

AT WHAT COST? UNRAVELLING THE HARMS OF THE FAST FASHION INDUSTRY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Fast fashion is an enormous, rapidly growing industry, with the number of new garments made per year nearly doubling over the past 20 years and global consumption of fashion increasing by 400%.



Waste occurs at every stage of the garment manufacturing process, harming wildlife, degrading land, and polluting soil and water.



The fast fashion industry is a significant contributor to the climate crisis, responsible for as much as 10% of global carbon dioxide emissions.



Animal-based textiles such as wool are responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, water pollution, widespread habitat loss from deforestation and grassland conversion, and other harms to wildlife. In fast fashion, wool is commonly blended with fibers derived from fossil fuels and coated with chemicals, further increasing the environmental cost of production and disposal of these garments.

Fast fashion has revolutionized the fashion industry at a cost to the environment and human rights. The fast fashion business model relies on the exploitation of resources and human labor to deliver garments following the latest trends to its consumers at an unprecedented rate. This quick output of garments demands a sizeable volume of raw materials fed into the fast fashion industry, creating a significant amount of waste, pollution and degradation to air, water and wildlife habitat. The pollution introduced by the fast fashion industry results in devastating impacts to both terrestrial and aquatic environments, with harmful effects linked to habitat degradation, proliferation of chemicals and microplastics in waterways, and the increasing impact of climate change from anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite the increased demand and consumption of fast fashion garments and people's apparent growing interest in fashion, they are buying more while wearing fewer of the items they own. The poor quality of fast fashion clothing contributes to the limited lifespans of garments, which often end up decomposing slowly in landfills or being incinerated. In addition to degrading in landfills or being

incinerated, fast fashion clothing has also become a notorious source of microplastics in marine environments as the cheap, plastic-based materials shed fibers that make their way to the oceans.

On top of the environmental exploitation that allows for fast fashion's cheap prices, the other contributing factor is worker exploitation in low-income countries where factories are based. Workers — primarily young women — are subjected to hazardous working conditions while earning unlivable wages, despite the companies pulling in massive profits.

Although both the fashion industry and consumers have indicated that sustainability is a priority, fast fashion is an increasingly unsustainable market that continues to grow, relatively unchecked. And the scale of this industry is enormous: For a company such as Shein, an estimated 1,000 new styles are uploaded daily — though there has been speculation that this figure may be a gross underestimate (Zhou, 2022). With the average number of each garment manufactured ranging from 50-100, according to the Shein website, this results in a minimum of 50,000 new garments created every day.

Changing these practices requires drawing attention to the harms of fast fashion and shifting the narrative from the glamour that has been assigned to overconsumption toward fashion that embraces sustainability and justice.