



## **The Hidden Cost of Cheap Fashion: Who Pays the Price?**

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### **Abstract**

Fast fashion has taken over our wardrobes-offering runway-inspired styles at rock-bottom prices and delivering them to our doorsteps in record time. It's never been easier (or cheaper) to stay on-trend. But beneath the glitter of new collections and irresistible deals lies a story we don't often hear. Behind every "bargain" lies a trail of environmental harm and unfair labour practices. Rivers polluted with dyes, factory workers toiling for pennies, and mountains of discarded clothes-these are just some of the real costs that never show up on the price tag. As consumers, we hold more power than we think. Understanding the impact of our fashion choices is the first step toward change. After all, style shouldn't come at the expense of people or the planet.

### **Introduction**

#### *The rise of fast fashion*

The rise of fast fashion didn't happen overnight. Its roots stretch back decades, growing alongside globalization and rapid technological advancement.

In the 1960s, a style shake-up known as the "*Boutique Revolution*" marked a major shift in how people dressed. Fashion was no longer just about exclusive haute couture, it had becoming more accessible, due to the raise of ready-to-wear clothing. This paved the way for a fashion industry that could move faster and reach more people.

By the 1990s, retail giants like Zara and H&M have taken that idea to the next level (Remy, Speelman, & Swartz, 2016). They introduced a new business model that turned fashion on its head: design, produce, and stock new styles in stores - all in just a matter of weeks. The strategy wasn't just innovative, also was wildly profitable, and it set the standard for what would become known as fast fashion.

But to keep up with growing consumer demand, something had to give.

#### *The fabric of fast fashion*



As clothing production ramped up, so did the need for raw materials. Natural fibres alone couldn't meet the soaring demand, so the spotlight shifted to synthetics. One of the biggest game-changers was Polyester.

Though invented in the 1930s, polyester was overshadowed early on by the excitement around nylon. It wasn't until 1951 that polyester made its grand debut to the American public, marketed as a "miracle" fabric. Wrinkle-resistant, low-maintenance, and most importantly cheap, polyester was a dream come true for fast-moving fashion companies. It could be produced quickly, in massive quantities, and at a fraction of the cost of natural fabrics. With polyester and other synthetics fuelling the supply chain, fast fashion had the perfect ingredients to take off. But this convenience came with consequences many of which we're only just beginning to reckon with.

### **Content**

In today's world of instant gratification, fast fashion has become a global phenomenon. Shoppers can snag the latest styles at unbelievably low prices, often just days after spotting them on a runway or Instagram feed. This rapid turnaround isn't magic it's the result of advanced technology, lightning-fast supply chains, and an insatiable demand for trendy, affordable clothing. But behind the glamour and good deals lies a much darker reality. Fast fashion brands like Zara, H&M, and Shein have revolutionized the way we consume clothing (Global Fashion Agenda & Boston Consulting Group, 2017). New collections arrive weekly, encouraging consumers to buy more, wear less, and discard quickly. This model feeds on consumerism and fuels an unsustainable cycle of production and waste. While the prices may be low, the impact of fast fashion is anything but cheap.

#### **1. Consumer Cravings:**

The desire to stay on-trend without breaking the bank is a major driver of fast fashion's success. This is especially true for younger shoppers, who are constantly exposed to style inspiration through social media and celebrity influencers.

#### **2. High-Tech Hustle:**

Modern innovations in manufacturing, logistics, and digital marketing allow brands to design, produce, and ship new collections in record time. That means what's hot today can hit store shelves or shopping apps tomorrow.

### 3. **Social Media Stardom:**

Platforms like Instagram, Facebook and YouTube play a huge role in fast fashion's popularity. With fashion trends changing at lightning speed, there's constant pressure to keep up and to keep shopping.

## **The True Cost of Fast Fashion**

### 1. **Environmental Fallout:**

Fast fashion is a major polluter. From the chemicals used in textile production to the mountains of discarded clothing, the environmental toll is steep. The industry's dependence on quick turnover and cheap materials results in massive carbon emissions and textile waste (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020).

Fast fashion is one of the most polluting industries in the world. Consider this:

- **Water Waste:** Producing one pair of jeans can consume up to 7,500 liters of water.
- **Pollution:** Textile dyeing is the second-largest polluter of clean water globally.
- **Waste:** Over 92 million tons of textile waste are generated annually, much of it non-biodegradable.

Synthetic fabrics like polyester, often used in cheap clothing, release microplastics into oceans with every wash, harming marine life and entering the food chain.

### 2. **Human Rights Concerns:**

Behind many affordable garments are garment workers-often in developing countries-who endure low pay, long hours, and unsafe working conditions. The drive for cheap and fast production often comes at the expense of basic human rights. Beyond the environmental damage, the human cost of cheap fashion is even more harrowing. Many garments are made in developing countries where labour laws are weak, and wages are low.

- **Exploitation:** Workers, often women and children, are paid meagre wages-sometimes less than Rs. 270 a day.
- **Unsafe Conditions:** The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh, which killed over 1,100 workers, spotlighted the dangerous conditions in garment factories.

- **Long Hours:** Employees often work 12-16 hour shifts without proper breaks or safety equipment.

These workers sacrifice their health and dignity to meet the world's demand for low-cost clothing.

### 3. **Economic Inequality:**

While the fast fashion industry does create jobs, it also fuels economic disparities. Many workers earn far below a living wage, while profits flow to multinational corporations.

### 4. **Psychological Manipulation and Overconsumption:**

Fast fashion thrives on marketing strategies that create a sense of urgency and inadequacy. Sales, limited time offers, and influencer culture push consumers to constantly update their wardrobes.

#### **This leads to:**

- *Overconsumption:* Buying more than we need, often impulsively.
- *Wastefulness:* Discarding clothes after just a few wears.
- *Emotional Impact:* A cycle of dissatisfaction and need for more.

#### ***How Did We Get Here?***

Fast fashion began to rise in the late 20th century when clothing companies started outsourcing production to countries with cheaper labour. This shift enabled retailers to produce clothes quickly and inexpensively. Over time, the model evolved into a global industry fuelled by rising disposable incomes, global connectivity, and the non-stop churn of trends on social media.

#### ***Where Are We Headed?***

Despite its ongoing popularity, the fast fashion market is nearing saturation. Dozens of brands compete for consumers' attention and wallets leading to questions about sustainability and the industry's long-term future.

As awareness grows about the true cost of fast fashion, more consumers are turning toward sustainable and ethical alternatives. Whether that shift will reshape the industry remains to be seen but one thing is clear: the future of fashion must balance style with responsibility (Kantamneni, 2020).



### *Who Really Pays?*

So, who pays the price?

- *The environment*, burdened by pollution and waste.
- *The workers*, enduring low wages and poor conditions.
- *The consumers*, caught in a never-ending loop of consumption.

The low-price tag we see doesn't reflect the true cost. It's merely a smokescreen that hides exploitation and environmental degradation.

### ***What Can We Do?***

#### *The Future of Fashion: Turning the Tide Toward Sustainability*

As the fashion industry reckons with its environmental and social footprint, one thing is clear: the future must be sustainable. To truly make a difference, fashion needs to do more than just reduce harm—it should actively do good.

#### *Rethinking the Way, We Make Clothes*

Sustainable fashion isn't just a buzzword—it's a blueprint for the future. That means embracing eco-friendly materials like organic cotton, hemp, or recycled fabrics, adopting ethical production methods, and finding innovative ways to cut down on waste at every stage of the supply chain.

But the next frontier goes beyond sustainability— it's *regeneration*. This emerging practice doesn't just avoid harm; it actively restores ecosystems and improves soil health, offering hope for a healthier planet.

### **Smarter Shoppers, Stronger Impact**

Consumers are catching on. A recent study found that 66% of people are willing to pay more for sustainable brands. This shift in mindset has the power to reshape the entire fashion landscape.

Fashion brands can play a major role here by raising awareness, sharing the stories behind their clothes, and inspiring more mindful shopping habits. When people understand the impact of their purchases, they're more likely to buy less, choose better, and keep their clothes longer.

#### *Building Trust Through Transparency*

Today's consumers want to know where their clothes come from and how they're made. That's why transparency and traceability are more important than ever. Brands that openly share their sourcing and production practices not only build trust but also set a standard for others to follow. When honesty



becomes the norm, the entire industry moves forward.

### *Embracing the Slow Fashion Movement*

At the heart of the sustainability shift is the *slow fashion* movement—a conscious rejection of disposable trends. Instead of chasing fast-changing styles, slow fashion champions timeless design, quality craftsmanship, and clothing that’s built to last. It’s about choosing fewer pieces you truly love—and making them count.

As consumers, we hold power to demand change. Here’s how we can make a difference:

- *Buy Less, Choose Well:* Invest in quality over quantity.
- *Support Ethical Brands:* Look for companies that prioritize fair labor and sustainable materials.
- *Educate Yourself:* Learn about supply chains and the impact of your purchases.
- *Extend the Life of Clothes:* Mend, upcycle, or donate instead of discarding.
- *Advocate for Change:* Support policies and movements that aim to reform the fashion industry.

### **Conclusion**

Fast fashion may have democratized style, but it has also left a deep scar on our planet and its people. The allure of cheap, trendy clothing often blinds us to the environmental devastation, human exploitation, and psychological manipulation woven into each seam. Every new collection that floods the market represents not just a fashion statement but also a complex web of consequences we can no longer afford to ignore.

Yet, there is hope. Change begins with awareness and with action. As consumers, we have the ability to drive a more ethical and sustainable future. Every mindful purchase, every garment chosen for its quality and longevity rather than its price tag, sends a powerful message to the fashion industry. Supporting slow fashion, ethical brands, and sustainable innovations isn’t just a trend; it’s a necessary revolution.

Moreover, technology and creativity are opening doors to greener alternatives—from biodegradable fabrics and closed-loop recycling systems to digital fashion (where garments exist solely online) that could dramatically reduce physical waste. The future of fashion lies not in faster trends, but in smarter choices and deeper respect for the resources and people behind the clothes we wear.

Ultimately, true style transcends fleeting trends. It’s about expressing ourselves with integrity, making choices that align with our values, and leaving a positive legacy for future generations. Fashion should be a celebration of creativity—not a cause of destruction. It’s time to stitch together a new narrative, one

where beauty, fairness, and sustainability walk hand in hand.

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