

Ethics of the Fast Fashion Industry as it Relates to Climate Change

The term fast fashion is a contemporary term used by the fashion industry to categorize retailers that quickly and cheaply produce and sell trends that were originally seen on the catwalk. Fast fashion, or the fashion industry more generally, has been noted a major contributor to climate change, even more so than air and sea travel. It is also detrimental to the environment and well-being of people in a multitude of ways. It utilizes a system that exploits workers, swindles consumers, and hurts the environment. However, despite all of this, the 2.4 trillion-a-year fast fashion industry is a powerhouse. Millions of people consistently buy their products, many still knowing the negative impacts it has. It has value and plays an integral role in our capitalist society. Majority of the population also do not have access to ethically-sourced and ethically-made clothing of high quality, so fast fashion is their only option. And for better or for worse, it is a global industry. Consumers and manufacturers often reside in different nations, making international relationships an integral part of its success. Garment factories are also commonly located in poorer nations, and those communities rely on our mass consumerism to make a living. It also makes up a decent portion of our economy in America. Although fast fashion is detrimental to the earth and our well-being, it is difficult to imagine our world functioning without it.

In this paper I will outline the main arguments for ecojustice among the parties involved in the fast fashion realm utilizing principles concerning the allocation of responsibility for climate damage. I will also discuss the arguments supporting the existence of fast fashion and its significant role in society. Finally, I will detail my own position that supports the arguments against fast fashion and offer a solution for the allocation of responsibilities that is most ethical in my view.

The problem of fast fashion is still pervasive because the current systems battling the negative effects of fast fashion are not sufficient. Although donations to charity, recycling garments, and producing the garments in a more sustainable way are actions done with good moral intentions, the problem lies with producing the garments in the first place. The companies that produce these cheaply made clothes have moral obligations to their workers, consumers, and the environment. However, although fast fashion companies benefit from environmental wrongdoing and their factories are the ones contributing to pollution and climate change, consumers fall in the web of relationships that sustain the fast fashion industry and should carry some responsibility to tackle this issue. Additionally, I believe the American government should be reforming climate policy as it relates to fashion considering its immense effect on their communities' well-being and its contribution to the global issue of climate change. All nations should be actively participating in tackling climate change, especially those that are major contributors to the problem and have the resources to do it. Therefore, I believe it is most ethical and feasible to distribute the responsibility to all parties (fast fashion companies, manufacturers, consumers, and the government), but with more weight put on those that have the resources for change (i.e. fast fashion companies and the government).

In this paper, I will be discussing various ethical principles related to climate change to determine which are appropriate for the ecojustice issues of fast fashion. The beneficiary pays principle suggests that those who have benefitted from wrong doings (or emissions in relation to climate change) should pay in proportion to their respective benefits. Those who benefit in terms of fast fashion would be the companies and consumers. While companies have more resources and finances to take on responsibilities of climate damage, making consumers pay seems impractical as many shop fast fashion because they don't have the finances to pay for more high

quality clothing. The ability to pay principle, however, addresses the ethics problem by focusing on an entity's current resources rather than who should or should not pay based on history. Those able to pay would be the companies and government, although the government has moral obligations to financially attend to other industries, not just fashion. The polluter pays principle states that those who are responsible for climate damage should pay in proportion to their contribution to the damage. In the case of fast fashion, we can define the manufacturers as the direct source of pollution. However, I think it is more fair to say that the companies assigning work to the factories are the polluters, as the factories don't have much agency to change their polluting habits. Additionally, when considering environmental damage more broadly, consumers could also be considered polluters. They throw away their garments, contributing to the buildup of synthetic materials in landfills.¹ These three principles will be highlighted in the main arguments for who is responsible for the climate damage of the fast fashion industry.

A Washington Post article titled “The Troubling Ethics of Fashion in the Age of Climate Change” by Robin Givhan states the facts about the environmental damage this industry has caused, and the ways in which the system can reform. The job of the fashion industry is to goad consumers into wanting and needing more. That somehow, a trendy hot pink mini skirt is something that everyone wants and something that you definitely need. Most would not consider a hot pink mini skirt a wardrobe necessity, but in the age of influencers and social media, it is surprising at just how many wild fashion trends can spread like wildfire, leading consumers to believe that they'll be happier with a certain piece of clothing. The reason the masses can keep up with the trends is mainly due to fast fashion. These companies essentially copy designs from the runway and produce them quickly and for cheap in primarily poor nations where any kind of

¹ See Roser and Seidel for more in-depth descriptions of each principle as well as a couple other principles not outlined in this paper.

work, even work with low wages and in inhumane conditions, is readily taken up by citizens who need it to survive. These companies are therefore able to pump out new styles as quickly as every two weeks, and sell them at much lower prices than their designer counterparts, appealing to those with a smaller budget, or even those with the budget but don't want to spend hundreds just for a trendy piece. Many consumers now are fine with the poor quality of fast fashion clothing since it is not much of a financial investment in the first place. However, since the garments aren't made to last, the consumer ends up buying new clothes frequently, which is exactly what these fast fashion brands want. We treat clothing as though it is disposable. The Council for Textile Recycling estimates that Americans throw away 70 pounds of clothes and other textiles every year.² In this view, consumers should be held more accountable and given responsibilities for their actions. Especially since the majority of consumers are in developed nations with the resources to change their environmentally damaging habits.

Not only is fast fashion extremely wasteful, but additionally, most garments are made with inexpensive, petroleum-based synthetic fibers that don't easily decompose. This includes materials such as polyester, nylon, and acrylic, which have been filling our landfills over many years now and will continue to do so with the current fashion industry systems in place and consumer attitudes towards fashion. People are generally mindful of their use of plastic bottles and try to recycle them when they can. However, people do seem to be okay with buying garment after garment and tossing them out when they no longer want them. Even if one donates their clothes to charity or has them recycled, it does not somehow offset constantly buying new fast fashion garments. Mass clothing waste is a huge problem, but we also have to consider the other end: resource strain by manufacturing the garments themselves. An unbelievably large

² See Chen for more statistics about fast fashion's impact on the environment.

amount of water, coal, and so forth are used in the manufacturing process. There are also often byproducts of the manufacturing such as dyes and other toxins which are damaging to the environment and the health of the factory workers producing the clothes.

Givhan says that ultimately, the solution to fast fashion lies with the consumers. He writes, “the simplest, best path to sustainability is not anti-fashion, it’s anti-gorging.” Consumers can be categorized as a population that benefits from the carbon footprint fast fashion and also as polluters who constantly dispose of and purchase new garments— the beneficiary pays and polluter pays principles mentioned earlier are applied. It can also be argued that the ability to pay principle is also being applied, given that consumers have the finances and resources to make small, consistent investments into fast fashion that add up to surprisingly large numbers. Although focusing on consumption relieves responsibility from companies, manufacturers, and the government, it does incorporate three moral principles for climate justice.

Oppositions to the argument given in this article may include the significant role fast fashion plays in the economy and society. The fast fashion industry also meets the needs of lower income populations and provides an income (albeit very minimal) for the factory workers in poorer nations. Although completely ceasing fast fashion production and transitioning to “slow fashion” (made with locally grown materials, domestically manufactured or sourced on a relatively small scale) seems morally right, the effect on the workers and consumers that depend on fast fashion needs to be considered. However, if consumers stop investing in fast fashion and decreasing their annual purchasing of garments in general, they will invest that money into another industry. A noticeable cultural shift is already at play— sustainability is “in” and people are choosing more environmentally conscious and minimal lifestyles. I believe that with this cultural shift, more money will be invested in experiences, and these service industries with

better working conditions, more ethically sustainable practices, and a much smaller carbon footprint will grow.

Another opposing viewpoint is that fast fashion companies like H&M have already committed to being more ethical and sustainable by changing their company practices. For example, they are trying to enact a closed-loop system by placing bins at their stores where customers can drop off their old clothing to be recycled. However, recycling still uses a large amount of resources, especially with the low quality of the garments and the materials they are made of. It could also be argued that fast fashion companies are pushing towards the use of more organic materials rather than synthetic to be more sustainable. The problems of synthetic materials in landfills seem to be eliminated in this effort, but landfilling of non-synthetic materials emits methane, a greenhouse gas. Avoiding climate damage is therefore not as simple as switching to organic materials. Mass production, even if recycled or made ethically, is still detrimental to the environment. I believe that these companies are still aware of the environmental harm they are inflicting while elusively deeming themselves 'sustainable.' This is essentially lying to consumers, which is not ethical at all. It leads people to think they are making ethical and sustainable choices, but the reality is the opposite.

One last opposition I would like to highlight is the focus on consumers as those responsible for fast fashion's climate damage. While it is true that they are responsible, they are not solely responsible. It is easy to say that consumers could stop buying fast fashion which would then stop production and stop climate damage. But we can't forget that consumers often fall victim to our capitalist world, at no fault of their own. Companies and manufacturers also undoubtedly contribute to the climate damage, so responsibility should be given to them as well.

I align with the arguments that support reformation of the fast fashion system, but I believe this reformation should not solely be placed on the shoulders of consumers as stated in the last opposition. As said previously, putting responsibility on consumers does agree with the beneficiary pays, polluter pays, and ability to pay principles, making it a logical solution to the problem. It is also very simple and straightforward, making it more practical. However, I do not think it is ethically right to relieve companies and manufacturers of their sustainable responsibilities, as they play a major role in climate damage. They should also play a role in reform, as well as the government, since they have the agency to do so. I would like to emphasize the polluter pays principle more to account for fast fashion companies' climate damage. I think the ability to pay principle should also be highlighted and include the government as a part of the solution. While consumers are already investing in fast fashion and can therefore invest elsewhere, many make up the middle and lower-class populations who buy fast fashion because of its affordability. Companies and government definitely have more funds and resources to enact large scale reform, so it makes more ethical and practical sense to hold all parties responsible, but with an emphasis on fast fashion companies and the government.

The entire fast fashion model is environmentally damaging, but asking these giant companies to change their production to a more slow fashion model is fundamentally telling them to lose money— it's not realistic. If the government gets involved, however, action will be taken. Stricter pollution standards, further regulation of fashion production, producing higher quality clothing, and improving the working conditions and wages of factory workers should be enforced. This would ultimately mean the price for garments would increase, and improved quality would make the production time go from 'fast' to 'medium-paced.' The government

ought to be involved not only for their agency to enact large-scale change, but also because they have an obligation toward the well-being of their people.

Garment factories do not have much agency to reform, and therefore should not be expected to have many moral obligations in terms of climate damage. Although they are direct producers of pollution, they are because of the demands for production. They are also most directly impacted by the pollution they produce. The main moral responsibility they hold is to use sustainable practices and be managed with better attention to workers well-being. This of course can only be done with resources from their partner company or the government, which is why most of the responsibility should fall on these two parties.

As Givhan suggested, consumers should cut back on their consumption in general. While second-hand shopping and clothing rentals are more sustainable than fast fashion and relatively cheaper than buying high-quality clothing, not buying any clothing is even more sustainable and even more cheap! Consumers should at least be aware of where and how their clothing is made and what it's made of. This means buying from companies that actually share this information. If we support ethical fashion companies, the fashion industry will then become more ethical.

Essentially, fast fashion is a major global climate change and environmental problem that needs to be addressed. Consumers should be responsible for reforming the fashion industry considering how they benefit from the environmental damage caused by it, how they contribute to garment pollution, and their general financial ability to. However, they should not be solely responsible— consumers, fast fashion companies, manufacturers, and the government should all be involved in reform. More responsibility given to companies and the government since they have more finances and resources. Additionally, the fast fashion manufacturers in poorer nations can only make changes in their practices if their partner companies and/or the government give

them the resources to do so. As consumers, the most ethical option to stop climate damage from the fashion industry is to be naked. But considering the societal norm that we all wear clothes, other ethical options are to borrow clothes from friends and family, second-hand shop, rent clothes, and shop from companies that have ethical practices and are transparent about every step of the manufacturing process.

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