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FASHION FOR A GREENER FUTURE: THE TRUTH BEHIND FAST FASHION'S DARK SIDE

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Abstract: Fashion often associated with creativity and self-expression, yet behind the glossy magazine covers and trendy outfits, a hidden world thrives, one of extreme water use, mountains of discarded clothes, and invisible hands working in unsafe conditions. This article reveals the shocking truth behind the rapid clothing production system of "fast fashion" and its real consequences and invites readers to reconsider what lies behind everyday fashion choices.

Key words: fashion industry, clothing production, environmental impact, labor conditions, recycling, circular fashion.

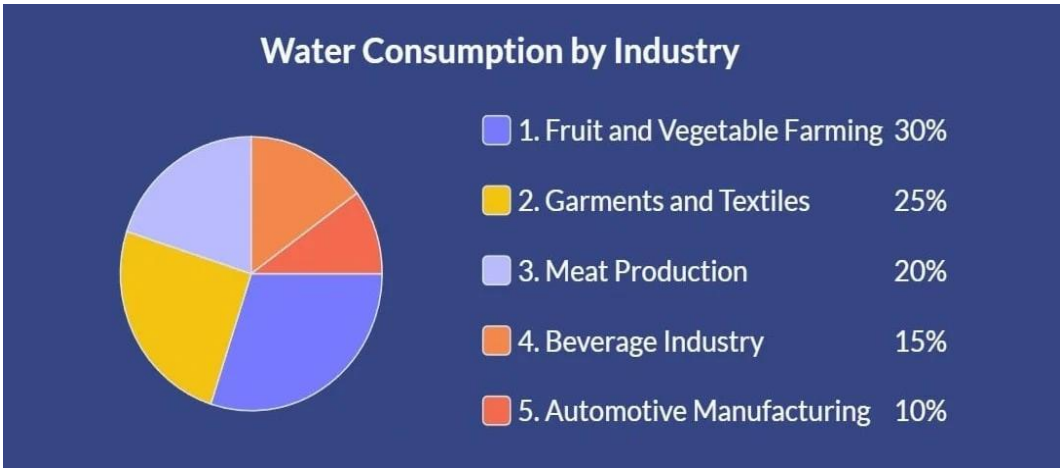
Аннотация: Мода часто ассоциируется с креативностью и самовыражением, однако за глянцевыми журналами и модными нарядами скрывается другой мир - мир чрезмерного потребления воды, горы выброшенной одежды и невидимых рук, трудящихся в небезопасных условиях. Эта статья раскрывает шокирующую правду о системе быстрого производства одежды «fast fashion» и её реальных последствиях, побуждая читателей переосмыслить, что скрывается за повседневным выбором моды.

Ключевые слова: индустрия моды, производство одежды, влияние на окружающую среду, условия труда, переработка, круговая мода.

Introduction. Fashion is commonly viewed as a source of pleasure and enjoyment. The process of choosing, purchasing and wearing clothes allows people to express identity and satisfy their needs for comfort and self-expression. Specifically, wardrobes remind museums of hopes and memories; because people often buy clothes that they do not really need and then throw them away without a second thought. And this is exactly what fast fashion is, that all about overconsumption. It refers to the quick and cheap production of clothing designs from the fashion shows to retail stores to keep up with the latest trends. However, due to the rapid production, the quality is always not very good. That is why, the clothes, which made from fast fashion, are worn mainly because they are stylish, with its affordable price but after some time they are usually thrown away.

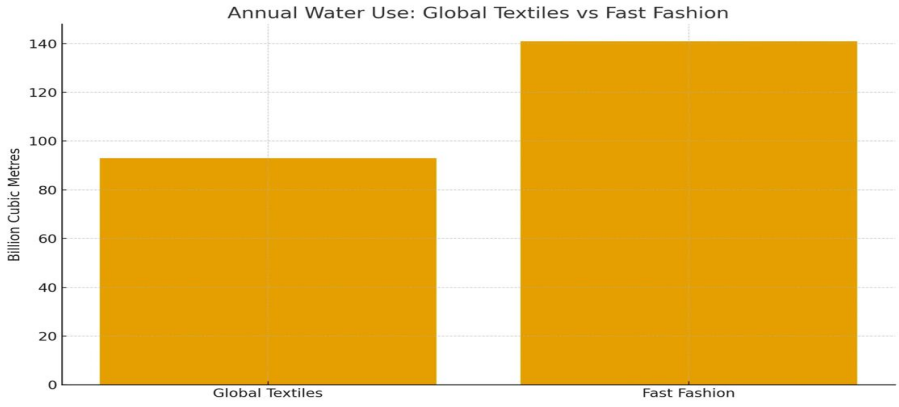
Fast fashion began in the 1950-1960s, when designers like André Courrèges introduced new styles which were quickly copied by mass market brands. In 1980, fast fashion became more influential due to the growth of mass media and fashion magazines and they increased demand for affordable and trendy clothing. In the 1990s, that is when fast fashion started and the brand Zara, which is founded by Amancio Ortega, changed the whole fashion industry by producing new styles very fast, sometimes every 14 days. On 31st December, 1989, the term fast fashion used by a magazine New York Times to describe this quick production cycle that could allow clothes to reach the shops in about two weeks.
Late 2010-2020s, this is when fast fashion became even faster. Online shops, such as SHEIN, ASOS and Boohoo popularized ultra-fast fashion, by releasing 52 micro-seasons per year. They produced about thousands of new clothing each week or sometimes even daily. As a

result, people are currently buying around 60% more clothes than they did in 2000, but only keeping them for a much shorter period. When purchasing new clothes, people rarely think about the ecological impact of producing a single piece of clothing. Therefore, the significance of the



fashion industry on the environment is a discussion worth having.

This pie chart illustrates industrial water use across 5 different sectors. It is clear from the chart that clothing and textile consumes about one-quarter of total water, making them the second-largest user after agriculture. This highlights the significant environmental effects of the fashion industry, as large quantities of water are required during production and even after the clothes reach consumers.



Water Usage In Textiles Ecommerce Statistics #19 World GDP Produced In Water-Scarce Regions

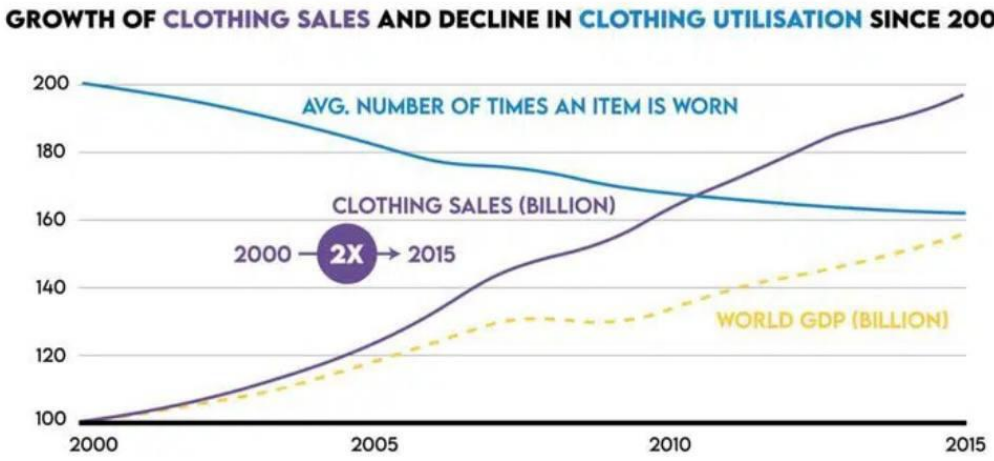
When it comes to this bar chart, it compares annual water usage between global textiles and fast fashion. At first glance, it is evident that, fast fashion sector alone uses approximately 140 billion cubic metres, compared with about over 90 billion cubic metres used by the global textiles industry as a whole. This demonstrates that fast fashion with its rapid production cycles and mass consumption, creates a greater demand on freshwater resources.

An analysis of these data reveals that the fast fashion is the second most water-intensive industry in the world. Sadly, other statistics show that about more than 2.5 billion people currently experience water scarcity. This bar graph describes the water usage for producing a jeans and T-shirt. As shown in the chart, it takes more than 700 gallons of water, in liters, it will be approximately 2,700 liters, used to produce an average cotton T-shirt. In fact, that is enough

drinking water for one person for around **900 days**, which is almost **2.5 years.** In comparison, producing a pair of jeans uses far more water than a cotton shirt, with 2000 gallons of water, this equals roughly 7,600 liters. To understand the scale, let's see how long this amount of water could meet one's drinking meets and calculate it step by step. First of all, assume average daily water consumption per person. It is approximately 2 liters. Then, divide the total liters by daily consumption to find the number of days. Lastly, convert days into years by dividing by 365. Overall, one person could drink such gallons of water over about 10 years.

Method. This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design supported by secondary quantitative data analysis. Data were collected from credible international sources, including reports published by McKinsey & Company, the European Parliamentary Research Service, Earth.org, and sustainability-oriented organizations. Statistical data related to water consumption, clothing production volumes, and textile waste was analyzed using comparative analysis and visual data interpretation methods. Information concerning labor conditions was examined through documented case studies, international labor reports, and policy briefs. Content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes related to environmental degradation and labor exploitation. This methodological approach ensures reliability by relying on verified secondary data sources widely used in sustainability research. How can such amount of water possible used for producing clothes? It may seem surprising, but most garments are made from cotton, which explains and answers this question. Cotton requires the most water compared to other crops. Moreover, to produce just one kilogram of raw cotton needs an astonishing 7,000-29,000 liters of

water. Then, to make clothing, raw cotton must first be **spun** into thread, **dyed** to add color, and **finished** to improve texture or appearance. These all processes not only need a huge amount of water but also pollute it, causing environmental harm, creating unsafe working conditions for factory workers and putting health risks for people who are living nearby places. Despite all these, every year approximately 92 million tons of **clothes-related waste** are discarded, which is equivalent to a garbage truck full of clothes and they all are thrown away, either burned or



dumped in a landfill in every second. This means that such amount of waste is enough to fill one and a half Empire State Buildings every day.

This data is further reinforced by the given line graph, and it can be seen that while clothing sales have increased twofold since 2000, from 100 to 200 billion items, the average number of times a clothes is worn decreased from 200 to just over 160. This indicates that clothing consumption is rising faster than its actual use. As a consequence, the fashion industry generates massive amounts of waste.

In addition to environmental impacts, for producing garments, the most crucial element is the labor process itself. However, garment workers or simply we called them as “dressmakers” are often underestimated and criticized, as if sewing were an ordinary and low-value job. In reality, very few people truly understand their efforts, skills and harsh conditions behind this process. Many company owners say that „for these workers, it is better than nothing”, „at least we give them a job!”. On the one hand, they might be right, but is that really fair? Admittedly, they exploit people’s suffering and take advantage of poor populations who have no other options but have to work for any salary and any working conditions. Even the European Parliament is using the term “slave labor” to describe the current working conditions of garment workers in Asia. Here the word slavery doesn’t mean literally being a slave, but highlights extremely harsh circumstances for low pays, with long hours and lack of choice. In other words, those workers are trapped in work that they cannot refuse which resembles slavery.

Result. After understanding their situation, garment workers’ extremely low salaries are a central example of how they are exploited. Many fashion brands claim that the workers who produce clothes earn at least a minimum salary that required by law. By contrast, the reality shows that many other brands do not even pay the legally required minimum wage! Generally, any worker, regardless of profession, should be able to afford and fulfill its basic needs, including food, rent, healthcare, education, clothing, transportation and other savings. And that is

called a "living wage". However, in most of the manufacturing countries, such as **Bangladesh**, **India**, and **China**, the minimum salary ranges between half to a fifth of the living wage. It means that if a 'living expenses' is $100, workers earn between just $50 and $20. The most infamous example of this situation is taking place in **Myanmar**, where most textile workers earn only $5 a day, which is far too low for living. Similarly, in **Bangladesh**, the minimum salary is around $90 per month. Trade unions assume these numbers should be doubled, but employers refuse, because they say that they cannot afford it.

In addition to law wage, textile workers often face long working hours and harsh conditions. They regularly face both verbal and physical abuse. Workers in textile factories are often forced to work about 14 to 16 hours a day without day off, which means 7 days a week. During the peak season, they have to work extremely long hours, sometimes staying at the factory until 2 or 3 am to meet a deadline. If they fail to meet production targets, they are denied breaks, have penalties or not even allowed to drink water. While working, talking and using mobile phones are prohibited. Besides that, they can be fired if they refused to work overtime, or in some cases, despite working such long hours, they are not even paid at all.

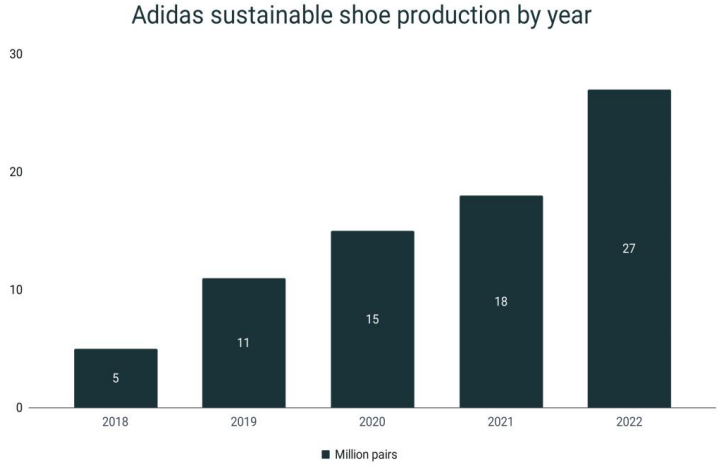
Last but not least, fast fashion is dominant of using pesticides and chemical materials, and these poor safety standards can put workers' health at risk. They usually work in unsafe buildings with no ventilation, breathing in toxic chemicals and inhaling fiber particles. Due to these conditions, their likelihood of living past the age of 50 is only 50%, which is over 20 years less than average life expectancy. These problems mostly occur and have been recorded in Bangladesh and India. The Rana Plaza collapse is a tragic example of such unsafe conditions in the fashion industry. Over 1000 garment workers lost their life and approximately 2500 were injured in the collapse of a textile factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013. Farah Kabir, Country Director at Action Aid Bangladesh, said: „Many of the survivors from the Rana Plaza collapse are still struggling mentally and physically. It's very concerning to see that more than half have not been able to find economic opportunities to move on. They desperately need support to find alternative livelihoods and the opportunity to live a decent life". This statement highlights the long-term human cost of the fashion industry. Even years after this disaster continue to affect workers. Therefore, this tragedy emphasizing the urgent need for fair labor treatment, safe working conditions, and sustainable livelihoods in the fashion industry. Meanwhile, in the same year, around 115 people were killed in a fire at the Bangladeshi firm Tazreen Fashions. Unfortunately, these were not isolated incidents. In April 2005, a nine-story garment factory, known as Spectrum Sweater factory in Savar, suddenly collapsed while workers were on the night shift. Actually, this building was constructed illegally with poor materials and extra floors. Because of this weak structure, over a half of Bangladeshi workers were killed and many others were injured. In fact, there have been similar disasters in India and Pakistan as well.

Discussion. The findings demonstrate that fast fashion operates within an unsustainable production–consumption paradigm that prioritizes speed and profitability over environmental protection and human welfare. Excessive water consumption contributes to water scarcity in regions already experiencing limited freshwater availability, exacerbating existing ecological challenges. As awareness of fast fashion industry's huge waste grows, new initiatives and efforts aim to reduce it. Circular economy and its role in fashion industry is crucial and can be one of a solution. To understand circular fashion, it is first important to understand the concept of a circular economy. It is a way of using resources wisely and creating less waste. Unlike the traditional "take, make, throw away" model where the things are used once and discarded.

According to Fashion for Goods Future of Circular Fashion Report, most brands still follow these wasteful models. Moreover, a circular economy encourages reusing and recycling materials while designing products to last. When it comes to new concept of circular fashion, this idea is introduced at the event in Stockholm, by sustainability expert Anna Brismar in 2014. She proposed a new way of thinking about clothing, where garments are not just worn or thrown away, but are repaired, resold, recycled into something new. Later, the idea spread like wildfire with two popular concepts: sustainable development and circular economy. As statistics shown that only 12.5% of the fashion industry has committed to circularity, including some major brands, such as, Nike(Adidas), H&M, Burberry, Gap, and Stella McCartney. They support sustainable fashion by creating the Make Fashion Circular initiative.

After understanding what circular fashion is, it is necessary to know how this system works. It teaches that fashion does not just start and end, but it evolves, sustains itself. So, circular fashion ecosystem has overall 3 stages and the first phase includes the supply chain, where it all begins. The journey of clothes starts with materials, but instead of using harmful fabrics, circular fashion priorities natural, renewable and recyclable materials. This is because, if people choose materials wisely, they can stop waste before it even begins. The next step involves the brand. Currently most clothes designed for fast fashion that is cheap and disposable, yet trendy. However in the circular system, brands create clothes that are made to last, so nothing ever goes to waste! And final stage is the community or a second life for clothes. In fact, this is the fun part, because instead of throwing away clothes, people can keep them in motion. And the question is how? The answer is simple, by swapping with friends, renting instead of buying, up-cycling an old piece into something new with a sprinkle of creativity or buying second-hand shopping.
Recycling waste into fashion products is a crucial and fun innovation toward reducing the environmental impact of fast fashion. Brand Adidas, for example, has developed shoes made from plastic waste collected from oceans and coastal areas. By turning marine plastic into trendy footwear, this brand not only solves the rising problem of ocean waste but also demonstrates how major fashion companies can support sustainability and promote circular production practices.

According to the statistics of Adidas ocean plastic shoes, sustainable footwear production has considerably expanded in recent years through its collaboration with Parley for the Oceans. As it is clear from the chart that in 2018, the company produced just 5 million pairs of shoes made from recycled ocean plastics. This number surprisingly doubled in 2019 and production

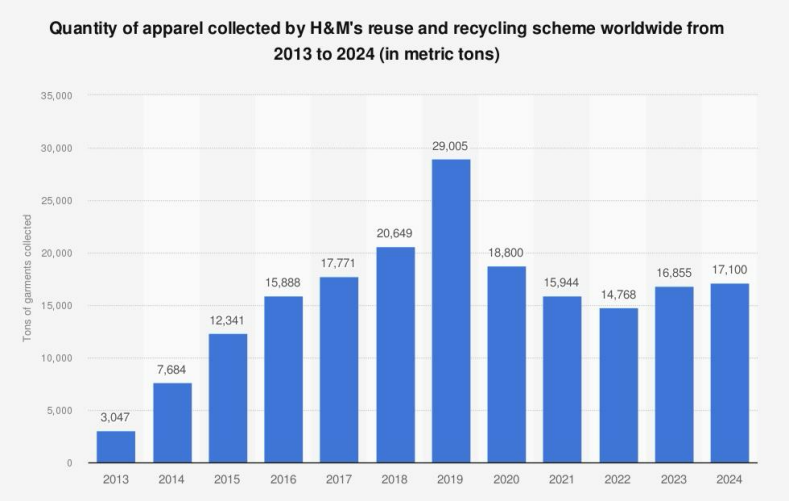


continued to rise, reaching about 27 million pairs in 2022. These figures highlight Adidas's growing dedication to sustainable innovation and environmental action.

Beyond creative footwear innovation, another effective initiative is H&M's Garment Collection Program. By accepting used clothing in any condition, this program aims to address the fact that 95% of discarded garments could be recycled or reused. H&M's Garment Collection Program uses digital technology, specifically the smart recycling bins with screens, which developed by Ombori in partnership with Microsoft and ITAB. It informs customers about the weight of the clothes that they have donated and explains how their contributions support H&M's initiative to plant one tree for every about 22 kg of clothing collected. Customers also get QR code on the screen and they can scan it to learn more about the tree-planting program. Fun fact that the screens also show up-to-date data about how many kilograms of clothes that have been recycled in each city and how many trees are planted because of these donations. Shortly, this program actively encourages and engages customers to participate such sustainable fashion practices repeatedly.

This chart clearly explains the amount of clothing collected by H&M's recycling program worldwide from 2013 to 2024. It is noticeable that there is an upward trend in the early years, until it marks the peak of the program's performance in 2019. However, in the next 3 years, there is a significant drop, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected retail activity and shopping habits. Interestingly, from 2023 onwards, trend shows a gradual recovery and even though these figures remain below the 2019 peak, they highlight renewed engagement with great efforts.

Last but not least, for shoppers who love both online and in-store experiences, virtual dressing offers a fun and interactive solution. Traditionally, the only way to know if a garment fits is try it on, but clothes often look different on models or store mannequins. Virtual dressing solves this problem. 3D body scanning technology allows people to see how clothes will fit on



them and it directly saves time, eliminates guesswork's and reduces return and waste. For example**, Farfetch on Snapchat** uses virtual dressing solves this to provide an interactive and personalized shopping experience to its shoppers, making the process both convenient and environmentally friendly.

Conclusion. To sum up, while fashion continues to serve as a powerful form of self-expression, the fast fashion has created a system of excessive consumption beyond sustainable limits. The evidence presented illustrates that environmental degradation and human suffering are deeply

integrated into today's fashion industry. Encouragingly, emerging circular practices and sustainable technologies provide hope for meaningful change. By rethinking how clothes are designed, produced and consumed, fashion can advance into a system that cares and respects both the planet and people.

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