

# More Than Just an Impulse Buy: The Intersection of Fashion and Sustainability

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No other feeling can replicate the confidence of being comfortable in one's own skin by wearing their favorite outfit. Fashion is one of the top indicators of self-expression, as an outfit can provide insight into others' personalities, interests, or sense of self. For example, someone with a distinct personal style may feel the most comfortable and confident with themselves as their style could reflect their interests or associated communities they may be a part of. This is also depicted in celebrity culture, with notable figures including pop sensations Christina Aguilera and her distinct, bling fashion in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the eclectic garb of Harry Styles of the present. These pop singers have a style that reflects the type of music they make, creating a certain aesthetic and energy that reflects themselves and their work. There are a plethora of styles that people may describe themselves best as, which may range from vintage, goth, athletic, or minimalistic, just to name a few. However, with the growing influence of TikTok which started during the COVID-19 pandemic, there came a new discovery of various fashion aesthetics that were progressively more niche, such as "cottage-core" or "coastal granddaughter". The desire to fit into a specific fashion niche became trendy, causing a higher demand for certain clothing styles and therefore allowing fast fashion retailers to begin pushing out new designs onto their websites at a rapid pace. This allows retailers to sell mass-produced apparel for low prices that hardly took any time to get from an idea onto the market of clothing sales. According to Miguel Angel Gardetti and Ana Laura Torres in their edited book, *Sustainability in Fashion and Textiles: Values, Design, Production and Consumption*, sustainability as a concept, however, is mainly associated with the environment and its impact on future generations (Eds. Gardetti and Torres 3), which is why implementing truly sustainable garments for regular consumption is an extremely high expectation set on those of all socioeconomic statuses and the fashion industry because of the acquisitive practices of both consumers and businesses, leading to overconsumption, exploitative labor practices, and environmental damage.

## Defining the Problem

Due to corporate greed along with the greed of consumers wanting to participate in the latest trends to the highest extent, it would be a challenge for sustainable fashion to make its way into major retailers. Fast fashion is the major production model most common today, contributing to the overconsumption of apparel. The term "fast fashion" was coined by Anne-Marie Schiro in her article written in 1989 for *The New York Times*, "Fashion; Two New Stores That Cruise Fashion's Fast Lane," to describe the newest up-coming fashion retailers, Express and Zara, and their rapid process of coming up with a design to selling it in stores within 15 days (Schiro). Fashion has had a major presence in the U.S. economy since the Industrial Revolution, however, the fast fashion we know of today similarly aligns with the rise of major clothing retailers such as Zara, Express, and H&M. Prior to these brands, Vertica Bhardwaj and Ann Fairhurstup state in their journal article, "Fast fashion: response to changes in the fashion industry," that clothing retailers used fashion and trend forecasting to predict consumer demand before the actual time of consumption until the late 1980s (Bhardwaj and Fairhurstup). Before the term "fast fashion" was used, garments were known as ready-to-wear, which Bhardwaj and Fairhurstup continue to say that ready-to-wear clothing is manufactured six months before it is available to the market, with Fall/Winter collections being in progress while the Spring/Summer collection has already been released, and vice versa (Bhardwaj and Fairhurstup). Although ready-to-wear and fast fashion items are both manufacturable, ready-to-wear does not nearly create the amount of waste fast fashion

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does due to having a longer production time, and therefore allowing for less textile and garment waste. Fast fashion apparel is deeply rooted in modern society as this practice has been steadily increasing in popularity for more than 20 years. The low prices and trendy pieces are enough for many consumers to purchase more clothing at a higher rate to fulfill the satisfaction of participating in the newest trends.

Social media is responsible for the end of the 20-year fashion trend cycle. According to Ni Kadek Yuni Diantari's journal article, "Trend Cycle Analysis on Fast Fashion Products," the trend cycle consists of five stages. The first is an introduction of a fashion style, typically introduced through marketing, celebrities, or fashion week. Next is the rise, where the introduced style starts to become a trend and is more accepted. Once the trend has made its way into the full general public, this is the peak saturation of the trend, until oversaturation occurs and the trend starts to decline, mainly due to consumers who want to feel more unique than mainstream. Finally, once a trend dies off, the trend enters obsolescence. It is now outdated to the public, and consumers are likely already starting to follow another trend (Diantari 26-27). The trend cycle is a continuous cycle that typically takes over the course of a few years, and is applicable to all fashion trends. For example, low waisted pants reached their peak in the 2000s until they became obsolete in the next decade. Currently in the 2020s, we are starting to see a rise of low waisted bottoms begin to trend and gain more traction in its popularity, typically amongst those in Generation Z. However, because of social media, fast fashion is causing the trend cycle to be completed at a rapid pace, where instead of it taking a few years for a trend to rise and fall, it is only taking months or even weeks for a trend to complete the cycle. This is mainly due to social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, as these platforms are an effective way for microtrends to easily gain popularity amongst users. A rapid trend cycle causes an influx of microtrends, and therefore an increase in consumption and textile waste, since the only way big brands can keep up with microtrends is through fast fashion practices.

As a result of the fleeting trend cycle, unethical labor practices are another result of corporate and consumer greed within the fashion industry. More specifically, a brand known as Shein is among the worst regarding ethics and the environment. In an article titled, "Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control: Inside Shein's Sudden Rise," written by Vauhini Vara, Shein is a Chinese owned business that has a leading valuation of \$100 billion within the fashion sector, surpassing top brands such as Zara and H&M combined. An interview with Shein's executives revealed that Shein's mass production allows them to introduce 1.3 million new styles onto their website in a 12-month period, while Zara lists about 35,000 and H&M lists about 25,000 within a year (Varas). When looking at these numbers, we realize that Shein, and fast fashion in general, plays a massive role in providing inexpensive clothing for consumers of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Shein's extreme measures of launching new styles allow for the exploitation of laborers. Channel 4's UK documentary *Inside the Shein Machine: Untold*, exposed the hidden conditions of Shein factories that are located in Guangzhou, China, essentially finding that there were many local labor violations, including employees, who were mainly female, working up to 18 hours every day with only one rest day per month and getting paid per clothing item made (*Inside the Shein Machine: Untold*). This documentary only showed a fraction of the multiple factories within the area, however, with the evidence presented by the documentary, there is no doubt about the concern of the other factories experiencing the same conditions. Channel 4 had to hide cameras in the production sites in order to see the truth behind this fast fashion giant, and exposes how fast fashion is not as great as it seems to be. The poor labor conditions show how fast fashion companies abuse their female-dominated workers who are barely working for a living wage job when they are paid per finished clothing item. Employees must keep up with their work in order for them to satisfy the demand expected of the company.

The exploitation of workers is not a new practice within the fashion industry. For example, Peggy Blum's textbook, *Circular Fashion: Making the Fashion Industry Sustainable*, discusses how 19th century textile production introduced the birth of sweatshops, where labor was long, harsh, and workers were poorly compensated (Blum 14). This parallels the harsh conditions of fast fashion production today, where laborers are being exploited for cheap clothing. The similar conditions of past and present labor environments depict

how corporations are powered by greed for profits through satisfying consumer demand. As fabric became readily available, the introduction of ready-to-wear garments that follow standardized sizings rather than having clothes custom fitted to the individual would prompt the first openings of department stores. Yet as sweatshops were a labor environment that indicated exploitation, poor conditions continued to remain present as the switch from custom-made clothing to ready-to-wear progressed with the growing fashion industry. Blum continues to state that “[M]anufacturers took advantage of foreign labor. With little protection... These poor conditions tended to be worse in large cities where sweatshops could be hidden in slums. In 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, in which 146 garment workers were killed, led to a public outcry that prompted new reform measures” (Blum 16). Businesses will hide their unethical labor conditions in order to get the clothing output they desire to get away with labor regulations. Furthermore, Zara has recently been exposed in 2021 for unethical practices: “Over the past few years, Zara has had numerous allegations filed against them for their forced labour and ‘slave labour’ conditions in its factories across countries such as Spain, Brazil, Argentina and Myanmar,” (“Fast Fashion at a Human Cost”). Poor pay and hazardous conditions are easily hidden in developing countries, and big corporations do not care unless they get caught. The ill treatment of garment workers has been present since the fashion industry has been industrialized. As long as the fashion industry progresses, these practices will continue to remain prevalent in any area of fashion.

The high demand and consumption of apparel is causing the environment to be confronted with more pollution than ever. As fashion is one of the top polluting industries, the Geneva Environment Network states that “fashion production makes up 10% of humanity’s carbon emissions, dries up water sources, and pollutes rivers and streams. What’s more, 85% of all textiles go to the dump each year, and washing some types of clothes sends significant amounts of microplastics into the ocean” (“Environmental Sustainability in the Fashion Industry”). With the increasing use of fast fashion, these harmful effects will continue to be detrimental to the environment and wildlife. Since many of these clothes have been poorly manufactured with synthetic fabrics, the amount of wear the clothing article would have is significantly less than an item that was made with an emphasis on quality instead of quantity. In an interview Varas conducted with Li Peng, who worked closely with the founder of Shein, it was stated that “the clothing was cheap, and that was the point. ‘We were going for low margins and large quantities,’ Li told me. Plus, he added, the low prices kept expectations about the quality down” (Varas). Low quality clothing results in less wear due to low durability, causing consumers to buy even more cheap clothing in order to replace a fleeting trend. This business model is contributing to the abundant textile waste and microplastic pollution, and when paired with mass consumption due to social media and advertisements, employing more sustainable and ethical practices in fashion production sites would be an extreme challenge, as more clothing sales equate to more profits for acquisitive business owners.

Social media platforms and influencers are introducing and sharing a diverse range of trends and styles, contributing to overconsumption as consumers move from trend to trend. In an age where social media is extremely influential in spreading information, it also has an exceptional role in provoking consumers to splurge on an entirely new wardrobe, which can be made possible by purchasing low-cost clothing from fast fashion brands. Fast fashion is not meant for long lasting and good quality clothing, and is more geared toward current trend cycles that would become obsolete in a few months or less. Fast fashion brands like Shein, BooHoo, ASOS, and Zara, benefit immensely from the collapse of the 20-year trend cycle. Consumers are participating in large-scale consumption and are continuously donating or discarding clothes that are out of style, replacing them with extremely affordable clothing that aligns with the newest trends, which are generally supplied by fast fashion brands. Upon viewing all of the low-priced clothing that are sold online, it appeals to all consumers of low to high income groups. People of lower socioeconomic status are now able to afford more cute and trendy clothing, and people of higher socioeconomic status are able to buy more variations of a garment they already own. Anyone could be drawn to the cheap prices of fast fashion apparel. Why would consumers purchase a \$20 shirt when they could purchase a shirt for \$3.85 on the Shein website? Customers are saving money, yet they are costing Earth’s future by contributing to extreme fast fashion companies in order to temporarily satisfy

the current trend. Those who overconsume are typically consumers of a higher socioeconomic status, as they could easily spend more money to buy hauls of cheap clothing. For example, a TikTok video filmed by the username “divvybobivvy,” had a caption that read, “i spent \$500 on shein,” and portrayed a young white teenage girl digging through a massive box of clothing that was filled to the brim with each item separately enclosed in plastic bags. Her video accumulated 1.9 million likes and 13.5 million views, and includes comments from users who have also spent hundreds of dollars on Shein (@divvybobivvy). The extent of spending this TikTok user underwent on a fast fashion brand is extremely unnecessary and adds to needless waste that could have been prevented. Instead of purchasing an entire wardrobe of poor-quality clothing, she could have spent her money on higher quality clothing that contributes to less waste and less exploitative labor practices. However, due to greed, wanting to participate in the latest fashion, or oblivion regarding the harmful effects of fast fashion, this user— along with many others— will continue to overconsume from extremely fast fashion brands.

Fashion is an extensive community comprised of individuals who seek individuality, have a love for the art, or are involved in subcultures. Recently within the past two decades, fashion has evolved to become more accessible and trendier due to the advances in clothing production, known as fast fashion. Fast fashion brands are detrimental to consumers, laborers, and the environment due to the acquisition of fashion companies and consumers alike. The influences of social media aid in widespread fashion trends and overconsumption, following the collapse of the trend cycle. Not only does this affect consumers, but it also harms the environment as textile waste accumulates from consumers who overconsume poor quality garments, as well as other environmental damages such as air and water pollution. The high demand for certain clothing pieces and increased popularity in fast fashion brands also allow these businesses to exploit factory workers. Fast fashion is a destructive practice within the fashion industry because it harms people and the planet.

## Historical Analysis

Fashion is a language that can be used to analyze history and can indicate the social, political, and economic climate of the time. For example, history museums with fashion exhibitions showcase more than just pretty ruffles, lace, and silk. It allows the museumgoer to obtain a sense of what occurred in that era and the expectations set on society. As opinions and ideas on fashion change throughout time, this social construction is much deeper than aesthetics; it affects the environment and ideals of the time, while reflecting the state of the economy. Fast fashion practices increase substantially from the 1990s to the present, thereby acknowledging the history of how clothing was produced, readers can increase their understanding of the harmful extent to which textile resources, exploitation of labor, and trends have on the environment and society.

In the early half of the 18th century during colonial America, clothing was made slowly. Since the country had just been colonized by Europeans, the colonists’ main goal was to build a society from the ground up. Therefore, Blum describes how colonists spun their own fabric from plant and animal fibers, making a limited amount of clothing due to the tedious and lengthy process (Blum 9). This era portrayed true sustainability as materials were raw and clothing was handmade. Because of the limited resources and the time and effort it took to spin cloth, there was hardly any textile waste since it was easier to reuse and recycle material instead of spinning more cloth. Fabrics made out of natural materials such as cotton, wool, and silk are sustainable because they are biodegradable and are a much better alternative to textile production than “man-made materials such as synthetic fibers (polyester, nylon, acrylic, etc.) or toxic chemicals used in textile processing and manufacturing which... do not fully decompose [at their end of life,] leading to an accumulation in the soil and landfills, leaching into waterways and compromising human, wildlife and overall ecological wellbeing,” (Eds. Gardetti and Torres 30). Synthetic fabrics are contributing to pollution because of their availability and low cost. Fast fashion apparel will typically be produced from synthetic fibers in order for costs to remain low,

as obtaining natural material for textile production would have a longer process, and would therefore increase the price of a garment for the labor. Nonetheless, when the state of the environment is at risk, textiles produced from natural resources are preferable to the synthetic fibers that are increasing pollution. The current highly advanced economy compared with the rudimentary economy of the early 18th century shows how fashion did not play a big role in the colonists' status due to the weak technology prior to the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution occurs in the second half of the 18th century and lasts for a few decades after. It included advancements in technologies such as the cotton gin, which Eli Whitney describes his invention in a letter addressed to Thomas Jefferson for a patent: "[T]wo persons will clean as much cotton in one Day, as a Hundred persons could cleane in the same time with the gins now in common use," (Whitney) and the spinning jenny, invented by James Hargreaves, is described by *The British Library*: "The machine used eight spindles onto which the thread was spun, so by turning a single wheel, the operator could now spin eight threads at once" ("The Spinning Jenny"). Such inventions mark the textile sector's growth and show the beginnings of mass clothing manufacturing. As the colonies continue to grow, the attitudes towards fashion transformed into a topic that became prevalent in American society.

Fashion had a much larger influence on society in the latter half of the 18th century when status and wealth started to evolve society's taste to uphold more opulent styles. Fashion reflects the state of the economy, as the demand for clothing increases with the growth of the colonies, correlating to the desired quality and flare of garments. While the cotton gin and spinning jenny were revolutionary inventions that expanded textile production, they eventually became insufficient in satisfying the finer tastes and demands of the colonists. American social hierarchies became prevalent in society through indentured servants, different religious groups, and wealthy landowners, causing fashion to be an important factor in allowing the colonists to distinguish themselves from one another. Kate Haulman's book "Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America," discusses how Britain prohibited the manufacture of goods in the colonies because of their desire to utilize the colonies as their source of raw material and the colonists' disinterest in investing time and energy into homespun fabrics resulted in the popularity of imported goods amongst the elite because of its utility and because it satisfied the high demand for clothing and textiles (Haulman 19). Fashion started to become an indicator of wealth as the elite could spend their money on imported goods and have clothing custom-made through seamstresses and tailors, separating them from slaves and indentured servants, who would only be able to afford to make their own clothes. The desire for the elite to be socially distinct corresponds to the actions of the elite today. By wanting to be different from the lower social classes, the wealthy will continue to create and look for new styles as long as the lower classes follow suit. This social distinction mirrors the actions of consumers who contribute to the decline stage of the trend cycle. A trend starts to decline based on the individuality complexes of those who create trends: they showcase the same need to be different from the majority. This continuous cycle of the lower class following the upper-class results in an accelerated trend cycle and overconsumption because of the clothing being bought by all consumers of each socioeconomic class.

This social custom observed in the past and present explains the trickle-down, up, and across effects. Georg Simmel, a German sociologist, analyzes the trickle-down effect through differentiation and imitation in his journal article for the *American Journal of Sociology*: "[A]s soon as the lower classes begin to copy [upper class] style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in turn differentiates them from the masses," (Simmel 545). This trickle-down effect essentially shows a vertical pattern of trends, starting with the elite and ending with the lower class, which also explains the actions of upper-class citizens in the latter half of the 18th century. In recent fashion news, Valentino, a major fashion house, showcased an eye-catching Fall/Winter 2022-23 runway full of monochromatic looks of their vibrant shade of "Valentino Pink". Eventually, this bright pink showed up in other luxury houses, such as Versace and Balenciaga, to mid-markets like Jacquemus and JW Anderson, and finally trickling down to low-end/fast

fashion brands such as Zara, Shein, and ASOS. On the other hand, Diantri summarizes the trickle-up effect as the opposite, with “the upper classes [imitating] the fashions of the lower classes; a new style or status symbol floats up rather than flowing down to the lower class. Subcultures create their unique style to differentiate themselves from other subcultures and the mainstream,” (Diantari 28). Fashion designer Vivienne Westwood is a prime example of this, as her self-named brand incorporates punk ideologies through each collection. Punk culture originated with the British lower class in the 1970s, which Westwood had been a part of, thus taking punk fashion and ideologies from the streets to the runway, therefore popularizing the punk movement. Finally, Diantri summarizes Dwight E. Robinson and Charles W. King’s theory of the trickle-across effect as a “new style that flows horizontally within the social classes rather than vertically... Evidence for this theory occurs when designers show a simultaneous view on prices ranging from high-end to low-end ready-to-wear,” (Diantri 28). Trickle-across is a fundamental process for mass distribution, as brands that appeal to different socioeconomic classes offer a certain item in multiple price ranges. Aviator sunglasses, for instance, demonstrate a trickle-across effect as there are many options available in each price range from low to high-end. These fashion theories allow trends and consumer patterns to be studied as they exhibit an increase in consumerism, which contribute to the textile waste that accumulates through overconsumption and poor-quality clothing.

As the Industrial Revolution progressed, an increase in technological advances allowed for the production of ready-to-wear items. Once the colonies gained independence from British rule after the Revolutionary War, textile production quickly became produced in factories at the turn of the century due to rapid industrialization. Cloth production was steadily increasing at a cheaper rate, albeit under poor conditions. For example, Blum discusses how 19th century textile production introduced the birth of sweatshops, where labor was long, harsh, and workers were poorly compensated (Blum 14). This parallels the harsh conditions of fast fashion production today, where laborers are being exploited for cheap clothing. The similar conditions of past and present labor environments depict how corporations are powered by greed for profits through satisfying consumer demand. As fabric became readily available, the introduction of ready-to-wear garments that follow standardized sizings rather than having clothes custom fitted to the individual would prompt the first openings of department stores. Yet as sweatshops were a labor environment that indicated exploitation, poor conditions continued to remain present as the switch from custom-made clothing to ready-to-wear progressed with the growing fashion industry. Blum continues to state that “[M]anufacturers took advantage of foreign labor. With little protection... These poor conditions tended to be worse in large cities where sweatshops could be hidden in slums. In 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, in which 146 garment workers were killed, led to a public outcry that prompted new reform measures” (Blum 16). Businesses will hide their unethical labor conditions in order to get the clothing output they desire to get away with labor regulations. For example, as I previously discussed, Zara was exposed for the unethical practices they hid from the public, including forced labor in degrading factories across developing countries (“Fast Fashion at a Human Cost”). Poor pay and hazardous conditions are easily hidden in developing countries because of less government regulation, and big corporations will choose to do business in these countries to achieve an emphasis on profits rather than quality and ethics. The ill treatment of garment workers has been present since the fashion industry has been industrialized. As long as the fashion industry progresses, these practices will continue to remain prevalent in any area of the fashion industry.

As the fashion industry continued to grow, the switch from clothing made in the U.S. to clothing made overseas resulted in the expansion of fast fashion. Stephanie Vatz’s newspaper article for *KQED* discusses how “A successive wave of trade liberalization policies in the 1990s, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, effectively wiped out most import restrictions and duties on foreign-made clothing. American retailers increasingly looked to suppliers in the Global South for all manufacturing needs,” (Vatz). An increase in fast fashion began in the 1990s, right when import regulations were less restrictive. Since the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, labor regulations in the United States are stricter regarding wages, working

hours, and safety. As a result, department stores are choosing to import clothing for a smaller price, showcasing their greed for sales. However, corporate greed is reciprocal to consumer greed, as consumers are purchasing massive hauls of fast fashion and allowing department stores to continue imports on fashion.

The result of fast fashion allows harmful standards of environmental damage, exploitation of laborers, and overconsumption. Throughout American history, the roles within the clothing and textile sectors depict similarities: the elite from the past demonstrated social distinction, which is also seen through the higher socioeconomic citizens of the present. Additionally, the exploitative labor practices of the past compare with the labor practices that have been exposed today. Studying the fashion industry in the colonial era, pre-industrial revolution, and post-industrial revolution makes way for the understanding of how the industry has expanded and how consumers play an important role in trends.

## Advocacy

In an age where social media is being used more than ever, fashion trends can rapidly reach many areas with the click of a button. This makes it especially easy to spread clothing styles and where to buy them, allowing for overconsumption as users continue to post about and follow these trends. With social media allowing for the end of the 20-year trend cycle and therefore contributing to poor labor conditions and environmental damage, advocacy surrounding fast fashion includes making sustainable and ethical purchases to reduce the horrors behind the fast fashion industry. Just as social media is spreading the idea of overconsuming unnecessary items, social media can be used to counteract overconsumption by creating an anti-trend. Instead of users being influenced by creators trying to sell them a look, users should promote de-influencing and decrease purchases from fast fashion brands and only purchase clothing that is necessary. Utilizing the same medium to spread fast fashion awareness ensures that the same users who are viewing content that promote fast fashion can also view content that promotes sustainable alternatives to shopping, such as secondhand clothing. It is ultimately the consumer's choice to make their own decisions regarding their spending habits and style, however, taking advantage of social media's widespread reach can help bring awareness to the perils of fast fashion, and may allow viewers to enable less consumption.

The effects of social media on the fashion industry caused the collapse of the 20-year trend cycle, along with overconsumption due to the microtrends that occur as a result. This results in an accumulation of textile waste in landfills and the release of microplastics into the environment because of the increase in trending styles and the desire to fit in. Not only does fast fashion harm the environment, but it also harms garment workers, who are oftentimes exploited and work in hazardous conditions for little pay. These problems that arise from the fast fashion sector are harmful to both the environment and garment workers. However, these burdens can be more widespread within public knowledge with the aid of social media to advocate for environmentally conscious consumerism and an improvement in labor conditions and operations. This is then evaluated under practicality, specifically for businesses and consumers.

Given the ethics fast fashion companies choose to follow, labor conditions may be improved when exposed to the public. As a result of Channel 4's documentary exposing Shein's factory conditions in Guangzhou, China, Bella Webb's article "Can \$15 million overhaul Shein's supply chain?" states that "Shein has pledged \$15 million to upgrade its supply chain over the next three to four years, and \$4 million per year to step up surprise auditing of its suppliers," (Webb). Shein is moving forward in the right direction to decrease unethical labor practices, however, they only began making these policy changes once they were exposed for millions to see. Thus, if fast fashion brands continue to be exposed, they may be inclined to increase funding towards a more ethical business model, as shown through Shein's actions. On the other hand, the action taken after being held accountable for an unfavorable practice is ultimately up to the brand, as Zara was exposed for using slave labor in developing nations and claimed against the use of slave labor, opting to not enact any change in their labor force ("Fast Fashion at a Human Cost"). As shown by Shein, fast fashion companies are able to make

the changes to improve fast fashion policies and labor, however, they must choose ethics over sales in order to see real change occurring within this highly exploitative industry. In contrast, Zara swept any unethical claims against them under the rug and ignored public opinion. Due to the nature of which fast fashion was created, fast fashion is a policy and not just the result of a fast-paced market. Fast fashion was made to promote consumerism by bringing fashion to a larger market. In order to keep up with the demand for the newest trending styles, corporations need to produce garments at a rapid pace for them to sell at a cheap price, which means cheap labor and cheap textiles are needed. Fast fashion will likely not disappear because of how affordable and accessible it is, therefore, the best solution for businesses to follow is transparency. If businesses make their labor practices known to the public, it brings more awareness regarding the production of fast fashion, allowing consumers to choose if they want to continue to support fast fashion, while ensuring that human rights are not compromised.

Consumers will have to change their mindsets on fashion and purchases in order to see a change in fashion as a whole. Fiona Harris, Helen Roby, and Sally Dibb's scholarly journal article, "Sustainable Clothing: Challenges, Barriers and Interventions for Encouraging More Sustainable Consumer Behaviour," states, "While clothing has been classified as a basic human need (Maslow, 1943), for many people clothing choices are motivated by their need for identity (Max-Neef, 1992) and esteem (Maslow, 1943). Consumers construct their social definition through the meanings encoded in their clothing choices (Dodd et al., 2000). This has been reported across different age groups" (Harris et al.). Despite its literal sense, clothing is revealing. Clothing can infer status, personality, hobbies, and cultural stereotypes. It is a tool for achieving self-expression, and therefore personal style. Personal style will help an individual from purchasing the newest trends through their own likes and dislikes. However, despite obtaining a personal style, there are many other barriers that disable consumers from sustainability. Harris, Roby, and Dibb continue to say that consumers must be able to refrain from following fashion and regularly buying a lot of clothing, repair clothing rather than discarding it, and look past the stigma and stereotypes of re-wearing clothes and not having a large wardrobe (Harris et al.). Consumers must realize their behavior towards fashion and how they can change their harmful practices by overcoming these barriers. The trend cycle depicts that the masses will understand and follow what is cool and what is not cool. If the majority of consumers realize the dangers of fast fashion, this will lead to changes in overconsuming clothing and shopping in favor of the environment.

TikTok has been used to promote overconsumption through the popularization of microtrends that lead to an oversaturated market of specific clothing styles. It has proven to reach a large audience through the millions of views and likes a viral video can accumulate. Therefore, if TikTok is the media causing consumers to overconsume, TikTok can also be used to reduce overconsumption by convincing the masses to overcome the barriers Harris, Roby, and Dibb mentioned. Instead of a new trend being named every few weeks by creators and influencers, TikTok creators can de-influence the masses into purchasing more clothing. In a TikTok posted by fashion writer and analyst Mandy Lee, the caption provides a summary of her video's content: "De-influencing, anti haul, and revisiting a trend forecast. 'De-influencing' to me is about arming folks with knowledge, and trying to facilitate conversation, ideas and critical thinking when it comes to personal style, consumption, cultural context, and fashion trends" (@oldloserinbrooklyn). Essentially, the role of de-influencing is an important aspect of the shopping experience the consumer must recognize. Following the collapse of the 20-year trend cycle, consumers should take a moment to understand and come to terms with their personal style as a way to decide on a purchase, asking themselves if the sole purpose of purchasing is to follow a trend to fit in. The quest for personal style is non-linear, and this causes consumers to experiment with and buy many types of styles. The dangers of social media and fast fashion have caused an influx of microtrends and overconsumption, however, if users are viewing videos that inform and educate users through de-influencing, consumers can then make the choice to spend their money based on a video promoting fast fashion consumption, or save their money based on a de-influencing video, educating users on the poor quality, planned obsolescence of a particular trending item.



Shopping from secondhand retailers is a great way to eliminate textile waste. In-person options include thrifting, hand-me-downs, going to flea markets to support small vendors, and going to curated vintage or secondhand stores. In contrast, online options include websites such as eBay, Poshmark, The RealReal, Vestiaire Collective, and Thredup. Shopping secondhand prevents unwanted clothing from being dumped in a landfill, as the English proverb states: "One man's trash is another man's treasure." Secondhand clothing has the same affordable price tag compared to shopping fast fashion. While fast fashion provides clothing with a similar price tag, the planned obsolescence of their on-trend clothing will cause consumers to only wear that certain item a few times before it starts to break down. Furthermore, because of the rapid trend cycle, clothing styles with short-lived popularity will eventually be found in thrift stores due to the nature of the consumer wanting to follow the newest trends and getting rid of anything that is obsolete. This is what de-influencing will prevent, as consumers will end up saving money if they take a step back to decide if they really need a certain item, refraining from impulse buying.

Fast fashion rules the fashion industry as a business model and consumer preference due to low costs and trendy styles. However, with the use of social media, fast fashion is proving to be harmful in the ways that it is causing the end to the 20-year trend cycle with the rise of microtrends. This is leading consumers to overconsume clothing that becomes obsolete in a short frame of time, worsening fast fashion's effect on the environment and garment laborers. However, by using social media to create an anti-trend and combat overconsumption, there will be more common knowledge on the harms of fast fashion and consumerism.

## Future Outcomes

Creating change at the consumer level is the first step in improving the conditions of labor and environmental destruction due to social media promoting overconsumption. However, the actions of consumers will not be enough to see real change if businesses do not contribute to the consumers' efforts. The main goal of the fast fashion business model is profit driven, emphasizing quantity over quality to create clothing that enables consumers to view fast fashion as disposable and easily replaceable. Corporations and consumers both have contributed to the problems in production and environment, therefore society as a whole must work together to end greedy business and purchasing practices in order to see change within the fashion industry.

In a profit-driven economy, fast fashion corporations will turn a blind eye towards ethical and sustainable fashion. Gracia Ventus's article, "It's The Economy, Stupid!: The Rise of Neoliberalism and Its Control on Fashion," writes how the sportswear brand Nike took advantage of the low labor costs in Asian countries in the 1970s and 1980s. With this, Nike and many other brands are taking production overseas and do not have to worry about wages and working hours as their main goal is to meet goals. If the country's government where production occurs interferes with their production, the brand will find a new location to continue this business model (Ventus). Without government regulation, businesses can easily get away with labor exploitation and produce garments at low costs, which is the goal of fast fashion companies in order for them to satisfy consumers and gain profits. Overseas production will continue as long as deregulation occurs. Corporate greed is the main factor that is prohibiting sustainability and ethics from being implemented in the fashion industry, as Ventus also discusses how "The typical fashion company today spends less money on labour and product development than on marketing and advertising campaigns. The value of the product no longer lies in the scarcity of textile or labour intensity or aesthetic value, but rather on an artificially-stoked desire and artificially induced shortage" (Ventus). With corporations focusing on their goal to meet production targets and profits, they turn a blind eye toward labor and wages in developing countries. For example, an e-commerce brand like Shein, may promote their clothing to their targeted audience by promoting their clothing through sponsorships and influencer marketing through sending influencers clothes to post in. As a result of the successful marketing done by these corporations, consumers fall into their trap in order to achieve their look, continuing to fuel overconsumption. While consumers are at their own fault when they choose to overconsume,

the corporations are also at fault as they made a problematic system that puts consumption and profits on a pedestal in order to get ahead in the economy.

The methods corporations undergo to combat global crises will translate into how they will handle unethical and unsustainable practices in the future. In Jerónimo Montero Bressán's journal article, "From Neoliberal Fashion to New Ways of Clothing," he states, "With the recession that followed the 2008 financial collapse, a combination between increased competition and stagnated consumption... has taken the clothing industry to a point in which companies increasingly resort to the acceleration of product turnaround in order to expand their sales (Bressán 208). Essentially, as companies tried to sell apparel in a competitive, oversaturated market, consumers were not buying clothes due to the recession. Because consumers were not buying clothes, companies began to rapidly create new styles in order to attract consumers to buy their clothes that differed from what other brands were selling. The 2008 recession shows how businesses play a huge role in the fall of the 20-year trend cycle. They are allowing customers to overconsume as a way to combat their problem of overaccumulation. This promotes a rapid trend cycle and a desire to buy the new styles these brands are pushing out to generate more sales and profit. As a result, Bressán analyzed how corporations would then have to invest in new technologies in order to keep up with the demand and reduce labor costs. One example is just-in-time personalization (Bressán 208). The main goal of corporations is to advance in the economy. This means that they must satisfy consumer demands and promote overconsumption. Just-in-time personalization is a technology that enhances the customer experience through e-commerce by showing personalized recommendations while they are shopping online. Once you press on a certain item to view, the website may show you other items that are similar. This aids in the encouragement to buy more clothing, allowing customers to overconsume.

Corporations had to handle the Covid-19 pandemic differently from the 2008 recession. Bressán's scholarly journal continues to say that with Western and Asian countries relying on each other for fast fashion production, the pandemic forced Western buyers to cancel their clothing orders made through their relationships with Asian manufacturers, causing some factories to close down due to bankruptcy, leaving many workers to be jobless (Bressán 209). As a result of the United States going into a lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus, consumerism crashed and affected the fashion industry negatively. If packages were unable to be delivered, stores were closed, and people were quarantined, the fast fashion agenda would not have been fulfilled and profits would essentially be nonexistent. However, the pandemic allowed people to connect with nature and the environment, as businesses were not open and it was not advised to be around others, especially in a closed setting. Su Yun Bae's journal article, "Pandemic and Post-pandemic Fashion Consumer and Business Trends," adds that since more consumers are connecting with nature, sustainability within the fashion industry is beginning to improve:

*An increasing number of fashion companies are looking into more sustainable business methods, from product designs to supply chain management (Le Rolland, 2022)... Many well-known firms, including Patagonia, Lululemon, Hugo Boss, and Steve Madden, operate their own secondhand or repair venues in response to customer trends and environmental concerns (Bae 122)*

Because of Covid-19, secondhand shopping is now more popular among consumers, and businesses are starting to see how consumers are paying more attention to the environment, and are taking advantage of it by implementing sustainability initiatives such as providing repair and upcycling, as well as allowing customers to bring in old clothing to recycle material. After the pandemic, more environmentally conscious consumerism may continue to rise, and companies may continue to put more focus on sustainability. As for the fast fashion laborers, unethical labor may decrease, following the closing of Asian factories during the beginnings of the pandemic. Instead, workers may be replaced by technology so that companies do not have to face backlash with being exposed for continuing poor labor conditions post-pandemic, as more consumers are in tune with

the ecological crisis. Workers will be left jobless; however, the poor standard of labor will decrease as a result. Analyzing consumption pre- and post-Covid-19 allows scholars to predict the sustainability initiatives of both businesses and customers, along with the ethics of fast fashion production overseas.

The corporations are responsible for creating the fast fashion model, promoting consumption, and putting profits before ethics when it comes to production. The consumers are responsible for allowing these corporations to impact their purchasing decisions, as a result, aiding in the fall of the 20-year trend cycle. However, with combined efforts to improve, there may be a positive future for the fast fashion sector.

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