

Chapter 12

The Social and Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion

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ABSTRACT

Fast fashion, known for its rapid production of low-cost clothing to match trends, dominates the global fashion industry but comes with substantial social and environmental costs. The study aims to explore students' influence on fast fashion demand, assess its environmental and social impacts, and investigate consumer roles in fostering sustainable fashion practices. Using a qualitative approach, it reviewed academic publications from reputable sources published between 2014 and 2024 for comprehensive insights. The main findings of the study are students drive fast fashion demand through affordability and trendiness, heavily influenced by social media. On the other side, fast fashion harms the environment through water pollution, high carbon emissions, and waste. It also fosters labor exploitation, especially in

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developing countries. Finally, consumers can help by choosing sustainable brands, quality products, and secondhand shopping.

INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion, characterized by the rapid production of inexpensive clothing to meet ever-changing trends, has become a dominant force in the global fashion industry (Taplin, 2014). While this business model enables consumers to enjoy trendy styles at affordable prices, it comes with significant social and environmental costs that are often overlooked (Pääkkönen, 2023). The industry's emphasis on speed and low-cost production contributes to exploitative labour practices in developing countries, where workers, primarily women and children, often toil under harsh conditions for meagre wages. These practices perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality, with little regard for workers' rights or safety.

On the environmental front, the fast fashion industry is a major contributor to pollution, waste, and resource depletion (Williams, 2022). Using synthetic fibres, such as polyester, requires vast amounts of fossil fuels, and the production process releases harmful chemicals into waterways, damaging ecosystems (Mishra et al., 2020). Moreover, the culture of disposability, encouraged by fast fashion, leads to an alarming increase in textile waste. Millions of tons of clothing end up in landfills or are incinerated every year, releasing toxic substances into the air and soil (Bailey et al., 2022). Additionally, the overconsumption of water for cotton production and the excessive use of pesticides have devastating impacts on both water resources and biodiversity (Ciornea, 2020). As fast fashion companies prioritize profit over sustainability, they leave a massive carbon footprint, contributing to climate change (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

The environmental degradation caused by fast fashion extends beyond resource depletion and pollution (Centobelli et al., 2022). The industry's supply chain is often characterized by inefficient manufacturing processes that produce excessive greenhouse gas emissions, exacerbating global warming (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Transportation of garments from factories in developing countries to global markets further intensifies the carbon footprint, as goods are often shipped or flown across great distances. Furthermore, the synthetic fibres used in many fast fashion items are non-biodegradable, meaning that when these clothes are discarded, they persist in landfills for decades, contributing to long-term environmental damage (Barbato, 2022). This growing waste crisis has also prompted concern over microplastic pollution, as washing synthetic garments releases tiny plastic particles into waterways, contaminating oceans and entering the food chain (Periyasamy & Tehrani-Bagha, 2022). Despite increasing awareness of these issues, the demand for cheap, disposable

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