

The Environmental Consequences of Fast Fashion



Dr. Shramana Roy Barman

Faculty
Department of Environmental Science
Asutosh College
shramanaroy.barman@asutoshcollege.in

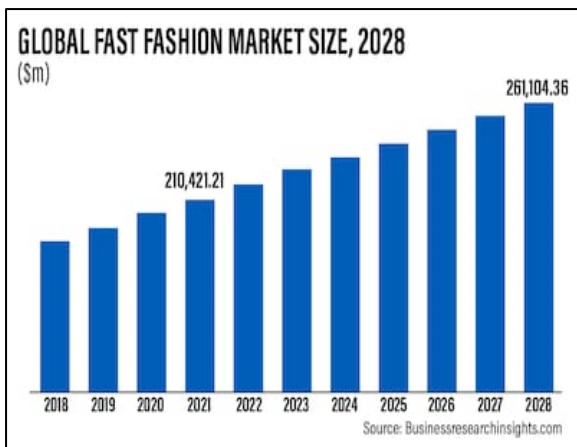
The fashion industry is approximately worth a towering \$2.4 trillion USD, making it one of the biggest global industries. The industry is a significant global employer, providing jobs to millions across various sectors. From the design studios of Paris, Milan, and New York to the garment factories in countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam, and China, the industry involves a diverse workforce.

Over the last few decades with the increasing consumeristic behaviour of the masses fast fashion has emerged as a dominant force in the global clothing industry. With its promise of affordable and constantly changing styles, fast fashion has revolutionized the way we shop.

However, beneath the surface of its flashy facade lies a darker reality: the catastrophic toll it takes on our planet. Fast fashion is characterized by its quick turnover of clothing collections, often designed to mimic the latest runway trends at a fraction of the cost. This business model relies on mass production, cheap labour, and low-

quality materials to churn out garments at an alarming rate. As a result, the environmental consequences are dire and far-reaching. Over 60% of fabric fibres today are synthetic, originating from fossil fuels. Consequently, when our garments find their way into landfills, they resist decomposition.

One of the most pressing issues associated with fast fashion is its staggering carbon footprint. Fast-fashion brands prioritize quick turnover rather than durability in their clothing designs, resulting in garments that aren't built to last. However, these products could potentially serve as significant markers of our consumption-driven era in the fossil record. The production of clothing involves numerous stages, each contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. From the cultivation of raw materials like cotton and synthetic fibres to the manufacturing process itself, vast amounts of energy are consumed, primarily derived from fossil fuels. Additionally, the transportation of goods across continents further aggravates carbon emissions.

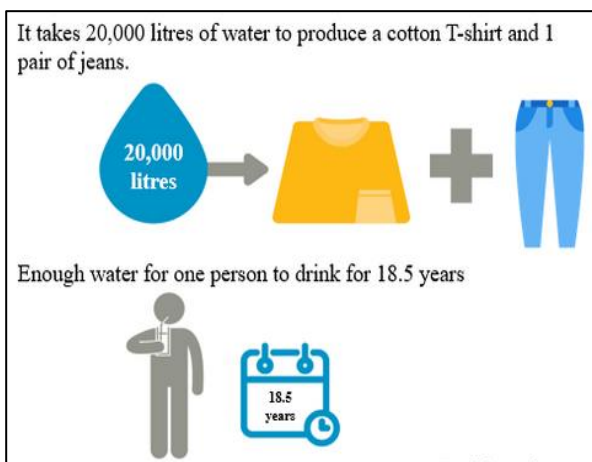


PHOTOGRAPH BY CHIN LEONG TEO



According to the United Nations Environment Programme, the fashion industry accounts for 10% of global carbon emissions, more than international flights and maritime shipping combined. Business Insider's analysis reveals that fashion production alone contributes to a significant 10% of the world's total carbon emissions, matching the output of the entire European Union. This industry not only depletes water sources but also contaminates rivers and streams. Shockingly, a staggering 85% of textiles end up in landfills annually. Even the simple act of washing clothes unleashes 500,000 tons of microfibers into the ocean yearly, equating to the disposal of 50 billion plastic bottles.

The 2018 Quantis International report identified three primary contributors to the global pollution footprint of the industry: dyeing and finishing (36%), yarn preparation (28%), and fiber production (15%). Moreover, the report highlighted that fiber production, primarily from cotton cultivation, has the most significant impact on freshwater withdrawal and ecosystem quality.



Source: chariki.co.uk

Fast fashion promotes a culture of unsustainability, where garments are treated as short-term commodities rather than long-lasting investments.

Another pressing issue related to fast fashion is the violation of human rights. The relentless drive for cheap labour has led to exploitative working conditions in garment factories, particularly in developing countries where regulations are lax. Workers, often marginalized and vulnerable, endure long hours, low wages, and unsafe environments to meet the insatiable demand for fast fashion. Tragedies like the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh serve as stark reminders of the human toll of an industry prioritizing profit over people.

Sustainable Fashion

Sustainable fashion emerges as a response to the detrimental effects of fast fashion on the environment. It stands as a call to curb the relentless pace of production, simplify convoluted supply chains, and promote mindful consumption.

Various efforts are being undertaken to create a sustainable ecosystem in fashion as per a report published by Harvard Business School in 2022. These include an intensive Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). According to the World Resources Institute, companies must adopt innovative business models that prioritize the reuse of clothing and extend their lifespan to maximize sustainability. The United Nations has also simultaneously launched the Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, aimed at mitigating the adverse impacts of fast fashion. Its mission is to cease the environmentally and socially harmful practices prevalent within the fashion industry.



Another effort to reduce carbon footprint of the fashion industry is the use of "next-gen materials industry." Innovators are now fermenting and growing bio-based substitutes for conventional materials such as leather and fossil fuel-based synthetics like polyester. Some of these new bio-based textiles can be engineered to offer performance features alongside properties such as biodegradability. However, these innovations face challenges including high initial costs compared to well-established alternatives that benefit from economies of scale, substantial capital requirements for new production facilities, resistance to change, and the lack of pricing for externalities, which allows fossil fuel-derived alternatives to be priced without accounting for their true social costs.

Various organizations also promote thrifting and rentals for clothing and other accessories to promote reuse.

A shift in consumer attitudes is crucial for the adoption of sustainable fashion. As consumers increasingly prioritize fast fashion's low costs and rapid trends, the environmental and ethical ramifications are often overlooked. To foster a sustainable fashion industry, consumers must value quality over quantity, opting for durable, ethically-produced garments rather than disposable clothing. This mindset change can drive demand for eco-friendly practices and materials, encouraging brands to adopt sustainable methods. Additionally, consumers should be educated about the impact of their choices, promoting a culture of responsible consumption and supporting initiatives that prioritize environmental sustainability.

In conclusion addressing the environmental and social impact of fast fashion requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders. Consumers can make a difference by embracing sustainable fashion practices, such as buying fewer but higher-quality garments, supporting ethical brands, and upcycling or recycling clothing. Governments play a crucial role in implementing regulations that hold companies accountable for their environmental and labour practices. Additionally, the fashion industry must prioritize innovation and invest in sustainable alternatives, such as eco-friendly materials and circular business models.

