

The Skeletons that Hide in the Closet of Fast Fashion

Have you ever checked how much time you spend using your phone? How many hours are spent using social media? More often than not, social media platforms like Youtube, Instagram, and Tiktok are a large percentage of one's screen time. Due to this extensive time online, these platforms exert a large influence on their users. When there's a new clothing trend showing up everywhere on your "For You" page, it suddenly becomes a very desirable item because everyone that you see online has it. Since these are often "micro-trends" that move very quickly, it's usually only fast fashion brands that are able to provide them to these consumers, because as the name suggests, they can produce their clothes fast. To hop on trends that move fast, many people often search for a cheaper alternative, but are usually unaware of what the lower cost means—harsh working conditions, non-biodegradable materials, etc. While consumers, especially college students, are able to purchase new clothes from brands like H&M and Shein at a cheaper price, is the true cost of "unethical fashion" worth it? In this paper, "unethical" will be defined as relating to poor labor practices as well as unsustainability, or the large amount of pollution. All research done will be to learn more about the labor environment of the fast fashion industry and how fast fashion affects the environment, as well as investigate reasons why consumers continue to purchase from fast fashion companies to figure out possible ways we can reduce our "unethical footprint."

Affordability is a big reason consumers may turn to fast fashion companies. With their fast production and cheaper materials, these brands are able to produce stylish clothes and sell them for less compared to other brands. But to keep up with this, "workers in the garment industry are required to put in 14 to 16 hours per day, seven days a week...exposed to harmful substances while working without enough ventilation," exclaims Lei Nguyen of the non-profit organization Earth.org (Nguyen). For many years, Leicester-based garment factories, producing for big brands like Boohoo, have been reported for poor practices such as low pay and requiring workers to fulfill orders

throughout the pandemic (Lewis). Dominique Muller, the Policy Director at the clothing worker's rights campaign group Labour Behind the Label points out, "the endemic low pay and abuse of vulnerable workers in Leicester's garment industry is nothing new" (Muller). These incidents have proved the ongoing practices of the fast fashion industry to be dangerous time and time again through episodes like the Nike Sweatshop Scandal in the 1990s where their consumers were shocked by the terrible conditions young children had to go through to sew a Nike football that would later be sold to other children with the ability to play outside instead of the responsibility of work (Wazir). Although measures have been taken through the forms of promises and new laws to prevent child labor and appalling work environments, similar commotions continue to resurface. For instance, Nguyen not only brings up the harmful substances in the environment, but she also brings attention to the Rana Plaza Collapse, a devastating event in Dhaka, Bangladesh for garment workers in which an eight story building crumbled, killing and injuring thousands of people, to further show that sweatshops are not safe nor fair to their workers. This is one of the hidden tolls shoppers may not know about when they're getting a good deal on a cute, new dress.

However, there have been Shein clothing tags with print screaming phrases like "Need your help" floating around and later becoming viral on TikTok, showing that their cheap and trendy clothing may not be worth the health and safety of their workers (Clark). US Lifestyle Reporter of The Independent, Meredith Clark, later found that Shein argued that the tags were from other companies and were poorly worded care instructions. While Shein claims to never violate labor laws, they are not very transparent on their labor practices, or how they ensure the safety of workers, and continue to withhold when asked questions concerning the claims of them exploiting their workers. As the not-for-profit organization Sustain Your Style has mentioned, "We often hear company owners saying that 'for these workers, it is better than nothing'... and to a certain extent, they are right" (Sustain Your Style). For people in developing countries, there are high rates of poverty which

contribute to the high mortality rates. So, going into the garment industry can seem like a good option to avoid causes of death like malnutrition and poor living conditions. However, this organization has also pointed out that “in most of the manufacturing countries, the minimum wage represents between half to a fifth of the living wage...the bare minimum that a family requires to fulfill its basic needs” (Sustain Your Style). Garment workers often go into this line of work intending to support themselves and their families, so if they’re only receiving the bare minimum that a family needs to live, is that one dollar bikini actually considered a steal?

From colorful advertisements to pop ups screaming “Register And Get 15% Off, Shop Now!,” fast fashion websites use multiple tactics to make a potential buyer feel the urge to purchase something, anything from them (Shein). However, recruiting influencers to spread the word about their brand as well as give discounts may be the most effective. By using people that their target audience looks up to for fashion, trust between the consumer and the company can be gained. Attracting customers then is no longer an issue when the relationship between the target audience and influencer can link customers to the retailer. When Vogue Business’s Lucy Maguire and George Arnett interviewed London student Iona Spensle, she highlighted, “It’s difficult to break the consumption cycle, where young people today feel pressure to wear the latest trends because of Instagram and reality shows like Love Island” (Maguire & Arnett). At the same time, many young adults are also inspired by these influencers and feel a sense of connection through their relatability, especially in this stage of life where they are transitioning. So, with social media platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, being one of the first applications used when picking up their phone, it's likely that people think of their favorite influencers when they think of the type of person they want to be.

Instagram posts only show as much as the person behind the account wants to show to the world—the best parts of their life through rose colored glasses. Mindlessly scrolling through

platforms like these is how many people get their news or information about the world around them now. This can be good as information can spread faster, but it can also lead to creating unrealistic goals about things like one's self-image (Anders). Many people have reported that they repeatedly compare themselves to these people that seem better off compared to them (Panj Rath). The development of a negative self-image can stem from the envy and low self-esteem that builds up the longer one uses social media. Influencers and their "perfect" lives, showcasing their designer clothes and exotic trips, have made others rethink their self worth (Panj Rath). Although everyone takes their own path at their own pace, questions like "Why can't I be like them?" arise even if it is the influencer's intention to inspire. This unhealthy relationship with social media can lead to feeling demotivated or to attempts to pursue that ideal, yet make-believe social image. Social comparison with these online personas can cause people to be wrapped up in how others perceive them. This paired with envy, fear of missing out, and even instant gratification, can drive these users down the rabbit hole of shopping. This is why an influencer's presence and their ability to persuade a mass audience is the peer pressure companies often rely on to make sure they can get as many consumers as possible to follow the ocean current of fashion trends.

This influence then leads to customers turning to stores with trendy clothes that won't break the bank. Other interviewees that participated in Vogue Business's survey explained that they could get more for their money and their friends with "similar socio-economic backgrounds" don't have a choice (Maguire & Arnett). The quick production of all these clothes usually means lower quality, but this also means that it's cheaper which is beneficial for one of their target audiences, college students. College students have to juggle going to school and sometimes working too, but with the standards of social media they are also held accountable to be presentable. As they have all of these bills to pay, from tuition to rent to food, they usually don't have much to spend on new clothes. This

is why fast fashion stores, especially online ones, are often the place to purchase clothes due to their convenience and price.

While it is certainly true that we shouldn't place "the onus on those unable to afford sustainable fashion labels to change their habits and stop buying cheap clothes," we can't deny that the purchasing habits of consumers have increased (Maguire & Arnett). Fast fashion brands and influencers strategically use marketing techniques to encourage consumers to purchase more and it works because the average consumer thinks more is better. Clothing hauls on TikTok frequently promote these thoughts, but overconsumption costs the consumer more money than they're willing to spend. As Gilchrist observes, "The reality is that the majority of fast fashion finds their way into landfill, littering the earth with the sparkling singlet you may have worn once and then discarded" (Gilchrist). In addition, researchers from Brown School discovered that "approximately 85% of the clothing Americans consume, nearly 3.8 billion pounds annually, is sent to landfills as solid waste, amounting to nearly 80 pounds per American per year" (Bick). Tossed away to landfills, clothes can take hundreds of years to decompose. One of the reasons fast fashion is sought out is for its offering of variety, something that also worsens the problem of waste, with materials like dyeing chemicals lengthening the process of decomposition. A good amount of the waste that fast fashion produces never reaches the customer. This doesn't just consist of unsold merchandise; it can also include old tools or resources that can no longer be used in sweatshops. All of the resources and materials it takes to produce the hundreds of thousands of clothes purchased results in deforestation in the Amazon Rainforest and contributes to microplastics in the ocean and loss in biodiversity. And barely any of that is recycled to be used again. Many people don't realize the environmental impact this has:

"They are contributing to 4% of all greenhouse gas emissions, or that almost all of their purchases will eventually end up in an incinerator or a landfill where they will

smolder and pollute the air. Or that of the 100 billion garments produced annually, only 1% will actually be recycled” (Earth Day).

The guilt that comes with knowing about the skeletons in the closet of fast fashion can be difficult to process; however, with this newfound knowledge we can take steps to make ethical choices.

We may not be able to change all fast fashion companies, but we can change our habits and the way we think. In the words of Maguire, “We need to address the whole behavioral issue with consumerism and the idea that we constantly need to buy” (Maguire & Arnett). To combat overconsumption of clothing, we can be more mindful by asking ourselves questions like “How many times will I actually use this?” or “How many outfits can I make with this piece and the clothes in my current wardrobe that I will feel comfortable and confident in?” To learn more about how ethical a brand is, Nguyen suggests using Good On You, a website supported by ethical pioneers like Emma Watson, to check how transparent and sustainable a company is (Nguyen). While sustainability isn’t always affordable, purchasing from second hand retailers, in moderation, is an alternative option that lets you stay ethical. If you aren’t able to do any of these, you can still fight overconsumption if you continue to love and use clothes for years, ethical fashion or not. While not everyone may be able to start purchasing from sustainable fashion companies, we can all start choosing to be more ethically conscious.

Works Cited

- Anders, Peter. "Opinion | Fast Fashion Is Unethical, but so Is the System That Created It." The Daily Iowan, <https://dailyiowan.com/2023/03/22/opinion-fast-fashion-is-unethical-but-so-is-the-system-that-created-it/>. Accessed 15 May 2023.
- Bick, Rachel, et al. "The Global Environmental Injustice of Fast Fashion." Environmental Health, vol. 17, no. 1, Dec. 2018, p. 92. BioMed Central, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7>. Accessed 18 May 2023.
- Clark, Meredith. "Shein Responds to Viral Claim Workers Are Hiding 'Help Me' Messages in Clothes." The Independent, 16 June 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/shein-help-me-messages-tags-b2102095.html>. Accessed 12 June 2023.
- EARTHDAY.ORG. "Fast Fashion Is Out of Fashion." Earth Day, 27 Sept. 2022, <https://www.earthday.org/fast-fashion-is-out-of-fashion/>. Accessed 2 May 2023.
- Gilchrist, Ava. "Allegations Of 'Modern Slavery' & Violations Of Labour Laws, Here's Exactly Why Shein Is Bad." ELLE, <https://www.elle.com.au/fashion/why-is-shein-so-bad-27846>. Accessed 4 May 2023.
- Lewis, Caroline. "Report: Boohoo & COVID-19: The People behind the Profit." Labour Behind the Label, 30 June 2020, <https://labourbehindthelabel.org/report-boohoo-covid-19-the-people-behind-the-profit/>. Accessed 18 May 2023.
- Maguire, Lizzy, and George Arnett. "Gen Z Still Loves Fast Fashion, but Boohoo Investors Are Spooked." Vogue Business, 10 July 2020,

<https://www.voguebusiness.com/consumers/gen-z-still-loves-fast-fashion-but-boohoo-investors-are-spooked>. Accessed 2 May 2023.

Muller, Dominique. “Boohoo Did Not Break Any Laws in Leicester Sweatshop Scandal - That Shows Laws Need to Change.” Inews.Co.Uk, 6 Aug. 2021,

<https://inews.co.uk/opinion/leicester-sweatshop-scandal-boohoo-did-not-break-any-laws-needed-to-change-1138030>. Accessed 18 May 2023.

Nguyen, Lei. “The Danger of Sweatshops.” Earth.Org, 10 Oct. 2022,

<https://earth.org/sweatshops/>. Accessed 27 April 2023.

Panjrath, Yashvi. ““Why Them, Not Me?": A Study Exploring The Impact Of Following Fashion

Influencers on Instagram on Body Image Satisfaction of Adolescent Girls and Middle-aged

Women.” International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation, Vol. 25, Issue 02, June 2021,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352018768_Why_Them_Not_Me_A_Study_Exploring_The_Impact_Of_Following_Fashion_Influencers_on_Instagram_on_Body_Image_Satisfaction_of_Adolescent_Girls_and_Middle-aged_Women. Accessed 11 June 2023.

Shein. <https://us.shein.com>. Accessed 1 June 2023.

Sustain Your Style. “Working Conditions.” SustainYourStyle,

<https://www.sustainyourstyle.org/en/working-conditions>. Accessed 15 May 2023.

Wazir, Burhan. “Nike Accused of Tolerating Sweatshops.” The Guardian, 19 May 2001. The

Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/may/20/burhanwazir.theobserver>.

Accessed 12 June 2023.