

THE SECRETS OF FAST FASHION FINALLY REVEALED

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Abstract

Fast fashion is a term that has become synonymous with the modern fashion industry. It refers to the rapid production of inexpensive clothing that is inspired by current fashion trends. This paper explores the phenomenon of fast fashion, its effects on society and the environment, and the ethical and sustainable alternatives that are emerging in response to its negative consequences.

Keywords Fast Fashion, Fashion Industry, Fashion Secrets, Sustainable Fashion.

INTRODUCTION

The Rise of Fast Fashion

Fast fashion emerged in the late 20th century and has since become a dominant force in the global clothing industry. Brands such as Zara, H&M, and Forever 21 have pioneered this business model, offering consumers affordable clothing that is designed to mimic the latest runway trends. Fast fashion has gained popularity due to its ability to quickly produce and distribute clothing, allowing consumers to keep up with ever-changing fashion trends without breaking the bank (Joy et al. 2012).

The rise of fast fashion is a relatively recent development. In the 1990s, retailers introduced a weekly cycle of trendy, low-cost, and often low-quality clothing to keep pace with the rapid evolution of fashion trends. Fashion became accessible, convenient, and disposable.

However, it's essential to recognise that fast fashion is a privilege. It's a privilege to buy clothing

solely for its style, ignoring the environmental consequences. In reality, the relentless cycle of consumption driven by fast fashion means that the garments we wear are increasingly likely to contribute to the 92 million tons of textile waste generated annually (Fletcher and Grose 2012).

Amid the pandemic, as brick-and-mortar stores shuttered, consumers shifted away from traditional fast fashion brands like H&M and Zara, turning to e-commerce sensations like Shein and Asos. These brands represent an escalation of both fast fashion and its environmental impact (Wang 2022). These newcomers in the fast fashion landscape thrived during the pandemic thanks to their unique business models. They operate exclusively online, enabling them to ship thousands of new styles directly from their warehouses to consumers daily, bypassing supply chain disruptions and U.S. import duties. Simultaneously, their reliance on inexpensive overseas labor and

synthetic materials ensures irresistibly low prices (Niinimäki 2010).

Affordable fashion has dramatically transformed the clothing choices of the majority of people. Cline (2012) claims that the latest fashion trends are now available at historically low prices. As a result, there is little incentive to continue wearing and repairing existing garments when fashion trends evolve so rapidly. It is simply more cost-effective to acquire new pieces. 'Fast fashion' is so called partly because the fashion industry now releases new lines every week, when historically this happened four times a year. Today, fashion brands produce almost twice the amount of clothing that they did in 2000, most of it made in China and other middle-income countries such as Turkey, Vietnam and Bangladesh. Worldwide, 300 million people are employed by the industry (Tiefenbeck 2022).

But what is the true impact of this proliferation of inexpensive fashion? What are we really doing with this abundance of affordable clothing? Even more importantly, what consequences do these choices have for us, our society, our environment, and our economic stability?

The Case of Zara

Zara, part of the Inditex Group, is one of the world's largest and most renowned fashion retailers. Founded in 1974 by Amancio Ortega in La Coruña, Spain, Zara has grown to become a global fashion giant known for its rapid response to fashion trends, quick production cycles, and vertically integrated supply chain. This short case study based on O'Shea (2020) examines the key factors that have contributed to Zara's success and its impact on the fashion industry.

Zara's success can be attributed to its unique business model, which focuses on speed, flexibility, and customer-centricity. Unlike traditional fashion retailers that plan their collections months in advance, Zara relies on a "fast fashion" model. The company constantly monitors customer preferences and market trends, allowing it to design, produce, and distribute new collections within weeks. This approach enables Zara to stay ahead of competitors and deliver fresh, trendy

merchandise to its stores regularly.

Zara's supply chain is a critical element of its business model. The company owns much of its production, which includes manufacturing facilities in Spain and other countries. While Zara has been a pioneer in fast fashion, it has faced criticism for its environmental impact and labor practices. In response, the company has implemented several sustainability initiatives, such as joining the fashion pact, sustainable fabric use, or a transparent supply chain. While the company has faced criticisms and challenges, it continues to adapt and evolve. Zara serves as a case study in how a traditional retailer can embrace fast fashion, respond to consumer trends, and address sustainability concerns in the 21st century. As the fashion industry undergoes further transformations, Zara's ability to innovate will determine its future success.

The Case of Uniqlo

For Yudhistira and Saggaf Shihab (2023), Uniqlo brand loyalty is so unique that it supports the business stability of the brand. The Japanese fashion retailer has gained global recognition for its unique approach to fast fashion. Known for its focus on quality, innovation, and sustainability, Uniqlo has disrupted the traditional fast fashion paradigm. Uniqlo, short for "Unique Clothing Warehouse," was founded in Japan in 1984 as a small retail store offering affordable, high-quality basics. Under the guidance of its parent company, Fast Retailing Co., Ltd., Uniqlo embarked on a journey of expansion, both within Japan and globally. Uniqlo's business model is grounded in several key principles that set it apart from traditional fast fashion retailers. These include a commitment to product quality, innovative design collaborations, efficient supply chain management, and a focus on functionality and simplicity. Uniqlo employs a unique marketing strategy that emphasises the universality of its products and the notion that "Made for All" transcends cultural and demographic boundaries. Through global brand ambassadors and innovative advertising campaigns, Uniqlo communicates its brand

message effectively. This section explores Uniqlo's marketing strategies and their impact on the brand's image.

Uniqlo's dedication to quality is a cornerstone of its success. The company places a premium on fabric technology, clothing durability, and comfort. Its LifeWear concept underscores the idea that clothing should improve people's lives. This section delves into Uniqlo's quality-focused approach and its implications for both consumers and the environment.

In recent years, Uniqlo has made significant strides in promoting sustainability. This includes efforts to reduce waste, minimise environmental impact, and ensure responsible sourcing and production. Uniqlo's commitment to sustainability aligns with the broader industry shift towards more eco-conscious practices. This section examines Uniqlo's sustainability initiatives and their implications.

Uniqlo's remarkable journey from a small Japanese store to a global fashion powerhouse underscores the potential for redefining fast fashion. By prioritising quality, innovation, and sustainability, Uniqlo has carved a unique niche within the industry. Its success story serves as a testament to the evolving demands of consumers and the need for businesses to adapt. As the fashion industry navigates changing landscapes, Uniqlo provides valuable lessons for companies seeking to thrive while embracing responsibility and sustainability.

The Impact of Consumer Behaviour

The fast fashion industry has transformed the way consumers shop for clothing, emphasising speed, affordability, and trend-driven designs. This transformation is intrinsically linked to consumer behaviour, as fast fashion retailers closely monitor and respond to consumer preferences and purchasing patterns (Fletcher 2008).

Consumer behaviour shapes production decisions, sustainability efforts, and the overall trajectory of this sector. The dynamic interplay between consumer preferences and industry practices underscores the importance of understanding and adapting to changing consumer behaviour. As

consumers continue to demand transparency, sustainability, and ethical practices, fast fashion brands must evolve to meet these expectations while maintaining the affordability and trend-driven appeal that defines the industry. Balancing these competing demands will be crucial for the future success and sustainability of fast fashion (Sassatelli 2007).

One of the key drivers of fast fashion is consumer demand for constantly evolving styles at low prices. The "wear it once" culture has become prevalent, with consumers buying clothing, wearing it a few times, and then discarding it. The evidence is clear from the data. In 1995, the textile industry manufactured 7.6 kilograms of fibre per person globally. Fast forward to 2018, and this number had nearly doubled to 13.8 kilograms per person. It's worth noting that during this period, the world's population also grew, from 5.7 billion to 7.6 billion people. Currently, over 60 million tonnes of clothing are purchased annually, and this figure is projected to surge even higher, reaching approximately 100 million tonnes by 2030 (Tiefenbeck 2022). This disposable fashion mentality has several negative consequences (Minton 2011):

- **Environmental Impact:** Fast fashion is a major contributor to environmental degradation. The production of clothing involves vast amounts of water, energy, and chemicals. Additionally, the disposal of discarded clothing contributes to textile waste in landfills.
- **Exploitative Labor Practices:** Fast fashion's emphasis on low production costs often leads to labor exploitation in developing countries. Workers in garment factories may endure poor working conditions, low wages, and long hours.
- **Loss of Craftsmanship:** The focus on speed and cost-effectiveness often means sacrificing the quality and craftsmanship of clothing. Traditional, well-made garments are increasingly being replaced by cheap, mass-produced alternatives.

According to Kaplan et al. (2023), policymakers bear a pivotal responsibility in encouraging fast-fashion retailers to shift toward more sustainable and circular business models. Greenwashing, a deceptive marketing strategy that has gained prominence in recent years, must be combated for genuine sustainability and transparency in today's marketplace. Greenwashing perpetuates artificially high demand and diminishes consumer guilt, thereby obstructing the transition to a circular economy. Instead, policymakers can adopt taxation, regulations, education, and consumer empowerment. The concept of greenwashing can be traced back to the early 1960s when environmental awareness began to emerge. Businesses started using environmental claims to improve their public image and sales. Over the decades, greenwashing tactics have evolved to become increasingly sophisticated, making it more challenging for consumers to differentiate genuine sustainability efforts from deceptive marketing ploys. Common tactics include vague or misleading labels, false certifications, exaggerated claims of eco-friendliness, and the selective promotion of environmentally responsible aspects while concealing unsustainable practices.

As a result, Andres and Sempere Ripoli (2023) feel that they can compare "fast fashion" and "fast education". Indeed university students often encounter a challenge where they grasp theoretical knowledge but struggle to apply it in real-life situations. Their learning process is rapid, but their retention is fleeting. When faced with practical problems outside the classroom, they struggle to connect these issues with the theoretical solutions they encountered at the university. By the same token in the realm of fast fashion, renowned brands and top designers invest substantial effort in creating unique, imaginative, and attractive fashion pieces. However, within a short span, these distinctive items are essentially copied by fast fashion chains and sold worldwide at remarkably low prices. Over time, this discourages original creators from engaging in such meticulous work. In the context of fast learning, educators put in significant effort, but the creation of materials and

lesson preparation often goes unrewarded in terms of achieving the desired student learning outcomes. Consequently, students tend to learn quickly but lack intrinsic motivation. Their primary motivation revolves around passing exams, leading to last-minute cramming and ultimately a swift forgetting of the material once the assessment concludes. In fast fashion, a disposable image predominates. If clothing items are worn only a few times before being discarded, the style is temporary and transient. It becomes challenging to establish and maintain a personal style over time due to the rapid pace of changing trends. In fast learning, when the concepts learned are short-lived, the learning process becomes temporary and transitory, lacking depth and lasting understanding. Developing a sustainable methodology for students to retain their learning over time becomes increasingly difficult. Educators invest significant effort in creating learning materials, but they often fail to establish practices that enable students to apply and retain the concepts. Students spend several months immersed in a subject, only to quickly forget what they've learned. This process essentially becomes "learning to unlearn," leading to a substantial time cost that makes little sense in the long run.

The Environmental Consequences

While it provides consumers with affordable and trendy clothing, the environmental consequences of this industry are profound. Fast fashion is known for its environmental toll, primarily due to the following factors:

- **Waste:** The fast fashion model encourages overconsumption and rapid disposal of clothing, leading to a significant amount of textile waste. This "throwaway" culture means that vast amounts of textiles end up in landfills, contributing to textile waste. Many of these textiles are not biodegradable, contributing to long-lasting pollution.
- **Resource Depletion:** The production of fast fashion garments consumes vast amounts of water and non-renewable resources. This contributes to water scarcity and

environmental degradation in regions where textiles are produced.

- Chemical Pollution: The dyeing and finishing processes in textile production involve the use of toxic chemicals, including dyes, solvents and fixatives, which can contaminate water sources and harm ecosystems, affecting both aquatic life and human health. Synthetic fabrics shed microplastic particles when washed, entering waterways and oceans. These microfibrils are ingested by aquatic organisms, potentially entering the food chain.
- Carbon Footprint: The transportation of clothing from production centres to retail stores and consumers' homes generates a substantial carbon footprint.
- Slow Fashion: Slow fashion advocates for timeless, high-quality clothing that is designed to last. It promotes responsible consumption and considers the environmental and social impacts of production.
- Ethical Production: Brands are increasingly transparent about their supply chains, ensuring fair wages and safe working conditions for workers. Certification bodies like Fair Trade and GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard) help consumers identify ethical products.
- Upcycling and Recycling: Some designers and brands focus on repurposing old clothing and materials, reducing waste and environmental impact.

Sustainable Alternatives

To mitigate these consequences, it is imperative for consumers to make informed choices, for the industry to adopt sustainable practices, and for policymakers to enact regulations that address these pressing issues. The future of fashion lies in a more sustainable and responsible approach that values both the environment and the well-being of all stakeholders involved.

While fast fashion may offer an enticing blend of style and savings, we must now, more than ever, acknowledge that we can't simply measure the real cost of our clothing by its price tag. Sahimaa et al. (2023) even argue that fast fashion cannot be fixed — the whole industry needs to be reconstructed to emphasise long material and product lifetimes. When consumers seek to refresh their wardrobes, they have sustainable options, including thrift shopping, up-cycling old garments, or researching environmentally-conscious brands.

In response to the negative impacts of fast fashion, there has been a growing movement towards sustainable and ethical fashion practices (Pookulangara and Shephard 2013). These alternatives prioritise environmental responsibility, fair labor practices, and quality over quantity. Some key developments include:

Research on sustainable consumption has been on the rise (Ramonienè 2023). The motivations, values, and communication strategies of business owners are centred around inspiring change in consumers' behaviours, taking responsibility to demonstrate respect for stakeholders and the environment, adopting a deliberate and unhurried approach in all aspects from design to shipping, and fostering a conscious and well-informed community.

Papasolomou, Melanthiou and Tsamouridis (2023)'s research investigates whether consumers' knowledge about fashion sustainability falls short of translating into environmentally conscious purchasing decisions. In pursuit of encouraging more sustainable fashion consumption, they claim that providing clear information regarding the environmental and social impacts of products and eliciting strong emotional responses could be effective strategies. While many consumers claim to possess knowledge about sustainability issues, their understanding tends to be incomplete, particularly regarding aspects tied to the sustainable supply chain, such as fabric, materials, recycling, or reusing fashion items. Furthermore, women display greater knowledge in this area, while men

exhibit a willingness to pay a premium for fast fashion brands that align with their moral values. Abbate, Centobelli and Cerchione (2023) have looked at how fashion companies are adapting their value chains to address the increasing demands from stakeholders for sustainability and a circular economy approach. They reveal that customer demand for transparent supply chains and the preference for certified suppliers play a significant role in influencing how apparel companies develop their business models. These factors compel companies to undergo a profound transformation in their value proposition, creation, and delivery. Such innovations in circular business models and emerging digital technologies empower apparel businesses to manage stakeholder engagement and promote sustainable development. For example the connection between social networks and consumption has undergone a transformation (García Calaza, Casal and Corbacho Valencia 2023). Initially, social networks encouraged fast fashion, but now they advocate for the idea of slow fashion. Consequently, this shift has given rise to the emergence of reselling applications that employ similar tools as social networks. There are two distinct approaches to luxury in the second-hand clothing market. The first is a considered luxury, referred to as "deliberate luxury," which emphasizes reflection and seeks attributes like creativity, exclusivity, and reuse. The second is an automated luxury, termed "iconic luxury," which involves post-commercial items, authenticity, and resale.

Thus Pop, Hlédik and Dabija (2023) have studied how the utilitarian, hedonic, and social attributes of mobile apps impact consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions within the context of fast fashion mobile apps. Among their many uses, applications play a crucial role in enhancing consumers' shopping experiences by aiding in the decision-making process. They found that hedonic motivations wield a more substantial influence on consumers' attitudes compared to utilitarian motivations. Furthermore, attitudes play multiple mediation roles, and the disruptions in shopping behaviour triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic

moderate the relationship between attitude and purchase intention. Such findings hold significant implications for fashion retailers seeking to optimise their mobile applications and enhance the overall consumer experience.

In recent years, the fashion and textile industries have faced mounting pressure to align with customer expectations. Previous research has often indicated that female consumers tend to be more active in clothing purchases and display a greater interest in fashion. However, studies investigating consumer attitudes toward sustainable fast fashion consumption have primarily overlooked the perspective of female consumers. Additionally, they have not delved into the impact of sustainable business strategies on consumer purchasing behaviour. To address this gap, Hageman et al. (2023) have focused on the purchasing behaviours of female consumers in response to the sustainable business strategies implemented by fast fashion firms. They found that female consumers exhibit a significant degree of sustainability consciousness, and are well-informed about the sustainable initiatives undertaken by fast fashion companies. Furthermore, sustainable initiatives exert an (often unconscious) influence on the attitudes and purchasing behaviour of female consumers. Consequently, it is imperative for fast fashion companies to conduct a thorough examination of how their sustainability efforts and strategies shape the attitudes and purchasing behaviour of female consumers.

Alptekinoglu et al. (2023) have observed that as consumers become more involved in the customisation process, their perception of the degree of customisation increases. This shift occurs as customer involvement moves upstream from Use to Assembly, Fabrication, and finally, Design. The anticipated lifespan of products and customers' willingness to pay both increase significantly when customer involvement is shifted upstream to the Design stage. Therefore mass customisation, particularly when focused on the Design stage, may offer a potential solution to mitigate the negative impacts of fast fashion on the

environment. This approach not only aligns with sustainability goals but also presents a win-win opportunity for both the environment and businesses, provided it does not come with significant cost disadvantages.

CONCLUSION

Fast fashion has transformed the clothing industry, making fashion more accessible to a wider range of consumers. Consumer demand has played a pivotal role in the rapid growth of the fast fashion industry, making it a significant challenge for governments aiming to promote a green economy and achieve sustainable development goals. Consumers' engagement in fast fashion consumption is strongly influenced by social motives. Despite being aware of the inherent characteristics of fashion items, which often include fading and a short lifecycle that encourages frequent purchases, resulting in waste and overconsumption, social media and societal factors motivate consumers toward impulsive buying behaviours concerning fast fashion products (Rosely and Syed Ali 2023).

However, its rapid production cycles, disposable culture, and environmental and ethical consequences raise important concerns. As consumers become more conscious of these issues, there is a growing movement toward sustainable and ethical alternatives that prioritise the well-being of people and the planet over fleeting trends. To address the environmental and social challenges posed by fast fashion, it is crucial for consumers, brands, and policymakers to continue supporting and implementing sustainable and ethical practices within the fashion industry.

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