

Research Articles

Appalling or Advantageous? Exploring the Impacts of Fast Fashion From Environmental, Social, and Economic Perspectives

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Fast fashion is a controversial topic in both academia and among the general population due to its perceived benefits for consumers in developed countries and consequences for the workers in developing countries. This paper explores the effects of fast fashion from environmental, social, and economic perspectives to determine whether fast fashion and its processes generate a net positive or net negative impact on society. This is accomplished by collecting and analyzing current research on the topics of fast fashion and sweatshops and synthesizing this data into a cohesive paper that provides a holistic outlook on the effects of fast fashion. The conclusion of this paper, based on the findings, is that fast fashion offers a net positive impact.

Introduction

Fast fashion is defined as “an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). On the surface, fast fashion provides only a positive impact by allowing consumers to conform to ever-changing fashion trends and purchase items of clothing for extremely cheap prices; however, this definition only takes the benefits to the consumer into account. When examined on a deeper level, one will notice that the process of fast fashion impacts not only consumers, but the workers who manufacture the clothes as well. This distinction is what makes this topic controversial.

From the perspective of manufacturing, fast fashion no longer looks like the perfect process. In order for companies in the fast fashion industry to create, distribute, and sell their products at surprisingly low prices, they must use cheap materials alongside the cheap labor and cheap real estate that are found in developing countries. The combination of these three pillars of fast fashion creates the foundation of the industry: sweatshops. According to the United States General Accounting Office (GAO), these manufacturing hubs are defined as a workplace “that violates more than one federal or state labor law governing minimum wage and overtime, child labor, industrial homework, occupational safety and health, workers compensation, or industry regulation” (Giljum et al., 2014). This definition illuminates a few negative impacts that the fast fashion industry produces for its workers, including working in unfavorable environments for low wages. In addition to these consequences, fast fashion can also be harmful to the environment through pollution and waste among other hazards.

On the other side of this argument, however, are the positive effects of fast fashion. The first, and most obvious, is that this industry allows consumers to keep up with fashion trends that, now, change more than just every season.

In addition, on a deeper level, fast fashion allows lower income individuals and families to purchase more items of clothing that are modern and trendy. Because of this, low-income individuals can wear styles comparable to those of their more well-off peers, thus mitigating the impacts of classism through clothing.

With this short list of the general pros and cons of fast fashion that is provided thus far, it seems as though only workers are negatively impacted by fast fashion and consumers are only positively impacted. However, this is not the case. This paper will examine fast fashion’s pros and cons for both workers and consumers from environmental, social, and economic perspectives and will explore the validity of the arguments for and against the fast fashion industry to ultimately conclude whether it contributes a net positive or net negative impact on all involved.

Background

In order to fully understand fast fashion, it is important to consider what led to this shift in the industry and how companies and businesses navigated this change. The term “fast fashion” first gained mainstream popularity at the beginning of the 1990’s when Zara, a fast fashion retailer, opened a store in New York with the mission “to take only 15 days for a garment to go from the design stage to being sold in stores” (*What Is Fast Fashion and Why Is It So Bad?*, 2022). However, the creation of the fast fashion industry began decades before when “the introduction of the PBS system during World War II and the growth of mass retailing . . . shifted production towards large manufacturers in the early post-war period (Doeringer & Crean, 2006).

The PBS, or progressive bundle system, was based on extreme specialization and was a much more efficient production technique than traditional supply chains. This system, combined with the demand for mass retailing allowed large manufacturers to supply large quantities of product at lower

prices, thus taking market share from smaller independent manufacturers throughout the 1970's (Linden, 2016). The large manufacturers used offshore supply chains to produce products at a surprisingly low cost. This increased the lead time of products and limited the manufacturer's flexibility, however "the far lower costs of imports more than offset these inefficiencies" (Doeringer & Crean, 2006).

As large manufacturers continued to steal market share from retailers sticking to traditional methods, more and more brand manufacturers "began to imitate large retailers by developing their own offshore suppliers" (Doeringer & Crean, 2006). With this trend of outsourcing labor continuing to expand, by the mid-1980's, many American apparel manufacturers moved their domestic operations to developing countries, and, by 2015, only 3% of apparel was produced in the United States (Linden, 2016).

While most manufacturers moved their operations overseas to compete with the continually lowering product prices, they all came across the same problem: increased lead time versus demand for trendy clothes. This issue was rectified as the large manufacturers began to specialize in global supply chain coordination and a vast network of supply chains was created for other offshore manufacturers to utilize (Doeringer & Crean, 2006). With this system in place, retailers are now able to deliver trendy clothing to consumers in approximately 2 weeks. This quick turnaround from the runway to the consumer aids in increasing revenue for the fast fashion companies, rising about 8.2% in 2017, but also contributes to the poor quality of the garments (Berg et al., 2018).

Expansion of Fast Fashion

In the 1990's, after viewing the success of other large retailers, even more companies moved their manufacturing operations to developing countries. Some companies profited, others were unsuccessful, but more and more businesses committed to moving their manufacturing divisions abroad.

Vans, in an attempt to imitate Nike's achievements, "repositioned itself from a domestic manufacturer to a market-driven company" in 1993 and began focusing on marketing and consumer awareness via the Vans Warped Tour and the sponsorship of hundreds of athletes. The company was able to afford these large marketing campaigns after closing their factories in America and contracting manufacturing to third parties in South Korea (Klein, 2000). Upon the closing of the American manufacturing factory in 1995, following the outsourcing of labor in 1993, Vans' revenue increased dramatically from \$2.7 million in 1993 and \$1.7 million in 1994 to \$88 million in 1995 (*International Directory of Company Histories*, 2002). For Vans, moving their manufacturing efforts to developing countries and becoming a fast fashion company, among other factors, contributed to their large increase in revenue and the rebound of their stock.

Another company that joined the mass manufacturing exodus from the United States was the popular denim apparel company, Levi Strauss. The company shut down 11 plants in North America in 1997 and 11 more in 1998, resulting in a total of 16,310 laid-off workers. The motivation

behind this shutdown was financial and similar to that of Vans, though less extreme, with a 4% dip in revenue from \$7.1 billion in 1996 to \$6.8 billion in 1997. Like other brands' explanations for cutting manufacturing in the United States, "John Ermatinger, president of Levi's Americas division" stated, "our strategic plan in North America is to focus intensely on brand management, marketing and product design as a means to meet the casual clothing wants and needs of consumers" (Klein, 2000). Acting on this promise, in 1997, Levi Strauss delivered an ad campaign costing about \$90 million, their most expensive campaign in the history of the company, using the extra revenue saved from their former domestic manufacturing efforts.

However, unlike Vans and other apparel brands making the switch from domestic to international supply chains, Levi's revenue continued to decline after its peak in 1997, falling to \$4.1 billion in just 5 years. For Levi Strauss, outsourcing labor to developing countries did not provide an immediate revenue boost for the company, and the brand is still working to recover lost profits and customers (Bergh, 2018).

Fast Fashion Today

As shown through the history of fast fashion, the beginnings of this trend came from traditional manufacturers moving their operations to developing countries. Now, consumers have moved to online shopping from companies that were founded solely to operate as a fast fashion company. These businesses do not have brick and mortar storefronts, nor have they ever produced their apparel in developed countries. The mission of these companies is to allow consumers to purchase trendy clothes quickly for the lowest possible prices.

These online fast fashion companies, such as Shein, Zafull, and Fashion Nova, have been on the rise since the early to mid-2000's and have grown exponentially in tandem with the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, alongside the older, more traditional fast fashion companies, such as Zara, H&M, and Uniqlo, fast fashion brands have created a \$33 billion global market with forecasts to be \$40 billion by 2025. This growth is unsurprising when considering that, in the United States, "up to 88 % of consumers prefer fast fashion retailers" (Knošková & Garasová, 2019).

However, as the popularity of fast fashion brands has continued to grow, consumers have begun to investigate the practices of these companies, finding articles on sweatshops, worker exploitation, and environmental hazards. As this information has become more widely known among the general population, the topic of fast fashion has become increasingly controversial.

Now, in 2022, many consumers acknowledge the impacts of their fast fashion purchases and usage. However, only some consumers have committed to only purchasing sustainable garments or limiting their fast fashion purchases while others continue to purchase apparel from fast fashion brands because of their convenience, low prices, and "up-to-date" clothing.

Methodology

The research methodology for this paper includes the analysis of secondary data that will aid in the exploration of the positive and negative sides of fast fashion.

Through secondary data analysis, which, in simpler terms, is analyzing the data and research of other scholars and researchers, this paper will provide evidence behind the pros and cons of fast fashion from environmental, social, and economic standpoints. Using a data-driven approach that includes these three perspectives to deliver this argument and draw a conclusion will differentiate this thesis from other scholarly articles, journals, or papers that argue for or against fast fashion and sweatshops based off only one or two viewpoints, thus leading to a less than holistic understanding of the topic. An analysis of this paper's findings will illuminate the positives and negatives of fast fashion to ultimately support the final conclusion of whether fast fashion contributes a net positive or net negative impact on all involved.

To come to this conclusion, methods for limiting any negative effects will first be researched and discussed. Based on this information, in tandem with the findings from secondary data research, an informed decision about the impact of the fast fashion industry and its processes can and will be made by analyzing the consequences that cannot be prevented versus the benefits and the mitigated consequences.

Findings

Current research on the topics of fast fashion and sweatshops, alike, are comprised of arguments in favor of and against sweatshops and the consequences thereof. Each of these arguments discuss the ethics behind fast fashion from environmental, social, and economic perspectives to conclude whether or not sweatshops are morally sound. Because the majority of these journals focused on only one or, at most, two of these viewpoints, the literature can be broken into three sections discussing the morality of fast fashion and sweatshops from the perspectives previously mentioned.

Differing from current research on the topic, the findings in this section, based on thorough analysis of secondary data, will illuminate the benefits and consequences of fast fashion for both consumers and workers from environmental, social, and economic standpoints. This investigation will aid in gaining a deeper understanding of the inner workings of sweatshops within the apparel industry and in drawing conclusions about whether the impacts of fast fashion on society as a whole are positive or negative.

Environmental Impacts

Beginning with the environmental impacts of fast fashion, the cited articles on this topic found no environmental benefits of fast fashion and its processes.

Clothing Waste

To start, each journal that had an emphasis on the environment shared the same sentiment that fast fashion is

causing consumers to cycle through their wardrobes more quickly, thus contributing an exponentially larger amount of waste to the baseline of what humans produce.

According to Bick et al., "80 billion pieces of new clothing are purchased each year" and, of those 80 billion pieces, "the average American throws away approximately 80 pounds of clothing and textiles annually, occupying nearly 5% of landfill space" (2018). Additionally, according to the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), "the average American buys 64 clothing items and 7 accessories each year" (*How Much Money Does America Spend on Clothes Each Year?*, 2021), which is alarming as the average American bought only 12 items of clothing annually in the 1980's before fast fashion was popularized (Thomas, 2019).

This sizable mass of clothing waste is formed in conjunction with the depletion of the income of consumers and the resources used to manufacture the garments, not to mention the long-term effects of textiles laying in landfills. Depending on the material of the garments, apparel pieces can sit in the landfill for over 200 years (Stanes & Gibson, 2017). This may not seem like a significant issue that expands past the potential of overflow, however, overtime, chemicals and dyes from the fabric of these clothing pieces begin to seep into the ground. This leaching can cause toxic materials to "be taken up by plants and animals, contaminate a human drinking water supply or volatilize and contaminate the indoor air in overlying buildings" (US EPA, 2017).

A seemingly simple solution to this problem of increased clothing waste is to encourage the donation of garments, so articles of clothing can be reused rather than thrown away after a few uses. This "resolution" can alleviate some of the impacts of fast fashion on the environment with an estimated "2.5 billion pounds of post-consumer textile waste" collected and donated in 2006 (Claudio, 2007). However, only 20% of this donated clothing was directly used or sold at charities and consignment shops, so the remaining donations are sold to textile recyclers to be made into rags, stuffing, and other products. Even with selling off textiles to recyclers, this still does not account for all of the donated clothing. The last step of the donation process is exporting used clothing to developing nations where the pieces are sold in marketplaces (Claudio, 2007).

This is a needed extension of the donation system because, according to Pietra Rivoli, a professor of international business at the McDonough School of Business of Georgetown University, "there are nowhere near enough people in America to absorb the mountains of castoffs, even if they were given away" (Claudio, 2007). These three steps account for the majority of donated clothing, however Americans alone consume 3.8 billion pounds of apparel annually, compared to the 2.5 billion that is donated, so a large amount of waste is still unaccounted for (Bick et al., 2018).

The best, and easiest, way to reduce the clothing waste that is exacerbated by fast fashion is to purchase less clothing and to wear pieces for longer periods of time. While this may seem simple, the current trends in fashion point to this speedy consumption continuing, so, even with the best mitigation practices, waste will continue to grow. This is concerning, but it is not the only environmental concern.

Water Use and Pollution

In addition to this waste, critics of fast fashion are concerned about other damages to the environment including excessive water usage and pollution, plastic microfibers in the ocean, and carbon emissions. Beginning with the immense use, or misuse, of water, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), “some 93 billion cubic metres of water - enough to meet the needs of five million people - is used by the fashion industry annually” (*UN Launches Drive to Highlight Environmental Cost of Staying Fashionable*, 2019). On a more incremental level, this equates to “2,700 litres of water to make one cotton t-shirt” which is “enough water for one person for 900 days” (Drennan, 2015).

These statistics, however, only account for water used in the manufacturing of apparel, not the water polluted as a byproduct. This is important to distinguish because the polluted water is a slightly less seen impact of the fashion industry, but it is still a large contributor to environmental damage. In fact, “an estimated 17 to 20 percent of total industrial water pollution comes from textile dyeing and treatment” (Drennan, 2015). That is “for every one tonne of textiles produced, 200 tonnes of water are polluted,” which is “the equivalent of 5,640,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools of water pollution from the textile industry every year” (Drennan, 2015) on top of the water used for manufacturing.

With over 2.2 billion people lacking access to clean drinking water according to the World Health Organization, this excessive usage and waste of water can be seen as immoral, especially when taking into account the “longevity” of the items manufactured with it. In addition, according to the United Nations World Water Development Report 2018, the trend of intense global water usage is projected to continue rising at a rate of 1% each year, which is only exacerbated by fast fashion.

Plastic in the Ocean

Moving on to plastic microfibers migrating into the ocean, UNCTAD stated that “around half a million tons of microfibre, which is the equivalent of 3 million barrels of oil, is now being dumped into the ocean every year” (2019). This statistic may seem far removed from the fashion industry, but “the manufacture of polyester and other synthetic fabrics is an energy-intensive process requiring large amounts of crude oil” (Claudio, 2007). According to The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), these plastic microfibers make their way into the ocean not only through the manufacturing process, but also from consumers washing these garments between wears (US EPA, 2020). “About 60 per cent of material made into clothing is plastic, which includes polyester, acrylic and nylon textiles,” and, because of this, “laundry alone causes around half a million tons of plastic microfibers to be released into the ocean every year—the equivalent of almost three billion polyester shirts” (*Fashion’s Tiny Hidden Secret*, 2019).

As a result of these tiny pieces of plastic ending up in the ocean, microfibers make their way up the food chain, causing “starvation, endocrine disruption, stunted growth

in some species and broken down digestive systems” according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2019). In addition, the UNEP states that according to Heidi Savelli, a United Nations marine environment expert, “one of the problems is plastic ingestion at all levels of the food chain, which may pass plastic to larger animals and humans” (2019). Ingesting these microfibers could have long term consequences. According to Campanale et al. in *A Detailed Review Study on Potential Effects of Microplastics and Additives of Concern on Human Health*, polyester, which is one of the synthetic materials used in 60% of apparel (*Fashion’s Tiny Hidden Secret*, 2019), is a polymer that can contain arsenic which is classified as a “known” carcinogen and is also known to cause congenital disabilities, gastrointestinal damage, and, even, death (2020). While microfibers in the ocean is a product of the fashion industry as a whole and not limited to fast fashion, the volume and speed of the production clothing is escalating this already significant issue.

Carbon Emissions

Lastly, as for carbon and greenhouse gas emissions, “the [fashion] industry is responsible for more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined” (*UN Launches Drive to Highlight Environmental Cost of Staying Fashionable*, 2019). This impact is quantified by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) stating that “the fashion industry is highly greenhouse gas intensive, with estimated emissions ranging between 2 and 8 percent of the global total” (2018). Polyester textile production produced about 1.5 trillion pounds (706 billion kilograms) of greenhouse gases on its own in 2015. While the fashion industry’s greenhouse emissions are already high, according to Elisa Tonda, Head of Consumption and Production Unit at the United Nations Environment Programme, “if we carry on with a business-as-usual approach, the greenhouse gas emissions from the industry are expected to rise by almost 50% by 2030” (*UN Launches Drive to Highlight Environmental Cost of Staying Fashionable*, 2019).

The effects of this carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions are vast, including climate change, or global warming, and air pollution. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), climate change can impact human health, the environment, and the economy (2021). Global warming worsens air and water quality, thus leading to a higher number of cases of respiratory diseases, such as tuberculosis, and diseases related to poor water quality, such as cholera (*Climate Effects on Health* | CDC, 2021). In terms of ecosystems, climate change influences life cycle events, such as reproduction and migration, and threatens coastal ecosystems. Lastly, in economic terms, increases in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, such as heat waves, droughts, and floods, can increase losses to property, cause costly disruptions to society, and reduce the affordability of insurance (US EPA, 2021). While climate change can be alleviated through other means and industries, the fashion industry alone, being the third largest contributor to global warming behind the food and construction industries, can lessen global emissions immensely by making small changes (“Net-Zero Challenge,” n.d.).

Social Impacts

While the environmental arguments revealed only negative aspects of fast fashion, the social side of this topic is more controversial. Arguments involving workers include concerns from scholars about the working conditions of the sweatshops, specifically for women and children, in developing countries. However, looking from the perspective of social benefits for consumers, researchers believe that providing consumers with the opportunity to purchase cheap, trendy clothes helps to alleviate the effects of classism in developed countries by producing apparel that both higher and lower income individuals can and want to buy.

Poor Working Conditions

Those who are concerned about the quality of life of the sweatshop workers often cite the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in 2013 where “more than 1,100 garment workers were killed and at least 2,000 injured” (Drennan, 2015). This event brought to light many contributing factors to the poor working conditions of these sweatshop workers, such as “lack of credible safety audits, extremely low wages for workers and the increasing pressure on manufacturers to reduce costs of garments” (Drennan, 2015). Along with this, The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, factory hazards are not uncommon with more than 80,000 safety issues found in just 1,106 factories in Bangladesh (Oldenziel, 2014).

One common factory risk that garment workers face is exposure to hazardous chemicals. Many workers are not equipped with the proper protective gear to avoid the consequences of being exposed to carcinogenic chemicals, like formaldehyde or potassium dichromate, that are used to treat and distress fabrics (Lambert, 2014). Working with these, or similar, chemicals without the proper protective equipment can lead to moderate health effects, such as skin irritation and rashes, breathing difficulty, or nausea, or severe health effects, such as behavioral abnormalities, physiological malfunctions, or cancer (US EPA, 2013).

Another common fast fashion apparel manufacturing risk for workers is factory fires. In 2012, a factory fire in Bangladesh killed over 100 people as workers were locked inside the building with iron bars covering the windows. This fire, and hundreds like it, were preventable. However, many fast fashion factories can be seen as a hub of items, events, and processes that make a fire much more likely. For example, garment factories often contain “flammable chemicals, faulty electric wiring, overheated machinery, and improper ventilation” alongside missing fire extinguishers, “unclean work spaces, and blocked or locked fire exits” (Lambert, 2014).

Circling back to the tragedy of Rana Plaza, structural defects are yet another factory hazard for apparel workers. According to Lambert, “building owners closed Rana Plaza the day before the collapse due to uncertainty about the stability of the building,” (2014). However, knowing this, workers still returned to work the next day after “employers threatened to fire absent workers” and because they could not afford to miss work with 35% of the Bangladeshi population living at or below the poverty line (Lambert, 2014). The

lead-up to this event included inspections from third-party auditors that later proved to be inaccurate. “It has since been revealed that cracks in factory foundations, bars on the windows, blocked fire exits and other unsafe conditions were left out of third-party reports” (Drennan, 2015).

According to Michael Lavergne, a responsible supply chain consultant and author of *Fixing Fashion: Rethinking the Way We Make, Market and Buy Our Clothes*, maintaining low prices for fast fashion retailers is the cause of many “health, safety, labour, environmental and human rights issues” (Drennan, 2015). He also says that “to be competitive, offshore factories will often cut corners on these infrastructure and management system costs” (Drennan, 2015).

Child Labor

The working conditions already mentioned are not just imposed on adults who have some choice in where they work and the conditions therein, but also children. Child labor is still at large within the apparel industry in developing countries. Bangladesh, alongside Pakistan, Egypt, and countries in Central Asia employ children to work the same long hours in the same unsafe factories as their parents (Drennan, 2015). Some children are even forced to work in worse conditions in “underground” factories as child labor is illegal in most countries, though the U.S. Department of Labor found 77 countries in violation of international standards as of June 23, 2021 (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2021). Child labor is attractive to these apparel manufacturing employers because “children are small, quick, cheap, and obedient” and are usually “paid significantly less than the already low minimum wages” (Lambert, 2014).

Child labor has been an issue for centuries in many different countries and industries, but the effects remain the same. E.P. Thompson, in her work *The Making of the English Working Class*, recounted one boy’s experience working in a mill stating that he was found sleeping while standing after working for seventeen hours and was beaten awake by the mill employers. The boy did not eat dinner after he was carried home and died from exhaustion the next morning (Seabrook, 2001). With these children being so young, the working conditions, abuse, and long hours often take a larger toll on their bodies than it does for adults.

In addition to the physical harm that these children endure, they also suffer mentally because they are not provided with proper education, as it is assumed they will work in the factories for the rest of their lives (Lambert, 2014). This cycle of using uneducated children for manual labor will result in generational poverty where future generations will be even more unlikely to increase their quality of life.

The use of child labor in developing countries and, specifically, in fast fashion factories is a known fact among the general populous. While many organizations, consumers, and firms are calling for a reform, the countries in which child labor is rampant are the same countries that ignore or do not enforce child labor laws, thus making changes difficult (Lambert, 2014).

Feminization of the Workforce

“Fast fashion is highly dependent on female work. Women compose most of the Asian garment producers’

workforce – around 80% - with men generally occupying managerial positions” (Colnago, 2019). The use of female workers in garment production is appealing because, in the manufacturing host countries where the apparel is made, women “are viewed as secondary earners who are easier to discipline, and less likely to negotiate and unionize” (Vijayarasa & Liu, 2022).

This female majority lends itself to many experiences of inequality, such as gender pay gaps, sexual harassment, and a lack of human rights protection. One way this inequality can be seen is through the lack of bathroom breaks, increasing the risk of urinary tract infections, which is exacerbated by the lack of soap, water, and menstrual supplies. These experiences are commonplace in countries where fast fashion manufacturers represent the majority of employers, such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Vijayarasa & Liu, 2022).

As for sexual harassment and violence, examples of gender-based violence, defined as violence that affects women disproportionately, have been found in many fast fashion apparel manufacturing factories (Global Labor Justice, 2018). “Female workers face sexual harassment, are forbidden to take maternities leaves, and are discriminated [against] when they get pregnant” even though the laws of the host countries forbid sexual harassment and state that women have the right to take three months of maternity leave (Colnago, 2019). According to a recent report released by a coalition formed by Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), CENTRAL Cambodia, Global Labor Justice, Sedane Labour Resource Centre (LIPS) Indonesia, and Society for Labour and Development (SLD), “women garment workers may be targets of violence on the basis of their gender, or because they are perceived as less likely or able to resist” (Global Labor Justice, 2018).

One factory that provides examples of this abuse and harassment is the supplier for the fast fashion brand H&M whose workforce is comprised of 74% women (*H&M Group Annual Report 2018*, 2019). According to the report *Violence Against Women and Men in the World of Work*, violence and harassment in these factories not only take place at the physical production locations, but also “during commutes and in employer provided housing” (2018). These events are not one-off, but rather there is repeated violence against women in the fast fashion industry that is created by “short-term contracts, targets for the daily production, disciplinary practices, salary related rights abuses, abusive working hours, and unsafe workplaces” (Colnago, 2019).

Consumer Impacts: Mitigated Classism

Classism is defined as “a belief that a person’s social or economic station in society determines their value in that society” and is often coupled with “behavior that reflects this belief: prejudice or discrimination based on class” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). In some cases, a person’s clothing can reveal information about which social class they belong to and, thus, enables others to treat them differently based off of predetermined opinions on the various social classes. These predetermined views cause individuals to see others as either better, worse, or about equal to themselves in terms of social class. Each one of these beliefs are equally

damaging to a person’s psychological state and intensifies the divide between classes (Cavaliheri & Chwalisz, 2020).

Fast fashion companies indirectly help in alleviating the lasting effects of classism in developed countries by producing apparel and marketing it to both higher and lower income individuals, so everyone begins to wear the same items regardless of social or economic class. Those with a lower income may not have as many pieces of clothing, or cycle through them as quickly, as people in the middle- and upper-class, but fast fashion gives them the opportunity to wear the same styles as their peers, thus diminishing one method people use to discriminate against those who are different than them (von Busch, 2018).

This small change in how social classes are perceived, however, is challenged by the recent push to shop sustainably. This motivation to adjust consumers’ current purchasing habits is prompted by the negative impacts of fast fashion becoming more commonplace in the mainstream media. However, one main reason most people currently choose not to shop from sustainable brands is due to the higher prices of “ethically-made” apparel. This encouragement for consumers to shop sustainably has created a trend of middle- and upper-class people shopping at thrift stores and consignment shops. This is harmful for working-class individuals because they may not be able to follow this new and more expensive trend and “the rising popularity of thrifting among more wealthy consumers as an alternative to buying from sustainable and ethical fashion brands reduces the already limited options available to low- income communities when it comes to clothing” (“Rise of Thrifting,” 2019).

Economic Impacts

The last of the three main considerations when determining the ethics and effects of fast fashion is economic impacts. Scholars that support fast fashion, or at least appreciate the positive economic effects of the practice, maintain that outsourcing apparel manufacturing is beneficial to both developed and developing countries. In developed countries, consumers are able to purchase more clothes for less while corporations preserve or increase their profits. In developing countries, important infrastructure is being improved or constructed to enable more businesses to begin operations there, which, in the long run, aids in the economic growth of developing countries, thus improving quality of life. However, while the fast fashion industry bolsters the global economy, the impact, whether small or large, of displaced manufacturing jobs in developed countries must also be considered.

Growing Global Industry

The fast fashion industry is continuing to grow as demand for cheap, trendy apparel increases. According to a report by The Business Research Company, the global fast fashion market was valued at \$25.09 billion in 2020 and \$30.58 billion in 2021 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 21.9%. This growth was particularly high due to many companies resuming their normal business operations with the declining impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the market is projected to continue growing at a

CAGR of 7% to \$39.84 billion in 2025 without the boost from recovering businesses (GlobeNewswire, 2021).

Developed Country Economy: Lost Jobs, Crippled Economy

According to Dana Thomas, in her book *Fashionopolis: Why What We Wear Matters*, the United States produced approximately 70% of the clothing that Americans purchased. However, this quickly changed with the emergence of fast fashion. Because fast fashion retailers strove to sell their products at the lowest prices possible, many companies outsourced their manufacturing to developing countries, thus eliminating jobs in the United States. The percentage of American-made clothing decreased from 56.2% in 1991 to 2.5% in 2012. This decrease was in tandem with the loss of 1.2 million jobs in the United States textile and garment industry between 1990 and 2012, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Thomas, 2019).

This change did not only affect Americans. In fact, in the 1980's, over 1 million people worked in the United Kingdom textile industry, which has decreased to about 100,000 in the 2010's. This theme of declining apparel manufacturing jobs echoed throughout western Europe and other developed countries and, soon, shifted to economic regression (Thomas, 2019).

The offshoring of domestic garment manufacturing jobs from developed countries created detrimental trade deficits. "In 2017, US apparel exports totaled roughly \$5.7 billion, while imports were about \$82.6 billion" while "Britain imported 92.4 percent of its clothing" (Thomas, 2019). The only country in the European Union that managed to remain unscathed was Italy due to its association with luxury and quality products (Thomas, 2019).

Developing Country Economy: Infrastructure and Economic Development

While fast fashion hindered the economies of developed countries, it also allowed developing economies to mature. According to Benjamin Powell, fast fashion sweatshops in developing countries are "part of the process of development that ultimately raises living standards. That process took about 150 years in Britain and the United States but closer to 30 years in . . . Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan" (Powell, 2008).

This quote mentioned an important point that even now developed countries once had sweatshops. In the 1800's, the United Kingdom had many textile mills that are comparable to today's sweatshops, as they were described as unsafe, unsanitary, and inhumane. Adults and children would work in these mills 12-14 hours a day while getting beaten, breathing in cotton particles, and suffering injuries from the dangerous machinery (BBC, n.d.). Now, the United Kingdom is the fifth largest global economy, with a GDP of almost \$3 trillion, and is considered one of the most powerful states in the world (Clark, 2022).

Many economists regard sweatshops as a "rite of passage" into the industrial revolution and as a vessel to help economies and countries shift from developing to developed. Sir Arthur Lewis, a Nobel Prize-winning economist

known for his work in economic development, created a theory known as the "Dual Sector Model." This theory explains how emerging markets develop, first stating that there are two economies in developing markets: the traditional agriculture sector and the modern manufacturing sector. The traditional sector involves low productivity, while the modern sector has higher productivity due to the use of technology.

According to his theory, Sir Arthur Lewis states that if traditional sector workers in developing economies moved to the modern sector, then they would "play a much more productive role and agricultural production would be left unaffected, thus "lead[ing] to the improved welfare and productivity of the nation" (Canepa, 2016). Under this theory, unskilled labor would continue to move to the modern manufacturing sector until the productivity of each sector is maximized.

With this, wages would increase, and less people would be living under the poverty line. "The benefit of sweatshops is that they move low-skill workers out of the countryside and into the cities, allowing the country as a whole to grow (Canepa, 2016).

An example of this theory can be seen in China. From 1981 to 2010, 160 million Chinese workers left the countryside to move and work in the city. This work involves poor conditions and low wages, however it is more productive than farming, so workers can earn much more in the modern sector than they would otherwise. Since this migration, China's poverty rate decreased from 84% in 1981 to 12% in 2010 (Canepa, 2016). Applying this same theory to sweatshops in developing nations such as Nicaragua, Bangladesh, and Cambodia, these countries should see a decrease in poverty levels and increase in standard of living as more people begin to work in the modern manufacturing sector.

Another element of economic development coming from the presence of sweatshops in developing nations is infrastructure. China, now the world's second largest economy after its industrialization, has invested \$10.7 billion in Ethiopia from 2010 to 2015 to help accommodate its Chinese business in the country. These loans have improved the country's infrastructure, including creating transmission lines and railways, enhancing mobile and internet coverage, and building processing plants. With this, Belachew Mekuria of the Ethiopian Investment Commission said, "The plan is to create a total of 2 million jobs in manufacturing by the end of 2025. We are an agrarian nation now, but that will change" (Donahue et al., 2018). Additionally, Bill McRaith, chief supply chain officer for PVH, the parent company of Tommy Hilfiger and Calvin Klein, held that "if you believe industrialization is a good thing and raises people up, out of poverty, where each generation has the opportunity to do better than the last, then the apparel industry has been the trigger in most developing countries. Maybe I am too old, but this is no different from China in the late 1980s to 1990s" (Donahue et al., 2018).

Wages and Quality of Life: Below the Poverty Line

The fast fashion industry is most popularly known for poor working conditions, as already discussed, and low wages for the garment workers. When considering "low

wages” in the fast fashion industry, other terms that come to mind are minimum wages and living wages that are used to add context to and describe apparel worker wages. The definition of a minimum wage is self-explanatory as it is the lowest wage an employer can pay an employee. A living wage is slightly more complicated and is defined by the United Nations Global Compact as “a wage that that enables workers and their families to meet their basic needs” (*Living Wage | UN Global Compact*, 2021).

According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, a very small number of workers, if any, make a living wage working in sweatshops, and, sometimes, workers do not even make minimum wage. A Romanian worker stated “I barely get the minimum salary, and one month I did not manage to reach the legal minimum wage after working even on Saturdays. I tell my boss that sometimes I don’t make the minimum if I don’t come on Saturdays and he says: ‘Then come on Saturdays’” (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2014). Even if these workers do make the minimum wage, it only covers 70% of their monthly expenses on food because in these developing countries “legal minimum wages are poverty wages” (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2014).

In Ethiopia, an 18-year-old garment worker shared that she makes \$23.70 a month, plus \$7.30 for meals and an attendance bonus of \$7.30 if she doesn’t miss work and still struggles to cover soap for laundry and transportation to her church. She also shared that she is afraid she will go into debt if she misses only a few days of work and does not receive her bonus (Donahue et al., 2018). In addition, in Kelly Drennan’s *Picking Up the Threads*, she states that the average sweatshop worker in Bangladesh makes only \$38 a month. With this low number, the Bangladesh government was pressed to raise the minimum wage and promised a 77% increase, thus raising it to \$68 per month, but “nearly 40 percent of factories are still not paying this new wage” (2015). With this, one can infer that even increasing the minimum wage may not provide a better quality of life for the sweatshop workers.

Wages and Quality of Life: A Better Alternative

Even with the negative social impacts of fast fashion listed in this section, some scholars, while agreeing that the working conditions and wages for workers in the apparel industry are poor compared to United States and other developed country standards, believe that these jobs provided by fast fashion retailers are better than the workers’ other options. In fact, Joan Robinson, a famous British economist, asserted that “the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all” (Robinson, 1962).

This economic argument is largely influenced by the rational choice theory that states that “individuals use rational calculations to make rational choices and achieve outcomes that are aligned with their own personal objectives” and should “result in outcomes that provide people with the greatest benefit and satisfaction, given the limited option[s] they have available” (Ganti, 2021). Using this theory in terms of the fast fashion argument, economists argue that the sweatshop workers would not choose to work in garment factories if they did not benefit from it.

In revealing potential alternatives to apparel factory work, “Stefan Dercon, an Oxford University development economist who recently spent a year studying Ethiopian factories,” stated that if factory work did not exist, then “these women might be spending their days shaping cow dung into pies for fuel,” which is, arguably, less preferred in comparison to sweatshops (Donahue et al., 2018). Providing a more specific example, in 1993, U.S. Senator Tom Harkin suggested that the United States ban imports from countries that utilized child labor in their sweatshops. In a swift response to this action, a Bangladesh garment factory dismissed 50,000 children from work and, according to Ox-fam, a British charity, caused a majority of them to become prostitutes to earn money for their family (Powell, 2008).

When interviewed, workers in fast fashion factories shared that their quality of life is better while working in the apparel industry. An Ethiopian factory worker stated that she used to live on a farm with her 7 siblings but now lives with one roommate in a concrete apartment right outside the city, expressing that “we are living better now in the city” and “in the countryside, we have no way to stay neat and clean. And we are getting experience” (Donahue et al., 2018).

Additionally, a Nicaraguan garment employee who makes less than a dollar an hour stated, “I wish more people would buy the clothes we make” when interviewed about her experience as a worker in the fast fashion industry (Henderson, 2000).

Rather than just using theory and the sentiments of fast fashion workers themselves, economists also provide statistics to back up these claims. In their paper, *Sweatshops and Third World Living Standards*, Powell and Skarbek found that apparel manufacturing wages in developing countries are favorable when compared to the standard of living of developing countries, as opposed to the standard of living in developed countries. According to the below graph, of the countries researched, including Bangladesh, Nicaragua, and China, 9 out of 10 countries’ apparel workers made more than the national average in wages after working only 50 hours a week. Additionally, these researchers found that “apparel workers in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, and Nicaragua earn 3 to 7 times the national average” (Powell & Skarbek, 2004). Various sources corroborated this notion. After surveying workers from three garment factories in Thailand, the International Youth Foundation “found that 72 percent regarded their wages as “fair” and that 60 percent were able to accumulate savings” (Brown et al., 2004). Meanwhile, the International Labor Office found that apparel workers in Bangladesh earn 25% more in wages than the country’s average per capita income (Bhattacharya, 1998).

Discussion

With the method for accumulating information on the topic of fast fashion from environmental, social, and economic perspectives being an analysis of secondary data research, the findings in this paper had a few limitations. Fast fashion is merely one facet of the entire fashion industry, so finding data that pertained solely to fast fashion proved to be difficult for some sections. Using the keyword “sweat-

shops” to replace “fast fashion” offered more and different information, however these articles mostly pertained to just the social aspect of the fast fashion industry. Additionally, when a large set of specific data on the fast fashion industry was available, it came in the form of a report costing thousands of dollars and, therefore, was not usable for the purposes of this paper. The data that was found from sources concerning fast fashion or sweatshops, specifically, was sufficient for many portions of the paper; however, for the segments that did not have this particular data, information from the general fashion sector was used, which is noted in the paper.

Another limitation of this research was a limited number of articles and papers previously written about the benefits of fast fashion. From the findings in this paper, the main benefits from fast fashion come from the economic perspective. Because of this, the literature is divided by economists writing about the positive economic implications of fast fashion and other scholars writing about the negative effects. With this division, a smaller subset of scholars is writing about the benefits of fast fashion, leading to the limited sources on the topic. To mitigate this constraint, some sources date as far back to the 1800’s during the time of textile mills in England. While up-to-date sources are generally better, these older sources echoed the same sentiments from the more recent papers and provided evidence that sweatshops have been around for centuries.

The Future of Fast Fashion

Fast fashion manufacturers have historically operated out of countries in Asia, such as Bangladesh and Indonesia, and Central America, such as Honduras and Haiti. In more recent years, fashion retailers have begun to shift their manufacturing operations to Africa (Canepa, 2016).

As of 2021, the apparel and textile industry in Africa was the second largest sector with an estimated market value of \$31 billion in 2020. Africa is an attractive location for fast fashion retailers for three main reasons: it is a good country for foreign investment, its citizens are paid even lower wages than Asian and Central American countries, it has good access to ports (Yamama, 2021).

In terms of foreign investment, trade in Africa has grown substantially over the last decade at a rate of 300%, making it one of the world’s fastest growing economies. Additionally, by 2050, Africa will encompass \$16.12 trillion in business and consumer spending. The combination of these facts in tandem with the growing population rate make Africa a very attractive target for investors.

As for low wages, the citizens of Ethiopia make only \$60-70 a month, which is considerably less than what the citizens of current fast fashion manufacturing countries will make as economic development increases. In addition to these low wages, Africa has the proper infrastructure for these manufacturers to quickly and cheaply move into African countries (Signé, 2021).

Lastly, in terms of access to ports, Africa has six main ports that can accommodate millions of shipping containers. These are Tanger-Med in Morocco, Port Said in Egypt, Durban Port in South Africa, Djen Djen Port in Algeria, Lagos Port in Nigeria, and Mombasa Port in Kenya. These

ports provide a quicker and more direct route to Europe and the Americas than those in Asian countries (Larnyoh, 2020).

These three assets will increase the number of companies moving to Africa and will, in turn, help African countries develop economically.

Limiting Negative Effects

Before determining whether fast fashion provides a net positive or negative impact to society, it is important to consider which negative effects, if any, can be lessened. According to multiple sources, including The Boston Consulting Group, the Northwestern University Economics Society, and the Columbia Climate School, the consequences of the fast fashion industry from each of the three perspectives discussed in this paper can be limited while the economy continues to grow.

A report by the Global Fashion Agenda and The Boston Consulting Group “found that addressing environmental and social problems created by the fashion industry would provide a \$192 billion overall benefit to the global economy by 2030” (Reichart & Drew, 2019). This statement is based off the idea that spending money on the front-end to preserve human and natural resources will generate more value in the global economy in the long-term. Some of the examples provided for this notion involve keeping water consumption at a constant level to generate \$42 billion of value and paying garment workers at least their countries’ minimum wage to produce \$5 billion of value from “greater local consumption and private investments” (Reichart & Drew, 2019). Under this notion, the negative environmental and social impacts of fast fashion would subside while the economic benefits would be maintained or, in this case, increased.

The concept of environmental and social justice working in tandem with economic development can be seen through America’s long history of “success in decoupling the growth of GDP and the growth of environmental pollution” (Cohen, 2020). Around the 1980’s, along with the beginnings of fast fashion and the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency, “businesses and governments developed and applied technologies that reduced pollution while allowing continued economic growth” with the use of “public policies ranging from command- and-control regulations to direct and indirect government subsidies” (Cohen, 2020). With this, major changes have been made. For example, people can now see the mountains from downtown Los Angeles due to the lessening of smog and Americans now treat their sewage waste rather than dumping it into the Hudson River all while both New York and Los Angeles’s economies continued to grow from the 1980’s (Cohen, 2020).

With these regulations mentioned above, the Northwestern University Economics Society warns against regulations being too strong that low-income countries are no longer attractive for fast fashion companies. However, this article also states that, as long as the regulations are not too strong, they “should not harm growth within those nations” and that “basic safety measures can go a long way in improving workers living standards and reducing the risk of tragedies which are all too common” (Canepa, 2016).

Echoing this claim, Paul Krugman, a Keynesian economist, holds that too much labor regulation in Bangladesh would cause the country to lose its comparative advantage to other nations, such as Cambodia and China, thus causing Bangladesh's economy to suffer. Similar to the ideas of Garry Canepa from Northeastern University, Kruman "believes that so long as factory reforms are kept modest and are shared among all nations, appropriate reform should be implemented" and that "The Trans-Pacific Partnership goes in the right direction as it attempts to establish labor protection among the member nations" (Canepa, 2016).

In addition to the idea of regulations aiding pollution reduction and economic development, according to the Columbia Climate School, environmental protection, itself, contributes to economic growth. Protecting the environment creates a snowball effect of development. For example, water and sewage treatment plants require more workers, thus providing more jobs, and creates better infrastructure in cities around the world. With better infrastructure, more companies come to developing countries and the standard of living increases for the citizens of those countries, thus making them better off than they were before the focus on environmental protection (2020).

Conclusion

To come to a conclusion about what type of impact, positive or negative, that fast fashion contributes to society, the analysis of the industry from environmental, social, and economic perspectives as well as the arguments involving limiting the negative impacts will be considered.

The thorough analysis of the effects of fast fashion revealed both consequences and benefits associated with this industry. The environmental standpoint conveyed only negative outcomes for society in the long term. These included clothing waste, water use and pollution, plastic in the ocean, and carbon emissions. Each of these are thought to lessen quality of life for both workers and consumers of fast fashion as well as people who are not directly involved.

The social outlook was comprised of both positive and negative impacts, however the positive effects corresponded to consumers while the negative related to the

workers. With poor working conditions, child labor, and feminization of the workforce opposing the benefit of mitigated classism for consumers, the social aspects of fast fashion favored the negative side of the industry.

Lastly, the economic section presented economic advantages for garment workers and economic disadvantages for manufacturing workers in developed countries, as well as contrasting arguments for the quality of life of the fast fashion workers. Assuming the contradicting quality of life statements cancel out, the economic perspective leans towards the positive side of the fast fashion industry with the benefits of the booming global industry growth and economic development in developing countries outweighing the negative of lost jobs for developed countries' unskilled labor.

When only considering these arguments, the impact of fast fashion seems to be more negative overall. However, when also taking the ideas of limiting the negative effects into account, this outlook changes. The notions in terms of this topic allude to increased economic development and benefit as a result of protecting both the environment and workers' rights. The overarching concept from this section is that increased economic development does not need to cause negative environmental and social impacts and vice versa. With this, as mentioned previously, global economic value will increase as environmental and social problems are addressed, thus eliminating the need to assess which perspective is the most important.

Considering the views relating to mitigating negative impacts, fast fashion's effect on society favors the positive side because, if fast fashion takes the necessary steps, the damage on the environment would be controlled, and the social aspects would be improved, all while the economy would continue to grow. With most of the negative impacts being alleviated, with the exception of the developed country economy, fast fashion has a net positive impact.

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