

Fast Fashion or Slow death?

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Abstract:

Living in the digital age when the “Depeche mode” business model is normalized, consumers have been polluting our environment without even knowing it. With fashion companies doing all that they can to reel in and take the money of consumers, they have resorted to marketing tactics such as greenwashing to make customers unaware of how the things they buy affect the world. The manufacturing of the clothing and accessories that consumers purchase and wear daily causes harm to our airways, waterways, and other parts of our environment which is slowly furthering our current climate crisis. While this business model of fashion has grown in popularity and become more normalized, so have the multiple alternatives against the fast fashion industry. With the growth of thrifting and its popularity along with the growth of thrift shops both online and in-person, different fashion aesthetics, and the newer generations increased individuality and social awareness, consumers can reverse the negative environmental effects of the fast fashion industry. Some more alternatives include but are not limited to upcycling (creating new clothes from old ones), clothing swaps, renting sites, and more. Along with these alternatives consumers need to be educated as to how the corporate world, CEO’s, etc who are in charge of running these companies also contribute to the problem. The topic of politics and how political affiliations can affect a person's viewpoint about fast fashion/ the environment along with the psychological aspect of the fashion industry and how it affects certain generations (the younger ones who spend more time on social media platforms) and their thought process towards fast fashion/sustainability.

Method and Analysis:

By looking at case studies from different brands along with statistics regarding pollution from the fast fashion industry this paper has been able to prove its point. All of the evidence supports the claim that the fast fashion industry causes harm to our environment and will affect us negatively in the future. All of the evidence written also furthers the point of the alternatives and how they're helpful towards preventing the climate crisis if used correctly. By analyzing the information presented it is clear that the fast fashion industry needs a complete reset to even attempt to be eco-friendly.

When diving deeply into our climate crisis and its causes, greenhouse gases and other forms of pollution given off by the fast fashion industry are some of the main issues causing climate change. "The fashion industry is responsible for 10% of worldwide GHG emissions, including 4% of global CO2 emissions, and this is on-trend to increase to 25% of global GHG emissions by 2050" (Stenton, Kapsali, Blackburn, Houghton). Fast fashion refers to the manufacturing, transporting, and selling of clothing/accessories for cheap prices to keep up with the ever-changing trends and a large number of fashion seasons that continue to grow every year. "The clothing tends to be affordable, so participants can have the latest trends for less money" (Sorenson, Johnson-Jorgensen). To sum it up, fast fashion was made as an easier method for consumers to "trend chase" or easily/affordably switch up their wardrobe to follow the quickly changing trends. Some of the more popular fast fashion brands that are well known and typically shopped at include Forever 21, Pacsun, Zara (which is highlighted in this paper), SHEIN, and so

many more. The issues surrounding these companies are their harmful effects on the environment done by “Depeche Mode” which is their current model of business. By mass-producing their merchandise at rapid speeds these companies cause more damage to our climate, bodies of water, and a strain on natural resources. “Current literature in this area generally tends to associate terms such as ‘slow’ and ‘quality’ with sustainability, insinuating that slow equals better when better actually depends on circumstance and fitness for purpose”(Stenton, Kapsali, Blackburn, Houghton). Another issue within the industry and the public's knowledge of it is that people are unaware that “fast” or “slow” refers to not only the way it’s made but its lifespan. What categorizes an item as “fast” or “slow” is how long it lasts, and what it can/cannot withstand. To slow down climate change, consumers should be wary of where they purchase their clothing and accessories, research companies before supporting them, and adopt alternatives to fast fashion (and eventually other things that they purchase) that are more eco-friendly.

Fast fashion History/Depeche Mode:

Due to the growth in trends throughout the past few decades, and the emergence of technology making these trends more widespread, the fast fashion industry has grown very much in popularity. “From 1994 to 2014, the production of clothing increased by 400%; 80 billion pieces are produced globally every year [6]” (Ting, Stagner). Increasing the number of clothes manufactured also increases the number of fashion seasons for clothing to be released. Depeche Mode, which is the current business model for the fast fashion industry, has proved itself to need a change to better suit our climate crisis. According to the article “The challenge of “Depeche Mode” in the fashion industry – Does the industry have the capacity to become sustainable through circular economic principles, a scoping review” by C.A. Moran, E. Eichelmann, and C.J.

Buggy the fast fashion industry would be the fourth largest CO2 emitter in the world if it were its own country. (Moran, Eichleman, Buggy)“You cannot mass-produce fashion or consume ‘sustainably’ as the world is shaped today. That is one of the many reasons why we will need a system change” -Greta Thunberg (Moran, Eichleman, Buggy). This quote by Greta Thunberg is referring to the overall fashion industry and its false claims of sustainability. The system change that needs to occur is far more than just creating the clothes, but also transporting, consumer care, and disposing of. Developing and applying such an industry standard that clearly defines sustainability measures and targets will increase consumer trust in fashion marketed under this standard and the perception of greenwashing can be avoided” (Moran, Eichleman, Buggy). One of the biggest system flaws of the fast fashion industry that needs to be updated is the marketing tactic of “greenwashing.” Greenwashing refers to a marketing tactic used by the fast fashion (and others) industry to falsely promote eco-friendly products. One way that companies might do this is by including a label on their products saying something along the lines of “100% eco-friendly” or “100% biodegradable” to fool consumers into thinking they are making a sustainable purchase. This allows the companies to make money by lying to the public and continuing to cause harm.

Purchasing/post Purchasing/Prices:

Along with clothing being manufactured quicker, it is also getting disposed of/ending up in landfills a lot faster. Consumers being aware of how to properly care for garments and accessories is key for keeping them out of landfills. “According to Doeringer and Crean (2006), a life cycle of fast fashion is a month or less” (Joung). As the decades progress, a multitude of things begin to develop/change including people’s economic status, and their attitude towards certain places/things. When comparing brands (sustainable VS fast fashion) there is a clear

difference that can show why consumers typically sway in the same direction. “For example, in the last five years, Inditex (Zara), based in Spain, experienced 47 percent sales growth and became the world's largest fashion retailer”(Joung). Within recent years, the economy has declined which left a lot of people tight on money. This is another reason why the fast fashion industry continues to thrive because it has become the only option for a majority of the population. “Fast fashion products are easily and quickly adopted by college students because they have limited financial resources” (Su, Chang). Two brands in particular SHEIN and Cerqular differ in how they affect the environment. Circular is a more eco-friendly brand that focuses on delivering sustainable products without harming any animals or nature according to its mission statement. SHEIN is a popular fast-fashion company where “everyone can enjoy the beauty of fashion” which was written in their mission statement. When looking at two of their similar items you’ll see a drastic difference in prices, for a pullover sweatshirt on SHEIN a customer would only be charged \$15 as opposed to the \$122 charged by Cerqular. While the manufacturing and prices of these clothes differ immensely, those aren’t the only things. Given the nature of both clothing brands, their products are made to withstand different amounts. “Fast-fashions are sold and made to be worn fewer than ten times (McAfee *et al.*, 2004), and are even called disposable fashions” (Joung). Given that fast-fashion merchandise is mass-produced to overcompensate for the increased number of fashion seasons at a low cost, companies use low-grade material that lasts very few wears. The issue with this is how often customers feel the need to replace their clothing and continue to shop from their brands while the clothes pile up in landfills/causing other pollution thus furthering climate change. “While global clothing production doubled between 2000 and 2015, the number of times each item was worn decreased by 36% during the same period” (Ek Styvén, Mariani). Due to poor customer care, the increase

in trends and, how often they are released, brands have to maintain their relevance by constantly putting out new merchandise. Customers continuously purchase from and support these brands because of their need to stay “in the loop” thus causing them to neglect their older “less trendy” items. “It should be noted that in the current study, although hoarders participated in recycling, their recycling behaviour was not related to environmental attitudes” (Joung). Although this is not something common, some people might associate their clothing with some type of value which is why they might be more willing to take proper care of their clothing regardless of their knowledge of the environment. With that being said, if more people were correctly educated it might add to their desire to recycle/properly care for their clothes, or even influence people to start recycling their clothes if it isn’t something they do already.

Zara/H&M:

One of the more “progressive” brands that are categorized within the fast fashion industry is Zara. “The company does not use plastic bags in any of its stores. All the Zara stores have containers for collection of used clothes for the purpose of recycling”(Jha, Veeramani). More efforts by the company are using forest-friendly fibers as well as having a no discharge commitment to ensure that they aren’t producing any pollution or waste to the environment. “Zara has accomplished 100% eco-efficient stores in 2020”(Jha, Veeramani). Because of their efforts towards sustainability, Zara was able to surpass other fast fashion companies in environmental friendliness, however, this does not categorize the brand as being 100% environmentally friendly or sustainable because its business model still contains an abundant amount of flaws that are contributing to climate change. “Business model of Zara itself is detrimental to sustainability”(Jha, Veeramani). While Zara may come across as eco-friendly due

to their different business model, they still cause a significant amount of environmental damage. “This goes some way to explain why the average American is estimated to throw away 37 kg of clothes each year, 85% of which will end up in landfill or be burned”(Jha, Veeramani). Despite their efforts, Zara's rapid production (500 designs a week and almost 20,000 per year) of textiles creates waste both from consumers and manufacturers. While Zara has been productive in trying to become more sustainable, other fast fashion chains have come close to Zara in reaching sustainability but haven't quite made it completely. In addition to Zara, another store that has a similar business model is H&M. “H&M reported that the recycling program yielded 39,000 tons of used clothing” (Sorensen, Johnson-Jorgensen). While H&M was also able to keep a large number of products from ending up in landfills, they still don't fall under the category of a “sustainable brand” because of ways similar to Zara that contribute to the climate crisis.

Water Pollution/Lessening it/consumer care:

One of the biggest parts of our environment affected by these harmful practices is water. The fast fashion industry uses a substantial amount of water to create their items, but they also pollute bodies of water when they're improperly disposed or taken care of. “Apparel washing has been established as a major source of synthetic microfiber emissions” (Gavignan, Kefala, Macadam-somer, Suh, Guyer). When maintaining an article of clothing for the entirety of its lifespan, consumers need to take into consideration how often their items need to be cleaned. Given the cheap production of their clothing items, the synthetic fibers, and cheaply made dyes leak into/pollute bodies of water during the cleaning process. “During apparel production, fiber losses occur from fabric cutting, trimming, and mistakes”(Gavignan, Kefala, Macadam-somer, Suh, Guyer). In addition to the waste created from improper disposal and continuous shopping trips, the production of the clothing produces a sizable amount of waste not only in the form of

greenhouse gases. “While globally economically beneficial the impact on the environment can be considered as disastrous” (Moran, Eichleman, Buggy). The increase in water usage also puts a strain on natural resources such as plants and other natural elements that can be used to produce fabrics and materials, leaving them scarce. “Approximately 60% of clothing is made from petroleum and 30% is made from cotton [6]. Production of clothing fibers requires large quantities of natural resources, thus, having a large impact on the environment, second to factory farming”(Ting, Stagner). To mass-produce garments, farmers have to grow the plants that make the material at rapid speeds often requiring the use of chemicals that are also environmentally unfriendly and cause damage to humans. “Consumer care is also very important. The garment must be washed fewer times and have a longer life, rather than being used once or twice before disposal; if so, the achievement of sustainability in the cradle-to-retailer supply chain (see **Figure 2**) is “wasted”. Therefore, consumer awareness campaigns are key to ensuring sustainability in the cradle-to-cradle life cycle”(Gonçalves, Silva). While companies are the main source of blame for their environmental issues, consumers have many options for doing their part to protect our climate by performing simple steps with their new clothes or clothes that they already own. “Across the full life cycle of clothing, the industry has an annual carbon footprint close to that of all 28 current EU states combined” (Moran, Eichleman, Buggy). Another big issue contributing to the excess amount of textile waste is influencer culture. Influencer culture refers to individuals on social media with a high following who people often look to for inspiration. To create the image of someone “relatable” or even to stay in the loop, these influencers with large sums of money who can afford the more expensive sustainable brands still choose to support harmful fast fashion companies. An example of this is “SHEIN hauls” that have grown in popularity on platforms such as YouTube and Tik Tok. These hauls usually consist of the influencer spending a

substantial amount (usually hundreds or thousands) of their money shopping from these brands and showing/styling their items on their platforms. The issues that stem from this are that these influencers are funding climate change by supporting these brands, the clothes are either used solely for the purpose of creating content or are only worn once, and this makes more people aware of these brands leading to more consumers shopping from/supporting them. These small steps, if done correctly can potentially act as a chain reaction thus resulting in their clothes last longer and the gaps between their shopping trips being widened.

Educating/Persuading Behavior/counterargument:

Due to the normalization of the “Depeche mode’ business model, a lot of consumers are less savvy in identifying different types/areas of fashion. “Sustainable fashion, on the other hand, is still relatively unknown to the public” (Ting, Stagner). The entirety of the fast fashion system also shows issues within other business models such as transporting garments. A majority of the time, clothing and accessories made by fast fashion companies are brought to other destinations via car and airways. The gasses given off by cars/planes add to the already high amount of harmful pollutants already being released into the air by the fashion factories thus calling for the entire business model/system to be changed in multiple industries. “Not only this, but a large proportion of aviation and maritime shipping is devoted to moving textiles, raw materials for the production of textiles, and finished clothing articles around the world, increasing the carbon footprint of the fashion industry further” (Stenton, Kapsali, Blackburn, Houghton). “None has highlighted how the industry can become resilient to climate change through intrinsically linking circular economic principles and models to science-based targets”(Moran, Eichleman, Buggy). Another important factor to include is the limited amount of research that there is about actually fixing the issues at hand. While there is an extensive amount of research listing out the harm

done by the industry, why it is wrong, and how it'll affect our greater future, there are very few solutions known by the public. While stores like ZARA have been able to improve in being eco-friendly (although they're still harmful), there is still very limited research that informs the public how stores that might be trying to become more sustainable can be successful in preventing climate change. "It found that younger individuals (18 to mid-40s) tend to identify more as Democrats. For individuals age 65 and up, more people identify as Republican or lean Republican"(Johnson, Pollock, Rauhaus) While fast fashion companies are at a large fault for falsely advertising their merchandise as "eco-friendly" or "sustainable" there is also a huge part being done by consumers and their social awareness or lack thereof. When looking at results from past presidential elections, statistics almost always show the same voting trends including younger voters (the millennial and Gen Z generations) typically lean towards the left. This is an important point because it shows the age gap that is apparent when discussing fast fashion and climate change. After all, it shows how younger people are more aware of these issues and are more likely to believe in the science behind climate change and all of its severity. This is shown in the voting trends from the past US presidential election because they displayed that more young people voted for the side (democrat) that is actively trying to combat our climate crisis. Their political affiliations can also affect their consumer lifestyles and their decisions on where they shop (someone who is more left-leaning and believes in climate change might participate in the alternatives to fast fashion to do their part, and reduce their carbon footprint). "Thousands of Americans have died. And President Trump still callously and willfully denies the science that explains why so many are suffering" (Democrat party platform). This quote points out the vast differences (especially in the past election) between both parties, what they stand for, and why one party might be more willing to avoid fast fashion than the other. This point also sheds light

on Gen Z overall because they have been labeled the generation that is going to make a change for the world. Given that Gen Z is one of the younger generations they have easier access to the internet, social media, and the easier availability of information. These younger consumers have access to anything that they want to know about any topic, which allows them the availability to research and understand these issues while also looking into their favorite clothing brands and discovering that they're problematic. "Government and industry must furnish and enforce policies to slow down the damage from the fashion industry" (Ting, Stagner). This evidence shows that climate change and the fast fashion industry are multifaceted issues, and there is more than one solution. While holding corporations accountable for their actions, and secondhand shopping, consumers also have to focus on the legislative side of these issues. When working to solve an issue as versatile as this one, we must think long term, meaning we have to reevaluate certain things such as where we fall politically to ensure that we are voting in political officials who will do their best to fight the climate crisis and hopefully make the environment more stable. When given social awareness this will spark a reaction that allows consumers to think more in-depth about these topics that can give them the inspiration to do their research and avoid harmful companies. "Therefore, previous studies have identified that this generation is willing to pay more for sustainable products, but they also have low discretionary incomes that make it difficult to follow their values" (Sorenson, Johnson-Jorgenson). Gen Z has been given a sort of savior complex within recent years which is because of their willingness to do their part in instances like these. While consumers are knowledgeable about sustainability and are capable of making their decisions around it, the fast fashion industry is helpful towards the economy which might be the deciding factor for companies on their business model. Fortunately enough, people's social awareness kicks in and oftentimes urges people to purchase from more sustainable or even

small businesses that are often more expensive to stay aware and do their part to aid in climate change prevention.

Upcycling/Depop:

When educating about the industry of fast fashion and its cons, there are also alternatives that must be included. In recent years, second-hand shopping also referred to as “thrifting” has grown more popular due to the increase in social media over the past few years. Consumers have also discovered online thrifting platforms such as Depop, Poshmark, Thredup, and so many more. These are helpful because it simplifies the thrifting process for consumers (especially those who may not have thrift shops nearby), makes it easier to narrow down products that they want to find (you can’t always guarantee you’ll find something nice in an in-person shop), these platforms also create a space for the public to start and eventually grow their small businesses. This is another popular alternative that has gained more participants in recent years because of the knowledge of corporate America and how it is corrupt in numerous ways. Because of this knowledge consumers have begun giving their money to small businesses on these platforms because it helps out an actual person as opposed to giving money to a large corporation using their wealth to hurt others and the environment. Another popular alternative that can be done either after thrifting or with things you already own is upcycling. Upcycling refers to taking something and making it “new” again whether that’s making simple modifications or completely redesigning the whole thing. “I have started repurposing old jeans into shorts with lace detail and new ombre dye techniques; so far I am really happy with the results (Blogger 20)” (Ruppert-Stroescu, LeHew, Connell, Armstrong,). Within the growth of YouTube’s business side, there have been a bunch of Youtubers such as Jenerationdiy who have grown their platform

making content specifically tailored towards “thrift flips” where the content creator buys a bunch of secondhand clothes at thrift shops and remakes them into something new. “I have more personal freedom to make what I want to at the moment(Blogger 52)” (Ruppert-Stroescu, LeHew, Connell, Armstrong,). The internet creating wider access to these tutorials and inspiration videos inspires more people to choose this alternative while simultaneously creating their own style. “It also may not be something the participant would typically choose to wear, as old clothing does not have the same appeal as new clothing” (Sorensen, Johnson-Jorgensen). When people think of thrifting, they might be turned off by it because of the thought that they would only find old clothes. While this may sometimes be the case, people often forget to take into consideration that trends are on a certain time clock meaning they resurface every few years. With this in mind, consumers can get a head start on trends before they become trendy again. Even if there is not a variety of options available at a certain thrift shop/on a certain platform this allows for users to participate in upcycling and turning these articles of clothing that might be “old” or “not exciting” into something “new” or “exciting” or even “trendy.” These alternatives give opportunities for taking something old and turning it into something new and unique while still maintaining some sort of environmental stability. When educating consumers about these alternatives to fast fashion, we must also educate them on how to go about them correctly. Thrift shopping has always been an option for those who prioritize being eco-friendly and those who might rely on second-hand clothing as their only affordable way of shopping. With the growth of technology/social media/influencer culture, thrifting has grown in popularity during the past few years which has raised a substantial amount of issues. One of these issues is resellers. While platforms such as Depop, Poshmark, Thredup, and many others (all online thrifting platforms) have experienced an increase in users there was also an increase in resellers who are known for

buying cheap items in bulk and reselling them on their platforms at prices substantially greater than the original. This behavior is problematic because there are people who rely on those second-hand items as their only source of wardrobe, but due to these resellers buying everything that leaves no clothing for those who need it and forces thrift shops in person and online to raise their prices making it harder for everyone to shop. Some ways that consumers can thrift respectfully are: being mindful of how much they buy, leaving behind necessities that they know they'd be able to afford outside of a second-hand shop (winter coats, gloves, long sleeves etc.). "While clothing and footwear is the eighth largest category in terms of household expenditure in the European Union (Eurostat, [27]), it is ranked fourth in terms of its impact on the environment" (Ek Styvén, Mariani). Second-hand clothing shopping can aid not only in creating/revamping a person's style/personal wardrobe but also as a way to aid in the prevention of climate change and the damage done by fast fashion companies. By selling and exchanging pre-loved clothing and giving it a second life, consumers are keeping these items from ending up in landfills and causing irreversible damage. "I turned away from fashion and have been inspired to create fall decor for my house" (Ek Styvén, Mariani). Upcycling can be used for more than just clothing, anything can be purchased second-hand and revamped for people to enjoy while also keeping pre-owned textiles and other items out of landfills. "Beyond the opportunity to use DIY offerings as information gathering exercises, these offerings may also bolster brand loyalty if customers feel that their concerns (e.g. on garments' weak points) are acknowledged and that the business genuinely supports them in finding solutions that do not involve purchasing a new item" (Freudenreich, Schlattegger). On top of helping the environment, the act of incorporating DIY (do it yourself) in the fashion industry would aid in customer loyalty because customers would not only see that the company's morals are intact but there would be a sense of care for the consumer

because their input is being asked for the production of their products thus urging these customers to repeatedly shop at these brands/stores. This would also aid in the change of the fast fashion system that was mentioned earlier because it would be a step in the right direction and potentially influence other industries to follow in its footsteps. “Growing second-hand sales and growth in online exchange as part of the reason, and argues that an increase of 10% in second-hand sales could save 4% water and 3% carbon per ton of clothing” (Ek Styvén, Mariani). The statistics presented above are proof that second-hand shopping and/or upcycling can aid in preventing the climate crisis because it shows how it aids with water conservation and reduces the overall carbon footprint. “Rent the Runway and LENA are online “fashion libraries” that allow consumers to borrow items and return them for others to use” (Sorensen, Johnson-Jorgensen). While fast fashion items are meant to be short-lived, another alternative that can be used is renting sites. Renting platforms such as the ones listed above are similar to thrifting but the clothes are returned to the sender after use. These sites allow for people to order and return clothes for certain purposes/events that they might only need one time and not need to wear again afterward. This would prevent unnecessary shopping trips thus preventing a surplus of clothes in landfills. One of the many other large impacting factors in this overall scenario is the psychological aspect of fast fashion and how consumers could be drawn to it in that way. “It's ok to 'wear that skirt that you've already worn before' because 'people are mostly paying attention to what they're wearing and what's going on in their heads and ... they're not going to notice and ... even if they did 'who cares right?'" (Horton). While growing up, especially during the digital age there is the overwhelming feeling that all eyes are on you and what you're doing/how you look. These feelings often cause people to have negative beliefs about things such as

wearing the same clothing or worrying about how they might be perceived by their peers. These psychological aspects also play as big of a role in climate change as the manufacturers do.

When looking at an issue as vast as climate change it is important to take note of every single factor involved in furthering the issue. When dissecting the specific category of fast fashion, there are a lot of elements that influence people's shopping/sustainability decisions. Whether it's an age gap, social awareness, or convenience in price, the support of these fast fashion companies will continuously do more harm than good to the environment if we let them. One of the main issues in influencing the public's opinion on ethical fashion is making them aware that there is a problem. Fast fashion business companies have participated in false advertising schemes such as greenwashing to have their products come across as less harmful than they are, which is why consumers need to begin researching brands and their relations to the climate crisis and what they are doing to prevent it as a method of avoiding the industry as much as possible, while still taking part in the alternatives. The fast-fashion business model has been around for multiple decades which is why consumers have grown used to it and may not recognize the harm. By providing insight on the factors that might be contributing to the overall blindness of consumers we can potentially sway their opinions, and stop more damage from being caused. By having consumers educated on these topics, it can potentially influence them to raise their voices and fight for the fast fashion system/the overall method for handling the climate crisis to be changed into something that will benefit us in the long run.

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