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Fast fashion in India: The adverse face of affordable fashion

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Abstract

The phenomenon of fast fashion has gained unprecedented momentum in the global apparel industry, epitomizing rapid production cycles, low-cost manufacturing, and disposable consumerism. This study illuminates the negative aspects associated with the apparent affordability and fashionable appeal of fast fashion. Through an interdisciplinary lens, encompassing economic, social, and environmental perspectives, this research aims to dissect the multifaceted impact of fast fashion on society and ecosystem.

Keywords: fast fashion, apparel industry, society and ecosystem

Introduction

Fast fashion, characterized by its swift production cycles, rapid turnover of styles, and budget-friendly prices, has surged into prominence over the past few decades. Zara, a Spanish clothing retailer, is often credited with popularizing the fast fashion model. Zara's mission of taking only 15 days for a garment to go from the design stage to being sold in stores is a key characteristic of fast fashion (Williams, E., 2022, What Is Fast Fashion and Why Is It So Bad? 2022)^[8, 7]. Global giants like Zara, H&M, and Forever 21 have become synonymous with this trend, establishing an extensive presence in cities worldwide. Despite its popularity, the true cost of fast fashion extends far beyond the price tags, with its environmental impact looming as a significant concern. In this article, I delve into the repercussions of fast fashion in India, shedding light on its adverse effects on the environment.

The Global Footprint of Fast Fashion

The fashion industry, known for its dynamism and trend-driven nature, stands as the second most polluting sector globally, following closely behind the oil and gas industry. According to world bank estimates, globally 20% of all water pollution is created during the run off processes of textile dyeing and rinsing of natural (mostly cotton) fabrics (Anguelov, N., 2015)^[1]. With fast fashion emphasis on mass production, contributes significantly to this environmental crisis. From resource-intensive manufacturing processes to excessive waste generation, the repercussions of this industry are felt far and wide.

India's Fast Fashion Landscape

In recent years, India has witnessed a surge in fast fashion's popularity, with a burgeoning middle class and a youth demographic keen on staying abreast of international trends. Many Brands have rapidly expanded their footprint in major Indian cities, fuelling a culture of disposable fashion.

Background

Fast fashion is indeed characterized by a rapid turnover of clothing collections, quick production cycles, and low prices. This business model has gained prominence in the fashion industry over the past few decades, driven by factors such as globalization, advances in manufacturing technology, and changing consumer behaviour.

Key features of the fast fashion business model include

- 1. Rapid Production Cycles:** Fast fashion brands aim to bring new styles from the runway to stores quickly. This requires efficient and speedy production processes, often resulting in shorter lead times compared to traditional fashion cycles.
- 2. Low-Cost Production:** Fast fashion brands often outsource production to countries with lower labour costs, enabling them to produce clothing at a fraction of the cost.

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However, this outsourcing has raised concerns about working conditions and ethical practices in some manufacturing facilities.

3. **Global Supply Chains:** Fast fashion relies on a complex network of suppliers and manufacturers located around the world. This globalized supply chain allows brands to take advantage of diverse resources and production capabilities.
4. **Trend Imitation:** Fast fashion brands are adept at replicating the latest trends from high-end fashion houses quickly. This allows them to offer similar styles at much lower prices, appealing to consumers who want to stay on trend without breaking the bank.
5. **Disposable Fashion:** The emphasis on low prices and rapid turnover contributes to a culture of disposable fashion. Clothes are often produced with lower quality materials and craftsmanship, leading to shorter lifespans and encouraging frequent purchases.
6. **Marketing and Consumer Influence:** Fast fashion companies invest heavily in marketing and advertising to create a sense of urgency and desire for new styles. Social media plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and driving the demand for the latest trends.
7. **Environmental and Ethical Concerns:** The fast fashion industry has faced criticism for its environmental impact, including resource depletion, pollution, and waste. Additionally, concerns about unethical labour practices in some manufacturing facilities have prompted calls for greater transparency and responsibility within the industry.

While fast fashion has been successful in meeting consumer demand for affordable and trendy clothing, it has also sparked debates about its sustainability and ethical implications. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and a push for more sustainable and ethical practices in the fashion industry, leading to the rise of slow fashion and other alternative models.

In the last fifteen years, the fashion industry has experienced an unprecedented surge in clothing production, effectively doubling its output. Ironically, as production escalated, the time consumers spend wearing a particular clothing item has plummeted by forty percent. These alarming statistics underscore a critical concern: the environmental impact of the fashion industry. Following current trends, it is projected that the fashion sector could consume a staggering quarter of the world's remaining global carbon budget, threatening to breach the two-degree Celsius warming limit by 2050.

According to international finance corporation, 2023, The fashion industry's current share of global emissions is on par with those of leading hard-to-abate heavy industries. As its current rate of expansion, the industry's total greenhouse gas emissions are projected to surge by more than 50% by 2030. Such figures demand urgent attention and action to curb the ecological fallout of the fashion world.

Shein demonstrates an abundance of choice and accelerated fashion production with around 6,000,000 products available for purchase on their website, and with a turnaround of 25 days, only 6% remains available for more than 90 days (Ritch, E. L., 2023) ^[6]. This abundance of options, coupled with the declining longevity of garments, fosters a disposable culture where clothing items are discarded after a mere handful of wears, exacerbating the environmental crisis.

In the United States alone, an annual production of twenty-five billion pounds of textiles results in an average of eighty-two pounds of textile waste per resident (Harris, C). While the act of donating unwanted clothing is often seen as a solution, the reality is far from ideal. Almost half of unsold clothing donations from affluent nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, are shipped offshore. This practice, labelled "waste colonialism," exposes the darker side of fashion's global footprint, as richer nations offload their responsibility for fashion waste onto poorer nations in the Global South.

This unwarranted burden thrust upon marginalized populations in the Global South has dire consequences, with approximately forty percent of donated clothing items ending up in landfills in countries like Ghana. The repercussions are severe, leading to environmental catastrophes such as excessive flooding and the spread of communicable diseases. In 2014, a cholera outbreak in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana claimed 243 lives, attributed to poor waste management and a lack of clean water, highlighting the interconnectedness of fashion, waste, and public health.

It is evident that the fashion industry not only exploits marginalized populations for labour but also relies on them to absorb the brunt of environmental consequences. The subsequent section will delve into the labour standards, or lack thereof, within the global fashion industry and the egregious abuses that follow. As consumers, industry stakeholders, and policymakers, it is crucial to recognize the symbiotic relationship between fashion and the environment and work collaboratively towards sustainable solutions that preserve both human rights and the planet.

Following are significant ethical and human rights concerns associated with the fast fashion industry

Exploitation of Workers

1. The garment industry provides around sixty million jobs globally, with a concentration in Asia, where labour regulations are often lacking.
2. The impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated these issues, with a reported eighty-nine percent of H&M workers' wages falling below the international poverty line.
3. Long Hours and Low Wages: Many workers in the fast fashion supply chain, particularly in developing countries, face excessively long working hours and receive low wages. This often results from the intense pressure to produce clothing quickly and cheaply.
4. Unsafe Working Conditions: In pursuit of cost-cutting measures, some companies compromise on workplace safety standards. This can lead to hazardous conditions for workers, risking their health and well-being.

Wage Theft in Karnataka, India

According to 'Business And Human Rights Resource Centre', December 2021, it was reported that more than 400,000 garment workers in Karnataka, India, had been receiving wages below the legal minimum at more than 1,000 factories since April 2020.

1. The variable dearness allowance, India's equivalent of a cost-of-living increase, was raised, but many workers did not receive the new minimum wage.
2. Twenty-two brands, including Abercrombie & Fitch, Adidas, and Target, were implicated in this wage theft.

Gender and Child Exploitation: Exploitation of Women

and Children: The fast fashion industry is often criticized for exploiting vulnerable groups, including women and children. In some cases, they may be subjected to discrimination, harassment, and unsafe working conditions.

Response from Brands

1. The International Business & Human Rights Resource Centre invited the implicated brands to identify steps taken to address wage theft and ensure fair payment.
2. Only sixteen out of the twenty-two brands responded with information about repayment efforts, suggesting a lack of accountability in the industry.
3. The global garment industry appears to have a laissez-faire policy regarding ensuring that production factories pay their employees a liveable wage.

Impact on Families

1. Families of garment industry workers are subject to abject poverty as a result of low wages and poor working conditions.
2. Fashion brands may compromise on labour costs to cut corners in production, contributing to the cycle of poverty among workers.

Impact on Local Economies

1. Monopoly and Unfair Trade Practices: Large multinational corporations in the fast fashion industry often dominate the market. This dominance allows them to dictate terms to suppliers, leading to unfair trade practices and putting local businesses at a disadvantage.
2. Economic Dependence: Developing countries that heavily rely on the garment industry may become economically dependent on these multinational corporations. This dependence can limit economic diversification and hinder the development of other sectors.

Environmental Concerns

Waste and Pollution: The fast fashion industry contributes significantly to environmental degradation through excessive waste and pollution. Rapid production cycles result in large amounts of discarded clothing, and the use of certain manufacturing processes and materials can contribute to environmental harm.

Consumer Awareness and Responsibility

Demand for Change: As consumers become more aware of the ethical and environmental impact of fast fashion, there is a growing demand for sustainable and ethical practices. This shift in consumer behaviour can potentially drive change within the industry.

Efforts are being made by some brands and organizations to address these issues through sustainable and ethical practices. These initiatives include fair trade certification, promoting worker rights, and adopting environmentally friendly production methods. However, challenges persist, and systemic change requires collective efforts from consumers, businesses, and policymakers to create a more responsible and humane fashion industry.

While some of the ills of the fashion industry have been recognized by U.S. legislation, these regulations do not solve the global environmental problem. For example, in 1976, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act created fines for companies who dumped excessive chemicals and

waste into bodies of water. However, only bodies of water in the United States benefitted from protection. When faced with pesky environment regulations, many companies moved production to underdeveloped nations in the Global South, shifting the environmental issues overseas. The same can be said for labour regulations that move work from the United States to other—less regulated—countries.

Although international law falls outside of U.S. jurisdiction, legislators can still act to protect international human rights of workers and the global environment.

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand introduced the Fashion Accountability and Building Real Institutional Change Act (“FABRIC Act”) In the United States, in 2022. The FABRIC Act offers incentives to accelerate domestic apparel manufacturing and workplace protections. (Harris, C).

According to ‘Working Group on Business and Human Rights’ an increasing number of countries require human rights due diligence (“MHRDD”) to hold corporations responsible for their actions. The MHRDD concept was inspired by the United Nations’ Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights publication, which established a guide to recognize the States’ obligation to protect and fulfil human rights, businesses’ responsibility to respect and comply with human rights laws, and the appropriate remedies when these responsibilities are breached.

In summary, the text underscores the urgent need for increased transparency, accountability, and ethical practices within the garment industry to address labour and human rights violations, including wage theft and poor working conditions.

Discussion

Following points provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and potential solutions related to regulating and addressing environmental and labour concerns in the global fashion industry. Here's a summary and further elaboration on some aspects.

Global Nature of the Fashion Industry

The globalization of supply chains has led to a complex web of economic interdependencies that span multiple countries and regions. This interconnectedness has also brought about a growing awareness and concern regarding the social and environmental impacts associated with globalized production and consumption (Bostrom, M., Jönsson, A. M., Lockie, S., Mol, A. P., & Oosterveer, P., 2015) ^[2] Emphasizing the need for international cooperation and agreements to regulate a global industry with complex supply chains is crucial. This could involve collaboration on standards, monitoring mechanisms, and enforcement strategies.

Data Collection and Research

Funding research efforts to gather comprehensive data is a fundamental step. Collaborative international research can create a unified knowledge base, facilitating informed policymaking and the development of effective solutions.

Legislation and Incentives

Highlighting the importance of recent legislative efforts, such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act and the FABRIC Act, acknowledges progress. However, emphasizing the need for international collaboration and incentives, like tax credits for responsible practices,

reinforces the idea of a coordinated global approach.

Human Rights Due Diligence

Recognizing the significance of Mandatory Human Rights Due Diligence (MHRDD) and its alignment with international principles is essential. The success of MHRDD depends on effective enforcement and compliance, which might require a collective effort from nations and corporations.

Challenges of Enforcement

Acknowledging the challenges of enforcing regulations on transnational corporations underscores the need for collaborative efforts involving governments, international organizations, and NGOs. This prevents companies from simply relocating to regions with less stringent regulations.

Consumer Awareness and Activism

Stressing the role of consumer awareness and activism in influencing market demand and encouraging responsible practices aligns with the idea that informed consumers can drive positive change in the industry.

International Cooperation

Reiterating the necessity of international cooperation as a central theme emphasizes the need for shared standards, agreements, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure global responsibility in the fashion industry.

Conclusion

There is a need for holistic, international approach to address the multifaceted challenges in the fashion industry. Balancing legislation, incentives, consumer awareness, and global collaboration is crucial for creating a sustainable and ethical global fashion landscape.

Government Regulation and Oversight

- There is a need for legislation and government funding to regulate the fashion industry. This is a crucial step in holding corporations accountable for their practices and ensuring compliance with ethical and environmental standards.
- Government oversight can play a pivotal role in enforcing regulations, conducting audits, and penalizing those who violate ethical and environmental norms.

Consumer Responsibility

- Acknowledging the role of individual consumers is important. Encouraging consumers to reevaluate their shopping practices and make conscious choices aligning with their values can drive positive change.
- The mention of second-hand clothing and sustainable brands as alternatives to fast fashion reflects an awareness of more eco-friendly options available to consumers.

Collaborative Efforts

The recognition that consumers, governments, and corporations all play a part in addressing these issues underscores the need for a collaborative approach. Progress is more likely when these entities work together towards common goals. There has been a growing awareness and movement towards sustainability and ethical practices in the fashion industry in recent years (McNeill, L., & Moore, R., 2015)^[5].

Long-Term Perspective

By stating that there is a "long road ahead," you acknowledge that significant change may take time. This perspective aligns with the understanding that sustainable practices require commitment and persistence from all stakeholders.

Importance of Progress and Accountability

The final point emphasizes that progress and accountability are necessary. This highlights the ongoing nature of the efforts required and the need for continuous improvement in the industry's practices.

Textile Recycling Programs

- Establish and promote textile recycling programs to reduce the environmental impact of discarded clothing.
- Collaborate with NGOs and recycling companies to create easy-to-access drop-off points for old clothing.

Green Financing

- Encourage financial institutions to provide incentives for sustainable practices within the fashion industry.
- Offer preferential loans or financial support to businesses adopting eco-friendly and ethical approaches.

The fast fashion industry in India has undoubtedly left a significant mark, marked by environmental degradation, social issues, and economic imbalances. However, the path to a more sustainable future is within reach. Fashion brands must take responsibility for their practices, adopting sustainable and ethical approaches to production. Consumers, too, hold the power to drive change by supporting brands committed to responsible practices and making conscious, long-term choices.

Despite the challenges, positive examples within the industry showcase that change is possible. Sustainable fashion companies implement and utilize co-creation practices with the customers at various stages of the economic, environmental, and social levels of their business models (Kuusisaari, M., 2022)^[4]. Initiatives promoting local production, fair labour practices, and eco-friendly materials provide a blueprint for a more sustainable future. It is imperative for both brands and consumers to play an active role in reshaping the fashion landscape. By taking decisive steps today, we pave the way for a fashion industry that not only meets our present needs but ensures a flourishing and responsible future for generations to come.

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