

The Culture of Fast Fashion: Challenges and Sustainable Approach

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ABSTRACT

The fashion industry has evolved significantly over the last 2 decades. Fast fashion- the never- ending culture arises in the form of affordable, trendy and fast supply of garments in the market. Multinational giants are more focused on gaining profits, however, on the other side, they are also exploiting the nature and labour all around the world. This study is carried out to analyse the impact of fast fashion on our environment, how and to what extent fast fashion is polluting the resources like water, soil, humans, etc. It tries to explore what goes behind producing cheap and trendy garments; impact of severe potential issues; the continuous supply chain of destruction and how we as consumers, retailers and governing body can help minimise the repercussions of fast fashion. Findings suggest that consumers are not aware about the environmental impacts of fast fashion. Interestingly, after knowing about the fast fashion consequences, most of the respondents are ready to change the way they shop. They are also ready to substitute their fashion to the sustainable one. This study will also provide the insights of people (particularly consumers) on different aspects of fast fashion. This study not only create awareness but also helps to minimize the carbon footprint of the fashion industry. Besides this, sustainable approach has also been suggested to solve these challenges.

Keywords: Fast Fashion, Culture, Environmental, Resources, Industry

INTRODUCTION

"If you're still making 500 garments per minute and tearing the earth apart to make your millions of garments a day, no one cares about your "sustainable" fabric."

This alarming situation compel us to think and understand fast fashion.

The 'industrial revolution' has been a major driving force in the development of the fashion industry and has given rise to the culture of fast fashion. The basic idea of fast fashion is "here today, gone tomorrow". At what cost fast fashion come?, there is no price tag for it. One of the most polluting industries in the world is the fashion industry. To make one cotton t-shirt almost 3000 litres of water is used (chathamhouse.org, 2018). A terrible problem of wastage is there, particularly wastage of water. Not just this, even animals are exploited and killed for so called fashionable clothes. Almost 100 billion new garments are manufactured every year which is 10-14 times of clothes for each and every person on this planet (undp.org, 2019). The fashion industry is now worth 1.2 trillion (ehjournal.biomedcentral.com, 2018). On an average, a textile waste of 35kg per person is generated in US per year (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017).

After the oil industry, fashion industry is the largest polluter in the world and stands at the second position. The pollution from the fashion industry is increasing. The environmental impacts of fast fashion increase by promoting unsustainable manufacturing, distribution and use of garments. There are many repercussions of

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fast fashion, like countries that cultivate cotton, suffer the most from chemical pollution. Also water pollution is very high in countries where waste water from the textile industry is not treated or purified properly before disposing. The greenhouse gases and microfibers emitted from chemicals used to manufacture clothes get spread globally and they bio accumulate in the ecosystem and enter into our food chain causing a risk to all organisms. The textile and fashion industry follows a complex supply chain network starting from production to retail. Each step of the production procedure has a harmful environmental impact due to the use of water, chemicals and energy.

In cotton farming, the heavy use of chemicals leads to premature death, cancer and miscarriages of cotton farmers. The fashion industry encloses many smaller industries. It is not just retail and online stores, but also designers and brands or fashion magazines. Working conditions of employees for garment workers, 7 days a week is the normal working schedule. More than 1000 workers died in the collapse of a textile factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013 indicating little or very less importance of life of textile workers. Employees are paid 5 times less than what is needed to live a dignified life. (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Marketing fashion houses which include models, their hair and makeup artists, photographers, advertisers, all make the eco-system of fashion industry. It is a consumer-based industry and changes happen rapidly and continuously and are constantly evolving. Earlier clothes were sold in physical retail stores but due to the advent of internet services, there has been a massive increase in the involvement of consumers in the fashion trends changing online. Social media is the driving force behind any trendsetting fashion. It also helps to forecast future fashion trends. Every brand big or small has its own website to sell high range of products innumerable times. This is how the fashion industry has seen changes in its environment over the past two decades.

The business models of fast fashion giants have enabled consumers to buy high volume of clothes at cheaper rates and cater to their ever-changing demands. Because of the increased presence of people on social media and the rise in dominance of the influencer culture, everybody now wants to be seen and stay in trend and this attitude is a major reason for the rise of the culture of fast fashion (lhlslance.org, 2021). Therefore, this study will investigate and detail the impact of fast fashion on environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fast fashion and the fashion industry has developed over the years into a multi-trillion industry. McKinsey and Company (2017) reported that the global fashion industry in 2017 was worth

\$2.4 trillion with a growth rate of 5.5 percent annually. Bailey and Eicher (1992) reported a sudden increase in the import of fashion oriented apparel for women as compared to the standardized apparel in the 1980s. This led to consumers becoming more conscious about fashion (Bailey 2001). According to O'Callaghan, (2015) high street stores offering cheap and disposable clothes act as instant retail therapy to those requiring a quick fix. Ekstrom and Salomonson, (2014) mentioned that clothing has become a consumer good so important that it needs to be produced and delivered quickly in order to be purchased and consumed at the same speed. This type of consumption rate has taken a toll on the environment as it has called for production of materials like cotton at rates never seen before.

Koszweska, (2015) depicts that the social and environmental impacts of every stage in the lifecycle of a textile may seem positive at certain points in the supply chain but has negative consequences in the later stages. Claudio (2007) mentioned that cotton is the most used crop in garment manufacturing which requires huge amounts of water and pesticides. De Brito, et al., (2008)- The production, drying, dyeing and finishing phases of cotton involve extensive use of natural resources and chemical products creating a huge impact on the environment. Strickman and Porkka (2008)- The huge consumption of water in cotton production has decreased the size of Aral Sea in Central Asia. Asia is the largest producer of cotton in the world with the most human suffering due to lack of water.

Myers and Stolton (1999), Vercelli (2003) – The synthetic fibers produced for garment production are extracted from non- renewable resources and require huge amounts of energy for its production and transportation. Koszewska (2015) – Bamboo is used to produce rayon which is a naturally renewable material but the process

used to produce rayon from bamboo is very intense chemically. Muthu, (2014)- Wastes from textiles are significantly responsible for damaging the environment due to their immense usage. Ekstrom and Salomonson (2014)- With the increase in population growth, the adverse impact on environment increases as on a daily basis as every individual consumes and disposes of huge chunks of garments. 2.2 Retailers and fast fashion Coresight (vox.com,2020), research reported that the site Missguided released monthly about 1,000 new products, and the CEO of Fashion Nova has said that it launches about 600 to 900 new styles every week.

McAfee et al. (2004) found that many major retail stores design garments that can be worn less than 10 times. Solomon (vox.com2020) – The development of fast fashion in the 21st century is majorly due to globalization and logistical efficiency. With the advent of artificial intelligence companies are even more efficient now. Koszweska, (2015)- The manufacturing processes of clothing companies are less transparent as compared to the production processes of food. Cepolina, (2012)- Due to huge competition in the fashion industry, the companies have to go through continuous innovation and modernization processes. The fashion giants have to invest a huge sum of money towards new machinery, technology, research, structuring new policies and strategies, marketing accelerate growth in productivity.

2.3 Consumers and fast fashion New York Times- While addressing questions about Gen Z shopping habits, a 20-year-old college student told that when she's dressing to go out, she is dressing to be 'seen' which is weird because she is not even a fashion influencer. Due to the rise in dominance of the influencer culture, everybody now wants to be seen and stay in trend and this attitude is a major reason for the rise of the culture of fast fashion. Hubbub, a London sustainability firm reported to vox.com (2020)- 41% of 18-25 year olds feel a constant pressure of wearing a new trendy outfit whenever they go out. Barnado's charity survey in 2017 to vox.com (2020) reported that British people can spend up to 2.7 billion pounds on clothes worn during summers only once. Morgan and Britwistle, (2009)- The phenomenon of fast fashion is more prevalent among youngsters who not have the knowledge of the consequences of their fashion consumptions but who have a wide range of clothes available at cheaper rates to choose from.

Barnes and Lee-Greenwood, (2006) - Fast fashion caters to a consumer's 'insatiable demand for newness'. Bruce and Daily, 2006 An environment has been enhanced where major decisions are taken by giving special importance the speed of transition of clothes instead of on its sustainability. A research by Kate Nightingale suggested (vox.com, 2020). Consumers are not willing to change their shopping behaviour out of the concern for the environment. Market research provider, Euromonitor International (commonobjective.com)- Out of all the countries in the world just ten countries account for three- quarters of the clothes market and two- thirds of the shoe market sold in a year. These countries are- Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, UK and US.

Not much has been researched about the disconnect between the sustainable behaviour and sustainable values of the consumers and barriers to sustainable consumption. Continued research on consumers' perception of fast fashion and understanding the consumer characteristics and their motivation to make purchase decisions for throwaway fashion is required. As fast fashion is a new concept relatively, there is a lack of integrated literature available on the same. The culture of fast fashion in many areas around the globe is not yet analysed which made this research stick to opinion-based on limited countries' consumer behaviour and a few fashion giants.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The existing study was carried out on a target population consisting from the age group of 20 to 50 from Uttarakhand, Delhi and many more states. Most of the respondents were located in Uttarakhand, India. This study followed the descriptive method of research to measure, evaluate and analyse the pollution caused by the fast fashion industry in the environment. An open- ended questionnaire was distributed to collect the data. More than 100 respondents were approached but only 86 responses were returned. Out of them, 79 were found valid and complete for further assessment. The secondary data was also collected from various sites and research papers and have been mentioned in the review of literature section. The respondents of this study are people who are in close contact of the researcher.

Various statistical tools have been used to carry out the study. 53.2% of the respondents were males while females constituted 46.8%.

FINDINGS

39.2% respondents mentioned that they know about the environmental impacts of fast fashion whereas 35.4% were not aware. When asked how willing are the respondents about changing the way they shop, after learning about the environmental impacts of disposing clothes, 48.1% were somewhat willing to change the same and 44.3% said that they are very much willing and the rest responded that they are not at all willing to change the way they shop. Following open-ended questions were considered for more deep analysis.

What is fashion according to you?

Fashion holds different meanings for different individuals as we can make this out from the answers received on this question. Different responses were collected where respondent 1 said fashion is convenience, respondent 2 said fashion is about showing inner confidence, respondent 3 said it is anything comfortable, trendy and cheap, respondent 4 said fashion has no type; it differs from people to people, it is subjective in nature, respondent 5 said fashion is prevailing style during a particular period of time i.e., fashion changes from time to time, respondent 6 said that he/she doesn't know about fashion but believes that clothes are just a necessity, respondent 7 said fashion is something that is cool as well as comfortable, respondent 8 said it is what is in trend with better quality, respondent 9 said it is feeling comfortable and confident in whatever you wear and lastly respondent 10 said it is outward show (superficial) but important to sustain.

Views on fast fashion.

When asked about opinions on fast fashion respondent 1 said that fast fashion is fashion with environmental consequences, respondent 3 said that it should be reduced as it is just a game to earn more money by the companies, respondent 4 said it is an unethical and irresponsible industry that makes millions off by exploiting women and children and the environment, respondent 5 had an opinion that it is wrong and said we should purchase things whenever we need them and not according to the trends, respondent 6 said it is unethical and wrong and lastly respondent 7 said it is a matter of discussion as it possesses a great threat to the environment.

Views on fast fashion brands like Zara, H&M, Nike, etc

Zara, H&M, Nike, etc are leaders in the fast fashion market. When asked about opinions on these brands respondent 1 said that if these high label brands would stop adopting fast fashion and create more sustainable clothing, it will make a positive impact on the planet, respondent 2 said that these brands are just making money by fooling people in the name of fashion respondent 3 said everyone is just running business, respondent 4 said spending on these brands is just a waste of money, respondent 5 said all brands are good and didn't have much to say on the topic and lastly respondent 6 said products from these brands have quality but are overpriced.

Discussion

Impact of fast fashion on environment

As per the organizational report, pollution from textile treatment and dyes contribute to 20% of industrial water pollution (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Every day in Bangladesh, toxic waste dumped into rivers is 22,000 litres (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Interestingly, 20,000 litres fresh water is used to produce one kilogram of cotton (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Therefore, it utilizes almost 2.6% of the freshwater available globally (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Each year, the fashion industry utilizes 1.5 trillion litres of water (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). 85% of the daily needs of water of the entire population of India would be covered by the water used to grow cotton in the country where 100 million people in India do not have access to drinking water." (Stephen Leahy from The Guardian).

Related to greenhouse emission, fashion industry accounts for the emission of 10% of carbon emitted globally (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). To produce polyester, every year 70 million oil barrels are used

(sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). If we wear a garment 5 times instead of 50 times, 400% more carbon is emitted. (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017).

Soil is degraded by overgrazing of pastures by sheep and goats which are sources of wool. Soil is also degraded by the use of chemicals on a large scale. Wood based fibre like rayon causes deforestation. Every year to make our clothes 70 million trees are cut down (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Around 30% of rayon and viscose are procured from ancient and endangered forests. (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017).

1. Microfibers pollution, waste problem and use of chemicals

Each year the textile microplastic fibre going into the ocean is 1,90,000 tons (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Wearing synthetic clothes also releases microplastic fibres in the air. Washing a synthetic garment releases about 700,000 microfibers into the water which in turn pollutes the oceans and make their way into our food chain via the aquatic animals (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Every second, textiles equivalent to a garbage truck is wasted (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017) Waste from textiles occupy 5.2% of landfills waste. It takes 200 years for synthetic fibres to decompose (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017).

2. Chemical usage

The textile industry utilizes 23% of the total chemicals produced globally (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Cotton chemicals are responsible for the death of 20,000 people every year. It also causes premature deaths among farmers (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017). Besides this, cotton cultivation utilizes 24% and 11% of insecticides and pesticides respectively produced worldwide and therefore causes soil degradation (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017)

How and up to what extent fast fashion is leading to pollution?

Companies are doing more greenwashing (greenwashing refers to false information on advertisements or false claims) than what they actually are for the environment (Westervelt, 1996). According to Walker and Wan, (2012) many companies claim their CSR initiatives on social and environmental factors but have been accused of not carrying out or seriously (greenwashing). After three decades of conceptualization of the term greenwashing, this practice has now grown enormously. Furlow, (2010) reveals that rapid increase in the amount of disinformation regarding environmental activities by giant corporates is such a great concern that media coverage on these issues has increased over the years. Du, (2015) expressed a growing concern regarding greenwashing. Many NGOs like Terra Choice undertake today the role of market monitors or 'watchdogs'. Lyon and Montgomery (2013) reveals, due to increase in greenwashing, the consumers today are doubtful about the sincerity of the environmental claims made by corporate giants. In April 2019, Swedish fashion giant, H&M released its 'conscious collection' featuring leather like Pinatex products made up of orange peelings and pineapple 24 leaves. However, one can question Pinatex's claim to be 'eco-friendly' & 'sustainable' as it contains petroleum-based agents and plastic products which makes the whole leather-like pinatex clothing line non-biodegradable and unsustainable.

This is how brands fool customers using greenwashing technique (downtoearth.org, 2021). Terra Choice, (in 2007, 2009) conducted various studies in Canada and the United States which tested a large number of products with green claims, best practices and official guidelines and the results showed that there is a growing popularity of green marketing among corporates and consumers and most of the green claims are false and misleading. Terra Choice has divided greenwashing in various categories called the 'seven sins' of greenwashing. Few of the sins are 'sin of fibbing' (complete false information about environmental practices, happens only in 1% of the cases), 'sin of vagueness' (environmental practices or behaviours that cannot be practiced), 'sin of worshipping false labels' (objective or unauthorized green labels). The studies of Atkinson and Kim, (2014); Baum, (2012); Fernando, Sivakumaran, & Suganthi, (2014) suggested that the practice of greenwashing is very much prevalent in today's businesses.

Rana Plaza Building in Dhaka, Bangladesh collapsed on 24 April, 2013 (International labour organisation; ilo.org). It housed five garment factories. This collapse injured more than 2,500 people and killed at least 1,132 garment workers. Workers had also earlier complained about the cracks in the building. (ilo.org) A fire inside

Tazreen Fashions factory in the outskirts of Dhaka, killed at least 112 workers. Human Right Watch representative after the Rana Plaza Tragedy (sustainyourstyle.org) said if the workers had more voice, they would have resisted the managers who forced them to work in the building standing on the verge of destruction a day after large cracks appeared in it.

The European parliament uses term “slave labour” to denote the working conditions of the Asian garment workers. Most of the garments are produced in the developing or underdeveloped countries where workers’ protection rights are almost non-existent. Amnesty International, aljazeera.com, (2021) documented that there is mass imprisonment and torture of minority Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, China. Almost the entire fashion industry is run by Uyghur forced labour. Due to this President Donald Trump also banned import of all cotton products from China due to numerous allegations of using forced labour in the manufacturing of those products.

The working conditions of employees

For garment workers, seven days a week is the normal working schedule. During peak season, garment workers work till 2-3 am to meet the deadlines of fashion brands. More than 1000 workers died in the collapse of a textile factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013 indicating little or very less importance of life of textile workers. Employees are paid 5 times less than what is needed to live a dignified life (sustainyourstyle.org, 2017).

Sustainable approach to control the impact

Ethical fashion

Ethical fashion Ethical Fashion Forum (2014) describes ethical fashion as an approach to the procurement, manufacture and design of clothing that focuses on reducing harm to the people, animals and planet. Chan et al. (2012) defines ethical fashion as fashionable clothing market that includes fair trade practices with labors free from sweatshops like conditions, not harming the workers or environment by using biodegradable and organic fabrics to make garments. According to WWD (thegoodtrade.com,2022), seven billion hours were spent by consumers online to search for items like ‘ethical’, ‘sustainable’, ‘eco-friendly’ and ‘fair trade’ in 2020. Shen, Wang, Lo, Shum (2012) states consumers are now becoming more aware about the content of materials with which their apparels are made. This increased awareness among consumers has led to the emergence of ‘ethical fashion’ among fashion companies.

Sustainable fashion

According to ethicalmadeeasy.com, (2020), sustainable fashion keeps account of manufacturing, marketing, usage of shoes, clothes and accessories in the most sustainable manner possible keeping into account both socio-economic and environmental aspects. Hence, we must use, reuse, remake, recycle and repair products and all its components. It takes into account the impact of production of garments on our environment and the animals, the garment workers and the end consumers. Aja Barber (2019) mentioned that Zara has pledged to make all their fabrics sustainable by 2025. Green strategy (2014) reports that the fashion companies have a responsibility to make their production, marketing and distribution strategies towards sustainability and also contribute more towards patterns of sustainable consumption.

Second hand fashion

To achieve this motive many companies started selling second hand fashion or providing rental services. Phau and Ong, (2007); Green Strategy (2014); Koszewska, (2015) signified that second hand strategy becoming popular among many clothing companies and they are manufacturing clothes from textiles that are certified using ecological, environmental and social labels which also ensures a fair trade. Sustainable fashion consumption requires consumers to use products for longer periods, buy less products and create less textile waste (Tilikidou and Delistavrou, 2004). Engagements in production and consumption of sustainable clothing is growing rapidly and this increase in sustainable clothing market implies growing concern of consumers towards sustainable clothing (Shaw et al., 2006). Sustainable fashion movement’s ultimate goal is to excessively slow down the rate of production and consumption of garments on a global level (Flower, 2007). It’s another

goal is to focus on replacing harmful chemicals with bio-degradable materials and reducing massive consumption and garment wastes by recycling apparels. To achieve sustainability many anti-fur campaigns were undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s, many scandals of sweatshop culture also came into limelight and many fashion companies were pressurized to implement better monitoring programs in their factories (BSR, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Fast fashion is that part of the fashion apparel industry that will continue to affect the industry over the next decade and have a direct effect on the consumer's purchasing behaviour and the environment. When asked about opinions on fast fashion, more than half of the total respondents had a positive opinion on it. That means they are not aware about the implications of fast fashion on the environment. Interestingly, though after learning about it most of the respondents are ready to change the way they shop. They are ready to substitute a cheap, low quality top with a better quality, long lasting, expensive top. The most influencing factor while making a buying decision is price and quality that means consumers hardly think about the environmental impacts of the raw materials used to make their garments.

As we see more and more fashion companies coming into the market, most of them are using unethical practices to gain profits easily. Now it is our responsibility as consumers to do our part and stop supporting these unethical brands and pressurize them to change the way they conduct their business activities. Make conscious choices and force unethical brands to conduct business ethically.

1. *Buy less*

Patagonia's Chief Product Officer Lisa Williams- "The most environmentally sustainable jacket is the one that's already in your closet..." Even the most environmental friendly garments utilise resources for production and transportation, therefore creating some environmental impact. The root problem lies in our extravagant consumerism behaviour; our grandmother bought 2 while we buy 10. Only key to reducing it is if we adapt to the philosophy of buying less clothes. If we think buying new clothes will give us satisfaction or happiness maybe, we need to introspect our sources of happiness.

2. *Think twice before disposing of clothes*

Most of our clothes are made up of non-biodegradable, synthetic fibres and throwing them away just pile up our landfills. Some other options are: Sell your clothes to second hand clothes dealers. Donate clothes unused clothes to needy one. Buy from brands that take back used clothes. If possible repair clothes. Prefer recycle clothes and make it habit.

3. *Buy clothes from sustainable brands*

These days more and more brands are taking into account the environmental and social impacts of manufacturing their clothes and are reconsidering their processes. Just like how organic food is available in every other super market, sustainable clothes will also be available if we create high demand for it. Although the prices will be higher than what we pay for fast fashion articles but now that we know the reality, every penny spent on sustainable clothing will be worth it.

4. *Buy good quality clothes*

Good quality clothes can be used for a longer period of time. Cheap clothes leave their shape and colour way too quickly and we end up buying the same types of clothes again and again. If we demand good quality clothes, brands will also start producing good quality garments which can be kept for longer periods of time and in the long run, it is good for our pockets also.

5. *Practice ethical fashion*

Ethical fashion refers to those activities that benefit those working towards the supply chain of fashion industry and creates a better future for everyone.

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