

4-12-2022

Fast Fashion: A Price the Planet Has to Pay

Abby Gager

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/environmental_law_journal_blog



Part of the [Environmental Indicators and Impact Assessment Commons](#), [Environmental Law Commons](#), and the [Sustainability Commons](#)

[Fast Fashion: A Price the Planet Has to Pay](#)

- April 12, 2022April 12, 2022
- by [Abby Gager](#)

“Ethical and sustainable fashion is not a product. It’s a practice. Everyone is invited to participate. There’s no obligation to buy. And you can get started right now. Today” – Elizabeth L. Cline



[Wong Maye-E/ Associated Press](#)

With fashion trends rapidly changing, the fashion industry is placed under pressure to produce new styles quickly and for a cheap price. Although consumers enjoy having the latest trends at their fingertips with the convenience of online shopping, the rise of fast fashion will have a long-lasting detrimental impact on the environment. Fashion is considered “fast” for a variety of reasons; the constant change in trends is fast, the rate of production is fast, the consumer’s decision and methods of buying are fast, delivery is fast, and articles of clothing are worn fast before they are tossed and to never be used [again](#).

Fast fashion is the mass production of cheap, poor quality, disposable [clothing](#). The fashion industry focuses on keeping up with the latest trends and producing as many articles of clothing at once and placing them at a cheap price to pull consumers in. The estimated number of times the average item of clothing is worn is only fourteen [times](#). In fact, The Guardian reported in 2019 that one in three young women considered an item worn just once to be [“old.”](#) Given the easy access to the most recent trends as well as cheap pricing, consumers are essentially encouraged to simply wear and toss. Although it appears simple, this fast process makes it easy to overlook the negative impact on the environment. To give you an idea of what this looks like, the fashion industry produces approximately eighty billion articles of clothing a year and our clothes can take nearly 200 years to [decompose](#). The fashion industry prides itself on keeping up with the times which is the essential driver of fast fashion, but it is in fact doing the opposite

behind the scenes. It may demonstrate the appearance of fast and easy, but this approach will have long-lasting environmental consequences.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic due to its deadly global [impact](#). This impacted people's jobs, income, and their everyday lives. One silver lining to the pandemic is that the disruption to the fashion industry caused companies to step back and consider more sustainable options moving forward. By prioritizing sustainability, companies can shift from a linear approach that involves buying, wearing, and throwing away to instead a more circular approach that favors recycling options.

In this article, I will demonstrate the impact fast fashion has on the environment and the importance of shifting towards more sustainable options. Consumers also play a major part in this necessary shift. Many consumers may view fast fashion as the easy, quick option. However, once they are aware of the depth of the threat it brings to the environment, they will be able to give companies the push needed to work instead in a circular fashion. As consumers spend more consciously, their expectations for sustainability develop. In fact, it has been reported that consumers are responding positively when brands demonstrate social responsibility and prioritize environmental [sustainability](#).

Environmental Impact

With a process as rapid as fast fashion, many people overlook what is actually happening to the environment. To give fashion companies the push needed towards sustainable options, consumers must be aware of the harmful consequences to help lead companies in the right direction. To highlight the required shift towards sustainability, I will briefly explain a few of the many environmental issues caused by the fashion industry.

Since the 1990s, consumer behavior towards fashion has shifted to buying more frequently. This means that more textile waste ends up in landfills at a faster [rate](#). In less than 20 years, the volume of clothing Americans threw away each year doubled and is likely to triple if a change is not made because the industry itself is not willing to step up and use alternative, sustainable [solutions](#). In the United States, each state has a designated amount of space left in their landfills, which causes some states to ship their trash out of the area, producing more greenhouse gases in the process of transportation than if it were to sit in a dump for a [year](#). To put this into perspective, at Ghana's Kamanto market, around 15 million clothing garments arrive from Western countries every week, meanwhile the population of Ghana is only 30 [million](#). The United States has been the biggest contributor by exporting more clothing than any other country on [earth](#). CBS news reported that as a result of America's addiction to fast fashion, an estimated 40 percent of all the clothing bales sent to Ghana end up in landfills and some of the unsold clothing washes out to beaches when it rains creating a massive tangled web called "tentacles" in the [sand](#). The United States cannot continue to pretend fast fashion is not creating a massive negative impact on our environment by shipping the problem away to other countries.



<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ghana-fast-fashion-environmental-disaster/>

In fact, the fashion industry accounts for 10% of all global carbon emissions due to the energy used during the production, manufacturing, and transportation of millions of garments each [year](#). The rate the industry has been producing in, especially with the rise of constant new fast fashion driven companies, the industry's greenhouse gas emissions are predicted to increase by more than 50% by [2030](#).

Textile waste also contributes to harming the environment by the use of water, energy, and other resources to produce [textiles](#). To accompany the production process, there is approximately 93 billion cubic meters of water that are consumed every year in the fashion [industry](#). In addition to fabric production, 20% of our planet's wastewater is the result of fabric dyeing and [treatment](#). As the wastewater is put back into our water systems, water contents are contaminated with toxins and heavy [metals](#). The wastewater is extremely toxic and, in many cases, no longer [safe](#). In addition, approximately [35%](#) of all microplastics in the ocean are synthetic materials that are used by the fashion industry. Not only do these microplastics pollute the ocean, disrupting the already delicate ecosystem, but they can also take [hundreds of years](#) to fully break down. Once degraded, a toxic substance is created, and these toxic microfibers cannot be removed and end up having a harmful impact on the marine [ecosystem](#). It is reported that the world now consumes about 80 billion new pieces of clothing every year making this approximately 400% more than the amount we consumed just two decades [ago](#). By spreading awareness as to all the harms caused by the fashion industry, eventually the fashion industry can be pushed to use a landfill as their last option rather than first.

Impact of the Pandemic

Given the easy nature of being able to walk into any store or buy with the click of a button online, it is easy to be drawn in by the low prices and access to the most current trends. However, as a result of the pandemic, for months people were forced to transition to shop online. Due to the unexpected consequences during the pandemic, consumers were given time to do more research into what brands deserved their [support](#). With a more mindful approach, this was the best time for consumers to do background searches on brands before purchasing clothes and could therefore become more informed and make purchases that would align with their environmental values. With vaccines to COVID-19 now readily available, people have been able to transition back into as much “normality” as possible during this time. However, the shut down within America due to the pandemic was the moment for industries to focus on sustainable options.

In the United States, fashion brands have been able to exist within a rather low regulatory environment as laws address specific issues rather than the system as a [whole](#). The federal government has passed the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act for example which has implications for fashion manufacturing. However, the issue remains that many fashion brands’ manufacturing and production takes place in countries where no equivalent environmental protections [exist](#). Studies show that over the past five years, brands have witnessed a rise of action from the Gen-Z and Millennial population that are able to use their digital platform to call forth the environmental issues at stake and ask for more transparency and environmental responsibility from both the fashion industry and the U.S. [government](#). With sustainable considerations on the horizon, the COVID-19 pandemic has created more awareness and the recent rise in online shopping has allowed brands the opportunity to highlight their efforts on the brand’s webpage for consumers to view.

Journey to Circularity

The road to change begins with visibility into how the fashion industry makes clothes and what is done with them after thrown away. Although there are no solid, quick solutions, three steps towards the circular model have been introduced by the McKinsey’s fashion industry experts that should be a focus for each fast fashion company. These steps include the following: embrace a circular design, ramp-up reverse logistics, and support customer [adoption](#).

First, embracing a circular design is the initial step towards sustainability. It is reported that ninety percent of environmental impact occurs at the design stage of a product, therefore companies can redirect designers to maximize resources by reusing fibers and other [resources](#).

Second, reverse logistics can help the waste situation by implementing in-store [circularity](#). A lack of awareness, or lack of seeking the proper resources is a leading factor as to why companies are not taking the steps to recycle. As reported by Forbes, many companies lack proper waste-management and recycling infrastructure. Forbes cites a 2020 SAP and Qualtrics survey stating that 61% of people globally do not have access, or the know how to, use recycling [infrastructure](#). If companies are not pushed towards a more sustainable alternative, the quick, easy solution will be to look the other way and avoid the proper disposal methods.

Finally, involving consumers in the entire process is a step towards circularly, but this requires complete [transparency](#). By offering a recycling experience and allowing consumers the opportunity and encouragement to trade in or recycle their products, this creates a connection between consumers and companies in an effort to improve environmental issues.



[Markus Spiske/ Unsplash](#)

You may ask yourself, what progressive steps have companies made? In 2019, The Fashion Pact was created where both luxury and fast fashion brands joined efforts to develop a plan to begin more environmentally friendly ways of [production](#). Although this is a step in the right direction, despite the vast number of brands, only a select few have joined including H&M, Nike, and Chanel for [example](#). If companies continue to create sustainable methods, consumers will be drawn towards these efforts which in effect will drive other companies to follow suit. For example, H&M, the world's second largest retailer, is working to achieve the goal of using only sustainable materials by 2030 and reducing more greenhouse gases than it emits by [2040](#).

To get consumers to help play a part in this sustainable transition, H&M's global sustainability manager, Vanessa Rothschild, stated that they have a responsibility to make the idea of "circular fashion" desirable and [attractive](#). In an effort to become fully circular and climate positive, Loop is an example of material innovation. This recycling machine is in one of [H&M's](#) Stockholm stores which allows consumers to see old garments turned into a new one right in front of them. When Rothschild was asked about the pandemic's impact on the industry, she stated that consumers are now making more conscious choices about the clothes they wear, and this is where industries see a transition of consumers embracing the shift towards the circular business [model](#). By seeing a positive reaction from consumers, this will show the importance of companies working together to support one another. This will create a wheel of knowledge and sustainability expertise that will ultimately have a positive impact on the environment.

In addition, media campaigns that showcase the longevity of certain products is an effective way to help consumers know where to shop. For example, the American denim brand Levi's launched a campaign 'Buy Better, Wear Longer' to raise awareness about the environmental impacts of the apparel [industry](#). The campaign focuses on creating quality clothing that will last for generations by using sustainable options by investing in alternative materials and [technology](#). As a result of these sustainable methods, [76%](#) of all Levi products are developed using its water technology that follows certain water recycling regulations thus saving more than 4 billion liters

of water and recycling nearly 10 billion liters of water since this was implemented. This is an open-sourced method available to anyone in the fashion industry to adopt to achieve similar [targets](#).

Looking Forward

With more companies leaning towards a circular system, those taking the step towards sustainability can be the catalyst for change. Awareness, transparency and persuasion will guide not only the fashion brands, but also consumers to make more environmentally friendly decisions when shopping. It will take a collaborative effort if we want to defy what the statistics predict to date about what is to come if we do not take steps toward sustainability and take them now. Fashion companies have a responsibility to produce in a sustainable fashion and consumers have a responsibility to not only be mindful of where they choose to shop, but also with what they do with clothes once they no longer wish to wear them. Together, we can divert the unsustainable system from overwhelming our planet. Fast fashion should not be the price our planet has to pay