



Fast Fashion and the Environment

"Fast fashion is not free. Someone somewhere is paying the price". – Lucy Siegle¹

1. Introduction

The rise of the fast fashion industry in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has had enormous social, economic and environmental consequences. It is a huge industry built on over-production, over-consumption, and the excessive use of natural resources to the detriment of the environment; and it engages in exploitative labour practices in rampant pursuit of profit.² Fast fashion causes catastrophic environmental damage through extreme resource depletion, toxic chemical pollution, and overwhelming waste.

2. What is Fast Fashion?

The fashion sector has undergone profound transformation in the last two decades. What was once a seasonal, relatively slow-moving production and retail cycle, has accelerated dramatically.³ Fast fashion describes the rapid mass production of cheap, trendy clothing that mimics runway styles at low prices. Clothes go from design to store shelves in a matter of weeks. They are manufactured from inexpensive synthetic fabrics which keep retail prices very low, and dozens of micro-seasons replace traditional four-season fashion calendars. By endlessly offering new trends at cheap prices, fast fashion brands such as Shein, Zara, H&M and Temu encourage consumers to continually buy more clothing. Consequently, previous purchases, perhaps worn a handful of times, are soon discarded. This business model encourages high rates of consumption and disposal.⁴ The low prices of cheaply made clothing and the constant influx of new styles creates a built-in obsolescence, pushing consumers to continually purchase more.⁵ The rapidity of the current fast fashion production process is at such a scale that it outweighs consumer demand.⁶

The average fast fashion consumer wears an item only about seven times before discarding it.⁷ At the core of fast fashion lies the concept of the swift imitation of runway ensembles and trendsetting items for rapid sale. This generates a sense of urgency among consumers.⁸ Critics say that another important aspect of fast fashion is 'planned obsolescence', which refers to a strategy employed by manufacturers that aims to deliberately shorten the lifespan of products so as to encourage consumers to purchase replacements more frequently.⁹ Ultra-low prices, flash sales, and aggressive digital marketing encourage consumers to buy large volumes of low-quality, trend-driven goods they often do not need.

3. 100 Billion Garments

Research conducted in 2014 found that more than 100 billion garments are produced globally each year, and this is likely to double by 2030.¹⁰ There has been 36 per cent decline in how many times a single garment is worn over a 15-year span, while 60 per cent more clothing is purchased by consumers annually compared to two decades ago.¹¹ Research conducted in Australia reported that the average consumer buys around 55 new clothing items per year, with numbers reaching up to 68 items annually in high-consumption markets like the US, UK and EU.¹² This represents a 60 per cent increase compared to purchasing habits from fifteen years ago, and is heavily driven by the rise of cheap, trend-focused fast fashion. Furthermore, 60 per cent of new clothing is discarded within one year of purchase and, with brands producing more clothing than the market can absorb, between 10 and 40 per cent of manufactured items are never sold and are dumped before ever being worn.¹³

Some unsold stock and donated garments are exported as second-hand goods but, while some pieces may be resold, large quantities are unwearable and become waste in the receiving country. According to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the total annual textile waste produced globally is projected to surge past 134 million tonnes by 2030.¹⁵

4. The Environmental Cost of Fast Fashion

The ecological footprint caused by the production of fast fashion attire is significant. "This includes a range of processes such as textile manufacturing, packaging, dyeing and transportation as well as the transboundary movement of waste from areas of privilege and affluence to areas with lower economic status and influence."¹⁶

4.1. Water

The textile industry uses billions of gallons of water and accounts for 20 per cent of global wastewater, largely due to toxic dyeing and finishing processes. Water is essential in the textile wetting processes which involve pretreatment, dyeing, printing, laundry, and finishing. This process utilises 85 per cent of the textile supply chain's water stock. The United Nations confirms as much by stating that the amount of water used to manufacture a pair of jeans – 8 000 litres – is equivalent to one person's drinking water for roughly seven years.¹⁷ Furthermore, textile dyeing is the second-largest polluter of water globally, frequently dumping toxic heavy metals and chemicals into local streams and rivers.

Clothing manufactured from artificial fabrics goes on to shed microplastics when worn or washed.¹⁸ 500 000 tonnes of microfibers are released into the world's oceans every year during washing – matching the plastic weight of 50 billion bottles. According to a Greenpeace report, approximately 35 per cent of primary microplastics in the oceans are from washing synthetic textiles.¹⁹ These microplastics are consumed by fish and enter the human food chain.²⁰

4.2. Carbon Emissions

The fast fashion industry as a whole is responsible for roughly 10 per cent of global carbon emissions, which is more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined.²¹ Textile production is an energy-intensive process. When

mass manufacturing, a common fast fashion practice, is added to the equation, the demand for energy increases and so do carbon emissions. The Chinese textile manufacturers, Shein and Temu, significantly impact the environment through massive carbon emissions from global air freight, rampant packaging waste, and the promotion of hyper-consumerism. These two manufacturers dominate digital orders in South Africa.

Fast fashion travels great distances from suppliers to consumers. Instead of utilizing sea freight, millions of lightweight packages are distributed directly from China to consumers worldwide via air freight. Air transport emits significantly higher levels of greenhouse gases than ocean shipping, contributing to an estimated footprint of millions of metric tonnes of CO₂ annually.²² Furthermore, because goods are shipped directly to individual buyers rather than in bulk to retail stores, the volume of packaging is exceptionally high. Many items are individually wrapped in synthetic, non-biodegradable plastics.

Shein is reported to have produced 60 per cent of all clothes globally and is officially the biggest polluter in fast fashion.²³ The company generates massive greenhouse gas emissions – surpassing 24 to 26 million metric tons of annual carbon dioxide equivalent, driven by its rapid output of thousands of daily items, synthetic polyester usage, and an expansive global supply chain.²⁴ By selling cheap, disposable goods directly from Chinese manufacturers to global consumers, its business model drives rapid resource depletion and accelerates textile and plastic waste accumulation in landfills.²⁵

4.3. Textile Waste

The over-production, over-consumption and discarding of fast fashion results in considerable textile waste. According to the World Economic Forum, only a small percentage of clothing is ever recycled, reused or repurposed – the rest ends up in landfills or is destroyed.²⁶ This business model of make, sell and throw away results in an annual estimated 92 million tons of clothing waste, creating a real textile waste crisis. It is estimated that the equivalent of one garbage truck of clothing goes to a landfill or is burned every single second.²⁷ Clothing dumped in landfills containing polyester, nylon, or any other synthetic textile, is effectively made of plastic and will never fully decompose, while leaching

chemicals and dyes into local groundwater.²⁸ The open burning of piles of synthetic and chemical-treated textiles releases toxic fumes and microplastics into the atmosphere. Countries in the global north dump their fashion waste in the global south – including Africa – under the guise of charitable donations. This process has been termed ‘waste colonialism’.²⁹

5. Waste Colonialism

The term waste colonialism was first documented in February 1989 at the United Nations Environmental Programme Basel Convention working group, when African nations articulated concerns about the disposal of hazardous wastes by high GDP countries into low GDP countries for inexpensive disposal.³⁰ Discarded and unsold clothing is funnelled into global second-hand trade routes, ending up in massive informal open-air dumps, municipal landfills, or illegal burn sites primarily located in the global south, such as the Atacama Desert in Chile³¹ and the coastal or wetland areas near markets like Kantamanto in Ghana.³² The volume of dumped clothing in the Atacama Desert is so large that, like the Great Wall of China, it is said to be visible from space.³³ Even when clothing is donated to charity shops, the overwhelming volume creates severe unintended consequences. Charity shops can only sell roughly 10 to 30 per cent of what they receive. The rest is sold in bulk and exported to countries in the global south, flooding local markets.³⁴ Millions of donated and unsold garments arrive from the UK, EU, and US. After sorting through massive local markets, up to 40 per cent of bales are unsellable and end up discarded in informal dumps, drainage systems, and coastal wetlands.³⁵ This form of colonialism positions “second-hand clothing exports as a way to help low-income countries rather than a convenient way to offload the problems of overproduction and overconsumption onto the global south, along with the risks and the consequences of environmental pollution and damage to human health”.³⁶

Another damaging aspect is that flooding a developing nation with free or ultra-cheap second-hand western clothing frequently undercuts and destroys the local textile and garment manufacturing industries.³⁷ Ghana, by way of example, does not get paid for receiving fast fashion waste; instead, local market traders pay high prices to buy bales of second-hand

clothes from Western markets. Around 40 per cent of these clothes are unsellable waste, leaving Ghana to bear the heavy economic and environmental costs of clearing it.³⁸ Moreover, second-hand clothing imports overwhelm local markets, and unsellable garments end up in landfills or waterways.³⁹ “The country is in a Catch-22 situation when it comes to this issue. On the one hand, there is little it can do by way of a complete ban due to the number of consumers on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum who rely on these textiles for their livelihood. On the other hand, the inflow of textiles is exacerbating an already difficult environmental crisis ultimately killing local economies like manufacturing and fishing.”⁴⁰ This system forces marginalized communities to bear the heavy environmental and health costs of overconsumption by the global north.⁴¹

6. Fast Fashion in South Africa

South Africa’s fast fashion market features massive global online giants, international mall retailers, and large local groups selling trendy, budget-friendly clothing at scale. Popular options range from direct e-commerce apps such as Chinese manufacturers Shein and Temu to major South African retail chains. A report commissioned by the Localisation Support Fund found that in 2024 Shein and Temu made around R7.3 billion in sales in South Africa.⁴² Spanish retail giant Zara and Swedish manufacturer H&M have a presence in major South African shopping centres. Local South African retail groups include The Foschini Group (TFG), which operates high-street chains like Foschini, Markham, and Sportscene, which cycle modern trends quickly; Mr Price (MRP) which is one of South Africa’s most prominent high-volume, low-cost fashion value retailers; Jet & Ackermans; Pick n Pay Clothing, as well as PEP Stores’ mass-market everyday value apparel. All these retailers are long-standing budget family fashion retailers with a massive footprint across the country.

It is estimated that South Africa generates hundreds of thousands of tonnes of clothing and textile waste each year, much of which ends up in landfill. Cheap imports and the large volumes of second-hand clothing entering a country, often overwhelm local manufacturing systems and undermine local textile economies, resulting in ripple effects on livelihoods, skills retention, and economic resilience.⁴³ However, unlike

some of its African neighbours, South Africa strictly regulates second-hand clothing imports, meaning the vast majority of this textile waste is generated domestically or through unsold retail inventory and manufacturing off cuts.

7. Push Back

The practice of destroying wearable garments is sparking massive legal pushback. Increasing awareness of the environmental cost of fast fashion has resulted in some governments and organizations advocating for greater transparency and accountability within the fashion industry, aiming to foster more sustainable practices.⁴⁴ In July this year the European Union implemented regulations in terms of which companies are no longer allowed to destroy unsold clothes and shoes, forcing fashion brands to change how their industry handles unsold products. Brands must rethink how they produce and manage stock; instead of disposal, they will be expected to explore options like recycling, donation, or improving production planning.⁴⁵ This sweeping policy aims to eliminate the fashion industry's widespread practice of incinerating or shredding perfectly usable, pristine inventory just to clear warehouse space or protect brand exclusivity.⁴⁶ This could lead to more responsible manufacturing and reduce the environmental impact linked to excess textile waste. "The decision reflects a broader shift toward sustainability and accountability. It sets a clear boundary that usable goods should not be treated as waste. For many, it signals a future where industries are pushed to balance profit with responsibility, shaping a system that values resources rather than discarding them."⁴⁷

The South African Retail-Clothing, Textile, Footwear and Leather Value Chain Master Plan to 2030 focuses on reducing the use of hazardous chemicals and improving water management; optimising manufacturing energy efficiency and consumption; fibre-to-fibre recycling; reducing single-use sanitary wear; adopting clothing and footwear leasing models; and increasing the second-hand clothing market.⁴⁸

8. Slow Fashion

Understanding what waste colonialism is helps us question where our discarded products go. It also forces a broader conversation about fairness, responsibility, and what real environmental

progress should look like.⁴⁹ Slow fashion prioritizes "durable garments, ethical supply chains, lower volumes, and extended use to reduce resource consumption and waste. The narrative emphasises transparency, worker welfare, fair wages, and sustainable materials".⁵⁰ In 2018 the UN Environment Programme launched the UN Alliance on Sustainable Fashion to encourage the private sector, governments and non-governmental organizations to create an industry-wide push for action to reduce fashion's negative social, economic and environmental impact and turn it into a driver for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.⁵¹ The *Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR)*, which came into force in 2024, sets EU-wide rules to make products more durable, repairable, recyclable and resource-efficient.⁵² It advocates keeping "your clothing in use for longer to reduce its environmental footprint, as well as reducing the amount of new stuff you need to buy and the consequent use of resources. This also reduces the impact of the disposal of perfectly good but unwanted clothes".⁵³

Another option is to buy 'preloved' or vintage clothes. While slow fashion tends to be more expensive, shopping second-hand is accessible on a tighter budget. Today, the second-hand clothing sector in South Africa is worth nearly R10 billion, with thrift stores and charity shops popping up in every city.⁵⁴ In her book, *'Consumed'*, Aja Barber points out that it is possible for fast fashion companies to engage in ethical practices by implementing fair trade policies, improving working conditions, and paying living wages.⁵⁵ Others argue that overproduction and overconsumption is inherently harmful to the environment and exploitative of garment workers, and that the model itself must change entirely.

Greenpeace advocates upcycling whereby clothing can be repurposed. "Leg warmers made from old sweaters or heavy socks, pillowcases repurposed from old dresses or leftover fabric, and jeans transformed into shorts are all examples of upcycling."⁵⁶ An article in the Wall Street Journal suggests that "big fashion retailers are leaning further into second-hand clothing to drive fresh sales growth, score sustainability credentials and generate brand buzz".⁵⁷ Zara, for example, is currently expanding circular economy programmes, such as the Zara Pre-Owned platform, which offers garment repairs, resale, and donation options to help extend the life of clothing.

9. Conclusion

The *International Day of Zero Waste* aims to raise awareness about the critical role of waste management and responsible consumption and production in achieving sustainable development. It calls on individuals and organizations to adopt a life-cycle approach, focusing on reducing resource use and environmental emissions at every stage of a product's life cycle.⁵⁸ Responsible guardianship of our common home demands

increased restraint regarding our careless consumption of fashion for transient satisfaction, and a move away from the 'make-take--waste' model. We need to embrace more circular economies that reduce consumption of fashion and instead reuse, repurpose and repair what we have. This would go some way to reducing the environmental and social consequences of overproduction and over consumption for which someone, somewhere will pay a high price.

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¹ A British journalist and writer who specialises in environmental issues.

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