Julia Kipnis

Mr. Greco

English IV

12 December 2024

The True Price Tag of Fast Fashion

Flashy ads promising the latest styles at unbeatable prices flood your inbox. On instagram, influencers flaunt their trendy new outfits. You want to be fashionable don't you? The prices are unbeatable, and the thrill of purchasing new clothes is hard to resist. You rejoice in cheap, new clothes while your perfectly good outfit from last week lays in your closet, never to be worn again. Behind this stylish facade lies a different reality, one where factories are running day and night, releasing toxins, and clothes lay piled up and rotting in landfills. The pervasiveness of fast fashion stretches beyond your closet and contributes significantly to environmental degradation.

We live in a culture driven by constantly evolving trends, where a new aesthetic emerges every month. The innate nature of trend culture is a constant demand for new styles which in turn is the driving force behind fast fashion. In 2020, for example, the "Y2K" style surged in popularity. To meet the growing demand for clothing in this style, fast fashion companies such as Shein and Forever21 began mass producing low rise jeans and bedazzled tees. Though other companies offered quality clothing, consumers chose to purchase clothes from Shein and Forever21 due to their low prices, convenience, and trendy appeal.

Proponents of fast fashion argue that it has made clothing more accessible and affordable, allowing people from all income levels to enjoy styles that were once exclusive to the wealthy. Advances in globalization and technology have expanded the range of available clothing,

encouraging self-expression and cultural exchange. While I understand the appeal of affordable clothing and the importance of personal style, the environmental costs of fast fashion far outweigh these benefits.

Fast fashion has damaged our environment through surpluses of waste, excessive carbon emissions, polluted waterways, and deforestation. The damage fast fashion is causing is ongoing and may be irreparable.

Fast fashion operates on a model of mass production where companies often end up overproducing clothing. This overproduction leads to a massive surplus of garments that inevitably end up in landfills. Consumers also play a role by discarding clothing at alarming rates, with the equivalent of one garbage truck full of clothes being burned or dumped in a landfill every second (McFall-Johnsen). Companies intentionally design garments with a limited lifespan, using planned obsolescence to encourage continuous buying. Companies appeal to trends and make garments that are purposely designed to be of lower quality with a limited lifespan\ (Maiti). This manipulates consumers into feeling like they have no choice but to buy new clothes. More than 50% of fast fashion products are discarded within a year. Due to this, consumers lose around USD 460 billion annually. (Ellen MacArthur Foundation) Many garments are discarded after seven to ten wears. Due to the exploitative practice of planned obsolescence combined with ever evolving consumer culture, clothing utilisation has decreased by 36% between 2003 and 2018 (Clarke). These statistics challenge the claim that fast fashion saves consumers money. Consumers are actually spending more money due to the constant cycle of discarding and purchasing new garments. Overall, the massive amounts of waste generated by the constant cycling of clothing has contributed to overflowing landfills, an urgent global issue that is largely overlooked by consumers from wealthy nations.

Fast fashion's impact on water pollution is another critical concern. The use of toxic chemicals in dyeing and finishing garments pollutes rivers and water supplies, damaging ecosystems and the communities that surround them. Over 8000 synthetic chemicals are used in the process of treating fabrics. This requires using freshwater and then releasing the tainted water back into waterways (Nabeerasool). This includes chemicals such as mercury, lead, chromium, copper, sodium chloride, toluene, & benzene. Benzene specifically has been linked to causing cancer. Besides dyes, the material used to create garments also pollutes water.. "The fast fashion industry relies on synthetic materials that lower costs but do not biodegrade easily, such as polyester, acrylic and nylon" (Whitehurst et al.). These textiles are made with plastic materials which are toxic to the waterways that they inevitably end up in. Textiles based on these materials have the potential to release microplastics (<5 mm in size) into the environment during production and laundering (Fontana et al). Both the production and washing of polyester garments involve the release of microplastics, which pollute water sources and enter the food chain. Communities near these garment factories often face adverse health effects due to their proximity to waterways polluted with these chemicals and microplastics. One specific area impacted by water pollution due to rapid garment production is the Citarum River in Indonesia. There are around 2000 textile factories found along the river bed that are dumping chemicals directly into the river. It's been found that the main contaminants are lead, chromium, zinc, and polonium while lead concentrations are three times higher than the maximum allowance (RT Documentary). These contaminants have harmed the rice fields in the area and given the people who inhabit villages along the riverbed skin conditions and various kinds of cancers. Though we don't face the true burden of waterway pollution from our comfortable position in the U.S., our fellow humans in other countries do.

In addition to waste and water pollution, fast fashion significantly contributes to global carbon emissions. The industry produces 8-10% of global CO2 emissions, which is about 4-5 billion tons (Niinimäki et al.). To put this statistic in perspective, that's more than the total CO2 emissions of the entire European Union, which accounts for about 7.6% of global emissions (Center for Climate and Energy Solutions). The fast-paced production of clothing demands a huge amount of energy. The production of a single t-shirt produces 2.6kgCO2, and the production of a single pair of jeans produces 11.5kgCO2 (Niinimäki et al.). Fast fashion suppliers and manufacturers are based in countries with lackluster guidelines on green energy. Many of these factories rely on nonrenewable sources of energy for garment production and fiber cultivation. Textile manufacturing in China uses coal-based energy, emitting 40% more CO2 than textile manufacturing in Europe (Niinimäki et al.). Another example is conventional cotton cultivation in India, which emits 3.5 times more CO2 emissions than organic cotton cultivation in the U.S. (Niinimäki et al.). Besides the high emissions during production, the logistics involved in delivering these garments across the globe similarly emits massive amounts of CO2. The model of fast fashion relies on speedy deliveries and many companies opt for air and sea freight. Air and sea freight accounted for a combined total of 812 million tons of CO2 emissions in 2020 (Greene). The high carbon emissions associated with fast fashion pose a significant threat to our planet's climate health, we see this reflected in global rising temperatures, melting ice, increased extreme weather events, and general air pollution.

The production of textiles for fast fashion also contributes to deforestation as trees are used for fabric production, and forestland is cut down to make space for cotton farms. Each year, over 200 million trees are cut down to produce materials like viscose (Helwagen). Viscose is derived from cellulose fibers extracted from trees. Boreal and tropical forests are cut down to

make way for plantations of just one tree species to produce enough pulp to meet demand (Sampson). This reduces overall biodiversity in the forests impacted by this practice. Biodiversity is vital for supporting the health of ecosystems that we rely on. Rainforests are especially impacted with more than 300 million trees being cut down each year. Cotton farming also contributes to deforestation as a majority of the cotton used by fast fashion brands such as Zara and H&M originates from land cleared by illegal deforestation on the Cerrado biome in Brazil (Nemitz). The current area of cotton production in this biome is 1,935,000 hectares. This widespread deforestation not only destroys vital habitats for wildlife but also decreases the planet's ability to absorb carbon dioxide, further perpetuating global climate change. The destruction of rainforests for textile production reflects the industry's disregard for sustainable practices and its prioritization of short term profits over long term ecological stability.

The fast fashion industry's detrimental impact on the environment is indisputable. From overproduction and water pollution to carbon emissions and deforestation, the environmental costs of maintaining this unsustainable production model are overwhelming. While fast fashion may provide economic benefits in first world countries, such as affordable and accessible clothing, this gain is overshadowed by the harm inflicted on the environment and inhabitants of other parts of our world. There are ways to address the current issues. As a society, we can embrace more sustainable practices. This starts with a shift away from trend and consumer culture. Instead of purchasing newly produced garments, I suggest that people thrift their clothes, or even avoid purchasing clothes as often. This is not only environmentally friendly, but also wallet friendly. I also suggest that we choose to support environmentally conscious brands such as Tentree, which plants 10 trees for every purchase. As consumers, we have all the power to restructure our fashion industry by prioritizing quality garments over quantity, as well as

environmental sustainability over toxic fibers and rapidly delivered packages. Though we've benefited from the convenience of fast fashion, it's imperative that we keep in mind the true cost of cheap garments.

Works Cited

Berg, Achim, et al. "How the Fashion Industry Can Reduce Its Carbon Footprint.", *Mckinsey & Company,* 26 Aug. 2020 www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/fashion-on-climate.

Bick, Rachel, et al. "The Global Environmental Injustice of Fast Fashion." *Environmental Health*, vol. 17, no. 1, 27 Dec. 2018, pp. 1–4. *BMC*, link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7.

Center for Climate and Energy Solutions. "Global Emissions | Center for Climate and Energy Solutions." *Center for Climate and Energy Solutions*, 4 Jan. 2018, www.c2es.org/content/international-emissions/.

Clarke, Rebekah. "Fast Fashion's Carbon Footprint." *The Carbon Literacy Project*, Aug. 2021, carbonliteracy.com/fast-fashions-carbon-footprint/.

Ellen MacArthur Foundation. "Fashion and the Circular Economy." *Ellen MacArthur Foundation*, 16 Sept. 2019, www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/fashion-and-the-circular-economy-deep-dive.

Fontana, Giulia Dalla, et al. "Assessment of Microplastics Release from Polyester Fabrics: The Impact of Different Washing Conditions." *Environmental Pollution*, vol. 264, Jan. 2020, p. 113960, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.2020.113960.

Greene, Suzanne. “Freight Transportation.” *MIT Climate Portal*, 3 Feb. 2023, climate.mit.edu/explainers/freight-transportation.

Helwagen, Lindey. “Fast Fashion and Its Devastating Impacts on Forests Revealed.” *Earth Day*, 31 July 2023, www.earthday.org/fast-fashion-and-its-devastating-impacts-on-forests-revealed/.

Maiti, Rashmila. “Fast Fashion and Its Environmental Impact.” *Earth.org*, 5 Jan. 2024, earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/.

McFall-Johnsen, Morgan. “These Facts Show How Unsustainable the Fashion Industry Is.” *World Economic Forum*, 31 Jan. 2020, www.weforum.org/stories/2020/01/fashion-industry-carbon-unsustainable-environment-pollution/.

Nabeerasool, Akmez. “How Is Fast Fashion Polluting Our Water?” *Open Access Government*, 14 Nov. 2019, www.openaccessgovernment.org/how-is-fast-fashion-polluting-our-water/77704/.

Nemitz, Ellen. “Fashion Crimes: How Cotton Crops May Be Harming a Brazilian Biome.” *FairPlanet*, 4 May 2024, www.fairplanet.org/story/zara-hm-cotton-pollution-brazil-cerrado/.

Niinimäki, Kirsi , et al. “The Environmental Price of Fast Fashion.” *ResearchGate*, Apr. 2020, www.researchgate.net/publication/340635670_The_environmental_price_of_fast_fashion

RT Documentary. “Deadly Waters. Citarum: Indonesian River Keeps Textile Industry’s Dirty Secrets (Trailer).” *YouTube*, 20 May 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BoXfqVid0M.

Sampson, Eirini. “Fashion’s Footprint in Our Forests.” *SfS*, 2 Jan. 2022, www.sustainabilityforstudents.com/post/fashion-s-footprint-in-our-forests.

Shukla, Nikita. “Fast Fashion Pollution and Climate Change.” *Earth.org*, 21 Feb. 2022, earth.org/fast-fashion-pollution-and-climate-change/.

Whitehurst, Jetta, et al. “Fast Fashion’s Polyester Predicament, Quality Concerns.” *Fresh Take Georgia*, 25 May 2024, freshtakegeorgia.org/fast-fashions-polyester-predicament-quality-concerns/.