

# Rapidly Changing Fast Fashion Trends Dents Ecology

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**Abstract**—Fast fashion, inexpensive and widely available of-the-moment garments, has changed the way people buy and dispose of clothing. By selling large quantities of clothing at cheap prices, fast fashion has emerged as a dominant business model, causing garment consumption to skyrocket. While this transition is sometimes heralded as the “democratization” of fashion in which the latest styles are available to all classes of consumers, the human and environmental health risks associated with inexpensive clothing are hidden throughout the lifecycle of each garment. From the growth of water-intensive cotton, to the release of untreated dyes into local water sources, to worker’s low wages and poor working conditions; the environmental and social costs involved in textile manufacturing are widespread. In this paper, we put forward that negative externalities at each step of the fast fashion supply chain have created a global environmental justice dilemma. While fast fashion offers consumers an opportunity to buy more clothes for less, those who work in or live near textile manufacturing facilities bear a disproportionate burden of environmental health hazards. Furthermore, increased consumption patterns have also created millions of tons of textile waste in landfills and unregulated settings. This is particularly applicable to low and middle-income countries (LMICs) as much of this waste ends up in second-hand clothing markets. These LMICs often lack the supports and resources necessary to develop and enforce environmental and occupational safeguards to protect human health. The phrase “fast fashion” refers to low-cost clothing collections that take off current luxury fashion trends. Fast fashion helps satisfy deeply held desires among young consumers in the industrialized world for luxury fashion, even as it embodies unsustainability. Trends run their course with lightning speed, with today’s latest styles rapidly trumping yesterday’s, which have already been consigned to the trash bin. This paper addresses the inherent dissonance among fast fashion consumers, who often share a concern for environmental issues even as they pamper in consumer patterns antithetical to ecological best practices. The clothing production has almost doubled since 2000 and sales have gone up by almost 60%. The fashion industry needs to urgently address its unsustainable practices. Environmental sustainability has become a centerpiece for managers working across industries that have negative impact on the environment, and the fashion industry is not an exception. The increasing public awareness of environmental issues during the last decade has urged clothing retailers and manufacturers to adopt practices that cause less harm to the environment.

**Keywords:** luxury brands, fast fashion, sustainability, quality and consumer behavior.

## Introduction

Clothes are undeniably indispensable in daily life that their presence has been taken for granted. However, it is not so widely known that the apparel industry is one of the largest industrial polluters, second only to oil (Sollano, 2017). The increasing public awareness of environmental issues during the last decade has urged clothing retailers and manufacturers to adopt practices that cause less harm to the environment (Chen & Burns, 2006). It is apparent that the issues concerning environmental sustainability in the fashion industry have received much attention among both the press and especially the academia. Sustainable development has become a responsibility rather than a mere trend after the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was introduced by United Nations at the start of 2016 (www.un.org). Among the 17 Goals, already five of them directly address the environment. Indeed, environmental sustainability has become a centerpiece for managers working across industries that have negative impact on the environment, and the fashion industry is not an exception. Just last year, a film named “River Blue” was released, exploring how rivers and waterways have been heavily polluted by the textile industry and affected the lives of many people (River Blue, 2017). The processing of materials and textiles as well as the manufacture and distribution of clothes have altogether put an extremely heavy strain on the environment. Specifically, the advent of fast fashion in the last couple of decades as a response to changes in the fashion industry has further exacerbated the issue with its low cost and flexibility in design, quality, delivery, and speed to market. Many fast fashion firms have attempted to mitigate their environmental impact through numerous sustainability initiatives, which have brought favorable outcomes overall considering the environmental performance indicators that these companies report on

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review seeks to perform a structured review of available literature concerning the environmental

sustainability issue particularly in fast fashion, a phenomenon that has emerged in response to changes in the fashion industry. Definition of Sustainability The concept of “sustainability”, also known as “sustainable development”, was originally defined by the United Nation’s World Commission on Environment and Development as the capability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs .However, the interpretation of sustainable development from a corporate perspective is sometimes rather different managers mainly associate corporate sustainability with the economic performance, neglecting the other two, and focus on the maximization of shareholder value, market share, and innovation (Bansal, 2002). Sustainability can be perceived differently depending on each organization’s strategy, whether as “a compliance issue, a cost to be minimized, or an opportunity for competitive advantage” (Hubbard, 2009: 181).The concept of Triple Bottom Line Sustainability is believed to be based on three interconnected pillars, namely economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social justice, which can also be recognized as the 3Ps –people, planet, and profit (Elkington, 1997; Bansal, 2002; Elkington, 2013.The triple bottom line of 21stcentury business”, in 1997 (Elkington, 2013). He strongly believed the TBL to be something that individual businesses and gradually the entire economies would have to perform when the 21stcentury was approaching Hubbard (2009) also held the same opinion when he claimed that measuring social and environmental performance was not a straightforward task as they were specific to each firm or industry and usually quite difficult to be quantified. Nevertheless, the TBL is still popular among many big businesses; exemplars include General Electric, Unilever, Proctor and Gamble, and 3M (Slaper and Hall, 2011). They do not adopt an index-based TBL, but they do measure their sustainability performance . After all, the flexibility of the TBL allows companies to employ the concept according to their needs. These concepts of sustainability and triple bottom line play a crucial role for clothing retailers and manufacturers, as they do not exist in a vacuum but rather in a circle with various stakeholders, and their decisions and corresponding actions inevitably have impacts on those stakeholders. In view of the increasing public concerns of social and environmental problems, industry practices are bound to undergo changes (Turker & Altuntas, 2014. However, Aakko & Koskennurmi-Sivonen (2013: 16) maintain that recycling materials consumes energy for the mechanical or chemical processing of fibers and respinning them into new yarns, which means it is “a way of managing waste, but not a way of reducing it”. Another issue associated with textile waste is the release of microplastic fibers, or microfibrils, during domestic laundry of synthetic fibers, particularly polyester (Bruce et al., 2016; Hartline et al., 2016; Pircet al., 2016). Microplastics, plastic particles smaller than 5 mm, are a new pollutant found in freshwater and marine environments (Andrady, 2011; Hartline et al., 2016).

### **Western fashion brands**

Western fashion brands—from Tommy Hilfiger to Nike to Zara—have recognized the enormous opportunity the Indian market opens up, and have been rushing in to woo Indian consumers. India’s economy is expected to grow 8% a year until 2022, and the Indian middle class is expected to expand at 19.4% a year over the same period, outpacing China, Mexico, and Brazil. According to a report by Business of Fashion and Deloitte, India’s fashion market will be worth \$59.3 billion by 2022, making it the sixth largest in the world, on par with the U.K. and Germany. India’s meteoric growth is dovetailing with a growing awareness of how the apparel industry’s pollution—from plastic waste to carbon emissions—is reaching a breaking point, both in the country and globally. A Nielsen study from eight years ago showed that Indian consumers were already becoming more conscious of environmentally friendly fashion practices, and this awareness is only growing. Groups like the Worker Diaries, which advocates for the welfare of workers in the region, and Fashion Revolution India, which pushes for sustainable and ethical practices in fashion, are helping make ethical and sustainable issues more visible. India has a huge influence on how our fashion is made globally. Also a huge consumer market, Fashion Revolution India writes on its website. It encourages Indian consumers to ask fashion companies to explain where their clothes come from through social media—and reports it has received responses from over 1,000 brands so far. And even as America pulls out of the Paris Climate Agreement, India has doubled down on its commitment to joining the other nations of the world in cutting carbon emissions. India is the third highest polluter in the world after China and the United States but is committed to absorbing 2.5 billion to 3 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub> through planting trees, achieving 40% renewable energy by 2030, and reducing the intensity of greenhouse gas emissions based on its GDP by a third below its 2005 levels. According to a recent United Nations report, India is on track to meet the first two of these goals ahead of this deadline, reflecting the government’s dedication to averting a climate disaster. It’s important to note that on a per capita basis, India is still only the 128th in terms of emissions, and 300 million Indians don’t have access to electricity. As its economy grows, more people will move into the middle class and have access to goods that contribute to the world’s pollution, including fashion. As the number of consumers grows, it’s arguably a critical time to introduce eco-friendly products. As fashion’s biggest European and American brands enter the Indian market, selling sustainability is not just the ethical thing to do—it also makes good business sense. This is part of the reason that global giants are pitching themselves to Indians as eco-friendly brands. At the same time, as they rapidly expand, it’s become clear that to truly tackle the looming threat of climate change (to which the fashion industry contributes mightily), brands need to rethink not only what they are selling customers, but also how much.

### **Global Brands in India**

The American denim brand Levi's was one of the earliest American fashion labels to enter the Indian market in 1995. The brand has been working to lower its environmental footprint globally, by reducing carbon emissions and using lasers to finish jeans instead of chemicals. Indian consumers are aware of the importance of such sustainable practices and are more likely to shop from brands that make clothes ethically. In Levi's stores broadcasted messages about its sustainability goals, like its plan to reduce carbon emissions across its offices, retail stores, and distribution network by 40% and use 100% renewable sources in its own facilities by 2025, or its new technique for finishing jeans that requires less water—which it made it open source, in the hopes of saving 50 billion liters of water by 2020.

H&M, a Swedish brand, was a far newer player in the Indian market. In 2015, it opened its first store in New Delhi, but now has more than 40 stores throughout India. It's not only in big cities, where wealthier, more globalized consumers live. H&M is working to introduce the concept of fast fashion in India—but it's making the case that inexpensive, on-trend clothes can be made ethically and sustainably. The company is working to use entirely recycled or sustainably sourced materials by 2030, and totally offset its carbon footprint by 2040. India is one of the largest producers of cotton in the world, and many Indian consumers will be familiar with the horrific stories of entire villages in the Indian countryside being poisoned by the chemicals used in the cotton-growing process. By 2020, H&M aims to source all its cotton sustainably—which it defines as using organic cotton, recycled cotton, or cotton certified by the Better Cotton Initiative, which helps farmers grow cotton in a way that reduces environmental stress. Like Levi's, H&M uses its tags to stress its efforts. Sustainability and circular fashion has gained a lot more attention here over the past few years. Organizations—including the H&M Foundation—are working to develop technologies that will be able to separate the many fibers that are used in fabric blends. But H&M is already working to collect clothes from customers, which are either given to people who will use them or taken apart to be recycled. And in that same period, the number of units of clothes sold annually has doubled from 50 billion units to 100 billion units. The reason we see so much waste happening is because we're producing more and wearing the clothes less number of times. Rather than selling more clothes that are marginally more sustainably made, a truly earth-changing solution would be to encourage consumers to buy fewer, more durable products. This may seem radical, but we've seen it work for brands like Patagonia, which mends customer's well-worn garments to extend their life, and Eileen Fisher, which eschews fashion trends to encourage customers to wear the same outfits season after season. While these brands haven't grown as fast as their more popular fast fashion counterparts, they are both successful, profitable businesses. A more radical approach to sustainability, both in India, and around the world, is for fashion brands to make durable products in classic styles.

As they expand into India, global giants have a chance to rewrite the book on fast fashion. That would be a much more effective approach to sustainability than a simple recycling bin.

The \$2.5 trillion fashion and apparel industry is an economic heavyweight. One of the largest consumer industries, it employs over 60 million people along its global value chain. For many emerging markets it is a stepping stone out of poverty with women making up over 70% of the supply chain. Consumers in the developed world have become used to fast fashion and cheap clothes as a throw-away commodity that mostly ends up in landfills. The average consumer today purchases 60% more clothing than 20 years ago. As concerns about water scarcity and climate change are on the rise, the industry's enormous environmental footprint has been moving center stage as well. By some estimates, the fashion industry is responsible for up to 10% of global CO2 emissions, 20% of the world's industrial wastewater, 24% of insecticides and 11% of pesticides use. In the absence of global rules or major changes on the consumer side, the fashion industry is now carefully exploring options on how to improve its social and environmental impact while successfully operating in a highly price-competitive environment. **The early 21st century** has been good to the apparel industry. Thanks to falling costs, streamlined operations, and rising consumer spending, clothing production doubled from 2000 to 2014, and the number of garments purchased each year by the average consumer increased by 60 percent. Fast fashion is now a large, sophisticated business fed by a fragmented and relatively low-tech production system. This system has outside environmental effects: making clothes typically requires using a lot of water and chemicals and emitting significant amounts of greenhouse gases. Reports also continue to emerge about clothing-factory workers being underpaid and exposed to unsafe—even deadly—workplace conditions, particularly when handling materials like cotton and leather that require extensive processing. Sales increases suggest that most shoppers either overlook or tolerate the social and environmental costs of fast fashion.

#### **Fast fashion leading to grave consequences**

Apparel sales have risen dramatically in recent years, thanks to several trends that appear likely to continue. Businesses have aggressively cut costs and streamlined their supply chains. This has caused the price of clothing to fall relative to the prices of other consumer goods. Shorter lead times for production have also allowed clothing makers to introduce new lines more frequently. Zara offers 24 new clothing collections each year; H&M offers 12 to 16 and refreshes them weekly. So it's crucial that we move towards researching and developing more sustainable materials because it's critical to the future of the fashion industry as well as the planet. **It takes almost 3,000 litres of water to make one cotton t-shirt.** Waste is one of the most pressing problems in the fashion industry. 100 billion products are being pumped out of

factories every year. One of the most striking examples of this is the Aral Sea which was once the world's fourth largest lake but has essentially dried up largely because of cotton farming. Fortunately, there are now innovative ways to dye clothes without having to use water which is extremely fascinating. **If the growth of the fashion industry continues along its current trajectory, by 2050, it could account for around a quarter of the world's total carbon emissions.** The fashion industry is one of the most globalized industries in the world in terms of the flow of goods, services and people but it's only over the past couple of years that the social and environmental impacts have been taken seriously by decision-makers because fashion always seems so frivolous. Over 100 billion products are being pumped out of factories every year and many of those products are made from synthetic materials that frankly take hundreds of years to biodegrade.. There are a lot of leaders investing in innovation but there are also a lot of laggards. Increased consumption patterns have created millions of tonnes of textile waste in landfills and unregulated settings. This is particularly applicable to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) as much of this waste ends up in second-hand clothing markets.

### Conclusions

In the two decades since the fast fashion business model became the norm for big name fashion brands, increased demand for large amounts of inexpensive clothing has resulted in environmental and social degradation along each step of the supply chain. The environmental and human health consequences of fast fashion have largely been missing from the scientific literature, research, and discussions surrounding environmental justice. The breadth and depth of social and environmental abuses in fast fashion warrants its classification as an issue of global environmental justice.

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