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Fast Changes Through Slowing Consumption:
The Need for Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

Abstract: This paper will discuss the need for sustainability in the fashion industry. It will describe the numerous ways that fast fashion is unsustainable, in terms of both the ecosystem, human rights, and economy. It will also examine the role that corporations, consumers, and governments alike should take in alleviating the strain that fast fashion exerts on the world, both environmentally and socially.

In 2015, a court in Bangladesh upheld charges against 38 people accused of murder. With a death toll of 1,135 people, and thousands more injured, few were able to escape the bloodshed unscathed. Years later, the bodies of 200 people remain lost. A manhunt for those involved lasted four days, as the accused attempted to flee the country. Those charged with murder in Bangladesh can face the death penalty (Calvo). In America, people continued their daily lives unaware of the trial taking place. However, we were more connected to the trial than we could have realized or imagined, because the 1,135 people who were killed died while making our clothes (Factory Collapse).

The Rana Plaza factory collapse was one of the deadliest disasters in fashion history. However, disaster was entirely preventable. The building had added floors illegally, and workers were ordered to return to work despite large cracks being noted the day before the collapse. They were threatened with losing their job if they did not return to work. The owner of the factory, Sohel Rana, "...brought paid gang members to beat the women and men workers, hitting them with sticks to force them to go into the factory. Managers of the five factories housed in Rana Plaza also told the frightened workers, telling them that if they did not return to work, there would be no money to pay them for the month of April, which meant that there would be no food for them and their

children” (Factory Collapse). Even before the collapse, those who worked in the factory had been mistreated. Work days lasted 13-14 hours, and employees made as little as 12 cents an hour.

Unfortunately, this abuse is all too common in the fashion industry today. While the Rana collapse was one of the most notable examples, every day millions of workers return to conditions just like the factory at Rana: unsafe, underpaid, and overworked. While the collapse brought this topic more towards the public eye, the few who survived say little changes have been made in the industry.

This paper will examine (1) the definitions of fast fashion and sustainability, (2) the environmental consequences of fast fashion, (3) the human rights violations of fast fashion, (4) alternative methods of producing and shopping for clothing, and (5) the role of the government in protecting garment workers and the environment. Specifically, I will argue for the role that the corporations, consumers, and world governments must collectively play in resolving this crisis. I will argue for the need for sustainable production and sustainable consumerism alike to ensure that future disasters can be prevented. The fashion industry and consumers alike need a combination of a return to old sustainable practices and values from before the fast fashion era, and new sustainable methods of production and consumer habits. Additionally, governments globally need to take a more active, tenacious role in regulating businesses and ensuring the safety of employees and the environment alike. This is important because we can not only hold companies accountable and wait for a change; rather, we must all take nuanced effort on a corporate, social, legal, scientific, economic, and global scale.

The UCLA Sustainability Committee charter defines sustainability as “the physical development and institutional operating practices that meet the needs of present users without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, particularly with regard

to use and waste of natural resources.” Sustainability has three main focuses: ecological protection, human welfare, and economic vitality. With the drastic changes in climate, habitat loss, pollution, and overuse of resources continuing to plague the planet unchecked, the need for sustainability in all aspects of life is urgent (What is Sustainability). While some progress has been made, scientific evidence indicates that the climate change crisis is far from over. Excess greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have raised the ocean’s acidity levels 25% over the past 200 years, leading to mass coral bleaching, habitat destruction, and loss of biodiversity (Ocean Acidification). Sea levels have risen 6.7 inches in the past century, and are projected to displace millions of people in the near future as their homes are submerged (Historical Records). Climate change also directly affects the health of people, causing respiratory disorders from air pollution and an increase in heat related deaths per year (Climate Change Indicators).

The fast fashion industry violates sustainable values in numerous ways. It contributes extreme amounts of pollution to the environment and is a heavy tax on resources. It gets its name from the extremely rapid pace of a fashion trend, from the runway and factories of production to stores, to being thrown out for the next trend. Just a few decades ago, one year would see about four fashion seasons, yet today one year could hold as many as fifteen fashion seasons (Tan). This decreases the amount of time each trend is worn and in turn places more pressure on the market to keep up with fast-paced consumer demand. This fast pace of hyper consumerism is heightened by cheap prices, which make it easier for shoppers to view their clothing as disposable and temporary. After clothing is worn, it is often either thrown out and sent to a landfill or exported to developing nations. Clothing left in landfills releases greenhouse gases into the environment, contributes to climate change, and releases toxins into the surrounding ecosystem. While at first it may seem beneficial to send gently used clothing to countries in

need, this can have a detrimental effect on the country's local industries as people consume imported clothing more than locally made clothing. As a result of increased reliance on cheap, imported clothing and decreased support of local manufacturers, the developing country's economy suffers and the country faces more difficulties escaping poverty (Claudio).

Fast fashion is a wicked problem because when approaching the current state of the fashion industry, there is a wide network of systems to consider. Efforts to make fashion more sustainable make this topic even more complex, as sustainability requires the coordination of three different perspectives. When dealing with fast fashion, it must be acknowledged that the factors that have contributed to its rise are far more complex than the focus of this paper alone. Therefore, until such complicated issues like global poverty and child labor corruption are solved, any solutions to the fast fashion crisis cannot be entirely perfect. However, there are steps that companies, consumers, and world governments can take to make each of their roles in the fashion industry more sustainable.

The companies involved in the production of fast fashion need to adopt a more sustainable approach to their business, both environmentally and socially. This would entail using more sustainable materials and dyes to create their clothes, relying on reusable energy in their factories, paying their employees a fair living wage, and ensuring the safety of their employees.

One of the simplest changes a company could make to become more sustainable is to switch to more eco-friendly fabrics and dyes. According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, making synthetic fabrics like polyester "is an energy-intensive process requiring large amounts of crude oil and releasing emissions including volatile organic compounds, particulate matter, and acid gases such as hydrogen chloride, all of which can cause or aggravate

respiratory disease. Volatile monomers, solvents, and other by-products of polyester production are emitted in the wastewater” (Claudio). Manufacturing polyester requires petroleum, a nonrenewable resource. The harvesting of petroleum also reaps a plethora of environmental hazards. In addition, 25% of the country’s pesticides are used on cotton alone. The EPA classifies many synthetic textile production plants as hazardous waste generator (Claudio). Subsidies on cotton plants allow production to increase drastically and is one of the contributing factors to the globalization of the fashion industry. Materials like viscose require extensive amounts of deforestation to keep up with consumer demand, and high demand for cashmere leads to over breeding of sheep, straining the ecosystem as carrying capacity is exceeded (Singer). Synthetic dyes create rinse water that can be highly polluting and contaminate local water supplies. In response to this issue, companies could use many alternative sources of fabric to produce their clothes. Bamboo is highly renewable as it grows at a very rapid pace and takes little energy to harvest. Other renewable sources include hemp and organic cotton. Some brands even offer clothes made of fabric produced from recycled plastic.

The question of sustainable dyes, however, is more complex. Synthetic dyes are commonly used in the fashion industry but frequently contaminate local water supplies from the runoff produced. This poses a threat both to ecological and human health. Natural dyes produce less contaminated rinse water, but are not as bright or long-lasting as synthetic dyes (Chhabra). Since sustainability calls for buying less disposable clothing and choosing long-lasting pieces instead, natural dyes do not necessarily hold up to sustainable standards of fashion. They are also most effective on cotton, which is currently not a sustainable crop due to heavy pesticide use. In addition, “13 acres of land is needed to grow enough dye for one acre of cotton,” according to Phil Patterson, a director of Colour Connections and global consultant to textile companies

(Chhabra). The best form of fabric dyes, perhaps, is a hybrid of natural and synthetic dyes, potentially based on genetically modified plant-based dyes designed to last longer. Another solution involves waterless dyeing of fabric. According to Sustainia, it takes 25 liters of water to dye just one T-shirt in standardly used practices. A new technology enables supercritical carbon dioxide to replace water, both saving water resources and taking carbon dioxide out of the environment, helping to curb the greenhouse gas effect. The process also allows dye mixes to be reused instead of creating wastewater and uses less energy than water-based dyeing (Textile Dyeing).

Another way for companies to be more sustainable is to improve the treatment of their workers. The majority of clothing factories that are involved in fast fashion are essentially sweatshops because many safety regulations and workers' rights are ignored. Loopholes in any existing laws or regulations are constantly found to make clothing manufacturing cheaper and quicker. This problem is further exacerbated by subcontracting companies. Subcontracting involves one supplier delegating an order to an unknown supplier that is not part of the company contract. These unknown suppliers can fill orders faster because they often are unregistered enterprises. Since many of the suppliers involved in subcontracting are not registered, they are not inspected for safety or labor violations, making it easier for workers to be taken advantage of (Fact Sheet Hidden). Subcontracting also makes it hard for companies to know exactly where and how their clothing is being made. Many of the companies who were discovered to have clothing being made at Rana Plaza did not know that they were using that factory, because they relied on a third party to find factories to complete the clothing orders rather than finding a trustworthy factory themselves.

In countries where most fast fashion is produced, like India, Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Brazil, workers are fired for going on strike or demanding better conditions. Thousands of workers get sick, injured, or die on the job every year. Inspectors either turn a blind eye or are unable to improve conditions, due companies lying to them during inspections. Employees are threatened with losing their job or even physical assault if they do not give answers that benefit the company during interviews with inspectors, so their hardships often go unreported (Dhanarajan 43). As a result, workers are overworked, put in dangerous conditions, and underpaid. Child labor in particular is extremely common in the fashion industry. Child labor is defined as “work for which the child is either too young – work done below the required minimum age – or work which, because of its detrimental nature or conditions, is altogether considered unacceptable for children and is prohibited” (Moulds). Child labor is so prevalent in the fashion industry because children are easily targeted; they are forced to work to help provide for their families rather than going to school and have no real voice or representation. Children younger than 10 years old frequently get sick or injured from unsafe working conditions, long hours in cotton fields, or toxins in garment factories. A shocking 11% of the global population of children are engaged in child labor, and “60% of workers in yarn and spinning mills began working at that location before the age of 18” (Moulds).

In order to improve these conditions, companies need to mandate that their staff is ethically trained, force compliance with labor standards, and regulate manufacturing more. In addition, they need to ensure that they have long-term, trustworthy relationships with the factories they use, rather than relying on subcontracting companies to complete their orders with no transparency about the factory conditions (Dhanarajan 44). In other words, corporations need

to take a more active role in supervising the factories where their clothes are made and ensuring that labor rights are not being violated.

Some may argue that forcing corporations to change their methods of production would interfere with their ability to profit. They point to the free market and the notion that companies should have the freedom to do what is most profitable to them. While garment factories cut many corners to increase production and decrease costs, the countries where they are located do not have as many laws regulating business and production as the United States. It may seem logical to assume that since companies are not breaking laws and since business should be allowed to thrive without interference under the free market system, companies should not have to change their policies. However, a recent report shows that companies that use sustainable methods of production can be equally or even more productive than their fast fashion counterparts (Zokaiei). Switching to more energy efficient practices in powering factories or saving water, for example, might cost the company money temporarily but save them money in the long run. Solar panels, for example, highly sustainable in that they are energy efficient, use renewable energy, and save money in the long-term. A recent study from World Wildlife Fund indicates that companies could save up to \$190 billion in the year 2020 by cutting carbon emissions by just 3% annually. To cut carbon emissions, companies should adopt more energy-efficient technologies and energy sources that use less carbon, like solar panels or wind energy (3% Solution). This information indicates that sustainability does not have to interfere with companies' profitability. While there are much fewer protective laws in place in countries that are primary producers of fast fashion garments, the laws that are in place are rarely even followed. Additionally, the freedom of the market does not extend past the individual's human rights. Since the fast fashion industry is violating numerous human rights, including the right to a fair wage and the right to a safe

working place, the companies involved in these abuses are ethically obligated to change their policies, regardless of what laws, or lack thereof, are in place. Although I concede that corporations are legally only obligated to follow existing laws in the country of production, I still maintain that corporations have a moral duty to act on sustainable values. Additionally, regardless of profitability, companies are not above following basic ethical values or ensuring that human rights are met.

Numerous ethical values are contradicted through the habit of fast fashion. The principle of justice demands that all humans get what they are entitled to. According to the UN all humans have rights. The most applicable human right described by the UN is found in Article 23, which states that “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment” and that “everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests” (Universal Declaration). These rights are clearly broken under the fast fashion system, in which garment factory workers are threatened with losing their jobs or are physically beaten for attempting to strike for better wages or form a union. Legally, factories only have to follow the laws of each country, but ethical standards dictate that humans need to be treated with dignity and that their rights to fair labor need to be protected.

While it is crucial for corporations to improve their methods of production, this process needs to be expedited by consumer demand for true progress to begin. Historically, consumers, through organized effort and mass involvement, have used their influence to promote social changes or force companies to change policies. While getting consumers to consciously reject a system that is so seemingly beneficial to them will no doubt be a difficult feat, previous successful boycotts demonstrate that if the consumer's values are threatened by corporations, they have the

potential, and will, to take the necessary steps to remedy this, regardless of personal benefit. Many studies have demonstrated that most consumers consider environmental protection important, as well as labor rights. However, they have a difficulty connecting these issues to the clothes they wear. This cognitive dissonance between consumer values and consumer actions could be remedied through more education and public awareness about the topic (McNeill, et al.). Aside from its production methods, fast fashion is unsustainable because of the rapid pace at which new clothes are bought and discarded. The constant demand for new trends puts more pressure on companies to produce clothing quicker, largely contributing to the unethical treatment of factory workers. After clothing is purchased, it is typically only worn as few as ten times before it is discarded and replaced by the newest trend. The large amount of textiles in landfills puts a heavy strain on the environment. Often, used clothing is sent to developing nations in an effort to keep textiles out of landfills and help those in extreme poverty. However, this can have an unforeseen detrimental effect, as the people of developing nations may receive so many clothes from developed countries that their own local clothing makers lose business. This ends up hurting the economy and only perpetuates the poverty cycle in those countries. Several companies, like H&M, are already experimenting with the beginnings of sustainable practices. With enough rising pressure from consumers, companies would be forced adopt sustainable practices to satisfy their customers' demands.

In addition to lack of public awareness, a major reason that consumers give for their shopping habits is the high pricing of more ethically produced clothing. High prices often leave sustainable clothing only available to the upper class. This violates the concept of social equity, one of the primary concepts of sustainability. While the middle class could occasionally afford to purchase sustainably produced clothing, the majority of consumers could not afford to shop

exclusively from fair-trade, organic, sustainable clothing brands. However, consumers need not be discouraged from ethical shopping. Until enough companies adopt sustainable habits and overall prices of sustainable fashion drop, the consumer has many different options besides the fast fashion industry. Supporting local clothing producers helps the local economy, and the clothing is generally more ethically produced due to the extensive labor laws in the United States or other developed countries. It also reduces the fuel cost of shipping products overseas from different stages of production and distribution. Clothing swaps involve trading gently used clothing with someone else to acquire new clothing. This eliminates needlessly throwing out used clothing in or purchasing from fast fashion companies. Consumers can shop second hand at thrift stores and consignment shops, both saving money and reducing their environmental footprint, while still being able to update their wardrobe. An increase in shopping secondhand would decrease the demand for new more clothing produced; lowered demand would lead to a decrease in the production of fast fashion. (Tan). If consumers are truly committed to shopping more ethically, they could adopt a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity, which stresses the unimportance of excess material goods to individual happiness. However, regardless of income, all consumers will need to realign their perspectives and drastically reduce the amount of clothing they consume annually to accommodate the rapidly growing need for sustainable habits.

Another way to make sustainable clothing more accessible is to revolutionize payment for clothing. Instead of paying \$15 for a new shirt every month that would get quickly, consumers could invest in a higher quality shirt that would last longer and pay \$15 for that every month until it is paid off. Similar to how consumers pay for furniture, cars, loans, or technology, distributing payments over a period of time would allow consumers to buy sustainable clothing while still having money left for the month for other aspects of daily life. This method of payment would

also encourage consumers to see their clothing as a more long-term investment than a disposable trend. Reshaping the consumer's perception of fashion is crucial to a successful change in the industry (Siegel).

For those who can afford it, there are numerous sustainable brands that are fair trade and take many steps to reduce their environmental impact. Brands like People Tree are certified 100% fair trade, use biodegradable or recyclable substances as much as possible, and use eco-friendly materials like organic cotton. Their prices can be quite expensive, with dresses costing as much as \$250, but tops and skirts on sale can reach as low as \$27 (Fair Trade). While shopping at completely sustainable brands on a regular basis is simply unrealistic for the majority of consumers, discounted items can cost the same as their unsustainable competitors yet have much higher quality. A mixture of shopping for clothing less and actively seeking out affordable sustainable clothing would enable everyday consumers to make a big impact on the fashion industry's rapid pace and unethical means of production.

Some may argue that luxury or designer brands should be the primary institution in reshaping the fashion industry. Some believe that if designer luxury brands begin to adopt sustainable practices, everyday companies will follow suit. Research has indicated that consumers are more likely to buy green luxury goods if they are similar in appearance to former unsustainable luxury goods; furthermore, goods are viewed as more luxurious if they are more durable, which is typically the case for sustainable products. Therefore, so long as luxury brands keep their styles the same, sustainable practices could be adopted by luxury brands and spread through the fashion industry (Angelis, et al). However, putting the responsibility of change on luxury brands contradicts sustainable values of social equity by putting the instrument of change only in the hands of the wealthy. Luxury brands should adopt more sustainable practices, and consumers who

can afford to spend more money on ethical brands are arguably obligated to do so. However, rather than relying solely on one socioeconomic class to promote change, ethical options need to be made available to the everyday consumer. In other words, luxury brands should use their influence as much as possible to promote sustainability, but we cannot rely on luxury brands alone to incite change.

In summary, then, consumers have the obligation to try to consume fashion more sustainably, within their financial constraints. While corporations in principle should be responsible for ensuring ethical production, lax regulations allow them to cut corners, regardless of the moral implications. Consumers therefore need to force the hand of business to take a more sustainable approach themselves. Furthermore, we as consumers need to all take an introspective look at our clothing purchases and ask ourselves whether we can justify the amount of clothing we buy according to our commonly shared moral principles. Hopefully, in doing so, we can slowly come to the conclusion that excess consumption does not equate to individual fulfillment or long-term happiness.

While it is important that consumers and corporations alike adopt more sustainable perspectives, this is not a complete guarantee that serious change will take place. The most reliable method of ensuring that companies comply with sustainable, ethical methods of production is through government regulation. While there are already some government laws in place in countries involved in fast fashion production, they are meager and are not enforced well enough to ensure that they are followed.

During the industrial revolution, the United States had labor conditions very similar to the current state of fast fashion garment factories. Child labor was commonplace, unions were either ineffective or nonexistent, factory conditions were unsafe, and wages were far below minimum

wage. The implementation of labor laws catapulted the country into a nation of safer workplaces without the economy suffering. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), according to the United States Department of Labor, “requires employers to pay covered employees who are not otherwise exempt at least the federal minimum wage and overtime pay of one-and-one-half-times the regular rate of pay. For nonagricultural operations, it restricts the hours that children under age 16 can work and forbids the employment of children under age 18 in certain jobs deemed too dangerous” (Summary of the Major). This ensures that if extra labor is required to complete a project, the worker is paid fairly. It also protects children from excess or unsafe work. Specifically, the protection of worker’s rights to union representation and collective bargaining was influential in ensuring proper working conditions in the United States. While unions in our country today may have a more controversial role, there is no denying that they were crucial in shaping the safe job conditions we are so accustomed to.

Many countries involved in the fast fashion industry have little to no protection for union organization. Employees are fired for going on strike or attempting to organize their own movements (Dhanarajan 43). The unions that do exist have very uninvolved roles and have not made the progress that is so desperately needed for their workers. Paradoxically, evidence suggests that unions are more likely to take initiative after workers go on strike (Anner 3). However, most workers are too afraid to go on strike for fear of losing their job or physical abuse. This perpetuates the problem instead of addressing it. In Bangladesh, only about 10% of garment factories have registered trade unions, and existing unions are not very organized or efficient. None of the workers at the five factories at Rana Plaza had a trade union. Most applications for unions are rejected by the government, and current laws make it nearly impossible for unions to be formed, requiring union support from 30% of the factory workers (Bangladesh). Clearly, there needs to be

laws in place that protect workers from being fired or abused for going on strike before more serious improvements can be made. Employees have no guarantee of being paid overtime, or a fair living hourly wage. Instead, they get paid by the amount of clothing they produce. Existing laws need to be more heavily enforced so that companies cannot continue to cut corners at the cost of human welfare (Anner 3).

Some argue that while fast fashion is problematic, it still employs millions of people globally who would otherwise be jobless. They argue that in globalizing the fashion industry, increased product manufacturing helps improve the local economies. Many critics of sustainable fashion approaches point to the fact that ending the fast fashion industry would leave millions of people without a job. However, sustainable fashion does not call for a complete closing of all garment and textile factories. Instead, industry needs to be more closely regulated to ensure the safety of its workers and the environment. Workers can continue to work for the fashion industry, with improved guidelines to ensure their safety. The fashion industry needs to be rewritten, not eradicated. In addition, recent changes in labor laws indicate it may be possible to improve conditions for workers without increasing unemployment. According to James Surowiecki, “the Better Factories Cambodia program, administered by the I.L.O. in collaboration with the Cambodian government, has significantly improved not just working conditions but also workers’ rights, even as Cambodia’s exports have grown briskly” (Surowiecki). While it is true that in some cases, people may be left unemployed if companies had to invest in higher quality materials and pay workers fairer wages, the stability of employment would help families become more financially viable. This would enable more people to send their children to get an education, as in impoverished families children often miss school to help provide for their family. While it is true some people may lose their job if the fashion industry became more sustainable, as a society we

have to decide whether it is more ethical to grotesquely exploit the labor of many or treat those who do work with human dignity. The abstruse topic of unemployment and world poverty cannot be solved by addressing the issue of fast fashion; however, I believe that better regulating labor in garment factories will improve at least some aspects of global inequality and human rights violations.

In summary, the issue of sustainable fashion is difficult and complex. From an economic standpoint, there are many obstacles that need to be overcome. Implementing sustainable methods of production, however, does not need to cost companies any revenue. As for the consumer, there are many things that can be done to make sustainable fashion more affordable. Consumers can buy second hand and participate in clothing swaps instead of buying new clothes. This is both cheaper than buying new clothes and better for the environment, as it limits resources used on new clothing and helps reduce the amount of discarded clothing in landfills. The method of paying for fashion can also be changed to allow quality to increase while still being affordable.

Environmentally, there are many issues in the fashion industry that need to be resolved. From the materials and dyes used to produce clothing, the energy efficiency of factories, and the fuel cost of globalization, to the massive amounts of clothing thrown into landfills each year, there are many environmental consequences of fast fashion. These can be solved by adopting better methods of production and reshaping the public perception of fashion.

Finally, the human cost of fast fashion is arguably the most devastating and complex. Child labor, unsafe working environments, employee abuse, unlivable pay, and little union activity run rampant in the fashion industry. However, to solve these, companies and governments must both be involved. Companies must keep a closer eye on where their clothing is produced, and adopt sustainable policies that provide better pay and safety on the job. Governments must adopt a stricter

role, creating new laws and using incentives to ensure that policies put in place to protect workers are enforced. Overall, the fast fashion crisis will not be solved by focusing on one issue alone. Collaboration from multiple perspectives is needed to promote change at the rate it is needed. Although the topic is very complex and large, neither companies, consumers, or governments can afford to be apathetic or intimidated by the issue any longer. Fortunately, the growing number of sustainable brands and consumer awareness indicates that change is in progress.

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