

# Fast Fashion

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## Instructions



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## Module Introduction

### Description

Who doesn't want to be fashionable? Fast fashion is quickly becoming one of the world's biggest problems. The fashion industry is creating more clothing than we can use, most of it of lower quality, and many of which end up in landfills. Consumers buy this cheaply made clothing following fashion trends, but the garment breaks or we grow tired of it, and we donate it. What happens to the clothing we donate? It has been said that after oil, the fashion industry is globally the most polluting industry. This module explores the global impacts of fashion consumerism, the impact on local economies, and its effects on the environment.

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## Keywords

fashion, fast fashion, trends, economy, waste, global impact, developing countries, human rights, Redesigning Modernities

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## Part 1 What is fast fashion?

Before showing students the definition of fast fashion, ask if they have heard the term before. What connotations does “fast fashion” have?

### Part 1.1 Definition

The Oxford English dictionary defines fast fashion as “inexpensive clothing produced rapidly by mass-market retailers in response to the latest trends.”

However, as we will see in this module, this definition neglects to explain the human and environmental costs.

### Part 1.2 Materials and fabrics associated with fast fashion

Are there certain materials being used often in fast fashion? Are there any hazardous chemicals in the garments and accessories being manufactured as part of a fast fashion item? What about processes in the manufacturing of these garments? We know that some of these processes can be toxic and produce waste that pollute the water in the communities where they are located.

### Part 1.3 Origins of fast fashion

The fashion industry used to have two “seasons” or collections a year: fall/winter and spring/summer. In the 1980s, we had up to five seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter, and resort. Nowadays, there are fast fashion brands that produce up to 52 micro-seasons or micro-collections a year. How can we keep up with the manufacturing of these garments?

When can we say that fast fashion began? Can we point to a particular decade? What role does industrialization and globalization play in the emergence of the fast fashion industry?

Refer to the articles: "This Is What Fast Fashion Means (Definition, Problems, And Examples)," "What Is Fast Fashion?," "Fashion History Lesson: The Origins of Fast Fashion," and "Fast Fashion's Surprising Origins."

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## Part 2 The manufacture of fast fashion

### Part 2.1 Biggest offenders

Students can research different brands and come up with a list of the brands that have been accused of manufacturing fast fashion. Some of these brands are Zara, H&M, Forever 21, etc. However, there are brands that we do not associate with cheaply made fashion that have been thrown in the same category. Some designer brands have been accused of manufacturing garments and merchandising them in the same way as the cheaper, more common offenders.

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## Part 2.2 Where is fast fashion manufactured?

In which countries are these garments being manufactured? Why are fashion brands making garments in these countries (quality of the work, tax breaks, inexpensive to make, etc.)? Look at the conditions present in these factories, usually long work hours, demanding work, and many times unsafe and unsanitary. Workers are poorly compensated for their work and oftentimes children are employed. In the United States there has been legislation created to protect garment workers, but what has been done around the world? What prompted the United States to create legislation to protect the workers? Could this be a reason why these companies look to other non-Western countries to manufacture their product? Are there financial gains/losses from taking your garment manufacturing outside the United States? Consumers say that they prefer to buy "Made in the USA", but is that true? Garments made in the United States usually come with a higher price tag. Why?

## Part 2.3 Who buys fast fashion? Why?

Fast fashion is predominantly sold in Western countries. People, and in particular girls and women, experience pressure from peers, social media, and the media in general to look a certain way, to follow trends, to wear the latest in fashion. Consumerism is at the heart of the problem, as people are pushed to buy the latest trends to keep up with the latest in fashion. It is worthy to investigate the psychology of fast fashion, what keeps pushing people to keep buying. Some might reason that behind the purchase of fast fashion is that it is cheap, and mimics popular trends found in the haute couture runways. Why would someone buy an expensive garment if they can get the same look for much less? Students can look in their closets and drawers to see if they have purchased these brands.

## Part 2.4 Other things to consider

If we look at where these garments are manufactured in contrast to where the fashion brands are located and where they sell their garments, can we talk about colonialism and imperialism? Would neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism be more appropriate terms? How can we see this new relationship between former colonies and imperial powers reflected in fast fashion?

Refer to the articles: "Sneaky ways stores like H&M, Zara, and Uniqlo get you to spend more money on clothes," "Who is to blame? A re-examination of fast fashion after the 2013 factory disaster in Bangladesh," and "Buyer behaviour for fast fashion". If you want to delve further into the psychology of consumerism, we recommend the Harnish and Roster journal article "The tripartite model of aberrant purchasing: A theory to explain the maladaptive pursuit of consumption."

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## Part 3 What are the consequences of fast fashion?

### Part 3.1 Impact on the environment

Environmental degradation as a result of the fast fashion industry has global impacts, however non-western countries carry much of that degradation. The process of making fast fashion  
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requires lots of resources including a very large water input. After clothes are sold, they don't get worn much (lower quality and end of a trend). After that, they end up in landfills or in donation bags, but many clothes are not fit for donation and end up in the landfill, or back to non-Western countries. Some of these garments that end up back again in non-Western countries are sold by the pound to middlemen, who then sell the better-looking ones at markets. However, most of these garments will end up in landfills in these countries.

### Part 3.2 Impact on the local economy and local cultures

The garments that can be resold that make it back to non-Western countries are inundating the markets. For the middlemen working to sell these garments, they can make money to support their families, but they buy the garments by the box without seeing the merchandise. The garments in these boxes can be worth good money, or they can be worth nothing.

Another way this impacts the local economy is that local fashion brands cannot compete with famous fashion brand names. The livelihoods of these local entrepreneurs are impacted.

Western fashion is taking over the world and this can have an impact on local cultures.

### Part 3.3 Impact on human rights

They say that fast fashion is a feminist issue. Why is fast fashion a feminist concern? How much are women paid in these factories compared to men? What positions do the women hold in the factories? Most garment workers are women, most of them young, and they are not paid nearly enough for the work they do. These workers work for about 10 to 12 hours a day and if they do not reach the quota, they need to work unpaid overtime to meet it.

Workers in non-Western countries are being exploited and their safety is not guaranteed in these factories. We have heard of the fires in factories or building collapses in India and Bangladesh.

Refer to readings: "The Impact of Fast Fashion on Women," "Violence, Women, Work and Empowerment: Narratives from Factory Women in Sri Lanka's Export Processing Zones," "Environmental impact of the textile and clothing industry," "Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry," "Where Does Discarded Clothing Go?," "How Fast Fashion Is Destroying the Planet," and "Can 'upcycling' give Haiti's fashion industry a boost?"

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## Part 4 Brand activism or pseudo-activism?

There are brands that have come up with ways to address the issues that arise with fast fashion. See the image below. It was taken at a Gap store, where the t-shirt was hanging in the clearance section, and which will probably end up either in a landfill or in another country. It is part of the Generation Good from Gap. Students can do a quick search to look for Generation Good online and then discuss the image.

What is Generation Good? Why does Gap think it's fine to produce this garment and others like it? Are they acting responsibly?

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Credit: "No More Waste" by Melba I. Amador Medina, licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

#### Part 4.1 Which brands are addressing the issue? How are they doing it?

We see brands advertising their sustainable efforts, their eco-friendly and socially and environmentally conscious efforts. Is this just branding and marketing? Are there any fashion brands that are really addressing the issue or are they using the trendy buzz words to confuse the consumer? Students can research which brands are taking responsibility and acting accordingly to improve the negative effects from fast fashion. They already know about Generation Good from Gap. Are there other brands? How are they addressing this issue? Some brands are addressing it from the manufacturing side of things, using sustainable processes and materials in their manufacturing. There are fast fashion brands that have up to 52 micro-seasons a year, that is a new collection every week. How are brands addressing the increase in the fashion seasons/collections?

Students can work on a project where they choose a brand and research the effects it has on certain countries, populations, the environment, etc. Encourage students to choose brands they purchase, but do not have them repeat a brand that another group chose. Students can add if the brand is addressing the issue, and how they are addressing it. Have students comment on if they believe it is a real solution or is it greenwashing.

#### Part 4.2 Greenwashing

The word "greenwashing" has been in the Oxford English dictionary since 1989. It defines it as the practice "(a) to mislead (the public, public concern, etc.) by falsely representing a person, company, product, etc., as being environmentally responsible; (b) to misrepresent (a company, its operations, etc.) as environmentally responsible."

How many of the brands we wear engage in greenwashing?

Refer to articles: "5 Sustainable Luxury Designers for Eco-Friendly Fashion," "Fueling the Sustainable Fashion Movement Unlocking "The Pull Factor" to Tip Fashion Toward a Sustainable Future," "The "ghost stores" of Instagram," and "Can fast fashion be green?"

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## Part 5 Solutions?

### Part 5.1 What can I do as a consumer?

As consumers we must think about what we can do to lessen or to eliminate the impact of fast fashion, but what can we do?

Should I stop buying from brands that sell fast fashion? Should I adopt a minimalist lifestyle? Should I continue to donate clothing? Should I buy clothing and accessories more consciously and with less frequency? Should I boycott a fast fashion brand? Should I boycott a particular country for the lack of labor laws and for their human rights violations? Should I examine my buying habits?

As a class activity, students can create a document where they write down the ways they can help versus the impact it will bring to those involved. For example, a student might write, "I should boycott 'Made in Bangladesh' because of the lack of labor laws." On the side where they consider those involved/affected by the action they might write, "This might mean that people will be left without jobs in Bangladesh and without a way to feed their family."

### Part 5.2 How will my actions as a conscious consumer impact the fashion industry?

We all know that the fashion industry wants to make money. Can there be a place for fashion without fast fashion? What implications does this bring to the consumer and to the industry?

### Part 5.3 Class final project

Students can work in small groups on projects that address creative solutions to the fast fashion issue. How can people make more responsible consuming decisions? What can we do to reduce the consumption of fast fashion without affecting the livelihoods of those who work in these companies and factories?

Refer to articles: "Sustainable design techniques," "8 clothing rental services that let you change your wardrobe in an instant," "Council for Textile Recycling," and "10 awesome innovations changing the future of fashion."

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