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The Fast Fashion Fad

Megan Wu

English 128: Pop Culture Intersections

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## 1. Introduction

Now more than ever, people consume out of boredom. Whether it's food, entertainment, or tangible products, people have an unquenchable desire for more. Going to the mall or online shopping for fun are activities that have been normalized in recent years. With promotional emails and texts constantly buzzing on people's phones, it has become increasingly difficult to resist browsing for new clothes. Especially with the rise in ecommerce, buying items has become more convenient than ever; whether it's from a phone or computer, purchases can be made in a matter of seconds.

A momentary feeling of happiness and excitement stems from buying something new. Anticipation builds, subconsciously people wonder when that package they've been looking forward to is going to arrive at their front door, and society completely indulges them. Tracking numbers, confirmation emails, and text message updates all give us the satisfaction of knowing what we're getting, and exactly *when* we're going to get it. No one is immune to this shopping frenzy because we are constantly surrounded by media that promotes it. Commercials and advertisements have infiltrated our everyday lives and have slowly but surely brainwashed us into thinking we must own more than we need. As consumers, we feel obligated to not only take advantage of a good deal, but also keep up with the latest trends, which is exactly why fast fashion is so appealing. The term "fast fashion" is defined as "inexpensive clothing produced rapidly by mass-market retailers in response to the latest trends." From this, it is easy to see why fast fashion appeals to a large market. Its low prices and trendy styles tempt people to buy large amounts of clothing at a time.

The term “haul” is a direct effect of fast fashion consumption. These days, many Youtubers create haul videos where they essentially show all the articles of clothing they bought and review each item to promote the brand they bought them from. Even with TikTok, a rapidly growing social media platform, many content creators make videos titled “Things you didn’t know you needed from Amazon” or “Best online deals” promoting these inexpensive items. As a result, social media has increased fast fashion purchases in two ways: content creators purchase clothing in bulk so they can continue to create haul videos and followers buy the promoted products out of curiosity.

While the trends of fast fashion may be fashion-forward, it’s also important to look at the future of fashion from a different perspective. How many people actually pause to think, “How can this piece of clothing be manufactured for such a low price?” Many don’t. Behind those price tags are underpaid factory workers, rivers that are threatening to dry up, and acres of deforested land used to build new factories to manufacture this clothing. When people think of the future of fashion, they think about the upcoming styles that will appeal to the public, but not as much about how it’s produced. There’s an ugly truth about fast fashion that many turn a blind eye to: it destroys the environment.

Yes, fast fashion companies are extremely successful, but they succeed at the cost of the environment because they primarily use unsustainable resources to produce their clothing. Fast fashion garments are not created to last. The saying “you get what you paid for” is applicable here as low prices correspond with cheap material that easily tears or frays, which causes people to discard their clothing more rapidly than ever. Now, once pieces have the slightest imperfection, people throw them away rather than investing in higher quality clothing.

Therefore, fast fashion generates an unhealthy amount of waste. To combat fast fashion, there has been a small movement in the fashion industry towards sustainable fashion. New companies with mission statements to use solely recycled materials have started to pop-up all over the world. Even well established brands such as Nike or Adidas have started to create lines of products made with recycled materials. However, despite these efforts, I sadly believe that fast fashion will continue to dominate the fashion industry in the years to come due to two factors. Most consumers remain uneducated about the negative impacts that fast fashion has on the environment and mindlessly partake in society's consumerist culture. Therefore, they fall subject to marketing schemes fast fashion companies employ. While some may say fast fashion companies are talking about becoming more sustainable, they still aren't taking adequate action.

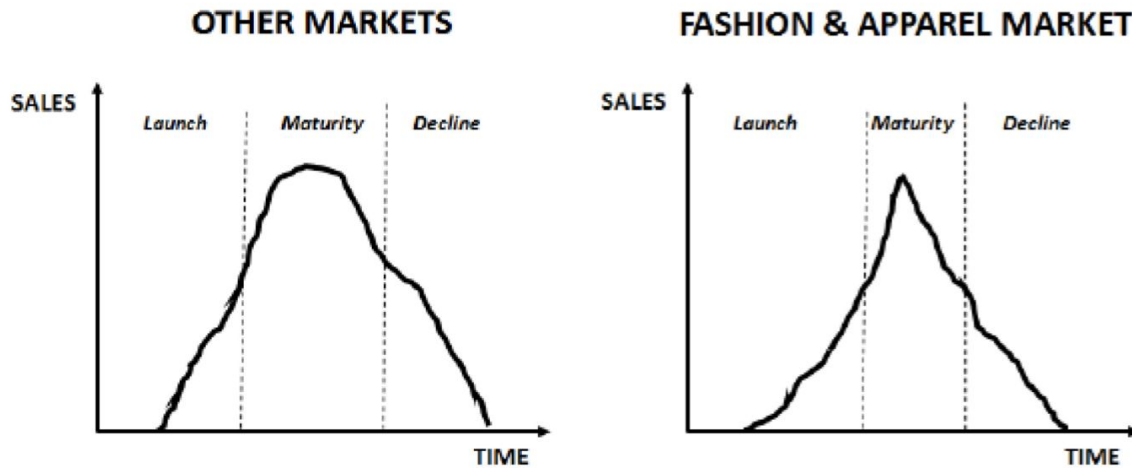
To illustrate this argument, I will focus specifically on Hennes and Mauritz marketing strategies. H&M does an exceptional job of highlighting its strengths rather than acknowledging its faults from an environmental aspect. Additionally, I discovered research that reveals many shoppers are unaware of the term "fast fashion" nonetheless its effect on the environment. These two factors paired together provide explanation for fast fashion's success and sustainable fashion's failure. After understanding the differences between those two drastically different retail models it is essential to look at the current habits of consumers and how clothes are being discarded in today's world. When addressing an issue as important as fast fashion, all aspects of the problem need to be considered, which include the suppliers and consumers in this case.

## **2. Background**

As previously mentioned, the whole concept of fast fashion is to bring the latest trends to consumers as quickly as possible. It is called fast fashion because everything about the process

revolves around speed. The time from design to production, production to stores, and stores to consumers all occur in a matter of weeks. Some brands that many aren't aware are fast fashion include H&M, Zara, BooHoo, ASOS, Urban Outfitters, Topshop, and countless others. To understand the mechanics of how fast fashion has developed over the years, Naila Fares and Maria Lebbar provide an explanation of how fast fashion supply chains optimize their processes. In the fast fashion industry there are three main seasons: pre-season, in season, and post-season (Fares and Lebbar 2019, 207). During pre-season, brands design their collections based on projected trends and gather the materials needed to produce them. As soon as "in season" hits, the garments are delivered and fill up shelf space to be sold. After only a few weeks, products that didn't sell are returned, sent to outlet stores, or simply thrown away. Out of the three phases, pre-season takes the longest because it consists of the creation of the products. However, instead of taking the design and manufacturing process in fashion step by step, fast fashion multitasks and has fabric production, cutting, and sewing occurring simultaneously (Fares and Lebbar 2019, 208). The most challenging part of fast fashion is the fluidity of the whole process. Because it moves quickly, fast fashion companies are constantly in a rapid cycle of designing, producing, and selling because as soon as shipments are headed to outlet stores, there needs to be a new wave of clothing ready to entice customers. The world of fashion is ever changing, so even though fast fashion meets the demand for current trends, they quickly go out of style. As shown in the figure below, the maturity period for fashion, compared to other industries quickly fades in

and out because trends are continuously changing.



This figure depicts the maturity period for fashion compared to other industries. (Fares and Lebbbar 2019, 212).

In contrast, sustainable fashion is modeled around producing clothing in a way that is gentle to the earth. From lower water usage, innovative materials, less carbon emission, and fair worker treatment, sustainable fashion takes into account each step of manufacturing products. These companies also address the backend of fashion, which is when consumers have already bought and used the products. To discourage people from throwing clothing away, they offer repairing and recycling services where customers can send their item in for mending or receive a discount for recycling their purchase. Some companies that institute this idea are Girlfriend Collective, Pact, Alternative Apparel, and Patagonia. Their goal is to create long lasting items that are also timeless and won't go "out of style." As a result, they only release new styles every season compared to fast fashion which drops new clothing every couple of weeks.

Fast fashion and sustainable fashion occupy different niches in the fashion market because their target consumers are unlike. Fast fashion appeals to the average consumer--the person who's looking for a new outfit for a one-time event and doesn't want to hurt their bank account while doing it. However, for the avid recyclers, reusable water bottle carriers, and the environmentally conscious, sustainable fashion is extremely appealing. While sustainable fashion is far better for the environment, it can be expensive and limiting. As aforementioned, new styles aren't released frequently and because the companies take so many extra measures to be environmentally friendly, their production costs are much higher resulting in a higher price.

Who were the brave souls who took a chance on sustainable fashion in the first place? Which people decided that taking care of the environment outweighed having to pay triple the price for a single piece of clothing? Journalists Sarah Bly, Wencke Gwozdz, and Lucia Reisch answer these questions in their research on sustainable fashion consumption pioneers. After interviewing fashion bloggers from around the world who participate in sustainable fashion, the main takeaways were style, well-being, and knowledge (2018, 133). These participants all distinguished style from fashion, claiming the terms are not synonymous like most people believe. While fashion changes constantly, style is more personal. Style includes understanding yourself and finding an individual aesthetic through clothing that embodies who you are as a person (Bly, Gwozdz, and Reisch 2015, 133). Style is stagnant and will only change if someone changes not just their physical appearance, but their inner aspirations, beliefs, and thoughts. The survey participants believed that sustainable fashion did a better job at providing style instead of fashion. Additionally, they also felt that sustainable clothing improved their well-being. Knowing the garments they wear minimize the environmental impacts of producing clothes



generated a feeling of happiness. This emotion is similar to the contentment most people feel after donating or volunteering. Overall, results showed that sustainable fashion consumption pioneers cared about developing themselves as a whole person, and viewed clothing as a tool to accomplish this.

### **3.1 Fast Fashion Success**

After understanding both fast and sustainable fashion, it is clear that fast fashion caters to a larger population. One company in particular, H&M, has taken advantage of what the market demands, and launched one of the most successful, well-known fast fashion brands in the world. Started in Sweden in the 1940s, H&M was one of the first companies to test out the fast fashion model of producing clothes. With favorable responses from the public even in its early years, H&M has only continued to expand. The brand operates with one goal in mind: to produce clothing quickly and cheaply. The company overlooks any obstacle that may prevent it from accomplishing this and even tries to find shortcuts for self-benefit. This includes using primarily cheap, cotton-polyester blend materials, plastic packaging, underpaying workers in third world countries, and even burning leftover clothes. How can a company that does all these horrible things still continue to profit? The answer lies in their marketing.

Every year, H&M Group releases a sustainability performance report, and after reading the most recent one from 2019, it's clear why the company has still continued to thrive. The report is prefaced with a brief introduction saying, "We are part of an industry that faces significant environmental and social challenges... We are proud of the journey we are on, but appreciate that there is a lot more work to do and much to learn" (Sustainability Performance Report 2019, 3). Here, they acknowledge that sustainability is important, but with the vague

wording, it's clear that the brand knows it's ultimately still fast fashion and there is only so much it can do to be sustainable. Compared to previous years, H&M's carbon dioxide emissions increased by 8%, the portion of stores with clothing recycling systems *decreased*, and a measly 13% of their water consumption was recycled. All of this negative data is combined onto a small data table in the beginning of the report that is easy to miss if not looking carefully. When addressing recycled materials, the report states, "our ambition is to move away from all virgin polyester and only use recycled polyester by the latest 2030" (Sustainability Performance Report 2019, 40). H&M continues to make these open ended "efforts" in all aspects of their production. Constantly pairing terms such as "our ambition" or "hopefully" when talking about using less water, finding renewable energy, reducing packaging, H&M fails to solidify its commitment to making sustainable changes. Because they don't give any data or projection models to show how they plan to achieve these statements, there is no accountability from the company's end.

However, the biggest breakthrough was when H&M launched its Conscious line, an extension of the brand supposedly created to promote sustainability. From the public's perspective, this seemed revolutionary, and many consumers appreciated H&M's efforts to become more environmentally friendly. Soon after the Conscious line of clothing was released, critics started to become doubtful about whether its products were truly sustainable or the whole extension was a marketing scheme. Recently, the Norwegian Consumer Authority accused H&M of failing to provide enough information about what makes its Conscious products sustainable. After attempting to find this information myself, the only explanation I could find was, "They're made from at least 50% sustainably sourced materials... The only exception is recycled cotton, which can only make up 20% of a product. If we included any more recycled cotton, the clothes

simply wouldn't have the same quality” (H&M 2020). While 50% sustainably sourced materials sounds like a step in the right direction, this wording is vague and uninformative. “Sustainability sourced materials” is a broad term because this can mean anything from sourcing materials locally to picking a different supplier. It does not mean the materials used were recycled, or the clothes were ethically made, which are ideas that people often confuse the term for. Furthermore, H&M does not address how its Conscious products are produced. There is no explicit wording that says the garments were created with less water or generated less carbon emissions than their typical products. It’s clear that there is a gaping hole in H&M’s advertisement of this brand extension that leaves it subject to criticism. If H&M had taken extra measures to create a sustainable line, it would have undoubtedly publicized more information about it.

H&M Conscious is a perfect example of greenwashing. Greenwashing is a technique used by many companies to mislead their customers into thinking their products are environmentally friendly. This deceptive technique is how H&M and other fast fashion brands will continue to stay afloat even when consumers begin to realize the negative environmental impacts of fast fashion.

Currently, H&M is still continuing to get away with its questionable Conscious line, and despite what critics are saying, this brand extension has helped the company substantially. A study done by Jessica Hill and Hyun-Hwa Lee found that lines like Conscious change consumers’ perception of the brand. As stated in their analysis, “the introduction of an apparel line that uses environmentally friendly production materials... showed a positive influence of consumer perceptions of both the parent brand and the cause on the evaluation of the brand

extension” (Hill and Lee 2015, 21). This shows that H&M is reaping the benefits from having a fake sustainable clothing line without even making truly sustainable choices.

Like any successful company, H&M knows how to market itself well, and over the years it has developed strategies to make its brand even more appealing to the public. Because of this, H&M is projected to grow another 10.67% in the coming years (Garasová and Knošková 2018, 67). Hennes and Mauritz is not an anomaly in the fast fashion industry, as other brands have adopted this technique as well. The combination of low prices, trendy clothing, and smart advertising has allowed fast fashion to flourish and become undeniably successful in today’s society.

### **3.2 Uneducated Consumers**

The other major component that has allowed fast fashion to continue to succeed is uneducated consumers. Ultimately, consumers control what succeeds and fails in the market due to the concept of supply and demand. As a result, companies must cater to people’s wants in order to meet their sales goals. The average consumer these days, steps into a shopping mall with factors such as style, price, and trend in mind (Hahn and Palomo-Lovinski 2019, 22). With rapidly changing trends, shoppers are becoming less willing to invest in clothing, knowing they are unlikely to wear it for more than a few months. A national study conducted by Kent State University professors showed that 72% of participants considered price to be the biggest influencer when shopping, followed by 55% choosing style, and 30% selecting trend. Fast fashion companies utilize this data to meet all the factors consumers look for when purchasing garments. Because of this, consumers are constantly looped into buying clothes from fast fashion brands because it meets all the criteria. Notably, sustainability is not a factor listed above.

It may come as a surprise that consumers would willingly buy clothes made by horrible fast fashion companies such as H&M, but the reality is that they are unknowing partakers. A national study conducted by Kent State University professors showed that over 57% of participants had never heard of fast fashion. Out of those who attempted to define the term, 43% of them supplied the incorrect definition (Hahn and Palomo-Lovinski 2019, 21). This lack of education can be traced back to the growth of the recycling movement throughout the early 2000s. In the past two decades, recycling has become normalized and part of people's everyday lives. This is thanks to the U.S. government's effort to teach citizens about the importance of recycling as well as the implementation of state regulations requiring people to recycle certain materials. Even though the concept of recycling can be traced back to post WWII, it is just now gaining popularity because the government has learned to prioritize it. Now, on streets and in buildings, green recycling bins can always be found next to trash cans, encouraging people to recycle plastic, paper, and glass products.

While this nationwide movement was successful, it only initiated basic recycling practices. It did not teach people to recycle other items such as clothing, electronics, or toys. A movement of the same magnitude as the recycling movement has not occurred in the fashion industry yet because people have not been taught to be environmentally conscious. Similar to political beliefs, environmentalist identity is something cultivated throughout a person's life, starting at childhood. This country has failed to integrate proper education about sustainability into its education system, which is why these days, people do not view the environment as a priority. America has taught its citizens to value money and tangible items instead of caring for the world we live in. The upcoming generations must be taught to care for the environment

because studies have shown that people who are more educated about environmental issues are more likely to purchase sustainable fashion over fast fashion. An article from the Journal of Cleaner Production reveals that people choose “products compatible with their individual value priorities” (Battenfield, Hörisch, Kathleen, and Petersen 2018, 1163). A previously mentioned source from Kent State professors Hill and Lee corroborates this finding stating, “the results showed that those having a higher degree of pro- environmental self-identity had significantly higher means scores on most of the sustainable behavior related to fashion purchasing/reuse” (Hill and Lee 2015, 20). Clearly, studies support that if people begin to prioritize the environment, sustainable fashion will also increase in popularity.

However, the job of educating consumers should not be the responsibility of the government alone. The fashion industry also plays a vital role in teaching people to shop sustainably. The issue is fast fashion is an extremely controversial topic in the industry because companies have varying stances on it. Fast fashion has created a divide in the world of fashion, pitting companies against one another. Luxury brands have grown to dislike fast fashion because they often copy designer styles, but sell them for a cheaper price, thus hurting their market. Sustainable fashion is constantly competing with fast fashion to convert consumers to clothing that is better for the environment. Obviously, fast fashion companies are weary of educating consumers on fast fashion because it is a conflict of interest. With all this tension, it is nearly impossible for brands to come to a consensus and form a united front on the issue. Therefore, fast fashion education has not progressed as rapidly as the recycling movement did in the past years.

Clearly, the issue of having uneducated consumers is one that can not easily be solved. Teaching people to care about the environment and then having their values eventually translate into sustainable shopping behavior is a change that will have to take place over a long period of time. However, the projected time frame for this reworking of America's education system should not discourage the country from making these changes immediately. The sooner this conversion starts to occur, the sooner we will have better educated consumers filling the market. This will be the turning point when sustainable fashion finally triumphs over fast fashion, but as mentioned before, this is unlikely to occur in the near future.

### **3.3 What horrendous effects of fast fashion today**

The detrimental effects of fast fashion do not occur solely on the front end of the operations. While companies' water usage, carbon emissions, and unethical production practices are extremely harmful when making clothing, it's also important to realize that they generate waste on the back end of consumerism as well. As previously mentioned, fast fashion follows the saying "you get what you paid for." With its low prices, it is not surprising that the fabric fast fashion garments are made with are tearable, see-through, and uncomfortable at times. The poor quality combined with changing trends cause people to wear the garments only a few times before deciding they do not like them anymore.

For some customers, throwing away clothing is arbitrary, but for others, they feel guilty about disposing of clothes they barely wore. In an effort to make themselves feel better, they will often hoard the clothing and justify it by telling themselves that they will wear it again eventually. The reality is, they never do. Many people have heard of the 80 20 rule, which in fashion means people wear 20% of their closet 80% of the time. Even though many do not want

to admit it, this rule is true because consumers choose from a select few pieces of clothing every time they reach for something to wear. The reality is people own much more clothing than they need. Society has taught people to value their physical appearance so much that they feel the need to have a plethora of options when it comes to clothing so they can feel stylish.

Unfortunately, people's large closet collections are very hurtful to the environment as well.

Hoarding is one of the worst options when it comes to dealing with fast fashion garments because it prevents the garment from being worn anymore. Its owner no longer wears it, yet it is not being donated or sold to consignment stores. Therefore, the opportunity to extend its lifecycle is abruptly ended, leading to the creation of more fabric waste.

The correlation between fast fashion and hoarding or disposing is not just an assumption based on previous knowledge from my research. A study done by Hyun-Mee Jeong, a professor at Northern Illinois University showed, "since fast-fashion consumers purchased more than they needed, they got rid of their unwanted apparel products by discarding for convenience" (Joung 2014, 694). The article also states that hoarding and fast fashion were positively correlated in its participants (Joung 2014, 695). Aside from believing they would wear the clothes eventually, Joung's group of participants offered further explanation saying the clothing either had sentimental value or they kept it as a personal goal for losing weight (Joung 2014, 694).

With this lack of recycling and donation, where do clothes end up these days and how does that impact us as consumers? "Textile production is one of the most polluting industries, producing 1.2 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent (CO<sub>2</sub>e) per year" and it creates even more carbon emissions when old clothing is incinerated (Price of Fast Fashion 2018, 1). Burning clothes in a common method producers use to dispose of old products. This came about when



companies realized there was so much clothing waste was being generated, landfills were overflowing. Therefore, they decided burning them was the best option so the articles of clothing would no longer exist and would not take up space anywhere. The environmental impacts of incineration are devastating because all the CO<sub>2</sub> it creates fuels the greenhouse effect. The greenhouse effect is the trapping of the sun's radiation, causing the surface of the earth to be warmer than normal. Greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide enforce the barrier that traps the sun's radiation within the lower atmosphere of earth, and if this barrier continues to grow, the planet will soon be inhabitable. Even today, we are already seeing the effects of this with icebergs melting and heatwaves becoming more frequent.

Incineration, while a common method, has still not been able to handle all the waste fast fashion produces. A large portion still ends up in landfills: "Approximately 85 % of the clothing Americans consume, nearly 3.8 billion pounds annually, is sent to landfills as solid waste" (Bick and Halsey 2018, 1). This amount is from 2018, but increases exponentially every year. Soon, empty land will be turned into landfills and we will be living right next to the waste we generate. However, today there are already people living beside the waste and toxins fast fashion companies produce. In many third world countries where these garments are manufactured, citizens have to deal with polluted water and air. Fast fashion is normally produced outside the United States because labor is cheaper in other countries. The factory workers in Bangladesh or Indonesia not only endure poor treatment for low pay, but they are also more impacted by the waste produced than Americans are. This results in what authors Rachel Bick and Erika Halsey call "the environmental injustice of fast fashion" (Bick and Halsey 2018, 2). This term captures the essence of how fast fashion impacts certain areas more than others, creating an imbalance in

pollution throughout the globe. Another injustice that occurs today is unethical worker treatment. In many countries, not only are workers underpaid, but sometimes even child labor is used. Big companies like H&M turn a blind eye to this important issue. In an interview conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), H&M was asked if it could “unequivocally say that it does not use any child labor in any part of its supply chain” (Young 2018, 16). The clothing brand responded saying that they were working on reducing the risk of child labor. The disgusting truth is H&M could not even deny its unethical practices because “reducing the risk” is not equivalent to saying they do not use child labor.

Today’s choices regarding fashion clearly harm not only the environment, but us as humans. The potential of landfills expanding and the earth’s temperature increasing to the point of fatality are not future implications we want. Dispose of clothing in a better way is a habit consumers must start to implement in their everyday lives so we can preserve the planet we live on. Additionally, fast fashion companies need to start providing recycling programs to harvest and reuse the fabric from old garments. Studies show that the energy it takes to recycle materials such as polyester (commonly used in fast fashion) is less than the energy used to produce it (Price of Fast Fashion 2018, 1).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The issue of fast fashion is not an easy problem to solve. Like anything controversial, it is challenging because there are many components to think about when trying to find a solution. The first step is to recognize that fast fashion is currently successful because companies know how to market themselves well, and consumers remain uneducated. It is a problem on both the seller’s and consumer’s part. It’s counterpart is also understanding that sustainable fashion is not

succeeding at the same rate because of its limited options and high price tag. The imbalance in the popularity between the two types of fashion can not be fixed unless people become more educated and environmentally conscious. Ensuring that there is an earth to live on in the years to come by practicing sustainability in all aspects of our everyday lives is not a streamlined mentality.

All around the world, large industries are struggling with this shift towards sustainability. The reason why this research is so important is because the future of fashion is representative of society's future. In order for it to sustain itself, fashion will need to migrate towards eco friendly products and learn to utilize its resources better. The fashion industry is only a small part of a larger problem because the same can be said about other industries. If large companies don't adapt and make an effort to be more sustainable, the earth will be stripped of its resources. How does that directly affect us as consumers? An earth without resources is barren and can't provide for its inhabitants. Therefore, in the long run, the environmental damage that is caused by fast fashion has the potential to hurt aspects of our everyday lives that we take for granted. Simple resources such as water, electricity, food, or even common household items are at jeopardy.

A topic for further research would be investigating how fast fashion companies are allowed to get away with immoral practices and the role policymakers play in this situation. Obviously what H&M does is not considered illegal, otherwise the company would have been shut down, but it shows that the current regulations in place to constrict their practices are not adequate. The Federal Trade Commission has created Green Guides, which are rules regarding environmentally friendly products. These guides supposedly declare greenwashing illegal, yet companies still do it and do not face repercussions. Policies regarding fast fashion need to be

carefully worded as to prevent companies from finding loopholes that are *technically* not violations of the law.

The combination of educated consumers, less greenwashing, and better policies has the potential to dissolve fast fashion. As an entire race, humans must learn to challenge what society tells us. Instead of consuming constantly, and desperately trying to keep up with trends, people need to think about what is essential rather than living in excess. Together, fast fashion can be combated, so the next time a phone lights up with a promotional email, think twice before filling your cart with cheap clothing. It might end up costing more than you think.

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