

What Is Fast Fashion, Anyway?

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AUDREY STANTON

A Closer Look At The Definition of Fast Fashion, & Why It's Time To Slow Down

“Fast fashion” is a buzz phrase¹ in the sustainability² world. And as we continue to encourage the industry to move towards a more sustainable and ethical future, it’s helpful to know what we’re up against. But what does this term *really* mean?

Fast fashion is a design, manufacturing³, and marketing method focused on rapidly producing high volumes of clothing. Garment⁴ production utilizes trend replication⁵ and low-quality materials in order to bring inexpensive styles to the public. These cheaply made, trendy pieces have resulted in an industry-wide movement towards overwhelming⁶ amounts of consumption. Unfortunately, this results in harmful impacts on the environment, garment workers, and, ultimately, consumers’ wallets.

But to better understand and define fast fashion, let’s first familiarize ourselves with the movement’s history and context.

Trend Replication & Increasingly Rapid Production

The fashion industry, up until the mid-twentieth century, ran on four seasons a year: fall, winter, spring, and summer. Designers would work many months ahead to plan for each season and predict the styles they believed customers would want. This method, although more

¹ trendy phrase

² renewability, βιωσιμότητα

³ βιομηχανία, παραγωγή, κατασκευή

⁴ ένδυμα

⁵ copying, duplication, αντιγραφή

⁶ συντριπτικός, σαρωτικός

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methodical than fashion today, took away agency from the wearers⁷. Before fashion became accessible to the masses, it was prescribed⁸ to high society, and there were rules to be followed.

It wasn't until the 1960s that a well-timed marketing campaign for paper clothes proved consumers were ready for the fast fashion trend. This resulted in the fashion industry quickening its pace⁹ and lowering costs.

"It's been customary for stores to have a towering supply of stock at all times, so brands don't have to worry about running out of clothes."

However, it wasn't until a few decades later, when fast fashion reached a point of no return. According to the Sunday Style Times, "It particularly came to the fore during the vogue¹⁰ for 'boho chic' in the mid-2000s."

Nowadays, fast fashion brands produce about 52 "micro-seasons" a year—or one new "collection" a week. According to author Elizabeth Cline, this started when Zara shifted to bi-weekly deliveries of new merchandise back in the early aughts¹¹. Since then, it's been customary¹² for stores to have a towering supply of stock at all times, so brands don't have to worry about running out of clothes. By replicating streetwear and fashion week trends as they appear in real-time, these companies can create new, desirable styles weekly, if not daily. The brands then have massive amounts of clothing and can ensure that customers never tire of inventory¹³.

While brands like H&M, Topshop, and Zara have been the brunt¹⁴ of overproduction complaints, even luxury brands measure growth by increasing production. According to Fast Company, "apparel¹⁵ companies make 53 million tons of clothes into the world annually. If the industry keeps up its exponential¹⁶ pace of growth, it is expected to reach 160 million tons by 2050."

Low Quality & Even Lower Costs

Many people debate what came first: the desire for fresh looks at an alarming rate or the industry's top players convincing us that we're behind trends as soon as we see them being

⁷ Did not allow the wearers to have a say in the creation of fashion

⁸ προοριζόταν, ήταν διαθέσιμη

⁹ βηματισμός, ρυθμός

¹⁰ the prevailing fashion or style at a particular time, trend, fad, μόδα, τάση

¹¹ The aughts is a way of referring to the decade 2000 to 2009 in American English. The equivalent term used in British English is the noughties. These arise from the words aught and nought respectively, both meaning zero.

¹² customary to do: εθίζεται, συνηθίζεται

¹³ απόθεμα

¹⁴ δέχομαι το μεγαλύτερο πλήγμα

¹⁵ ρουχισμός

¹⁶ εκθετικός, που αυξάνεται με γεωμετρική πρόοδο

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worn. It's hard to say, but there is no doubt that we thirst¹⁷ for the “next best thing” every day of our consumer-driven lives. (“10 Things I Hate About You,” anyone?)

Yet, with this increased rate of production, corners are inevitably cut¹⁸. Clothing is made in a rushed¹⁹ manner, and brands are selling severely low-quality merchandise²⁰. There isn't enough time for quality control or to make sure a shirt has the right amount of buttons—not when there is extreme urgency to get clothing to the masses.

The fast fashion manufacturing process leaves a lot to be desired, and pieces are often thrown away after no more than a few wears. The same urgency that throws quality out the window also keeps the costs of these garments incredibly low. Companies such as Topshop and Fashion Nova are greatly concerned with their bottom line²¹ and are banking²² on the “ocean of clothing” they churn out²³ for profit.

These brands earn millions of dollars while selling pieces cheaply because of the sheer number of items they sell, no matter the cost or markup. And garment workers are undoubtedly being paid well below the minimum wage. In the documentary “The True Cost”, author and journalist Lucy Siegle summed it up perfectly: “Fast fashion isn't free. Someone, somewhere is paying.”

“Fast fashion isn't free. Someone, somewhere is paying.”

— LUCY SIEGLE

Moral lines get blurred, however, when factoring in²⁴ how much more accessible and size-inclusive fast fashion can be. Ethical fashion advocates²⁵ have worked hard to unpack²⁶ this complicated narrative, but the cost and exclusive-sizing are still barriers for many.

Environmental Impact & Human Rights Violations

All of the elements of fast fashion—trend replication, rapid production, low quality, competitive pricing—add up to having a detrimental²⁷ impact on the planet and the people involved in garment production.

Brands like Boohoo, for example, use toxic chemicals, dangerous dyes²⁸, and synthetic fabrics that seep²⁹ into water supplies, and, each year, 11 million tons of clothing is thrown out in the US alone. These garments—full of lead³⁰, pesticides³¹, and countless other chemicals—rarely

¹⁷ we are thirsty

¹⁸ cut corners: κάνω οικονομία, τσιγκουνιές

¹⁹ βιαστικός

²⁰ εμπόρευμα

²¹ bottom line: κέρδος ή απώλεια επιχείρησης

²² bank on: υπολογίζω, βασίζομαι, ποντάρω

²³ παράγω, βγάζω

²⁴ factor in: συνυπολογίζω

²⁵ υπερασπιστές

²⁶ αναλύω

²⁷ επιβλαβής, επιζήμιος

²⁸ βαφές

²⁹ διαρρέω

³⁰ μόλυβδος

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break down³². Instead, they sit in landfills,³³ releasing toxins into the air. Fast fashion's carbon footprint³⁴ gives industries like air travel and oil a run for their money³⁵.

"Many of us are familiar with the news about Nike sweatshops³⁶, but they're just one of the many fast fashion brands violating human rights for the sake of fashion."

In addition to environmental impact³⁷, fast fashion affects the health of consumers and garment workers. Harmful chemicals such as benzothiazole, which has been linked to several types of cancer and respiratory³⁸ illnesses, have been found in apparel on the market today. As our skin is the largest organ of the body, wearing these poorly made clothes can be dangerous to our health.

This danger only increases in factories, towns, and homes where fast fashion is made. For example, conventional textile dyeing often releases "heavy metals and other toxicants that can adversely impact the health of animals in addition to nearby residents" into local water systems, according to the Environmental Health Journal.

The health of garment workers is always in jeopardy³⁹ through exposure to these chemicals. And that doesn't even take into account the long hours, unfair wages, lack of resources, and even physical abuse. Many of us are familiar with the news about Nike sweatshops, but they're just one of the many fast fashion brands violating human rights for the sake of fashion. The people who make our clothes are underpaid, underfed, and pushed to their limits because there are few other options.

The Rise of Slow Fashion

"It's encouraging to know that there are brands, communities, and individuals out there fighting for the planet and the safety of garment workers."

Although the fashion industry as a whole is guilty of committing many crimes against people and the environment, it is most evident when it comes to fast fashion. Society's obsession with consumerism may make it hard to quit, but better options are out there.

Slow fashion offers an alternative, with mindful manufacturing, fair labor rights, natural materials, and lasting garments. It's encouraging to know that there are brands, communities, and individuals out there fighting for the planet and the safety of garment workers. And by

³¹ ζιζανιοκτόνα

³² disintegrate, διασπώ

³³ χωματερές

³⁴ αποτύπωμα άνθρακα

³⁵ give someone a run for his or her money: κάνω κάποιον να ιδρώσει για να κερδίσει

³⁶ βιοτεχνίες κάτεργα, με συνθήκες εργασίας σκλαβιάς

³⁷ αντίκτυπος, επιπτώσεις

³⁸ του αναπνευστικού

³⁹ σε κίνδυνο

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buying garments from responsible brands as well as secondhand shops, we can ensure agency, and that we're advocating for the environment and others.

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The Reflection Pyramid

