87% is a very large portion of fabric to end up just being tossed away into a landfill which can instead be properly repurposed and turned into a number of different styles of clothing. When we (the consumer) decide to throw away clothing we are actually doing much more harm than good for the environment. Many of the materials used to create most of our clothing does not decompose and the ones that do can take up to 200 years to do so. "During the decomposition process, textiles generate greenhouse methane gas and leach toxic chemicals and dyes into the groundwater and our soil" (Brown, 2021) which in turn can have a severe impact on the plants and wildlife living in the surrounding area. To make matters worse, over the past 20 years the amount of clothing that gets thrown away each year has doubled from 7 million tons to 14 billion tons. Without a plan put in place to help make fashion more sustainable, it is highly likely to triple in the upcoming years.

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One of the main things we have to blame for a non-eco-friendly fashion environment is fast fashion. "Fast fashion is the term used to describe clothing designs that move quickly from the catwalk to stores to take advantage of trends. ... Fast fashion describes low-priced but stylish clothing that moves quickly from design to retail stores to meet trends, with new collections being introduced continuously (Hayes, 2019). The fact that fashion is everchanging creates the reason for many fashion designers and brands to continuously put out new lines and trends. Fast fashion is affordable for the consumer, profitable for retailers, and is fast/efficient. While these new trends and fashion lines help keep us up to date in the latest fashion wear this is not healthy for the world. With fast-fashion retailers such as H&M, Forever 21, Zara, and FashionNova there is a fast turnaround for fashion. Retailers such as these put on several different clothing lines within just a few months alone. Previously we would see many brands roll out a new line with the coming of a new season but it would seem that now they are coming out with something new every few weeks. "The fashion industry's operating model is exacerbating the problem by stepping up the pace of design and production. Collection launches are no longer seasonal; the replacement of clothing inventories has become much more frequent." (UNEP, 2019). This new fast-paced production of apparel is causing more and more clothes to end up in landfills instead of being recycled or even donated. Study shows that the average person today purchases 60% more clothing than people in 2000. Many teens and young adults have admitted that a lot of the clothes they purchase only get worn once or twice and never get worn again. So not only does the average consumer today purchase more apparel but they also discard more too which leads to a lot of waste created by just clothing.

In the fashion industry, the main goal for the majority of brands and retailers is to make a profit. To increase profit many businesses will offer incentives to encourage the customer to buy

more such as reward points, discounts, express shipping, and more. Now while many of these things dont necessarily affect the planet some of them do and one of them is shipping. In this advanced and modern era that we are currently living in, we take for granted many things. One of those things is that we can sit at home and order something directly to our house no matter where in the world it is. Although the majority of vehicles used to transport items around the globe do play a part in carbon emissions they are not the main source of the problem. The problem is with the overuse of packaging that is used to ship our items from one place to another. "Each form of packaging uses a lot of resources like energy, water, chemicals, petroleum, minerals, wood, and fibers to produce. Its manufacture often generates air emissions including greenhouse gases, heavy metals, and particulates, as well as wastewater and/or sludge containing toxic contaminants." (FoodPrint, 2021). When we order clothing from our favorite brands we don't realize the excessive use of plastic, paper, cardboard, etc that is used most of the time. Granted, some of the time it is used to ensure that our items are received in good condition but there is still an overuse of these products. If fashion industries pull back on the number of resources they use on shipping then there is great potential to be one step closer to sustainability in fashion.

Now while on one hand there are a lot of negative impacts that the fashion industry has, there are also many positive impacts and ways to help change this current situation. One of the first steps we can take into making the fashion industry much more sustainable is to use and incorporate more eco-friendly fabrics into the clothing we wear. Many fabrics such as polyester, spandex, and nylon take a very long time to degrade and are very harmful to the planet. Fashion designers should begin to use more biodegradable textiles such as organic cotton, bamboo, hemp, and linen in their clothing so it does not end up sitting in a landfill for hundreds of years. The

next step the fashion industry can take to sustainability is reducing the packaging used to ship items. When processing an item to be put out for shipping, companies should start to think much more eco-friendly. Small articles of clothing should not be put in huge boxes and wrapped in ample amounts of plastic. Instead, they should not only use the correct box size to reduce materials used but also switch to boxes made out of recycled material. Fashion companies should also try to make it that all items that you ordered are shipped at the same time in the same packaging instead of putting out multiple shipments in multiple packages. This will greatly help offset carbon emissions and help reduce the excess use of shipping materials. Lastly, all fashion brands and consumers should try their best to recycle their clothing. "In the industry full of options, repairing, and redesigning is the trendiest fashion. Not only consumers, but even brands and retailers are also following the 5 R's of fashion – Reduce, Repair, Recycle, Repurpose, and Reinvent" (Fibre2Fashion, 2020). All retailers should follow the 5 R's of fashion to help reduce their carbon footprint. By repurposing some of their old styles or apparel that didn't sell, they will be saving a lot of valuable resources used in the process. Many consumers go through their old clothes and end up throwing away the stuff they no longer like or wear but instead they should look to donate them. Donating clothing will help keep clothing from sitting in a landfill for years and also help out others in need. Something that I believe should be incorporated into all retail stores is to be able to give them old or unwanted clothes to be recycled. After giving the store your clothes they should give 10% or 20% off your next purchase to help as an incentive to not be wasteful and encourage the repurposing/recycling of clothes. This act helps the consumer, the company, and the environment to help go down the road of sustainability.

With the evolution of fashion came forth the inadvertent harm to the planet. Ready to wear fashion has made it so that fashion companies feel the need to constantly create new lines

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for people to wear. We need to come together so that retailers will put an end to the rapidly

moving trends of clothes. Brands that have already taken the first step into becoming more

eco-friendly are Pangea, Patagonia, H&M, and The North Face. By doing small things like

donating our clothes, using biodegradable fabric, and cutting down on packaging we can start to

see a much more sustainable fashion world.

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