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The Unsustainability of the Fast Fashion World

A stylish young woman named Sally is a college student on a budget that has a passion for fashion. She has always made it a necessity to keep up with the newest fashion trends by becoming an economical shopper and going to cheap retail stores. Even though Sally has enough clothes to open her own clothing store, she cannot resist going shopping for a little black dress for New Years Eve. She finds a black sequined dress from Forever 21 for $20.99 that looks stylish and of great quality. Sally purchases the dress and takes it home to hang up with the twelve other little black dresses she has in her closet. Some of these little black dresses have either never been worn with the tags still on them, sit in her closet because they are not in style anymore, or are falling apart waiting to be taken to Goodwill. Sally is an example of a consumer that is fully aware that her clothing will last about 3 washes and one great night out before the fabric falls apart. Sally reasons that that is long enough due to the new trends that will be out on the racks two weeks later.

Now what does Sally do with her low quality, cheap clothing? She throws it all out, sometimes taking her worn out wardrobe to Goodwill or Marshalls. This scenario of Sally demonstrates only a few of the serious issues that have arisen from the radical method called Fast Fashion. Fast fashion is not a new phenomenon, but a phenomenon that has nevertheless increased pressure on the fashion industry to produce in ways that demand cheap and non-durable fashion products to move from the runway to the sale rack at breakneck speed. The economical behaviors of the fashion industry have become increasingly fast paced causing the fast fashion method to produce in ways that jeopardize environmental and social sustainability.

Fast fashion has revolutionized the clothing industry over the past decade. Therefore what’s in style now is different than what will be in style next year, or next week. The demand from consumers and trends are so high, there is now an increased need to give consumers new fashions constantly. Liz Barnes, author of, Fast Fashion in the retail store environment states, “Therefore, we conclude that fast fashion is being driven by catwalk styles, celebrity looks and the desire for newness, particularly items identified in the media which create interest and drive high levels of consumer needs” (Barnes). This overwhelming drive for fast fashion that Barnes discusses has created various problems in the fashion industry. For example, today it would be impossible to convince a consumer to buy clothing at a reasonable price, and fast fashion is to blame for this by selling daily fresh trends at a low price. Why pay good money for clothes that aren’t going to be in style next season? There isn’t much incentive for consumers to buy worn, low quality clothing when a new dress costs less than going out to eat at a nice restaurant. According to author Elizabeth L. Cline in *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost Of Cheap Fashion*, “The natural pace of clothing consumption in the United States was suddenly being viewed as retail suicide” (Cline 95). This pace of fashion is creating an obsolete market for the fine quality clothing industry. Clothing is not being made to last anymore, it is being made to last until the next trend comes out. That being said most consumers can’t afford to follow fluctuating trends with expensive items, so they do what Sally does and become an economic shopper by going to cheap retail stores for the low-cost items.

Over the years garment prices have decreased but the rate of frenzied buying has increased. “Clothing has seen such dramatic declines in price that it’s gone from a budget-buster and a defining purchase for the American household to discretionary spending,” stated from Cline (Cline 22). Lucy Siegle’s essay, *Why It’s Time to End Our Love Affair With Cheap Fashion,* argues that the fall in production and quality of cheap materials establishes why it is unsustainable to have fast and cheap fashion. However when buying trendy, cheap fashion, people are not looking for high-quality investment pieces they are looking for retailers who will sell them the clothing cheap knowing the lack in fabric quality. Even though consumers thrive on cheap fashion, it is only hurting them when their clothes fall apart due to the cheap piece of clothing they had bought that had been made with cheap garments and fabrics that will eventually fall apart. Cline also argues that, “Stores like H&M are able to say they are “good quality” because in the era of fast fashion, its product will serve us well enough through a handful of wears—until the seams spilt open, a stubborn stain sets in, or the style changes and we grow sick of it. It is quality measured in the number of washes” (Siegle118). Though cheap fashion feels like a choice, it has become a huge staple of the apparel market that is impossible to ignore. Nonetheless consumers still keep going back to fast fashion retailers with the lowest prices because they have earned the loyalty of the American economy.

Cheap fashion at low-prices has become a significant part of the retail market. According to Elizabeth L. Cline, “Fast-fashion retailers have more than twice the average profit margin of their more traditional competitors” (Cline 96). The top fast fashion retailers such as Wal-Mart, Forever 21, Zara and H&M have to have quick and efficient products in and out with cheap prices at all times. Retailers have a few ways to make their profits, either by selling fewer goods with a high price or more goods with a lower price. Fast fashion stores create their own strategies to get consumers to buy more clothes, even when they already have a closetful of them or already have the same exact style. From author Ben Shen of, *Sustainable Fashion Supply Chain: Lessons from H&M,* The clothing company H&M is the fast fashion retailer to learn from when it comes to the most successful and sustainable fast fashion stores. H&M has recognized the importance of sustainability in business and to also incorporate green practices. Author Ben then further discusses all of the great things H&M is doing in regards to the company’s sustainable supply chain in developing eco-materials, providing safety training, monitoring sustainable manufacturing, reducing carbon emission in distribution, and promoting eco-fashion (Shen). All of these practices have taken H&M to a more competitive level when ethically competing for fast fashion’s top retailer. H&M is transforming the negative and factual views of fast fashion by becoming aware and proactive on environmental and social impacts that fast fashion has caused. One important aspect that H&M and all fashion industries rely on is change. To think about how much the fashion industry has changed over the years from something as like nowadays there will be new trends about every other week, but a decade ago there were only a few trends per decade. Fashion changed over a longer period of time but not as quickly as it is changing now.

The early days of the American garment industry has evolved a tremendous amount to get the fashion industry to where it is today. One significant change would be how clothes were made years ago. For hundreds of years American style was made by a dressmaker or was handmade. However, when clothing was starting to be made in the factories and store-bought in the 1900’s, clothing became less rarified. “According to the 100 Years of U.S. Consumer Spending, a 2006 study by the U.S. Department of Labor, the average American family in 1901 had in income of $750 and spent over 14 percent on their earning, or $108 a year, on clothing” (Cline 20). But after World War II American’s began to gain wealth, and the expenditures on clothing and everything else grew alongside paychecks (Cline 21). The fashion company Gap was one of the earliest retailers to get American consumers hooked on shopping frequently. Every month, Gap would have a new color and style that went into the window. The Gap revolution created a historic moment, having the low-cost priced fashion on the runway in 1996. The media said it was groundbreaking for pairing low-cost clothing with designers work (Cline 19). This act started a new revolution for the fashion industry. Today, any runway designer or trendsetting celebrity, stylist, or fashion blogger can influence the fashion winds through society’s 24/7 media world. Now there is no stopping this ongoing cycle of fast fashion. With new statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, in 2013 families spent nearly $1,700 a year on clothing (Cline 23). The quantity of clothing being produced keeps increasing tremendously over time. The over consumption of clothing that American’s face today was never an issue in the past. In 1929, the average middle-class man owned six work outfits and the average middle-class woman nine. Elderly citizens from the Great Depression, remember having no more than five dresses as a child (Cline 21). Nowadays the fashion industry is not just making cheap fashion, but they are making an abundance of clothing.

What fuels our hunger for fast fashion? It is the love affair that consumers have with his or her clothing. People cannot get enough of fast fashion. People have the desire to have more clothes and are constantly under pressure to buy the latest look. The overconsumption of clothing has gotten out of hand. According to Kelly Drennan author of, *Picking Up the Threads,*society consumes more than 80 billion pieces of clothing each year globally. Many of these hyper-trendy, low-cost clothing items move from the runway to the sale rack resulting in a fast fashion nightmare (Drennan). When a consumer has ripped a hole in his or her $10.99 sweater, he or she purchases a new one the following week. Where do the consumers put his or her old ripped up sweater? Typically the trashcan or Goodwill, both options are leading contributors the unwanted clothing in landfills polluting society’s environment. When clothes are taken to the Salvation Army, Goodwill or other thrift shops, the donations are so high the sorters choose around 11,200 garments a day to be divided up equally between the thrift shops. These statistics demonstrates that society has so much clothing that a majority goes underused and neglected. “According to a 2010 national survey in *ShopSmart* magazine, one in four American women own seven pairs of jeans, but only wear four of them regularly” (Cline 121). For many consumers, part of the appeal of cheap fashion is that is allows them to get rid of the clothes they don’t want when newer trends come out. “Every year, Americans throw away 12.7 million tons, or 68 pounds of textiles per person, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which also estimates that 1.6 million tons of this waste could be recycled or reused,” according to Cline (Cline 122). A tremendous amount of clothing is not being recycled but getting trashed, and the environmental impact of making clothes is being overlooked.

What is happening to the natural resources being used to produce the overconsumption of clothing? The massive pollution created by the textile industry cannot be blamed on one specific type of fabric. Each fabric has its own complex ecological footprint that is hurting the environment in some way. From, *Undressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion* its states that,

”Environmental reporter Stan Cox has noted that sheep farmed for wool can cause soil erosion, water pollution, and biodiversity loss; leather tanning involves toxic heavy metals all man-made fiber production emits greenhouse gases and pollutes water; and the U.S. cotton crop demands 22 billion pounds of weed killer per year” (Cline 125)

The water and fiber footprint fast fashion is creating is just as horrifying. “An estimated 17 to 20 percent of total industrial water pollution comes from textile dyeing and treatment—and approximately 8,000 synthetic chemicals are used throughout the world to turn raw materials into textiles” (Drennan). This is an example of just one of the many reactions that have caused harms to the environment and the depletion of natural resources because of fast fashion.

While society’s fast fashion fling might seem cheap and fun, there are serious long-term social impacts that have consequently led to the suffering of not only the environment but to the many people who have to make the clothes in rapid consumption. Consider the current situation in Bangladesh. “In one of the most tragic industry disasters to date, more than 1,100 garment workers were killed and at least 2,000 injured in the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory on April 24, 2013” (Drennan). Many attributes were contributed to the horrific tragedy in Bangladesh such as low wages for the workers and the increasing pressure on manufacturers to reduce costs of garments. The Bangladesh garment industry is a large employer of children, who are forced to work many long hours in unsafe factories. Many brands would not even check on the conditions of their factories in other countries, not knowing that there were bars on the windows, blocked fire exits and many other unsafe conditions (Drennan). The unbearable treatment that fast fashion has caused for these factory workers is unforgiveable. According to Michael Lavergne, author of Fixing Fashion: Rethinking the Way We Make, Market and Buy Our Clothes, unsustainable pricing for clothing is the reason many factories are not compliant with the laws around the health, safety, labor, environmental and human rights issues” (Drennan). After the event of Rana Plaza, fashion companies have come to be more aware of socially harmful situation. Companies are trying to turn things around by creating a more sustainable, green and healthier environment for the fashion industry.

Sustainability issues are crucial to the fashion industry. Many fashion companies such as H&M are recognizing the importance of sustainability and have an understanding in that if supply chain is more sustainable, more natural resources are used and less carbon dioxide emitted, but in return, prices might also increase. To comply with green practices, H&M created a sustainability program, which is called “Conscious Action”.

“In this program, broadly speaking, more job opportunities in less developed countries are created, more recyclable resources are used in production and consumers are educated to be more ethical. As a result, market and supply chain are turning to be more economically, environmentally and socially sustainable” (Shen).

Through eco-material preparation in maintain sustainability of natural resources, sustainable manufacturing, green distribution and green retailing by promoting sustainable ethical consumers in retailing, H&M has created an entirely new opportunity for sustainable, slow fashion that promotes eco-fashion.

The ongoing cycle of fast fashion is taking a toll on not only the fashion industry but to all that it effects including; the designers, the workers manufacturing the clothes, the retailers in the stores putting new products out, the natural resources used to make products and the environment. The research conducted about fast fashion also focused on examining a sustainable fashion supply chain and took H&M as the industry example. The H&M case showed the possibility for growth and a start to a way out of this fast fashion nightmare. If companies began to start after H&M’s examples fast fashion would slowly become all together sustainable. Through this essay consumers should have acknowledged the importance of knowing what they are wearing, where it came from, how it was made and what happens to it after they don’t want it anymore. Hopefully learning from the examples of fast fashion retailer stores and young stylish Sally has answered the question to why fast fashion has become such a threat to the environment economically and socially. The economical behaviors of the fashion industry have become increasingly fast paced causing the fast fashion method to produce in ways that jeopardize environmental and social sustainability.