

Literature review on
fashion industry, slow fashion and fast fashion
(IO1-A1)

Executive Summary

Authors:

aiforia / Germany
EKO / Hungary
MASZK/ Hungary
IDEC / Greece

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*"My grandmother has only one shirt in her wardrobe.
My mother has three. My daughter's generation, 50.
And 48% of them, she never wears."*
Jack Ma, Alibaba founder



OVERVIEW

Fashion (clothing, footwear, accessories) is a key target of global consumption habits today, in particular since it is connoted to be “Fast”. Partners in the “Fast Art, Slow Fashion” (FASF) project¹ attend to this particular phenomenon and strive to shed light on the fashion industry, on fast fashion and slow fashion respectively with this coordinated literature review.

Fast Art Slow Fashion (FASF) project



FASHION IN OUR SOCIETY

When analysing different terms of today’s „fashion industry”, it’s worth starting with a distinction between „clothing” and „fashion” as both imply textiles to enwrap and serve human bodies: “Clothing is our second skin, accompanies and protects us from heat or chill... Fashion is identity and cultural form of expression.”² Like the latter definition implies, „fashion” has social and psychological meanings which go beyond the practical approach of garments. The majority of definitions revisited identify both an individual meaning of fashion („translating self-esteem into a personal style.”³) and societal meanings as belonging to specific cultures (“practices which are controlling our social contacting and ... our dressing customs. ⁴) and epochs („popular ways of dressing during a specific era.”⁵).

Fashion has social and psychological meaning.

Fashion is a phenomenon that has been evolving and leaving a mark in different societies and historical periods from early on (e.g. the Tang Dynasty China 618-907 and Heian Period Japan 795-1185) ⁶ although the first known use of the term “*fashion*” was in the 14th century⁷.

¹For more information about the ERASMUS+ projekt, visit ONLY EKO’S WEBSITE. IT IS UNDER PREPARATION, I WILL SEND THE FINAL LINK WHEN THE WEBSITE IS READY

²Dr. Burckhardt, G., Prof. von Wedel-Parlow, F. (2017): Preface. In: Fair Fashion Guide, FEMNET (ed.), April 2017, p.3

³<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/1999/10/what-is-fashion/> Downloaded: 26 April 2021

⁴https://tudasbazis.sulinet.hu/hu/0d0cc85d-f7b5-41fb-aec0-d1b8362c7ebf_e90c4562-46d5-4b3a-a5ed-d640f67b512a_cca0d252-8fb4-416f-ac29-41411acedb91_42097f0a-9b1f-4765-81f9-3ebd8755883f_9596819a-6d5a-4fb6-8578-375c175bcf00_5fe3928b-45c8-476f-a62b-b244292b00f7 Downloaded: 28.04.2021.

⁵<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/key-differences-between-fashion-and-style#what-is-style> Downloaded 26 April 2021

⁶Steele, V. Definition of Fashion: <https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/alphabetical-index-fashion-clothing-history/definitionn-fashion>

⁷Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Fashion. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved May 3, 2021, from <httpswww.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fashion>



Both aspects of fashion – the free individual expression through style and the expression of belonging to a specific societal group or spirit of the time – have developed further and intensified: “The later nineteenth century witnessed both the mass-production of ready-to-wear clothing and the development in Paris of the haute couture.”⁸



SURGE OF FAST FASHION

With the surge of so-called „fast fashion” in the 1980’s, these two trends were merged and „revolutionised textile production: What is presented today on catwalks in New York, Paris or Milan can be found as inexpensive copies in the shopping streets of our cities within a few days.”⁹ The term of fast fashion as such goes back to the fast food phrase. It means that the products are made quickly, from cheap ingredients, under bad circumstances. Usually in Asian countries, where the employees are poorly paid and overworked¹⁰. This was made possible by global trade and multinational retail chains, shifting production to countries with cheap(er) labour and less controls of environmental and social standards. Fast fashion “relies on mass production, low prices and large volumes of sales, as a European Parliament Briefing states”.¹¹

Fast fashion: products are made from cheap raw materials and fast

Whether this development is driven by an increased demand of consumers or the marketing strategies of retailers is viewed differently in the sources revisited. However, the results are unambiguous: countless new fashion collections per year („micro-seasons”) are promoting a throwaway culture in which clothing has evolved from a durable good to a daily purchase, thus fashion is “accelerating the decreasing of the moral of the already owned wardrobe”¹².

Who is responsible: consumers or firms?



ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF FAST FASHION

The economic impact of fast fashion is showing to be robust. Within the apparel industry, it is responsible for an average 4.78% growth in recent years, with few signs that this increase will

⁸Steele, V. Definition of Fashion: <https://fashion-history.lovetoknow.com/alphabetical-index-fashion-clothing-history/definitionn-fashion>

⁹Greenpeace (2017): Konsumkollaps durch Fast Fashion. Greenpeace, January 2017, p.3

¹⁰Korn, A. (2020): De mi is az a fenntartható divat? – fast fashin és slow fashion.

<https://www.ruhastory.com/post/de-mi-is-az-a-fenntarthat%C3%B3-divat-fast-fashion-%C3%A9s-slow-fashion>

Downloaded: 28.04.2021.

¹¹[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633143/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)633143_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633143/EPRS_BRI(2019)633143_EN.pdf)

Downloaded: 27 April 2021

¹²Kandikó, J. (1982): Divat és marketing. Közgazdasági Szemle, 29/1, 63-78.



slow down in the future.¹³ On the opposite: sales from clothing items are expected to reach 160 million tonnes of material in 2050. Altogether, the global clothing production has almost doubled in the last 15 years (from 7 to 13kg per person)¹⁴, with 60-75 million people working in the total global value chain of textiles.¹⁵

The main driver for this increase is commonly identified in the growing demand for cheap clothing items across developed economies middle-class population. An average person buys five times more clothing now than in the 1980s; European citizens even buy 27kg of textiles annually, spending 5% of the salaries on clothing and footwear. Not only in-store visits are frequent (more than 1 per month in 2012 regarding Zara stores), but e-commerce has also been on the rise. The so-called haul videos on YouTube have contributed to the continuous rise of online sales.¹⁶

Rising demand for clothing items

However, major negative impacts become obvious when looking at the global value chain (GVC) of textile and garment: although the majority of processing is done in developing countries, these stand at the bottom of the GVC, while developed countries are on the other end.¹⁷ One of the reasons are the low wages paid to textile workers e.g. in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Vietnam, and there's a general imbalance also in the value-added chain: the cost of making the clothes is \$ 5, but they are sold for \$ 80¹⁸. Consumers do not only pay for the item, they

Global value chain in textile industry: inequalities across countries

also pay for advertising, design, transport, packaging, wastage and profits. Whilst farmers, seamstresses and others receive rather low wages; the managers and investors who control the means of production, extract surplus from both manufacturing and retail".¹⁹

The reasons for this imbalance root in the economic model of fast fashion: Factories are not owned by the fashion corporations, they are only entrusted with production. Contractual conditions are set by the corporations, the contracts and agreements are unilateral and factories are not allowed to contract with others. Companies pay after the arrival of the manufactured and delivered goods; if they don't accept it (for deficiencies or other reasons), the factories are not allowed to use

Producers vs. Fashion industries: contractual performance and its consequences

¹³ <https://fee.org/articles/fast-fashion-has-changed-the-industry-and-the-economy/> Downloaded: 3 May 2021

¹⁴ Shirvanimoghaddam, K. – Motamed, B. – Ramakrishna, S. – Naebe, M. (2020): Death by waste: Fashion and textile circular economy case. Science of the Total Environment, 718, 137317

¹⁵ https://ecodesign-centres.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ETC_report_textiles-and-the-environment-in-a-circular-economy.pdf Downloaded: 11 May 2021

¹⁶ <https://smartasset.com/credit-cards/the-economics-of-fast-fashion> Downloaded: 3 May 2021

¹⁷ European Parliament (2016): Improving global value chains key for EU trade. Briefing, June.

¹⁸ <https://www.reutersevents.com/sustainability/supply-chains/rana-plaza-rebuilding-more-factory> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

¹⁹ Brooks A. (2015): Systems of provision: Fast fashion and jeans. Geoforum, 63, 36-39.

these goods or sell it to another company – they need to destroy the clothes or give them away for free.²⁰

But also in developed, „Western” countries, the major production shift to Asian countries has left economic impacts on the textile industry, leaving less work to local seamstresses and tailors: in 2017, the European textile and clothing industry had only 176,400 companies left with 181 billion EUR turnover and 1.7 million employees (less than 3% of textile workers around the world)²¹. This means that less than 27% of the textiles consumed in Europe are produced here as well.²²

Another negative economic impact originates from the linear model of the fashion industry with

*linear model of the fashion industry:
Take, Make and Waste*

three key stages: take (the harvesting of raw materials), make (the production of garments), and waste (the wearing and subsequent disposal of garments). This throwaway model is also supported by consumers: 30% of the clothes bought by European consumers was not used for more than

one year²³ and less than 1% of clothing items are recycled. Thus, the annual value of clothing discarded prematurely is more than \$400 billion²⁴.



SOCIAL IMPACTS OF FAST FASHION

Different studies prove that the economic model of fast fashion mass production in overseas countries on order of Western corporations is generating a lot of social impacts all along the production chain. The growth of cotton, for example, is a source of income for 5.8 million farmers in India which accounts for 25% of world cotton production. These farmers are mostly smallholders who cultivate less than 2 acres of land.

The high competition forces them to sell their crops at a depressed price and corporate governance drives them into further financial difficulties: they have to buy expensive GMO seeds, use expensive tools and fertilizer, and there is no government

*Cotton producers in India: 25% of
global production*

²⁰<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/made-in-china-we-are-not-machines-we-are-humans/> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

²¹ibid

²²https://ecodesign-centres.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ETC_report_textiles-and-the-environment-in-a-circular-economy.pdf Downloaded: 11 May 2021

²³European Parliament (2019): Environmental impact of the textile and clothing industry. Briefing, January.

²⁴Drew, D. (2019): By the Numbers: The Economic, Social and Environmental Impacts of “Fast Fashion”, <https://www.wri.org/insights/numbers-economic-social-and-environmental-impacts-fast-fashion>



credit to help them out of debt²⁵. In result, a reported 11,000 and 15,000 Indian farmers commit suicide every year²⁶.

In China, Uyghurs and other minorities are relocated and forced to work in cotton fields without pay, often they are victims of torture, rape, forced sterilization, indoctrination. The trade from here involves 82 international brands, but whichever company opposes it is boycotted by China²⁷. In Uzbekistan, where the state forces adults and children to work on the cotton fields as well, serious

Cotton producers in China and Uzbekistan

health problems are reported: chemical insecticides cause respiratory diseases, skin and eye irritation, seizures, death; and further diseases can be traced back to this. 70-80 children are born with mental or physical disabilities in every village, but the low wages paid leaves parents no money for treatments²⁸.

But aiming to maximize profit based on the consumers' demands, companies are taking advantage of labor force in the factories as well (e.g.: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Vietnam)²⁹ Workers' wages ranged at the time from an average of \$ 35 to \$ 60 per month³⁰. Out of 60-75 million people working in the total global value chain of textiles, 40-75% are women, especially young and underage women.³¹ Many of them financially support their families and cannot afford to lose income, even when becoming victims of violence³². But the issue is not only about the measly wages for long hours of work, but for the dangerous working conditions with no benefits or protection³³. This became most

Employee in a textile factory: low wages, bad circumstances, child labour

²⁵<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/standing-up-for-the-farmers-who-grow-our-cotton/> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

²⁶<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/19/asia/india-cotton-farmers-suicide/index.html> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

²⁷<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/human-rights-transparency-and-accountability-in-fashion-a-conversation-on-uyghur-forced-labour/> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

²⁸<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/standing-up-for-the-farmers-who-grow-our-cotton/> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

²⁹Maiti, R. (2020): Fast Fashion: Its Detrimental Effect on the Environment. <https://earth.org/fast-fashion-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/#:~:text=Among%20the%20environmental%20impacts%20of%20fast%20fashion%20are,use%20of%20massive%20amounts%20of%20water%20and%20energy.>

³⁰<https://www.reuterevents.com/sustainability/supply-chains/rana-plaza-rebuilding-more-factory> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

³¹https://ecodesign-centres.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ETC_report_textiles-and-the-environment-in-a-circular-economy.pdf Downloaded: 11 May 2021

³²<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/bangladesh-accord-an-urgent-call-to-action-to-protectprogress/> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

³³Maiti, R. (2020): Fast Fashion: Its Detrimental Effect on the Environment. <https://earth.org/fast-fashion-detrimental-effect-on-the->

visible with the collapse of Rana Plaza on April 24, 2013 which buried 3,000 employees of clothing factories and took the live of 1,129 people³⁴. Although the 8-storey building in Bangladesh had already been evacuated the day before due to visible cracks, labor inspectors forced workers back into the factory with the threat of a monthly pay cut³⁵.

From the consumers' perspective, some positive social effects can be attributed to fast fashion: since it is designed for speed and affordability, it can respond to ever-changing customer needs, s.a. continuous renewal³⁶. Whilst fashionable clothes have previously been an elite privilege, fast fashion has made them made available to lower strata as well. They have the opportunity to expand their clothing, thereby expressing social and economic status. However, for the

Consumers: low prices, continuous change

growth of conventional cotton (non-organic) many pesticides are being used which end up in the finished cotton product. These toxins have been linked to major health concerns in humans including respiratory problems and even cancer.³⁷

As a psychological observation, 62% of surveyed persons were ashamed of wearing fast fashion clothes in their first job interview, and with the collapse of Ranza Plaza, this feeling of shame was coupled with a feeling of guilt as well. Nearly half of U.S. consumers said they would consider to change their consumption habits. As a result, an increase in demand for rented and used clothing has been observed.



ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF FAST FASHION

In the case of the production of clothing (and textiles in general) the impacts on the environment are manifold and appear in all steps of the processing, from the use of resources (input) to the emission of toxins (output). This holds true both for natural fibres and synthetic fibres.

Environmental impacts: input and output side

The intense cotton farming for fashion industry's

Production and painting of clothing: significant need for water!

purposes is a big consumer of water and intensifies issues of water scarcity. Cotton needs a lot of water to grow, and it grows in hot regions where water is scarce already. Just one single cotton T-shirt takes 2700 litres of water for its production³⁸. The growth

[environment/#:~:text=Among%20the%20environmental%20impacts%20of%20fast%20fashion%20are,use%20of%20massive%20amounts%20of%20water%20and%20energy.](#)

³⁴<https://ourgoodbrands.com/real-impact-fast-fashion-industry-world/> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

³⁵<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/bangladesh-accord-an-urgent-call-to-action-to-protectprogress/> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

³⁶<https://docplayer.hu/47861395-H-m-mint-fast-fashion.html> Downloaded: 14.05.2021

³⁷Fair Trader(2020): 9 Surprising Facts About Fast Fashion and the Environment, <https://fairtradefinder.com/fast-fashion-and-the-environment/>

³⁸Hugh(2019): Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion (With Facts and Statistics), <https://get-green-now.com/environmental-impact-fast->

of conventional cotton (non-organic) many pesticides are being as well used which pollute the soils, impact local ecosystems and are made responsible for human health issues, including respiratory problems and even cancer.³⁹

A great amount of water is also being required to dye and manufacture textiles: the production of a ton of dyed fabric needs up to 200 tons of water and releases wastewater which can be toxic and contain pollutants such as lead, mercury, and arsenic. Where environmental laws are not strict and do not hold much power, factories dump untreated wastewater directly into rivers or lakes that are being used by locals. This not only has an impact on aquatic life, but on the health of the local population living by these water bodies.

The overall production chain further has an impact on global climate, as the House of Common Environmental Audit Committee states: “Clothing production contributes more to climate change than long-distance aviation and shipping combined. The fast fashion industry creates 10% of yearly global carbon emissions. This rate of pollution will increase by more than 50 % by 2030 if left unchecked.”⁴⁰ The production of synthetic polymers releases additional greenhouse gases such as nitrous oxide are being released to the atmosphere which is 300 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

Another problem can be noted from the handling of clothes: When new trends enter, the previous ones end up in garbage dumps for decades, and possibly even centuries. Polyester requires 200 years to decompose and nylon a minimum of 30-40 years. During the procedure of decomposing, the fabrics release microplastics into the soil which can pollute the nearby area.⁴¹

Non-used clothes: going to landfill



SLOW FASHION RESPONSES

In reaction to the different, mostly negative impacts of fast fashion, several counter-trends and initiatives have evolved in the last decades such as ecological fashion, ethical fashion, sustainable fashion, organic fashion, future fashion. Official authorities, such as the EU, most commonly use the general term of sustainable fashion in their communications.

[fashion/#:~:text=%20How%20Does%20Fast%20Fashion%20Impact%20the%20Environment%3F%28Fast,Deplet es%20and%20Pollutes%20Water%20Resources.%20The...%20More%20 All of these facts ar from this site](#)

³⁹Fair Trader(2020): 9 Surprising Facts About Fast Fashion and the Environment,

<https://fairtradefinder.com/fast-fashion-and-the-environment/>

⁴⁰Hugh(2019): Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion (With Facts and Statistics), [https://get-green-](https://get-green-now.com/environmental-impact-fast-)

[fashion/#:~:text=%20How%20Does%20Fast%20Fashion%20Impact%20the%20Environment%3F%28Fast,Deplet es%20and%20Pollutes%20Water%20Resources.%20The...%20More%20 All of these facts ar from this site](#)

⁴¹Hugh(2019): Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion (With Facts and Statistics), [https://get-green-](https://get-green-now.com/environmental-impact-fast-)

[fashion/#:~:text=%20How%20Does%20Fast%20Fashion%20Impact%20the%20Environment%3F%28Fast,Deplet es%20and%20Pollutes%20Water%20Resources.%20The...%20More%20 All of these facts ar from this site](#)



However, this review is focussed on „slow fashion” which is the most direct response to „fast fashion”: “The antithesis of fast fashion, it focuses on quality and longevity while standing up for both nature and people.”⁴² Design activist and professor Kate Fletcher is widely credited with coining the term “slow fashion” in 2007. Its concept borrows heavily from the Slow Food Movement where pleasure and consumption is linked with awareness and responsibility. Similarly, slow fashion intends to offer an alternative to fast fashion, with mindful manufacturing, fair labor rights, natural materials, and lasting garments.⁴³

*Sustainable fashion,
slow fashion*

Consumers are encouraged to “1) adopt a non-consumerist mentality, and 2) shift toward shopping habits that are beneficial for the planet and the people who call it home.”⁴⁴ Such include building minimalist wardrobes, investing in garments to keep for a lifetime⁴⁵, either bought from responsible brands or secondhand shops.

Retailers on the other hand are requested to “hit the brakes on excessive production, overcomplicated supply chains, and mindless consumption. With slower production schedules, small-batch collections, and zero waste designs, slow fashion brands aim to reduce the textile waste clogging our landfills. Instead of chasing trends, these brands utilize enduring styles with layering options and create classic and versatile pieces, trying to encourage customers to build minimalist wardrobes and invest in garments that they keep for a lifetime⁴⁶ .

*Responsibilities of consumers and
traders*

This can result in a larger societal change, as Emilia Wik, Head Designer at BYEM puts it: “Slow fashion is also about returning to a personal relationship with fashion. One where trends and seasons don’t matter, but where your ethics and aesthetics seamlessly unite, and you can escape the stress of constant consumption, focusing on the style that truly appeals to you.”⁴⁷

⁴² <https://passionpassport.com/how-slow-fashion-can-save-the-environment/> Downloaded 26 April 2021

⁴³ <https://www.thegoodtrade.com/features/what-is-fast-fashion> Downloaded: 26 April 2021

⁴⁴ <https://www.sustainablejungle.com/sustainable-fashion/what-is-slow-fashion/> Downloaded 26 April 2021

⁴⁵ Stanton, A. (2020): What does slow fashion actually mean?. <https://www.thegoodtrade.com/features/what-is-slow-fashion> Downloaded: 28.04.2021.

⁴⁶ Stanton, A. (2020): What does slow fashion actually mean?. <https://www.thegoodtrade.com/features/what-is-slow-fashion> Downloaded: 28.04.2021.

⁴⁷ <http://www.savant-magazine.com/magazine/2018/4/5/difference-between-slow-ethical-and-sustainable-fashion-4-industry-insiders> Downloaded 26 April 2021