

Fast Fashion: What does it mean and how can we fix it?

Summary: The fashion industry is one of the largest proponents of environmental issues in our world, and fast fashion has especially harmful effects. Now more companies are changing their practices to continue providing affordable clothing while decreasing their environmental impact.

Fast fashion is a byproduct of our consumerist culture which leads to the mass production of cheap clothing. While this is good for economic growth it has negative impacts on the environment, causing pollution and impacting the health of organisms. Over the past few years, the issue of fast fashion has become more prevalent in the public eye, but many people still don't know what fast fashion is and what is being done to shift towards more sustainable practices. One of the major affects the fashion industry has on the environment is its large consumption of water. 3,000 liters of water are needed to produce just one cotton shirt,¹ and billions of cubic meters of water are used each year by the fashion industry alone. This industry not only uses a large amount of water but it also contributes to poor water conditions through the garment dyeing process which deposits toxic chemicals to the water system.² The production of synthetic materials, which are commonly used as a cheaper alternative in clothing, causes even more water pollution. Synthetic materials, such as polyester, contain plastic fibers which generally produce more carbon emissions than cotton.³ When introduced to the ocean system through our washing machines synthetic materials take longer to degrade and end up in the food chain, which is harmful to both animals and humans. The culture of clothing consumption itself exacerbates these issues. Affordable fast fashion allows for more items to be produced to keep up with ever-changing trends. Also, because each item is lower quality items are more likely to be

thrown out quicker when they get worn out or when the trends change. This mass influx of lower-quality clothing to landfills causes public health issues. The communities that live near landfills face the direct impacts of the toxic substances and gasses released by the landfill. By trying to decrease the costs of clothes the fashion industry is directly increasing their negative environmental impact.

An interview with Elizabeth Cline, a sustainable fashion advocate, exposed a critique of the popular H&M brand and its unsustainable practices. H&M is a major player in the fast-fashion world, selling low-quality products at affordable prices while producing a large amount of waste. It is reported that “a third to 75% of clothes made are never sold and are often destroyed or Landfilled.”⁴ H&M, in particular, had \$4.3 billion dollars worth of unsold products in 2018, proving how incredibly wasteful their process is.⁵ There also fails to be proper recycling practices for fashion. When an item is worn out it is either sent to a thrift store or down-cycled, which means it is used as different products. To increase sustainability in the fashion industry, old clothes can be used as the material for new clothes but the proper recycling system for that is not yet in place at a large scale.

Cline believes there are possible solutions to fast fashion, but many of them lie in the hands of the consumer. People should adopt a fix instead of a toss mindset where consumers don’t immediately throw away a product the second there is an issue. Also, consumers should focus on buying sustainably, either second-hand or buying things you truly love rather than something you will only wear a few times. The materialistic nature of humans in developed societies is hard to break, but by making more sustainable choices on an individual level the system can begin to change.

Larger companies are beginning to take notice of a desire for sustainable fashion and many have begun to adopt sustainable practices. One of these companies is H&M which Cline criticized as a large proponent of fast fashion, but the new CEO, Helena Helmersson, wants to take the company in a new direction. Helmersson's issue is not with fast fashion itself but the current system of throw-away fashion that produces hundreds of billions of garments for people to only wear them a couple of times.⁶ H&M has adopted new goals with more sustainable practices including a desire to have 100% recycled or sustainable materials and where all the garments can be reused or decompose easily. They have enacted these goals by switching some of their material to circulose, which is recycled cotton. They have also developed an in-store recycling system and forecasting demand to limit overproduction.⁷ By reducing the production there are direct positive environmental impacts: less water is used, less water pollutants are produced, and less materials are wasted and placed in landfills. H&M is a prime example of a common shift among large companies from practices with negative environmental impacts to provide their products at an affordable price while also being environmentally conscious.

Sources:

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