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FAST FASHION AT THE COST OF ENVIRONMENT: WITH RELATION TO INTERNATIONAL LAWS

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ABSTRACT

Textile industry is a unique industry where the designer wants to touch the emotions of the human – the ultimate user. Significantly, Fast fashion brands promote and breed the longing for something trendy which has a negative impact on the environment. In response to meet the fast-shifting consumer needs, clothing ends up in large amount of landfill and contaminated water in the long run. It also contributes to a large range of potential hazards to its workers, the surrounding communities, and the environment. As consumers go ahead on organic products whenever possible over the artificially derived commodities, it is also essential for them to understand the chemical nature of the fabrics and its impact on the environment. While consumers can be exposed to hazardous chemicals in textiles through skin contact, inhalation or unintentional ingestion of dust released from the materials. In this paper, we posit that each stage of the fast fashion supply chain has created a global environmental justice quandary. Fashion industry should focus on producing textile end products in a non-toxic, ethical, and sustainable manner. In this era, humans are no longer just affected by weather cycles and affecting natural seasons and climatic cycles they are also suffering from the consequences of unfeasible fashion. We discuss the role of industry, policymakers, consumers, and scientists in promoting sustainable production and ethical consumption in an equitable manner.

Keyword: Fast-Fashion, Sustainability, Environment, Industry and Consumers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the textile industry is estimated at about 3 trillion dollars and the global revenue of the apparel market was calculated to amount to 1.53 trillion U.S. dollars in 2022. The projected growth of the fashion industry is guesstimated to expand by an additional 40% with the global fashion resale market is set to grow 127% by 2026. A few decades ago, the fashion brands show up with new collection every season like summer and winter which is not more than 2-4 collection a year. But the fashion brands presently come up with 52 micro- collections in a year and that is new collection every week to keep with the latest trend making our previously owned clothing outdated and unfashionable.

This business model in the clothing industry is termed as *fast fashion*.

Latest statistics reveal that nearly 100 billion pieces of clothing are manufactured every year, almost 400% increase more than 20 years ago and 90 million tonnes end up in landfills. To put things in perspective, this means that the equivalent of a truck full of clothes ends up on landfill every second. This practice of excessive production turns out to have a humongous impact in the environment concerning chemicals used in manufacturing resulting in contaminating water streams and emission of greenhouse gases.



II. FAST FASHION

Fast fashion is a profitable business model dominating the fashion industry with the idea of inexpensive high street fashion, widely available of-the-moment in large quantities sold at cheap prices focusing less on durable construction and more on affordable prices and trendy styles.

Luxury or legacy brands such as Yves Saint Laurent, Dolce & Gabbana, Valentino, Versace etc put collections in a few seasonal releases as they work on every sector in the process of making a garment from Design, Sourcing, Manufacturing and Distributing which as a whole may take 14-21 months for a piece of clothing to reach the light of the world. This fast fashion brands are series of chain retailers who can produce knockoffs replicating runways of the luxury brands quickly at competitive prices and put in the supply chain to reach the consumer domain at light speed, creating enormous negative effect to the ecosystem.

The fast fashion business model capitalises on this ability and shortens the trend cycles with the intent to promote consumers to buy a greater number of clothing in order to keep up with the fashion trends. It is all about making trendy disposable clothes quickly at cheap prices, as these clothes are intended to look luxurious and not to last long in the wardrobe ultimately end up in landfills.

III. ENVIRONMENT PERSPECTIVE:

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the fashion industry is the second-largest consumer of water and is responsible for about 10% of global carbon footprint that is more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined.¹ Along with textile dyeing is the second largest polluter in the world after the oil industry and a major source of microplastic pollution in the ocean.

One of the most dangerous aspects of manufacturing clothing is the chemicals and

the textiles we use daily is produced in harmful manner from cultivation to disposal. The supreme materials utilized by the fast fashion industry is commonly polyester, Viscose, Rayon and vaguely cotton. Cotton takes up 2700 gallons of water and huge amount of chemicals to produce one T-shirt. Water is also need at every stage of the manufacturing garments to dilute chemicals like dyes, bleaches, brighteners, softeners, stiffeners and detergents to infuse, wash and rinse out the chemicals for the further step in the process and releases destructive pollutants which may affect the nature including the human beings. And experts say that polyester fabrics can shade immense microplastics fibres every wash eventually end up in the ocean.

Annually 92 million tonnes of textile waste are created by the industry and Landfills is where the worlds unwanted fashion end up, the fabric that finds their way into landfills are usually polyester and synthetic which takes several decades to decompose. In an average of clothing manufactured and sold every year, more than 85% of the clothes end up in landfills or burned and only 12% of the materials are being recycled. With reference to the Supreme court judgement in the case of *Tirupur Dyeing Factory Owners Association v. Noyyal River Ayacutdars Protection Association and Others*,² Noyyal River Ayacutdars Protection Association contended that the factory has discharged chemically infuse effluents into the Noyyal River and has polluted the river, along with surrounding streams and channels, to the extent that the water was too polluted for human contact and was no longer capable of being used for irrigation and other such purposes. The supreme court held that the factory owner is liable, referred two intrinsic principles to municipal environmental law and policies – the polluter pays principle and the precautionary principle. The onus of cleaning up the river and the effects of its waste disposal was imposed on the factory, in addition to

¹ Nowhereandeverywhere.co <https://nowhereandeverywhere.co/learn/the-total-greenhouse-gas-emissions-from-textiles-production-are-more-than-all-international-flights-and-maritime-shipping-combined/>

² Tirupur Dyeing Factory Owners Association v. Noyyal River Ayacutdars Protection Association and Others, (2009) 9 SCC 737

which they also had to compensate those aggrieved by the polluted water.

The fast fashion industry employs on an average of 75 million factory workers worldwide and it is estimated that less than 2% of them make a living wage. To cope up the micro-trend cycles, companies engage in unethical labour practice to produce clothing at low-cost. To look at the supply chain of the fashion brands a typical life of garments starts in the industry located in China, India, or Bangladesh to avoid opening them up to enormous legal liability. These companies have come under fire for exploiting workers from child labour to forcing labour to handle hazardous chemicals and being underpaid for long hours. On April 24, 2013 the worst garment factory accident in history, the collapse of Bangladesh's *Rana Plaza garment factory* in which more than 1,100 people lost their lives also reminded the conditions in which clothes around the world are manufactured.

IV. GLOBAL ADVANCEMENTS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY:

Admitting the fact that the textile industries use wide variety of chemicals in its process of making garments and further such chemicals remain in the garments which gets absorbed when it comes to contact with the human skin causing harm to the body. Textiles also contributes a wide range of potential damage to its workers and the surrounding communities. So, it is essential to understand the chemical nature and its impacts on the environment and try to restrict the use of such chemicals. REACH³ (stands for Regulation, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals) is a regulation of the European Union, adopted to improve the protection of human health and the environment from the risks that can be posed by the chemicals. Cotton 2040 is a platform with the main aim to accelerate progress and maximise the impact of sustainable cotton

initiatives to bring everyone across the value chain.

New York Fashion Sustainability and Social Responsibility Act⁴ will be the First US law to regulate the fashion industries to place sustainability requirements. If passed, then the companies will require to disclose environmental and social policies, processes, and outcome, with transparent supply chain mapping and Supply and Environmental Report to identify, prevent and account for potential adverse impacts.

Ethical Fashion Initiative⁵ is a flagship programme of the International Trade centre that creates and strengths enterprises in the developing economies to connect international fashions brands with talented micro-producers. This initiative contributes to the sustainable fashion industry by connecting the marginalised communities to the international market by development of social enterprise hubs, implementing ethical standards according to the EFI Code of Conduct to define fair and decent working conditions and payment of a living wage. The Sustainable Fashion Alliance was established in 2009 to lay the groundwork for the global manufacturers, the UN commits to changing the path of fashion, reducing its negative environmental and social impacts and to contribute to the sustainable Development Goals. The main objective of the alliance is to promote active collaboration, Knowledge sharing, Strengthening Synergies and achieve outreach and advocacy. They also created HIGG Index which allows the companies to self-assess and measure the rate of environmental and social sustainability throughout the supply chain. The Swedish fashion council in 2019 decided to cancel Stockholm Fashion Week to address the

³ ECHA (European Chemical Agency)- Understanding REACH <https://echa.europa.eu/regulations/reach/understanding-reach>

⁴ The NATIONAL LAW REVIEW- New York Fashion Sustainability Act: Now in committee (posted on Friday, April 29, 2022)

⁵ UN alliance for sustainable fashion- <https://unfashionalliance.org/members/itc-efi/>

environmental concerns and to concentrate on attaining sustainable development goals.⁶

India's approach towards sustainable fashion—SU.RE stands for “Sustainable Resolution”— a firm commitment from the industry to move towards fashion that contributes to a clean environment. In 2019, the Ministry of Textiles launched Project SU.RE, along with clothing Manufacturers Association of India (CMAI), United Nations of India and IMG Reliance to set a sustainable pathway for the Indian Fashion Industry. The main objective of the project is to understand the environmental impact of the current production and business model, to develop a sustainable policy and to communicate our sustainability initiatives effectively to consumers. Through these actions, it helps in making supply chain sustainable chain by 2025, contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030, especially SDG 12 for responsible consumption and production.⁷

In the attempt to be more sustainable, high fashion brands have incorporated recycled plastics into their clothes. In respect to that Prime Minister Narendra Modi turned up to the Budget session with the garment made from recycled plastic bottles throwing light on sustainable fashion which was designed to him by the Indian Oil Corporation presented during India Energy Week in Bengaluru. Plastic pollution is one of the biggest problems as plastic account for 85 per cent of all marine litter. This being the solution for two problems, clothes from recycled plastic are a step forward towards a greener and healthier environment.

V. COPERNI ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY

Coperni is a Parisian fashion brand well-known for its minimalist aesthetic, found by Sebastien Meyer and Arnaud Vaillant in the year 2013. This

luxury fashion brand won the Paris Fashion Week with its collections for the spring summer 2023 and the huge moment which made this collection viral was the spray-on dress worn by Bella Hadid using a liquid textile⁸. She was sprayed on live using spray-on fabric technology which combines natural and synthetic fibres suspended in a polymer solution creating an instant fabric which was further styled to showcase the technology. Manel Torres, scientist, and a fashion designer who created the spray-on material and the company Fabrican, in 2003, says that it can be washed and re-worn or diluted to put back in the can and resprayed later. The spray-on dress created buzz not only about material innovation but also about Fashion's priorities overall than any of the actual material alternative and other sustainable initiatives that many luxury brands are experimenting with.

VI. FAST FASHION GIANTS GREENWASHING:

Fast fashion companies like Zara and H&M being aware of the complication in their fabrics, supply chain and drawbacks of excessive production, together with consumer concerns about the environment, creates sustainability profiles to greenwash consumers about their brands and selling their products as “green.” The materials used in the garments are usually polyester which is produced through petroleum and the process uses lot of energy and release Carbon, further chemicals and acids are also released in the water supply.

Zara's Join life tag on the subject matter of transparent labelling as showcased in the website are stamped by the Forest Stewardship Council⁹ is only referring to the tag and not the whole piece of clothing misleading the consumers. H&M recycling Bins are promoted to recycle the old clothing donated by their customers but only less 10% of it is recycled and the other 90% are trashed, incinerated or

⁶ SWEDEN SCRAPES STOCKHOLM FASHION WEEK DUE TO ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS- (03-07-2019) - <https://www.euronews.com/green/2019/07/03/sweden-scraps-stockholm-fashion-week-due-to-environmental-concerns>

⁷ Union Textiles Minister launches Project SURE on Sustainable Fashion Day at Lakmé Fashion Week posted on: 22 AUG 2019 by PIB Mumbai - <https://pib.gov.in/pressreleasepage.aspx?prid=1582685>

⁸ Bella Hadid Has Her Futuristic Coperni Slip Dress Spray-Painted on Live on the Runway by Alex Kessler (posted on 30 September, 2022) <https://www.vogue.com/article/bella-hadid-spray-dress-coperni>

⁹ Forest stewardship council https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest_Stewardship_Council

burned. This way the brand tends to look “green” and availing discount for you to shop more. Terms like ecological- grown, Green, ethical, responsibly-made and conscious are used to paint a favourable picture about the brand. The Statistics in use and production are often misinterpreted and confusing for the customer. These companies promote eco-friendly fast fashion and has collections that claim to reduce the environmental impacts in the process of dress making and are also operating to make their entire wardrobe sustainable, trying to use ambiguity to sell feeling of responsibility to the customer.

VII. DUTY OF CONSUMERS:

According to the demography, Although the great majority are well aware of environmental concerns only about 15% of the consumers are concerned and enlighten of sustainability. Despite the environmental concerns only a few are willing to spend extra on sustainable fashion whereas the vast majority would prefer sustainable products only if it is at the price of fast fashion commodities. As Fast fashion led way to excessive consumerism, throwaway culture making disposable commodities, the consumers must make conscious choices on appropriate kind and amount of clothing purchased by them. To put in perspective, just by wearing clothes for 9 months longer can reduce the carbon footprint of that garment by 30% and by purchasing used or second-hand products instead of new garments can save six pounds of carbon emission equivalent on removing half a million cars off the road for a year. So, consumer instead can opt for purchasing durable clothes, supporting independent designer, shopping at thrift stores and reuse, recycle and upcycling the old garments.

VIII. CONCLUSION:

The fashion industry has been growing exponentially over the last 20 years and fast fashion is the major contributor despite many crises. It should be considered as a global environmental issue due to the impacts it has

on the environment and the amount of social injustice, violations and negligence in the part of producers, retailers, consumers and the supply chain as whole. On a consumer level, they should be aware of “Greenwashing” and weigh up the corporate claims on environmental performance as it could be misleading creating positive beliefs on the companies’ sustainable practice and products¹⁰. Sustainability can be achieved by global cooperation in terms of regulation of resource, transparency in supply chain and restriction of chemicals. A unified green policy must be codified and implemented by analysing the effects and benefits to motivate the manufacturer to produce sustainable products. Consumer behaviour and perspective about fashion has the significant influence, Fashion is expressing one’s individuality in unique way and clothes are bought for social validation and repeating clothes are assumed to depreciate the value of individuals. Responsible consumerism, ethical production, trade policies and global cooperation can help in the fashion industry to the advancement of environmental justice.

¹⁰ The means and end of greenwashing by Lyon Thomas and Wren Montgomery <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1086026615575332>