



To what extent has the fast fashion phenomenon increased the demand for a more sustainable fashion market?

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Abstract

The fashion industry has been one of the fastest growing industries in the world for the past few decades and leading the fashion industry is Fast fashion. The fast fashion phenomenon changed lives of those everywhere as it helped provide trendy clothes, fresh off the runway at what can be deemed extremely affordable prices. While it may seem like the perfect thing to hit the markets, no innovation can be this perfect. Aside from the trendy and stylish wardrobe, fast fashion has brought extreme harm and degradation of the planet, ripping off designers' hard work, inhumane conditions and low wages for workers who helped create the very product. Consumers are finally catching on to and beginning to protest the inhumane practices that fast fashion companies follow in the name of profit. This paper highlights the harmful effect of fast fashion companies and the need for such brands to adopt more sustainable practices. The paper also describes the relation of fast fashion brands with that of influencers and celebrities and how they help rocket the sales. Further it also suggests ways in which consumers can have a sustainable and guilt-free wardrobe and how they can create a demand for environmentally friendly products.

Keywords: Fast Fashion, sustainability, Low wage

Introduction

IS YOUR CROP TOP KILLING THE PLANET?

The fashion industry is the 4th biggest industry in the world. With its value exceeding 3 trillion dollars, it contributes a lot to the global economy in general, employing more than 300 million people per annum globally. This industry is no stranger to trends, however, one that shook it and arguably took the entire world by storm is

Fast Fashion. The term first heard in the 1990s, was coined by the New York Times to describe one of the biggest fast fashion brands available today, Zara (Saxon, 2021). “Fast” in its name comes from the fact that this type of attire comes very quickly and hits the shelves of some stores, taking inspiration from styles showcased in fashion weeks, runways and celebrities in general. Fast fashion sets the idea in the mind of consumers that a new and in vogue wardrobe is what defines style making them discontented with their closet and ramping up the urgency to want to buy more and more (Rauturier, 2022).

Fast Fashion seems to provide notable benefits to its consumers and may sound like a dream, however, the style comes at an environmental and ethical price. Because of the cheap materials used to make such garments, $\frac{3}{5}$ of all such items bought by a single consumer end up in the landfill alongside the already discarded 21 billion textiles that went into making the bulk amount of clothing lines every year (Silvestri, 2021). Not only is fast fashion responsible for land degradation but also for 20% of industrial water pollution (Crumbie, 2021). On top of the million nature-related issues, the fashion industry seriously violates moral conduct as well. There are countless horror stories of fast fashion brands exploiting their workers - whether it's poor wages or long hours of tremendous work, the list is endless. Some of the biggest contenders in the fast fashion market are Zara, H&M, Pretty Little Thing, Forever 21 etc. In this paper, I'll be diving deeper into the case study of H&M, a Swedish Fast Fashion brand founded in 1947.

However, the conversation around sustainability and fashion going hand in hand has been on the rise for the last few years. Many studies have found that consumers are now beginning to become more skeptical and firmer with the brands they buy from. Demanding a circular economy, fair wages for the workers, donating to thrift stores, reusing and reducing are just the tip of the iceberg, all one needs to make things better is to be willing to accommodate such small changes in their lifestyles. Many fast fashion brands are not willing to follow sustainable practices because sustainable fashion is costly, and the main ideals of fast fashion are cheap and fast clothing. But not all brands are following the same path. Levi's and Patagonia are prime examples of fashion brands attempting to make a change by introducing new recycling programmes and innovative clothing lines using eco-friendly materials. That being said, only 1% of all the clothes produced are recycled into new ones (The Business Research Company, 2020). Therefore, the current actions being taken are not enough, to bring about a difference, reform is needed, and it is needed before it's too late.

This paper aims to scrutinize the fast fashion industry whilst attempting to prove that this very phenomenon has caused customers around the world to demand more sustainability from the fashion industry. In order to do this, the paper will answer the research question “To what extent has the fast fashion phenomenon increased the demand for a more sustainable fashion market?”

Fast fashion - an introduction and discovery

As stated earlier, the term ‘fast fashion’ was first used to describe the clothes put out by Zara in the 1990s. Fast Fashion can be described as a type of clothing that is trendy, cheap and disposable (Chua, 2019), and is made in such a rapid manner that the standard turnaround time of six months, from runaways to consumers, is reduced to just a few weeks (Saxon, 2021). This is done so that these trends reach the markets when they are still in their prime. Though Fast Fashion was already well known to consumers, with the added influence from social media and influencer marketing, the demand for such fashion accelerated through the roof. Influencers, who started to gain popularity in the early 2010s, are those who have an “influence” on an audience by presenting their opinions and reviews of famous brands, movies, celebrities etc. Influencers are in abundance on social media and some of them are so popular that they have a following of millions. So, it isn't very difficult for them to sway their followers' opinion and convince them to buy something, regardless of its consequences on the environment. In fact, a survey carried out by the Fashion Retail academy found that more than half (54%) of the people surveyed believe that influencers have caused a rise in demand for fast fashion (Skeldon, 2020).

Influencers have always been known to wear fast fashion because of their in-styles, however, a new trend rising amongst them is collaborations with these brands. Some of these collaborations are done on a small scale, where the influencer earns a profit whenever someone uses a code provided by the influencer which gets them a discount (this leads to the garment being cheaper, ultimately resulting in even lesser wages given to the workers).

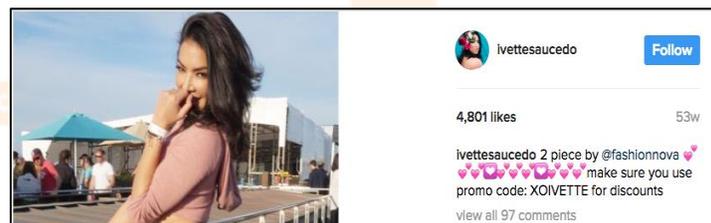


Figure 1: Example of an influencer using a referral code to promote fast fashion (Miranda, 2017)

This is one of the most widespread ways in which fast fashion brands get promoted. According to studies, the number of brand endorsement posts in 2020 exceeded a whopping 6 billion. In 2021, the influencer market was valued at an all-time high of 3.7 billion USD. Tiktok, a fairly new addition to the social media marketing sector, saw a massive increase in the number of influencers on the app, from 35.5 to 106 thousand (Statista, 2021).

However, the real problem starts when celebrity influencers with millions of followers start collaborating with fast fashion brands and putting out collections. For example, there was a recent collaboration of Megan Fox and Boohoo then Doja Cat, one of the biggest pop stars currently, put out her new collection with Pretty Little Thing. There are many such partnerships in today's world, however, this paper will be diving deeper into the study of one of the most successful ones. One of the best examples of the aforementioned is Cardi B's collaboration with

Fashion Nova. Cardi B, an American rapper, partnered up with FashionNova, one of the biggest leading fast fashion brands in 2018. The launch was widely successful, earning almost a million dollars in the first 24 hours. Since the first collaboration was so successful, FashionNova collaborated with Cardi B a second time, which broke the record of the first collaboration. The second collection sold out completely within minutes and gathered a revenue of more than a million dollars.



Figure 2: An image from the FashionNova x Cardi B campaign

Overall, Cardi B's reach and influence made FashionNova over ten million dollars (97.9 The Beat Staff, 2018). From the given figures, we can draw out the conclusion that these partnerships are very profitable for both parties. In fact, the campaign brought in so much demand that the brand had to make 5x more items (Hargrove, 2019), which unfortunately also means 5x the degradation.

The above is a prime example of an explicit collaboration between an influencer and fast fashion brand. However, is it possible that an influencer can earn profit without promoting or being an ambassador for a fast-fashion brand? Let's investigate the Mugler x Kim Kardashian x FashionNova controversy. On the night of February 17th, 2018 (My Life After Coffee, 2019), A-List celebrity Kim Kardashian West wore a stunning vintage Thierry Mugler cut out gown. But this one-of-a-kind stellar piece was listed on FashionNovas' website less than 24 hours after Kim wore it. Coincidence?



Figure 3: Kim Kardashian's original dress (left), The copied dress by FashionNova (right)

The fast fashion industry is not new to ripping off designs from both small and big designers. There are numerous such cases where fast fashion brands blatantly copy the hard work of designers. In this scenario, many rumors spread of potential leaks within the inner circle i.e., it was suggested that Kim or a close ally may have sent details of the dress well in advance of it being worn in public. This raises questions regarding the potential for influencers to deal under the table with fast fashion brands to benefit both parties but once again degrade the environment further.

A detailed case study of H&M – a fast fashion brand

There are a lot of brands in the industry that support fast fashion. There is more than 50+ major brands that sell/promote fast fashion. Such brands are notoriously known for violating human rights, workplace laws and social ethics. From long hours of unpaid labor (GAP, 2006) to sexual assault allegations (Victoria's Secret) (Rebecca, 2019), a lot of controversial allegations have arisen from the workplaces of such brands. However, I'll talk in more detail about one such brand, which is arguably one of the biggest, if not the biggest, fast fashion brands in the world. Dominating the fashion empire for the last 70 years, H&M is a Swedish fast-fashion brand founded by Erling Persson. However, they've had their fair share of controversies and still do to this day.

H&M has always been under fire for the amount of waste they generate in one year, which continuously adds to the earth's carbon footprint. It's been known to produce 3+ billion clothes in a single year (Segran, 2021). The clothes' trendy designs encourage the consumer to purchase them however because of the cheap quality, the consumer only wears them 7-8 times and then throws items out, adding to the piling heap of fast fashion products.

Furthermore, with affordability being one of the biggest selling points for this brands product, they need to ensure they are cutting down on its production cost. The ways in which this is done, however, highly suggest violation of moral code and basic ethics by H&M.

In lien with the above, H&M has also been accused of not paying its employees and laborers a living wage and making them work long days of around 15 hours. Not only this but H&M was also under heavy fire when many women working in the factories in India started to report cases of sexual assault, harassment, gendered bullying and much more after Jeyasre Kathiravel, a 21-year-old Dalit worker, was found dead in a field near the factory (Kelly, 2021). Her supervisor has been charged with her murder and many claimed that she also went through a lot of harassment before her demise. Many women stated that the verbal and physical abuse was done to make them work faster. They were expected to make a whopping 1000+ items in one workday.

H&M not only underpays their employees for their work, but they've also been known to steal many luxury fashion houses' and indie designer's work. For example, H&M was slammed for using Tori LaConsy's graffiti without giving any credit to her (Bhasin, 2012). It was copied detail by detail and when she contacted H&M customer service, she was told that they have a team of 100 independent designers and that her work did not influence any of their designs. However as seen in the comparison, this was surely not the case.



Figure 4: A side-by-side comparison of an H&M product and graffiti by LaConsy (Bhasin, 2012)



Figure 5: A side-by-side comparison of an H&M and Balenciaga product

H&M has been in hot water many times for copying luxury brands and one such instance is when it copied a stunning cutout bustier corset by Balenciaga (Fleming, 2013), a fashion house based in Paris. The main problem with this is that not only is the design basically the same, but it is also sold at the price of 51x less than that of the original - Balenciaga's bustier was \$1535 whereas H&M's bustier was retailed at \$29.99. This has an obvious impact on consumer demand as many individuals desire to have runway looks at these affordable prices.

Keeping all these controversies aside, we cannot ignore the fact that H&M in recent times decided to launch a sustainability campaign. Their campaign consisted of products made from recycled items like plastic. They even launched their circular fashion collection.

They claim to use sustainable materials for 65% of their product line. While it's a start, the 35% left still do a great deal of harm to the planet so while these efforts are definitely worth it, more needs to be done by all fast fashion brands. By 2030, H&M is supposedly planning to use only recycled or sustainable eco-friendly materials.

Sustainability in the fashion industry

With the increasing damage caused to the planet by fast fashion or the fashion industry in general, more and more people are getting informed about the harsh reality behind their wardrobe. People are now opening their eyes to the horrors of the industry and educating themselves as to how they can become ethical in their consumer habits. Social media is playing a major role in keeping consumers aware of different sustainable brands and what kind of brands to avoid. Instagram is a new hub for small sustainable brands and with the help of various engagement tools, many brands have been able to prosper in the pandemic. This is beneficial for the consumers as well as they can buy more ethically sourced and quality products without the guilt of harming the environment.

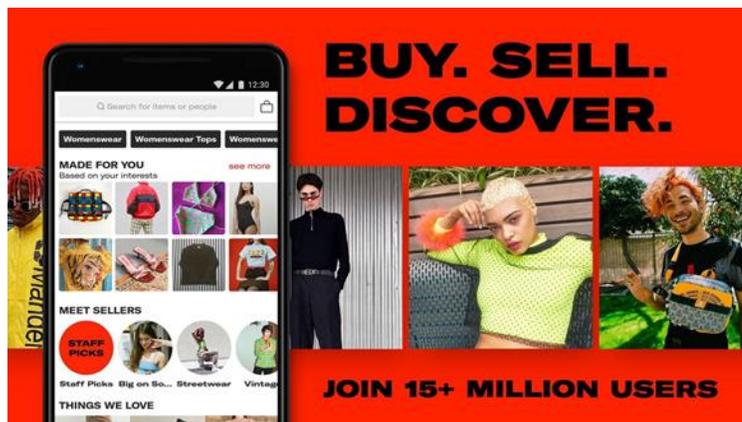


Figure 6: An example of an online second-hand store

During the pandemic, many people, especially Gen-Z, also started buying from second-hand and thrift shops. Thrift stores can be defined as stores that sell second-hand items, mostly clothes. People can either buy or donate such items. They are sold at huge clearance discounts since the motive isn't to earn any profit as most thrift stores are run with the purpose of charity. Some of the most popular thrift stores are Depop, Goodwill, Maeven Vintage etc. In fact, there was a 16% increase throughout 2020 in Gen-Z shoppers who buy second-hand (Holland, 2021). It has also been shown in studies that more than 40% of millennials and Gen-Z shoppers have bought from thrift stores (Holland, 2021b). Not only does thrifting benefit the environment, but it also helps with the burning holes caused in many consumers' pockets due to the fashion industry. Many young people are attracted to thrift shops solely because they can afford a cute and trendy wardrobe and they don't have to worry too much about their savings. It is also convenient for those who wish to clear out their closets or even their garage, kitchen etc. as thrift shops carry home appliances, furniture etc too. Thrifting is also very useful in finding such items that may have been discontinued (Weiss-Roessler, 2014).

However, whenever a concept goes viral on the internet, it is bound to attract opportunists. Because of the increasing sales, many resellers are also hopping on the bandwagon of thrifting. Many resellers are opening online thrift stores where they buy from local thrift stores in bulk and then resell at a higher price. This completely ruins the entire purpose of these stores which was to provide people with affordable clothing (The Finery Report, 2020). The one aspect of reselling that people enjoyed was that thrift stores were more available now. However, it wasn't enough to keep customers satisfied and they raised their complaints against the rising prices.



Figure 7: Gucci's new sustainable range

Apart from second-hand clothing, several companies are also taking on more sustainable approaches. Many luxury brands have taken pledges and launched campaigns where they use 100% organic materials and supplies. One such example is Gucci. Gucci's Off The Grid collection is a circular collection (Rauturier, 2021) that used renewable and bio-based materials only. Aside from this, Gucci's last year's and current year's collection also included items made from ECONYL, which is regenerated nylon made completely out of the ocean and landfill waste (Econyl, 2019). Not only that but all the items are packed and shipped off

in an FSC-certified recycled cardboard box and a recycled nylon dust bag.

Whilst there are many other brands such as Gucci, that are only just taking on sustainable business models after they have already been established. Some brands have stood for sustainable and eco-friendly principles since their existence – one such brand will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Patagonia - a case study of a successful sustainable fashion brand

Patagonia is an American retailer of outdoor fashion founded by Yvon Chouinard in 1973 (Patagonia, 2020). Their wide range of product line consists of outdoor gear such as insulated jackets, fishing and hunting gear, snowboards, alpine pants etc. and casual clothing as well for everyone including children too. They even sell consumable items that can be used while camping etc.



Women's	Men's	Packs & Gear	Kids' & Baby	Collections
Shop All	Shop All	Shop All	Shop All	New Arrivals
New Arrivals	New Arrivals	New Arrivals	New Arrivals	Workwear
Jackets & Vests	Jackets & Vests	Black Hole® Bags	Babies & Toddlers	Patagonia Best Sellers
Fleece	Fleece	Backpacks	Boys'	Capilene® Cool Tech Tees
Sweatshirts & Hoodies	Sweatshirts & Hoodies	Laptop Bags	Girls'	Fundamentals
Sweaters	Sweaters	Totes, Slings & Waist Packs	Browse Used	Technical Insulation Guide
Shirts	Shirts	Duffel & Travel Bags	Patagonia Kids	Hike Collection
T-Shirts	T-Shirts	Technical Packs		Rainwear
Pants & Leggings	Pants & Jeans	Water Protective Bags	Web Specials	Seasonal Inspiration
Snow & Alpine Pants	Snow & Alpine Pants	Water Bottles & More	Men's	Food + Drink
Shorts	Shorts	Sleeping Bags	Women's	Trade In
Dresses & Skirts	Boardshorts	Browse Used	Kids' & Baby	Used Gear
Overalls & Jumpsuits	Wetsuits		Packs & Gear	Books
Swimwear	Waders & Fishing Gear			Gift Cards
Wetsuits	Baselayers			
Waders & Fishing Gear	Underwear			
Baselayers	Socks			
Underwear & Sports Bras	Hats & Accessories			
Socks	Workwear			
Hats & Accessories	Browse Used			
Workwear				
Browse Used				

Figure 8: An image displaying the various products offered by Patagonia

While Patagonia might seem like a regular fashion retail brand, what really sets them apart from the other brands is that they've had a sustainable model since their very existence, before it was even 'trendy'. Patagonia is one-of-a-kind brands, which encourages its customers to not buy its products. This might seem like a peculiar statement however that is exactly what they did in their 2011 Black Friday campaign.



Figure 9: The 'Don't Buy This Jacket' campaign

This was a great marketing tactic used on consumerism and this campaign not only educated people about the 4Rs of the environment but also increased their sales by 30%. In addition to listing the importance of reducing purchases, the campaign also highlighted the amount of materials that are used in the production of a single jacket (for example, 36 gallons of water). This is important as it also educates the consumers about the harsh reality.

Apart from this campaign and their general attention to environmentally friendly practices, Patagonia also has a marketplace for their products where people can sell and buy second-hand Patagonia products. It is called the 'Worn Wear Program' and is a great way in which Patagonia makes sure that it remains circular, thus reducing wastage and advocating for thrifting.



Figure 10: Patagonia's Worn Wear Program

Taking it a step further, Patagonia's founder, Chouinard also imposed a 1% environmental tax on the company, where they donate 1% of their sales for the restoration of the natural environment (Patagonia, 2017). Patagonia has also joined hands with the Fair Labor Association, showing that their sustainability extends to human life as well as the planet.



Figure 11: Patagonia's Activism section

business model and even better high-quality products.

Now that the consumers of the new generation are becoming more conscious and learned, circular and sustainable business models won't be a rare occurrence in the coming future anymore (Spoljaric, 2018). Everyday buyers around the world advocate for ethical materials, animal welfare and fair treatment of garment workers. As I discussed earlier in this paper as well, many brands are also taking initiative to become more and more environment-friendly day by day.

So, if the demand for sustainable fashion is increasing at such a great rate, why is the slow fashion market increasing so slowly? One of the most common misconceptions and fear in the mind of consumers is that *sustainable fashion is expensive*. Understandably, many people are not able to afford sustainable fashion because of how pricey it is but the underlying problem is the cheap cost of fast fashion. If one buys from a 100% sustainable shop as compared to fast fashion, it will be expensive but, what most people don't realize is that they don't have to just start buying from such shops, they can just reduce their consumption. Going sustainable also means that one buys secondhand and thrifted clothing and takes great care of their existing pieces. Even a fast fashion item can be sustainable if taken good care of, with proper washing methods and getting them repaired instead of discarding them on the first tear (Joy, 2021). Also as mentioned earlier, people can rent, swap, and donate, whatever they want with their clothes as long as the items are not ending up in a landfill and reducing a buyer's consumption as the most sustainable wardrobe is the one that we already own (Christinee, 2020).

On the whole, even though the progress is slow, it is slow and steady and even the slightest improvement is a good improvement

Conclusion

The fast-fashion phenomenon has led to the demand for a more sustainable market. Fast fashion refers to the type of fashion that hits the stores very quickly after its designs have been showcased at runaways. Over the years it has contributed to over 300 million tons of waste in the landfills of the planet and consumers are finally opening their eyes to the horrors of the fast fashion industry and the environmental degradation caused by it. Not only does the fast fashion market impact the environment but it also does not follow a moral code: stealing and copying designs from other designers, terrible inhumane working conditions for the laborers with a minimal living wage. However, even after such observations come to light, the demand for fast fashion, in general, has not decreased by a lot because of how trendy and cost-friendly it is. Influencers also add fuel to the fire by promoting fast fashion brands as they get paid to do so. Many fast fashion brands, like H&M, have been under heavy criticism and bad spotlight recently and thus to change their image, they are starting their own green, ecological product lines and are becoming more inclusive in general. While these efforts are not sufficient, they still help the industry in moving forward, **progressing**.

With companies starting their own sustainable collections, thrift and second-hand stores are also gaining popularity now, especially amongst the younger generations as they are eco-friendly and pocket friendly. However, not all brands are new to the sustainability scene. Some brands, like Patagonia, have been sustainable since their very beginning. Nonetheless, there remains a common myth amongst consumers that sustainable fashion is pricey. While it is true to some extent, there are several ways in which one can stay green on a budget. Even though the journey to a sustainable fashion industry is a long one, one cannot disregard all the progress being made and it can be seen that, if consumers can create a demand for a sustainable fashion market, brands will have to provide the supply.

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