

FAST FASHION: TODAY'S TREND, TOMORROW'S TRASH

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How many of us have bought clothes that we do not really want or need, which we only wear once (some never worn) because it was irresistibly cheap and often obtained with just a click of a button? Clothes shopping used to be an occasional event - something that happened a few times a year, when the seasons changed, or when we outgrew what we had. However, about 20 years ago, something changed. Clothes became cheaper, trend cycles sped up, and shopping became a hobby. Enter "fast fashion" and the global chains that now dominate our high streets and online shopping. Fast fashion is a term that has become ubiquitous in the fashion industry over the past decade. It refers to a business model prioritising speed and low cost over everything else. Fast fashion brands churn out clothing collections unprecedentedly, with new items arriving in stores every week or even every day. This business model has revolutionized the fashion industry but has also come under scrutiny for its environmental impact, labour practices, and contribution to consumer culture. The most mentioned fashion brands on social media networks seems to have ruled over the internet culture in the past years, testifying to user interest in these fashion giants like Shein, Zara, H&M, ASOS, GAP, Primark, Forever21 and the list goes on.

It was all too good to be true in the oughties, where all these stores selling very cool, trendy clothing you could buy with your loose change,

wear a handful of times, and then throw away. Suddenly, everyone could afford to dress like their favourite celebrity or wear the latest trends fresh from the catwalk. Then in 2013, the world had a reality check when the Rana Plaza clothing manufacturing complex in Bangladesh collapsed, killing over 1,000 workers. That is when consumers really started questioning fast fashion and wondering at the true cost of those \$5 t-shirts.

Fast fashion is the term used to describe clothing designs that move quickly from the catwalk to stores to take advantage of trends. The collections are often based on styles presented at Fashion Week runway shows or worn by celebrities. Fast fashion allows mainstream consumers to purchase the hot new look or the next big thing at an affordable price.

It is undoubtedly that fast fashion is profitable for manufacturers and retailers. The constant introduction of new products encourages customers to frequent stores more often, which means they end up making more purchases. The retailer does not replenish its stock but instead, it replaces items that sell out with new items. Accordingly, consumers know to purchase an item they like when they see it, no matter the price, because it is not likely to be available for long. And because the clothing is cheap (and cheaply made), it is easy to get people back into stores or online to make fresh purchases.

Fast fashion became common because of

cheaper, speedier manufacturing and shipping methods, an increase in consumers' appetite for up-to-the-minute styles, and the increase in consumer purchasing power, especially among young people - to indulge these instant-gratification desires. Because of all this, fast fashion is challenging the established clothing labels' tradition of introducing new collections and lines on an orderly, seasonal basis. In fact, it is common for fast-fashion retailers to introduce new products multiple times in one week to stay on trend.

The strong point of fast fashion is clothes are affordable and not just any clothing, but innovative and stylish clothing. Even those of modest means can constantly buy smart new clothes, indulge in fun or impractical items, and wear something different every day without costing an arm and a leg. The democratization of fashion or stylish clothing - the action of making something accessible to everyone, has resulted in breaking away from exclusivity of the privileges. Now, everyone can look good, and fashion is no longer exclusively served to the rich and famous, fashion is for all.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to know that fast fashion's impact on the planet is immense. The pressure to reduce costs and speed up production time means environmental corners are more likely to be cut. Recent research has showed that fast fashion's negative impact includes its use of cheap, toxic textile dyes - making the fashion industry one of the largest polluters of clean water globally. The poorly made garments do not age well, but they cannot be recycled because they are predominantly (over 60%) made of synthetics. So, when they are discarded, they molder in landfills for years.

Aside from the environmental cost of fast fashion, there is a human cost as well. Fast fashion impacts garment workers who work in dangerous environments, for low wages, and

without fundamental human rights, apart from other abusive and exploitative practices. Further down the supply chain, the workers may work with toxic chemicals and brutal practices that can have devastating impacts on their physical and mental health - in short, a modern-day slavery.

Fast fashion also encourages a "throw-away" consumer mentality. That is why it is also called disposable fashion. Many fast fashionistas in their teens and early twenties - the age group the industry targets - admit they only wear their purchases once or twice. The speed at which garments are produced also means that more and more clothes are disposed of by consumers, creating massive textile waste. According to some statistics, in Australia alone, more than 500 million kilos of unwanted clothing end up in landfill every year.

As climate change has become a more widely shared concern, sustainability has become a focal and selling point for many fashion brands right now. It is hoped that not everyone is swayed by ultra-cheap prices for fresh-off-the-runway trends. Many believe that contemporary consumers, especially younger ones, have a heightened awareness of the impact that their clothing shopping habits can have on both the environment and human rights, with many opting for more circular and sustainable forms of getting their fashion fix: buying vintage or sustainable brands, swapping and repairing items, or the best-case scenario - just using less. But most importantly, as long as fast fashion is being created by these companies and still being sold in the amount and scale that they are being produced, there is always going to be someone who buys it since hopping for the best will not do the trick, drastic action needs to be taken.