Confessions of a Contemporary Consumer: Environmental and Humanitarian Impacts of Fast Fashion

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Abstract

This paper addresses the impacts fast fashion has on the environment and people, drawing from the reality in South Asia and the Shein factory located there, while also addressing global consequences. Today’s consumer culture has incited a behavior of purchasing clothing at a rate that has never been seen before. Trends go in and out, and along with them, the clothing items that are created to fit the current styles. Fast fashion has become an environmental issue due to the amount of fabrics that are being incinerated and discarded daily that pollute the oceans and land. Additionally, it is a humanitarian issue because clothing factory workers are underpaid, must withstand dangerous conditions, and many live near factories or landfills that affect their health. Chapter 1 connects fast fashion and climate change to highlight the negative consequences it has created in the 21st century on the ecosystem and the workers of such brands. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of fashion trends and clothing manufacturing and explains how consumer culture has become unsustainable. Chapter 3 covers the environmental economics aspect of the fashion industry. Chapter 4 uses the disciplines of Political Science and Ethics through the lens of Environmental Justice Studies to identify the social issues related to this topic. Chapter 5 recommends policy changes, utilizing resources like the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution Programme (SMEP, 2019), for fashion brands and consumers to become more earth-conscious and offer better working conditions for their employees.

Keywords: fast fashion, environmental justice, environmental economics, consumer behavior, climate change, working conditions, sustainability, gender
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Introduction: Trends Wear Out
Confessions of a Shopaholic (Hogan, 2009) is a film that takes the viewer on a journey where Rebecca Bloomwood, the lead, balances her shopping addiction. It illustrates the insatiable need to be a part of every trend, to take advantage of every sale, and the devastating consequences—debt—of spending more than one can afford. The film imitates real life experiences of a shopaholic. When Black Friday comes around every year, stores are packed with clients trying to get the best deal, as is Rebecca Bloomwood. Apart from this being an enjoyable romantic comedy, by the end of the movie the audience understands that excessive shopping can lead to extreme debt and addiction, and that happiness, contrary to fashion companies’ advertising, does not lie in buying clothing. This film highlights some of the social consequences of rampant consumption, but this thesis aims to incorporate a multidisciplinary approach using sciences, economics, and humanities to grasp the global impact of consumerism.

As I study trends throughout history, I notice the versatility in fashion. Like how there are numerous types of clothes that cater to different occasions, seasons, and activities. For example, sports clothing, black-tie formal wear, casual outfits, loungewear, and countless other styles. Within each category there exist microtrends that a lot of people want to be a part of. Its seemingly harmful versatility can be dangerous in promoting overconsumption, as one day a certain shirt may be the definition of good style and the next it may be the opposite. Now more than ever in the age of technology trends that are coming in and out of fashion get more exposure and clothing can be produced at faster rates. When demand is being met and consumers can indulge in the pleasures of shopping, it can be seen as a good thing, but there are tons of hidden costs that are not clear at the time of purchase. Brands have been complicit in encouraging this excessive behavior and are depleting the earth’s resources to keep up with the demand they created. Additionally, the vast amounts of clothing being thrown away because it is “no longer in
style” or because brands made too much are not being discarded properly. Often, the people at the start of the supply chain are not recognized and, unfortunately, face a worrying amount of health concerns, hazardous working conditions, and are compensated fairly for their work.

This paper aims to address the main environmental and humanitarian impacts fast fashion has globally. Through statistical evidence, analysis, current initiatives, and a personal account from a Shein worker, I argue that today’s consumer culture has been shaped primarily by social media and access to innovative technology. I also argue that fast fashion has created a system that exploits their workers and has no appreciation for the environment. My hope is that this paper will inform readers about the detrimental effects of supporting brands like Shein and realizing the power in collective action as well as demanding parent companies and governments to implement labor laws and immediate aid to those affected. There is a concentration of factories and landfills where clothes are being discarded and incinerated that are in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) and near vulnerable communities. These countries are the ideal location for fast fashion companies to have their factories because of the cheap labor they offer and lax regulations on environmental standards and human rights protection. Asia is one of the biggest hubs for these types of factories. My research will focus on China as it “is the world’s leading producer and exporter of both textiles and garments” (“Responsible business conduct in China textile industry,” 2023). I will also use Shein, a brand based in China, as a primary example of how fast fashion companies work. Shein has surpassed Zara and H&M with a worth of more than $90 billion dollars according to Bloomberg and Business Insider (Ortakales Dawkins and Mayer, 2023). I chose Shein as my primary example because it is the epitome of the 21st century fast fashion industry and tailors perfectly to the demand of current consumer behavior.
Shein and H&M have been so successful in their sales because they offer a wide range of clothing styles for almost all types of people at a very low price and with international shipping. Accessibility has influenced a lot of consumers to buy from these brands, but easy access has also branded these items as disposable. It has allowed people of all economic classes to be “trendy” and find their style. With a powerful marketing strategy and lack of transparency in their supply chain, these brands have influenced a large percentage of consumers that have stayed loyal to them through the years. Even though accessibility is important, and all people should be able to have access to clothing they need and want, the true costs of supporting these brands are not evident when clicking the “Checkout” button. Trends are wearing out the planet and its ecosystems and have affected the livelihoods of low-income factory workers.

Chapter 1 dives into the consequences of fast fashion and explains why it is an environmental and humanitarian crisis. It also presents reasons why this topic is so important in the 21st century. Chapter 2 looks at consumer culture and how it has developed through the years. I also argue how consumerism has been shaped by the way companies have fabricated trends and their targeted advertisements. Chapter 3 further discusses consumer trends through the lens of environmental economics. It will explain how this system of manufacturing is unsustainable and how it has affected the economy. Chapter 4 investigates how social media has a significant influence on consumer culture and examines how Shein has benefited from it. Finally, Chapter 5 recommends policy changes for governments, international organizations, and companies, as well as urge readers to reflect on their behavior and power as a consumer.

Chapter 1: Environmental and Social Implications After Checkout
Fashion is one of the biggest industries in the world. There is so much demand for new clothes each day due to ever changing trends. Seasonal trends create an avenue where fashion brands can exploit consumer susceptibility to advertising and sell an excessive amount of products. Each year a trend comes in, and not even a year later, that same trend has been already rendered ‘unfashionable’ or ‘basic.’ Fast fashion is “a mode of production… that relies heavily on quick conceptual designs” (Webster 2023, 108) manufactured with cheap materials. Multiple factors contribute to the success of trends and fast fashion companies, i.e. globalization, social media, clever marketing techniques, a capitalist mentality, among others. The way we perceive what is fashionable is subjective, and because we live in an interconnected world it has become easier to have access to clothing that fits every style imaginable. Even though high efficiency rates in clothing production is practical, the public is often not exposed to the external costs that this industry has on its workers and the environment.

What is Fast Fashion? The reason fast fashion is considered an environmental issue is because it produces tons of textile, plastic, and chemical waste each year. The materials commonly used to make garments in this cycle like polyester, nylon, and acrylic take hundreds of years to biodegrade. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), fashion is an industry that is valued at 2.5 trillion US dollars. It makes up between two and eight percent of the global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The way we consume clothing has changed dramatically since the year 2000. Now, an average consumer buys “60 percent more pieces of garment, yet each clothing item is now kept half as long.” (“UN Alliance aims to put fashion on path to sustainability” 2018). These statistics were published in 2018, and since then, the industry has grown exponentially causing more damage to the ecosystem and its employees.
In the 1960s the environmental movement in the US started to gain a lot of popularity with Rachel Carson’s globally recognized book *Silent Spring*, the inauguration of the first Earth Day in 1960 and the controversial demands from the environmental justice movement (Dunlap and Mertig, 2008). Since then, these movements have only gained more traction both in the US and internationally. The 2023 Climate Change Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that “Global surface temperature has increased faster since 1970 than in any other 50-year period over at least the last 2000 years.” The environment has suffered irreversible losses in recent years in “terrestrial, freshwater, cryospheric, and coastal and open ocean ecosystems” (Andreadakis and Owusu-Wiredu 2023, 5). Loss of habitat has left species without a home and forced them to migrate. Warmer temperatures have disproportionately affected vulnerable communities. There has been an increase in the occurrence of heatwaves, droughts, and hurricanes. Additionally, fast fashion hinders the ecological services humans benefit from. There are four types of ecosystem services as defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): provisioning (food and water), regulating services (clean air, water, and soil), supporting services (shelter), and cultural services (aesthetic and recreational) (“ESB,” *FAO*). Fast fashion has interfered with every one of these services and their delivery. Namely, it has decreased biodiversity worldwide by polluting the environment with textile, plastic, and chemical waste.

Provisioning services have been affected by these practices because humans cannot access clean water and air. Fashion companies have additionally affected cultural services because they contaminate the “aesthetic” of many cities by building huge factories and creating more landfills that destroy natural habitats and displace people to make them. The environmental consequences of fast fashion also harm regulating services and the well-being of humans by
contributing to climate change via GHG emissions and habitat degradation. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provides research that indicates that in 2018, more than 11.3 million tons of clothing and textiles were thrown away ("National Overview," 2018). This amount of waste hurts the species’ natural habitat and inhibits access to clean air, water, and soil for vulnerable populations. Millions of clothes end up in landfills that are often left unchecked, polluting the environment around it and emit gasses that contribute to global warming. Landfills that are lined with a plastic cover and clay soil to prevent leachate and those that are unlined both contaminate groundwater used for “drinking, domestic, irrigation, and industrial purposes” near the site (Stefania et al., 2018). When clothes are left to decompose, they emit GHG like methane and carbon dioxide that further contributes to climate change (DeVoy et al., 2021). If not in a landfill, the waste produced by the fashion industry contaminates other natural habitats.

*Environmental Impact.* According to Climate Trade the fashion industry is the third largest GHG polluter of the world after fossil fuels and agriculture ("The World’s Most Polluting Industries," 2023). Creating clothing garments requires tons of liters of water. It is responsible for “20% of global wastewater, with a predicted increase of 50% in GHG emissions by 2030” (Andreadakis and Owusu-Wiredu 1). Climate change and global warming have become among the most discussed topics in recent years and flooded with both scientific facts and misinformation. Those who were skeptical about the legitimacy of global warming have now seen for themselves how severe the consequences are with abnormal events like on June 7, 2023, when New York City was smoke-ridden and had a red sky due to the pollution from Canadian wildfires that made its way South. This phenomenon happens often in Asian cities and California, but because it happened in NYC, one of the world’s major cities, it received more attention (Krugman, 2023). However, it still reflects the heightened impacts of climate change.
Another instance is that during the past two decades the entire world has experienced increased extreme weather events, rising sea levels, hotter global temperatures, and loss of habitat (Andreadakis and Owusu-Wiredu 2023). As a result, human quality of life has decreased globally, but more severely in historically exploited countries like those in Africa, Latin America, The Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. While the Global North continues to consume and demand high quantities of garments, the Global South faces the consequences by being forced to deal with its production, pollution, and waste.

The life cycle of fast fashion garments usually goes something like this: it is manufactured in the Global South, exported to the Global North for consumption, discarded by the Global North, and returned to the Global South where they are recycled, go to landfills, or are re-distributed for second-hand shoppers. According to an EPA report on municipal solid waste, only 15% are recycled, 66% are sent to landfills, and 19% are combusted with energy recovery (DeVoy et al., 2021). Not mentioned in DeVoy’s paper is the emissions produced by clothing that is incinerated with no intention to reuse the energy created during combustion. The innovation of energy recovery technology has been instrumental in dealing with textile waste. However, much of the clothing discarded by the Global North is being sent to the Global South where these technologies or infrastructure are not available or not as regulated. This increases health risks, contamination of groundwater due to leachate, and GHG emissions in these countries which is unjust as they did not generate much of the waste in their own landfills (Lundberg and DeVoy, 2022). For example, US consumers that donate their clothing to thrift stores like GoodWill, Salvation Army, or Planet Aid are often sent abroad because these stores cannot sell everything. In the United Kingdom (UK) only 10-30% is re-sold or donated to people in need after being given to charity (Brook, 2015). In China, the largest exporter and
manufacturer of textile, 45% of their textile production is wasted. A study that surveyed 396 textile supply chain factories in China concluded that advances in waste management, generation, and recycling programs must be implemented in order to be able to mitigate the effects of these factories, i.e. pollution (Li et al., 2021). In China and all over the world, too much waste is being produced with no way of managing it or standards of production. By the time the clothing is to be distributed in another country for reselling, it is often too damaged for it to be used again. This is one of the costs of fast and low-quality clothing, it does not last long enough to provide for another.

The process of making clothes uses so much energy and water, and synthetic fibers require even more resources and pollute groundwater sources with toxic waste. Textile Exchange, a non-profit organization, publishes a report on the global fiber market every year. In 2022, an estimated 57% of the 116 million tonnes of global fibers were fossil fuel-based (Materials Market Report, 11). Fossil fuel-based synthetic fibers are made up of plastic and during the wash phase of production, they release microplastics that contaminate the environment and are detrimental to human health because they are likely to reach food. Cotton alone “is responsible for 44% of all global water use” without considering water use for textile washing (DeVoy et al., 2021). The root of the issue here is that overconsumption has been normalized. When there is demand, companies will continue to make more clothing which are made from plastics and synthetic fibers that burn fossil fuels and further contribute to global warming. Additionally, it is unjust that the Global South is being used as a dumping ground for textiles. These already vulnerable communities must deal with managing foreign waste and are disproportionately impacted by health and environmental issues that come with post-consumer waste.
The most vulnerable communities in the Global South are those who have contributed the least to climate change and only produce 54.7 pounds of textile waste per person each year compared to 95.7 pounds in countries with higher income (DeVoy et al., 2021). LMICs have been disproportionately impacted by more intense climate change consequences. According to the World Food Programme (WFP) the most affected countries by climate change are: South Sudan, Madagascar, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Chad, the countries in the Sahel, and the Dry Corridor in Central America, e.g. El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Due to recurring droughts, these countries suffer from food insecurity and largely rely on humanitarian aid to receive food, water, shelter, and clothing. Guangzhou, China—the industrial city where one of Shein’s factories is located—is home to one of the largest landfills in the world, measuring around 227 acres (“Fashion and Waste,” 2021). Human activities have also greatly impacted the United States and its low-income populations. For instance, due to droughts many have lost their homes to wildfires and building industrial facilities have contaminated the ecosystem around minority populations in the US.

*Humanitarian Impact.* The environmental justice movement (EJM) laid its foundations in the US in the 1970s, spearheaded by grassroots groups reacting to the environmental injustices linked to race and social inequality, and it gained more attention nationally during the 1980s and 1990s. Academics published works exposing how minorities in the US are in closer proximity to environmentally hazardous facilities that negatively affect their health. The EJM claims that these facilities are deliberately placed in low-income communities because of the lack of representation and power they have been denied historically (Taylor, 2012). An example of this injustice can be found in this study that showed that landfills or solid waste facilities in Northern California are 2.8 times more likely to be near communities of people of color (POCs) and 1.5
times more likely in neighborhoods where people earn less than $60,000 a year (Norton et al., 2007). This issue is not particular to California but also affects other states in the US and countries both in the Global North and Global South. Environmental racism has denied these communities a safe environment because fossil fuel, chemical, and transportation companies have targeted their neighborhoods to develop freeways, commercial developments, and high polluting facilities. Discussing environmental racism is essential because it affects communities’ access to health care, decent housing and suggests a structural issue in society that POCs and minorities cannot escape due to their lack of representation. This creates a toxic fixity that is hard to change without policy implementation. These marginalized groups are not able to move to other non-contaminated places because they have cultural and family ties to their homes. Many are low-income workers who are not financially free to move or don’t have access to land ownership (Taylor, 2014). EJM has its origins in the US, but it is an issue that exists all over the world, particularly in the Global South. EJM also makes it possible to expand the focus of the traditional environmental movement from preservation, wilderness, and environmental regulation and see the disproportionate impacts on LMICs and better articulate the role of race, gender, ethnicity, and class.

Employees are impacted by having to work under dangerous conditions and handling hazardous chemicals that affect their health. Many sweatshops owned by fast fashion companies employ people who are migrants, women, Black, Latinos, Asian, or Afro-Caribbean workers. Migrants have no other option but to work under these conditions due to their legal status or fear of unemployment. Robert D. Bullard explains this injustice in his writing as “environmental job blackmail” (1993). Vulnerable groups face the detrimental effects of environmental racism—the most polluted urban communities, those with crumbling infrastructure, ongoing economic
disinvestment, deteriorating housing, inadequate schools, chronic unemployment, a high poverty rate, and an overloaded health-care system, and lack of policy formulation (Bullard 1993, 17). Moreover, women tend to face more challenges in this industry as most of the workers hired in these factories are immigrant women. In India for example, the women who are hired in garment factories are “from lower castes or oppressed ethnic communities…and in 2018, over 540 Asian workers alleged abusive incidents at GAP and H&M’s supplier factories for not reaching the daily production targets” (Martinicorena Gómara, 2023; Hitchings-Hale, 2018). In addition to the fact that women are usually paid less than men for the same job, they are exposed to other types of discrimination based on their gender like sexual harassment.

Sweatshops have long been sites of worry in the humanitarian field. Workers are forced to endure inhumane conditions that put their lives at risk. Oftentimes they are not legally protected and therefore cannot defend themselves against major corporations. Labor in South Asia is extremely cheap due to lax labor regulations and secrecy in reports from companies. The product in the end is so cheap because companies avoid the costs of paying their workers a fair wage. People working in these factories rarely have formal legal benefits like health insurance, severance pay, or ensure that the environment in which they work meets health code standards. In South Asian factories, like those in China and Bangladesh, workers must meet expectations of how many garments they produce per day, often leading to long shifts exceeding 12 hours (Kanti Chakrabarti and Yadav, 2024). This violation is allowed to happen because, as mentioned before, the employees are often vulnerable because they are immigrants, women, or underage and they are easier to control and underpay.

As authors Kanti Chakrabarti and Yadav mention in their chapter, a singular picture for the working conditions in different countries cannot be determined. Because they are not located
in the same place, they follow different legal standards and socio-political regimes. However, events like the Rana Plaza tragedy on April 24, 2013, in Bangladesh exemplify how hundreds of workers are exploited and the authors go as far as to describe it as “modern slavery.” On this devastating day, a building that housed five garment companies collapsed due to foundational damages and killed over a thousand people and injured more than two thousand (Kanti Chakrabarti and Yadav, 2024). Even though the building was visibly unstable, sweatshops still opened for business and employees still came into work because they feared they might lose their jobs and payment. After the incident international organizations wanted to hold the parent companies accountable, and changes were made in the end but were not enforced. This is an example of “greenwashing.” The term dates to 1990 and is the “process of hiding someone’s errors and mistakes, making that one’s reputation remains clean” (Pasquotto Andreoli and Minciotti 2023, 8-9; Pasquotto Andreoli, Crespo, & Minciotti, 2017). Greenwashing promotes a company’s product or reputation by claiming to be working towards sustainability. The definition I chose is not a conventional one, and might even be controversial, but this is the reality of the fast fashion industry. Shein has purposefully hidden their supply chain, employment contracts, and working conditions for the benefit of their reputation. Greenwashing was used by the parent companies as they committed to implementing better working conditions, but the same deplorable practices were kept and were changed only when audited (Kanti Chakrabarti and Yadav, 2024). Like the disaster in Rana Plaza, many other sweatshops around the world endanger their workers the same way. Another example is the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire from 1911 that will be discussed in Chapter 2 which shows that this is not a new issue. Fast fashion has enabled companies to profit from their workers’ lack of safety and exacerbated the rate at which they must produce clothing. Lack of transparency and unchecked
legal regulation has also allowed the ongoing corrupt practices in sweatshops. There have been times when these terrible working conditions have been exposed by brave workers who have spoken up. However, there is still a need for systems that will put the workers first and ensure that no human rights violations are committed.

The notorious fast fashion giant Shein, also violates human rights in their workshop in Guangzhou. In recent years the company has faced international backlash, rightfully so, because of an investigation from 2021. Before this investigation the company was already suspected of not having humane working conditions as their clothes are famously cheap and cannot possibly pay their workers fairly with those prices. Shein’s production zone is so big that their workshops have been named “handshake buildings” because they are so close to each other which increases the risk of fires. Inside these buildings the employees “work till the dead of the night in the sweltering heat” and do not benefit from legal employment contracts that might offer insurance (Kanti Chakrabarti and Yadav, 2024). Retail items can be produced and sent out in fewer than three days with market research, but to do this, the people in the Shein factory have to work extremely hard, long hours under fluorescent lighting near hundreds of coworkers all competing to put out as many items as they can as evidenced in Figure 1 (Kanti Chakrabarti and Yadav, 2024; Peiyue, 2021).

Figure 1: Business of Fashion

A factory worker, Robin, was interviewed by Atmos, a nonprofit magazine, that gave detailed accounts of what a day looks like working at Shein. She mentions how after 12 or more-hour shifts, she gets paid between $9 and $15 USD. Only by working overtime can she get a higher pay of $277 a month. Robin also describes how if they do not meet the production expectations, they are verbally abused by their bosses. They rarely get bathroom breaks and when they have
enough time to go, the facilities are completely unhygienic because only about eight or nine out of fifteen toilets are functional for 180 workers (Chouliaraki Milner, 2023). Shein has done an excellent job at maintaining their factory conditions secret. It is only with investigations and workers calling out against these violations that the public realizes the reality of the situation in these poorly ventilated workshops.

Not only do factory workers face physical danger, but they also experience emotional abuse from their bosses as mentioned by Robin. This level of dehumanization is alarmingly common in these environments. Name brands like GAP and H&M have been also exposed by their workers as some have said that they have been denied bathroom breaks, healthy food, and overall, a good life that has in turn made them ill. Auditing systems that have been put in place to monitor these companies often favor the brand’s revenue statistics over the quality of the working conditions (Chouliaraki Milner, 2023). The emotional and physical trauma that they must endure is deplorable. Stricter regulations must be implemented, and transparent supply chain reports have to be accessible to the public and governments. To end this type of work, everyone should be allowed to have economic stability, freedom, human rights, and legal employment contracts. Further discussion on how this can be done will be presented in Chapter 5.

Initiatives to Mitigate Impacts. Scholars, environmentalists, and policymakers in the Global South have united to address the EJM’s worries and have created coalitions like the Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) movement and Group of 77 (G77) in the United Nations (UN). Discussions on what terms should be used have assessed whether “Third World,” “Global South,” or others are precise. The reality is that in many of these “Third World” countries there exist communities that operate like those in the “First World” (Natarajan, 2021).
Personally, I do not like the terms “developing,” “under-developed,” or “Third World.”

Development is a subjective term and is commonly used to reflect a country’s accomplishments towards the capitalist system. For the purpose this paper, I will use Global South when talking about countries that have been historically exploited due to their richness of raw materials but not being able to control or benefit from them. I do not condone the use of these terms to further highlight colonialist beliefs and drive a wedge between countries culturally and economically.

The UN has established a number of separate branches dedicated to mitigating the effects of climate change, and specifically the fashion industry's harmful practices. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are among the most prominent efforts to achieve sustainable practices with many companies and nonprofits wanting to promote them.

Additionally, the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion (UNASF) was created to focus on the impacts of the fashion industry and is backed by ten UN organizations. Some of the alliance’s most notable sponsors include UN Climate Change and the World Bank. UNASF addresses the distribution, consumption, and disposal of textiles and all related goods, including footwear. Their mission is to “support coordination between UN bodies working in fashion and promoting projects and policies that ensure that the fashion value chain contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals’ targets” (UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion 2023). Furthermore, there exist multiple fashion campaigns around the world, and one of the most famous is Fashion Week. This is an event that happens in some of the major cities around the world i.e. Paris, New York, and Milan. To diminish the effects these events, have on the environment—overconsumption and promoting companies with unsustainable practices—the UN has also introduced “Green Fashion Week.” By sponsoring sustainable companies, Green Fashion Week raises awareness for the transition to a healthier fashion industry.
Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), nonprofits, and science-based organizations publish reports each year on the impacts of fossil fuels, fast fashion, and climate change. This is important work because it provides the public with statistics on the topic. However, these can be text-heavy and can be hard to comprehend for the average person. Many of these organizations also have initiatives in their reports. It is undeniable that they have played a major role in education on the subject and have had great influence internationally. The fact remains that fossil fuel companies and those who depend on them still make up most of the production.

Even though efforts like Green Fashion Week recognize the importance of sustainability, they still promote consumption. Completely changing the way clothing is made and reducing the use of synthetic materials that are not biodegradable is a direct way to alleviate the pollution problem in the fashion industry. However, that option is not realistic since companies tend to prefer the cheapest and most practical option which is fossil fuel. I believe one of the most promising ways to incentivize fashion companies to change their distribution, manufacturing, and marketing tactics is to transform the ideology around consumption. Changing people’s minds is a long-term goal that has already begun and has proved its effectiveness. Some examples of this transformation are the rising popularity of thrifting and increasing support for small businesses. What would be even more impactful is replacing the business-as-usual economic model to a circular economy, or doughnut economics as Kate Raworth, the mind behind, calls it. The overall concept of Raworth’s model diverts from the basic idea that growth can fix anything from poverty and politics to environmental degradation. Instead, it concerns itself with “meeting the needs of all within the means of the plane” (Raworth, 2017). This proposal is one the most ambitious among the recommendations that will be introduced in
Chapter 3 and conceptualized in Chapter 5. First, it is important to understand how the fashion industry has changed through the years and what has led to where we are today.

Chapter 2: History of Trends and Manufacturers

The history of fashion has marked significant moments in human history. It is the study of what defines fashion and what garments represent at different eras. For example, French women in the 1500s and 1600s used to wear corsets on a daily basis because they represented the idea of beauty at the time. Having a small waist and emphasizing other aspects of the body, like the hips and chest, was the standard women wanted to achieve. In the United States “flappers” were extremely popular in the 1920s. This style went against previous centuries-old traditions of women being constricted in their clothes. It was a seemingly shapeless style that symbolized their freedom from those previous physical and social constraints. Wearing a dress above knee-length and showing one’s bare shoulders was unthinkable before this time. The flapper apparel provided women the opportunity to have a voice in the public sphere by demonstrating that they are in control of their bodies (McKenna 2023). This is to say, fashion is just more than clothing, it can make a strong statement in society that might cause controversy. Through the years, trends have come in and out, and the industry has created innovative technology that has allowed more people to express themselves through fashion. Now, certain brands carry more value because of logo placement and there exist property rights that go with designers' work. Fashion brands have made the act of purchasing clothing an enjoyable experience, and some have adopted the use of the term “retail therapy” to justify consuming even more. However, the way in which garments are made has had multiple makeovers as time has gone by. In this chapter, I will discuss the history of fashion and how the manufacturing process has become unsustainable.
The 19th Century. The term fast fashion is a relatively new term to describe the cheap and quick processing of clothing of the past 30 years or so. Previously, clothing was all hand-made, which now is not as common to find. Clothing that dates back to the 18th century rarely seems brand new. Back then, a more sustainable approach was the standard. Since textiles were not as easy to come by, many repurposed dresses/shirts/pants or any fabric available into a new item of clothing. In the 18th and 19th century, it was advised to reduce the amount of fabric used in a piece because it was not as readily available as it is in contemporary times. Pieces were also made to last; meaning that the fabric was durable, and an outfit was meant to be worn year-round and be multifunctional. Towards the end of the 18th century, the groundwork for the Industrial Revolution was set in 1770 by James Hargreaves, an English inventor, when he created the spinning jenny (Farley and Hill 2014, 35). This was a machine that facilitated the spinning of yarns when weaving. What was previously a tedious job now only required one person to function the machine. In turn, it left a lot of people out of jobs while simultaneously providing more free time for the workers.

The 19th century came with more inventions and really spurred the development of technology. Namely, the Jacquard loom in 1804, by Joseph Marie Jacquard, and the sewing machine, by Elias Howe. The Jacquard loom’s impact was not underestimated. Production of detailed woven fabrics was now “over 24 times faster than on handlooms” (Farley and Hill 2014, 36). Some consider it the first “computer” because it worked by inputting cards with information and resulting in creating intricate weave structures. Employers were, of course, content with the result because it increased the amount of product they could sell and decreased the costs spent on assistants and employees. Another characteristic of the loom, and later in 1846 of the sewing machines, was the geometric accuracy and nearly invisible mistakes that appeared on the results.
The sewing machine increased the “rate of stitching to approximately seven times faster than done by hand, and it was also neater and stronger” (Farley and Hill 2014, 39). Again, it was not only faster and less laborious, but the invention also decreased labor costs from $6,000 per week to around $1,600. Clothing made with a machine was considered less luxurious since it was less expensive. These inventions, however, did expand the market to lower-income communities. With lower prices, more people could afford to stay up to date with fashion trends. Men’s wardrobes were available as ready-to-wear in stores earlier than women’s garments. This was because women often sewed their own wardrobes or repurposed textiles they already had and spent money only purchasing for their husbands. The Industrial Revolution was the event that allowed more people to participate in the fashion industry, but also decreased the need for labor and normalized poorly paid laborers.

The 20th Century. Fashion in the 20th century was shaped by cultural events around the world. During this century we have World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, multiple waves of feminism, and the start of the environmental movement. Even though prices for ready-to-wear clothing were cheaper, the Great Depression brought sales down. Whole outfits like dresses or suits were not practical anymore and people turned to separate pieces like pants, shirts, and skirts because they could be used multiple different ways. It was during the 20th century that designer names gave a higher value to clothing. At a time when resources were scarce, people were still willing to pay high prices for quality and beautiful clothing. One of the biggest Parisian names of the century in the industry, that still has precedence today, is/was? Christian Dior. The designer, as paradoxical as it is, simplified their couture looks to make them appropriate for daily wear, and simultaneously, consumers began reusing their unique pieces. Appreciation for the craftsmanship and hand-stitching details was what separated couture from day-to-day apparel.
High production quality was valued, but not all consumers, particularly women, were willing to repeat the same outfit several times. So, rampant consumerism changed the rigid trends of war time, changing them to be more relaxed and wearable. The “New Look” created by Dior—hourglass silhouette and elegant femininity—instantly became popular and drove women to buy more of this diverging style. At the same time, women had to alter their own clothing to continuously fit the changing trends (Fanley and Hill 2015, 42-46). During the second-wave feminism in the 1960s, women wanted to express their ideals and go against the years of conformity reflected in fashion. With culture change came fashion change, and “the silhouette shifted from the ultra-feminized and rigid hourglass figure promulgated by Christian Dior to a boyishly thin figure donning Mary Quant’s mini-dress in the 1960s, to a 1970s androgynous yet sexualized physique” (McElvain, Sklar, and Harpham 2017, 1). Having room to experiment with different styles, spurred a desire to consume more variations. Women were able to wear pants without so much criticism. Instead of making a statement on status, women’s wardrobes now provided a social commentary. “Disposable” fashion evolved into the newest fad. This increased the demand for cheap clothing, moving away from the value in quality, and cheap labor. Evidently, the same demands have spilled over into the 21st century.

**Labor Conditions.** Cheap labor comes at great cost. As previously discussed in Chapter 1 under the Humanitarian Affairs section, the Rana Plaza disaster and the Shein factory accounts are clear exhibitions of how companies prioritize revenue and endanger factory workers. History has proven this time and time again manifested in catastrophic incidents in the industrial sector. Garment factories are not always up to date on health standards, employ immigrant women, and have poor pay reputations. Consequently, employees face job blackmail because they cannot look for other jobs due to their legal status and lack of representation in positions of power.
A very popular event in industrial history is the Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory fire in New York City. The factory in Greenwich Village burned down on March 25, 1911. In the fire, 123 women and 23 men died, totaling 146 tragic, yet avoidable deaths. Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the owners of the sweatshop, employed immigrant women, particularly, who worked in a cramped space on sewing machines. These women were exploited considering they worked 12 hours a day for $15 a week. The composition of the building was a fire hazard since there were only two exit stairways “but one was locked from the outside to prevent stealing and the other only opened inward” and sprinkler systems were deliberately not installed at the factory (Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, 2009). The owners’ track record raised suspicions when it became known that this same factory had burned twice in 1902 and another property of theirs, the Diamond Waist Company, also went up in flames in 1907 and 1910. Corruption in the garment industry was nothing new. City officials looked the other way as well, and owners benefited from these “accidents” by collecting fire-insurance policies. The fire started in a garbage bin which the manager was unable to put out. The 18-minute raging fire entrapped workers who tried to flee via the stairway door, only to find it was locked and were burned alive. Others, in a desperate attempt to escape the flames, jumped off the windows and fell tragically to their deaths. One out of the four elevators in the building—the only one that worked—managed to rescue those who fit in a total of four trips before it became impossible to operate. Additionally, the fire hose inside the building was not functioning properly because its tip was rotted and rusted all the way through.

Preventable accidents like this were not uncommon, but the significance of the Triangle Factory fire lies in the policy changes it established as a result. 80,000 workers from unions organized a march on April 5th in New York City’s Fifth Avenue protesting labor conditions in
the industry. It eventually led to reform in fire safety regulations with the Sullivan-Hoey
Prevention Law and the support from New York Democratic. Blanck and Harris were not
indicted and only paid $75 to the victims’ families. They also received $400 from insurance
policies for each death from the fire. Even though the owners were not found guilty, the fire shed
light on the dangerous conditions in sweatshops and prevented more incidents like this from
happening in the future (Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, 2009). Even with this well-recognized
tragedy, factories have continued to allow dangerous conditions in the workplace. More
regulation is needed to ensure incidents like this never happen again. Further on how this can be
done will be discussed in Chapter 5.

21st Century. According to the EPA, post-consumer textile waste has increased nearly ten
times more since 1960 (DeVoy et al., 2021). This information was published in 2017, and since
then the amount of textile waste has continued to grow. Fast fashion has reinforced this wasteful
cycle with their low prices, low quality, and fast production. With globalization, development of
technology, and changing consumer preferences, the 21st century has provided people with
exceeding amounts of clothing at a low price point. Nearly every country has stores, malls, and
department stores that give people access to trendy clothing that they want or need. Now, it is not
necessary to subscribe to fashion magazines to be up to date with the latest fashion. People all
over the world have exposure to trends and styles with the click of a button. Additionally, people
have dedicated themselves to promote this content on social media platforms like YouTube,
TikTok, and Instagram. Many of these platforms have their own stores that makes it even easier
to browse for products. With this development, people are not holding onto their clothes for
extended periods of time. Unlike in the 19th and 20th century when clothing was made to last
and be worn multiple times, in the 21st century clothing is now deemed disposable. Companies
have also found ways to further promote their items with growing environmental concerns from the public. Greenwashing and green marketing by brands and organizations has increased significantly with consumers placing a greater value on these standards (Pasquotto Andreoli and Minciotti, 2023). Brands like Zara, H&M, Shein, and GAP have used greenwashing to claim that they are committed to the environment and have repeatedly failed to prove the work they have done.

Shein specifically can be seen as the ultimate fast fashion company in the 21st century. Before becoming the best-seller for fast fashion, Shein sold wedding dresses in 2008. After a few years in 2015 the CEO, Sky Xu, named the brand SheInside, which we now know as Shein. Little is known about Xu, but he does come from a marketing and technology background which has helped the company get their products out immensely (Ortakales Dawkins and Mayer, 2023). This billion-dollar company is solely based online with a few pop-ups at Forever 21, another fast fashion brand with in-store shopping. During the pandemic, Shein thrived in the popularization of online shopping. Now it is easier than ever to shop from the comfort of your home. They have taken advantage of technology like “AI and big data analyses, collaborative consumption, quick response, frequent assortment changes,” and more (Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz and Oblój, 2023). AI has allowed Shein to put out hundreds of styles based on algorithms that would suggest which would become popular. Market research in the 21st century is unique in that trends change every day. By putting out so much clothing, Shein is bound to hit more than once what consumers want to purchase. Shein’s online model is unique to them and has changed the way fashion companies have to produce. It has only encouraged more overconsumption with little to no respect for human rights or the environment.

Chapter 3: Capitalism vs. Environmental Economics
A powerful argument against fast fashion lies in economics and the potential benefits of changing current business practices. Capitalists, however, are not enthusiastic about this and many lobby against transformative policies. As a response to the climate crisis, the development of environmental economics began. The exact year of the emergence of this discipline is debated, as some argue it started in the 17th century and others the 20th century. Modern environmental economics as we know it now has its origins in the 60s due to further development in science and technology and the rise of environmentalism in this decade. The proper establishment of this theory took place in the 80s when deeper research on it was published (Sadmo, 2015). This chapter will discuss why capitalism has remained the dominant economic system globally, its characteristics, and criticism against it and providing a substitution—doughnut economics. Distinguishing capitalism from environmentalism is key to understanding why consumer culture has evolved into what it is today. I recognize that it is challenging to summarize capitalism in a chapter, but here I will just introduce some of the main components of the theory and explain why it cannot continue. It puts into perspective what the future holds for us if we continue to live under the unsustainable system that is capitalism.

Intro to Capitalism. Capitalism is everywhere. From the multiple advertisements while scrolling on social media, giant billboards on the roads, and the idea that we must replicate what we see on celebrities and fashion trends. Since childhood, we have been taught to study for the entirety of our young adult lives and aim to get a well-paying job to be able to start a family comfortably; starting with the standard “What do you want to be when you grow up?” question. This “ideal path” that has become the norm, has its roots in capitalism, so that we, consumers, never stop desiring more and never stop doing what we do—consume. Paul Bowles, a professor of economics, defines capitalism as “a system for organizing production which is based upon the
institutions of private property and the market, and which relies upon the pursuit of private profit as its driving force” (Bowles 2024). This means that capitalism works solely to generate more profit which excludes any efforts to better society and the environment. Another essential part of the capitalist system is labor. Centuries ago, there was an established communal living system. For instance, before Christopher Columbus arrived in America in 1492, the communities of Latin America lived very differently. They had a culture of their own and a system they used with which they had survived by producing goods without selling or buying them and essentially just sharing and distributing good to those who needed them. Columbus forced unto these populations the idea of working to be able to live. It is what we know as feudalism.

Feudalism is said to have begun in Medieval Europe. This was the first time in history humans started selling their labor to survive. The main characteristics of feudalism are “a strongly hierarchical ordering of society, a web of personal obligations tying subordinates to superiors, the persistence of closed classes or “castes,” and a permanent serf-like status for the vast majority of the population” (Kotkin 2020). The nobility claimed land as theirs, and the “lower class” had to work on that land to survive, have a home, and be able to provide food for their families. Since then, the model of feudalism has evolved into capitalism. Many of the traits of feudalism remain the same in today’s labor culture. The elite minority rules over the poor, working majority. This disproportionate distribution of ownership and wealth controls the world we live in today. Workers get paid minimum wage or less, are overworked, and do not benefit from their work nearly as much as the big corporations that own them. Author and urban studies professor, Joel Kotkin, refers to this as neo-feudalism (Kotkin 2020). Then, a more structured system of the privatization of resources and the creation of markets comes into play. After the feudal system fell, capitalism rose.
Adam Smith, the father of capitalism, published his book in 1776, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, also known simply as *The Wealth of Nations*. In this publication, Smith describes improvement in labor, the different classes of people that exist, and advocates for self-regulating markets with little government involvement. It is a very specific definition of hierarchy, and he mentions how this is a natural phenomenon. Capitalism is a system in which individuals “pursue their self-interest, check only by their mutual competition and by the impersonal forces of the market” (Magdoff and Foster 2011, 37). So, this model does not recognize collaboration for the benefit of all, only that of the individual. In the current climate, this is extremely detrimental because it means that the already rich get richer, and the lower class must strive to get to where they are. If this trajectory continues, nonrenewable resources will eventually run out and catastrophic consequences, more than the ones we are already experiencing, will ensue. In the capitalist theory, it is believed that any problem can be fixed with unlimited accumulation of capital, and it knows no boundaries. In essence, any process’ purpose is to generate capital. For example, agriculture, health services, and production in general are aimed at creating profit, and their product i.e. food and health are only a side effect. Here lies the uniqueness of capitalism. The workers themselves are only a piece in capitalism. The exploitation of its workers is crucial for the system to work (Magdoff and Foster 2011, 39). These characteristics of capitalism clearly show that it is a distructive system to work under. With no real concern for safety and people’s health, it shows that it is a superficial and materialistic system. As there are plenty of promoters of capitalism like huge corporations, there also exist people who opposed the system. A few of the main opponents were Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and John Maynard Keynes.
Critiques. Over the years, capitalism has spread to multiple countries all over the world and has received a lot of criticism. It has become a controversial topic to discuss this economic model. Pro-capitalists and anti-capitalists are groups who have very strong opinions and have little room for suggestion. As cited in Foster’s paper from 1999, Marx writes in his first volume of *Capital*,

Capitalist production collects the population together in great centres, and causes the urban population to achieve an ever-growing preponderance. . . . It disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, i.e. it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil (Marx 1887).

This is one of the most prominent critiques of capitalism, the metabolic rift. That is, the never-ending growth that capitalism relies on cannot withstand the physical capabilities of the earth (Foster 1999). Excessively farming soil will not allow it to replenish itself within the timeline that demand in the economy sets. I argue that this is true not only when considering soil and land, but also humans. Under the capitalist system, humans' main goal is to study if it is possible economically, then get a job, and work the rest of their lives. Capitalism disturbs a healthy life cycle for humans. Workers are faced with constant stress when trying to meet these expectations. Many are forced into undesirable working conditions, such as the ones mentioned in Chapter 2. Capitalism has negative effects on humans due to the foundations it believes in and the tense environment it creates in the job market.

Adam Smith writes that “every man thus lives by exchanging, or becomes, in some measure, a merchant, and the society itself grows to be what is properly a commercial society” (Smith 1776). The takeaway from this excerpt I want to introduce now is growth. Growth must be a continuous process that never stops. Merchants must be able to continue generating profit, selling their goods, and spending their wealth to expand their capital. This trait has instilled in
consumers an insatiable need to continue accumulating capital and spending it. A company that remains stagnant is bound to die in this economic model (Magdoff and Foster 2011). Herman Daly, an ecological economist, introduces the Impossibility Theorem to explain the unsustainability of capitalism. This theorem illustrates how earth’s ecosystems never grow; they evolve. Nature develops to adapt to new circumstances; it does not expand in size. Capitalism will not allow our world to survive because of the value placed on growth. Daly also argues that there is no such thing as “sustainable growth.” Economic growth, by definition, cannot be considered a sustainable practice. He explains,

As the economic subsystem grows it incorporates an even greater proportion of the total ecosystem into itself and must reach a limit at 100 percent, if not before. Therefore its growth is not sustainable. The term “sustainable growth” when applied to the economy is a bad oxymoron—self-contradictory as prose, and evocative as poetry (Daly 1990).

Because the Earth’s resources are finite, there has to be a boundary that should not, and physically could not, be crossed. The faster we realize this, the faster we can claim to be doing “green” work. Now, we have been led to believe that growth can be “sustainable” or “green.” The reality is that these names have been placed in front of growth and have not really addressed the issue at hand, which is the physical limits that capitalism pushes onto the earth’s resources. Although capitalists claim that there is no other design that will work, this is completely untrue. It is possible to reach a global equilibrium that would prioritize meeting the basic needs of humans while also creating equal opportunity (Magdoff and Foster 2011, 28). The issue primarily lies in those who are never satisfied and are obsessed with capital accumulation. While most of the world lives in poverty, the 1% continues to benefit from the working-class exploitation.
The Environment, Economics, and Fashion. Robert Costanza is one of the main contributors to environmental/ecological economics. He was one of the economists who translated ecosystem services into monetary value. Costanza and contributors estimated from 17 ecosystem services that “For the entire biosphere, the value (most of which is outside the market) is estimated to be in the range of US$16–54 trillion () per year, with an average of US$33 trillion per year” (Costanza, et. al 1997). Within these 17 ecosystem services raw material, recreation, cultural, and water regulation are among them. I believe them to be relevant with the fashion industry because they are foundational to produce clothing. Discussion of natural capital, such as trees, plants, water, and minerals are essential when thinking about clothing manufacturing. This stock of renewable and non-renewable resources has a large impact on our economy and the environment. When excessively depleting it the ecosystem is disturbed and cannot function properly.

When making clothing, manufacturers figured out that synthetic fibers are much cheaper to produce than natural fibers. Synthetic fibers such as polyester come from petroleum. Polyester makes up 80% of fibers used and is just one of the multiple fibers that have been created to produce clothing. “In 2016, polyester fiber production is estimated at 52 million metric tons” (Textile Exchange 2017). Synthetic fibers have been at the forefront of the sprawl of fast fashion. However, it brings detrimental sustainability impacts. Transparency is hard to come by when trying to find out the source of one’s piece of clothing. Since many of these fibers come from petroleum, it is hard to pinpoint where it originated. When washed, these microplastics are shed that pollute marine and land ecosystems. When discarded improperly, they will contaminate ecosystems and stay there for a long period of time because they do not decompose quickly. Additionally, making these garments requires a large amount of energy and emits a lot of CO2s
(Fletcher 2008). On the bright side, these fibers can be recycled and made into new garments when they have deteriorated.

Patagonia is one of the companies that has spearheaded the sustainable fashion movement. Yvon Chouinard founded the company in 1973 in Ventura, California. He started the company out of his love for rock climbing and value in quality garments. Chouinard says, “I wanted to stay alive, so I chose quality at every turn, creating products that were simple, versatile, and made with the lightest, strongest materials I could find. And I didn’t want to deface the wild, beautiful places I loved, so I got creative and designed new gear that wouldn’t scar the rocks” (Chouinard 2023). His commitment to creating meaningful gear that would last decades while not harming the environment has proven to be a successful economic model. Defying what most economists urged him against, he has implemented a repair service for his products that allows customers to prolong the lives of their garments. His designs have proven to be so effective that many of the current styles date back to the 70s and 80s. “Quality is smart business” (Chouinard 2023), and if more companies had this outlook on sustainability, they too could be generating profit while practicing responsibly. Chouinard is now the previous owner of Patagonia. Since 2022, the company’s only shareholder is Earth. The two owners of the company are not Patagonia Purpose Trust and the Holdfast Collective. The money that is not used for the company itself, is transferred to these two organizations. Patagonia Purpose Fund works to uphold the company and its legal obligations. The Holdfast Collective is an organization that is devoted to equality and investing in reparatoriy efforts against climate change (Patagonia 2022). So, Patagonia is the prime indication that a sustainable business model is possible in today’s world.
Intro to Doughnut Economics. Even with these sustainable initiatives it is not enough to create a better world in the long-term. Switching to ethical materials and renewable energy is a great place to start, but what would be the best initiative is to completely eradicate capitalism. Many environmental economics have tried to take this challenge, and Kate Raworth is one of them. Doughnut Economics, coined by Kate Raworth, a renowned economist, refers to a new visually imagined model of a circular economy. Overall, it is a model that encompasses the needs that humans must be met with while also not surpassing the environmental ceiling. In essence it is “a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below and an ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we shout go beyond. Between the two lies a safe and just space for all” (Raworth 2017). Raworth came up with this model when she was troubled by the question of how to deal with 21st century needs. That is, the need to distribute resources all over the world. As a result, she first introduced the idea in a report she wrote and published at Oxfam in 2012. Doughnut Economics moves away from the degenerative industry that works on a take→make→use→lose model. She proposes something that is regenerative by design. In this visual model from Figure 2, Raworth explains how at this moment we are at an overshoot and shortfall. The ecological ceiling is being exceeded as products are being produced at a rate that does not allow resources to regenerate, and therefore have impacted the environment and contributed to climate change, ocean acidification, chemical pollution, etc. At the same time, there is a shortfall in meeting the social foundations (food, health, education, income & work, etc.). Doughnut economics defines a prosperous society as being within the doughnut at the safe and just space for humanity. That light green area is the goal in which the framework attempts to get to. This model is complete in the sense that it addresses both environmental and humanitarian concerns while still providing a way for businesses to survive. The main difference from the
capitalist model is that it considers all externalities and is not obsessed with capital accumulation.

*Figure 2. The Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2017)*

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**Chapter 4: Consumer Culture, Social Media, and Shein.**

Fashion is as subjective as any opinion. Historically, distinguished designers have influenced the way we view fashion. It is a way of expressing our inner style, making it very personal yet exposed for the world to see. Fashion has been the marker of class status, while also as a tool to trickle that hierarchy by imitation (Inkpen, 2020). As mentioned in Chapter 2, it is an element of our culture that defines our community as well as individuals. Fashion has also succumbed to the power of social media manipulation and consumerism. Shein, I would argue, is *the* fast fashion giant of the 21st century. After it arrived in the US in 2017, the brand has
continued to become more popular. It has mastered its marketing techniques as well as finding loopholes to take over the American market. The store offers an unbelievable amount of clothing that is cheaply and quickly made. The biggest appeal is that the clothing is extremely cheap. When ordering online shirts can sometimes cost even less than a dollar, get shipping for less than $10 USD, and it offers astonishingly similar “dupes” to luxury brand items (Looney 2023).

Another ‘fun’ aspect of ordering from Shein that buyers have shared is that since they order so much, it’s sort of a surprise when they get the package because they forgot what they ordered. This plays into the buy-use-discard behavior that fast fashion has inspired. However, it has also allowed teenagers who are not able to spend a lot of money on clothes to express themselves for a fraction of the real cost. Shein also caters to subcultures through the variety of clothing they have available and is a gesture that “offends the ‘silent majority’” (Hebdige, 1979). Furthermore, the impact social media has on the popularity of Shein and fast fashion is extensive. Influencers have made Shein’s model even more attractive for the general public.

In this chapter, I will discuss the sociology behind social media marketing and analyze the effectiveness of its reach. Specifically, I will investigate consumerism in the 21st century, and how it is detrimental to the environment and humanitarian rights. This has been a major contributor to fast fashion and overconsumption. Shein has gained so much traction in recent years and has simultaneously exposed its destructive practices.

*Social Media.* We are living in the age of technology that has connected the world in previously unimagined ways. Social media has plenty of benefits, but it also has a good amount of cons. For fast fashion companies it has resulted in more engagement from consumers. On the other hand, it has had adverse effects for the environment due to the large number of online orders; especially during COVID-19 where people did not have a lot to do. I cannot help but
notice the amount of TikTok hauls I encounter each week, even each day, when scrolling. I receive a sponsored advertisement every two stories I tap through on Instagram. Ads are everywhere now. Without a doubt, these ads affect the amount of clothing us viewers buy each year. Not to mention when these advertisements announce sales. My personal confession as a contemporary consumer is that I have fallen for these tactics. As we can all probably agree, low prices are appealing and have encouraged us to click that “Add to Cart” button.

Shein however, has a unique presence on social media. There are tons of TikTok influencers that post hundreds of dollars’ worth of Shein clothing. However, Shein distinguishes itself from other brands by having a lot of their exposure through unpaid videos. Personally, I come across more videos of a random customer showing their Shein purchases, than ads from the company itself. In fact, a study on consumer behavior and neural responses discovered “that display-only or cross-promoted products might not simply be engaging people’s attention, they might also be establishing the relative value of those other items as part of a choice” (Karmarkar and Yoon 2016). Exposure to these products, even if the consumer is not previously considering buying, sends signals to the brain’s sensory and social cues receptors that motivate consumers to be willing to pay for such items (Karmarkar and Yoon, 2016). In 2022, British Channel 4 published an exposing documentary on the inner working conditions of a Shein factory in China. The documentary consisted of hidden cameras inside a facility that revealed the dehumanizing conditions that employees had to work in. This was harmful for the company, so a year later in 2023 the company invited influencers to one of their factories in Guangzhou, China on an all-expenses-paid trip.

The trip soon received backlash from the public because influencers portrayed an untrue image of the working environment. Out of all the influencers who attended, Dani Carbonari,
@itsdanidmc, got the most exposure with users and faced the heaviest criticism. She was criticized by Catalina Goanta, a professor at Utrecht University, for humanizing Shein, spreading misinformation, and overlooking overworked laborers’ real conditions (Mendez II, 2023). TIME Magazine reached out to Shein and was met with a deflecting response from the company. In an email Shein wrote that the company is “committed to transparency, and this trip reflects one way in which we are listening to feedback, providing an opportunity to show a group of influencers how Shein works through a visit to our innovation center and enabling them to share their own insights with their followers” (Mendez II, 2023). This is a tactic Shein has used multiple times. It has come out with statements claiming to commit itself to human rights, sustainability, and transparency. On their website one can find 20 categories that range from “Women’s Clothing” to “Pet Supplies.” One can also see their “Sustainability” section that has an extensive list of efforts they are implementing to decrease their carbon footprint and offer opportunities for a diverse demographic of workers. They published that “45% of viscose fabrics came from producers who have achieved a ‘green shirt’ rating on Canopy’s Hot Button Report in 2022” (“Our Impact” Shein, 2023). Considering the amount of clothing the brand produces—around 100-200 pieces per day—45 percent does not seem as significant. It also lacks transparency in their supply chain, rating a “7 out 100 on Fashion Revolution’s latest Transparency Index” (Early, 2023). Social media has proven to be a beneficial tool for Shein to expand its reach in the American market. The overwhelming quantity of orders placed to the US has also sparked discussion about Shein’s management, labor conditions and pay, and trade violations.

*Declassifying Shein.* ABC News filmed a documentary *Impact x Nightline: Unboxing Shein.* The film talks with members of the US-China Economic Security Review commission, an ex-subcontractor, a professor and students at the University of Delaware, and independent
fashion designers. One of the scariest facts is that the research team behind the documentary was not able to find much information about Shein’s founder, Xu Yangtian, also called Sky Xu (Looney 2023, 03:45-03:48). Shein also differentiates itself from Zara and H&M because they track trends using algorithms and data. After collecting this information, they send an order of around 100 pieces to their manufacturers and then see how the items were received. If they have a positive response, they make even more. Among the designs they produce are some pieces that independent designers, like Bailey Prado, have claimed have been copied almost exactly. Big companies like Levi’s, Dr. Martens, and Ralph Lauren have also sued the company over intellectual property. The result is almost always the same, except with Ralph Lauren, in which there is a settlement, and the case never faces any serious charges. Shein also came out with a statement that read, “Shein takes all claims of infringement seriously. It is not our intent to infringe anyone’s valid intellectual property and it is not our business model to do so. Shein suppliers and marketplace sellers are required to comply with company policy and certify their products do not infringe third party IP” (Looney 2023, 11:00-11:11, 11:18). In a span of less than a year, Shein received over 53 lawsuits for copyright infringement, further proving their words are not backed by actions. Since they are a multibillion-dollar company, they usually snuff out small independent designers because they are not able to pay for the long process of hiring lawyers and do not have the time to go through with it.

To rehabilitate the company’s image, once again, it created SheinX, an initiative that partners with small designers to produce their clothing. Furnanda Campuzano is one of them, and she has felt supported through their partnership, but also denounces that stealing intellectual property is not right. It is also argued that influencers and the public in general should not hold the responsibility of performing an in-depth investigation on the brand before buying. There are
over 6,000 suppliers—that ABC News knows of—which is an absurd amount of research for a consumer to go through. Instead, if Shein was really trying to become more transparent, this information about their supply chain would be readily available (Looney 2023, 18:40-19:00).

*Cheap is Expensive.* Even though the price marked on the website is incredibly low, the true cost of fast fashion is way more expensive. The amount of clothing Shein alone produces in a month creates tons of trash that ends up in landfills or the ocean. As mentioned in Chapter 2 and 3, these plastic-based fibers, like polyester and viscose, remain intact for decades. The chain of labor is unethical, it pollutes the Global South, and the industry violates human rights (Boykoff *et al.*, 2021). In a world where millions of people suffer from water insecurity, water waste when manufacturing clothing has a large impact. For instance, “averaging an estimated 200 tonnes of water usage during the production of one tonne of textile” (Niinimäki *et al.* 2020). There have been efforts to mitigate the impacts like sustainable fashion ‘Trash the Runway’ show to raise awareness for the issue. Second-hand stores have also become more popular as consumers realize the impact brand new clothing has on the environment and workers (Yu, Gomez-Borquez, Zaichkowsky, 2023). However, there is still a lot of work to be done in order to address the issues with the fast fashion industry. These will be discussed more in-depth in Chapter 5.

Exhibitions of environmental injustice are also present in this industrial sector because such factories that have proven to harm human health due to toxins and pollution are located in low and middle-income countries (LMICs). Environmental Justice Studies have provided a helpful way to study the impacts in the Global South. It has been able to highlight the “disproportionate impact experienced by those who produce and dispose of our clothing is essential to understanding the magnitude of global injustice perpetuated through the consumption
of cheap clothing.” (Bick, Halsey, Ekenga 2018) which makes a political statement in addition to a stance on the environmental concern.

Chapter 5: What is in Store

It is clear that the current business model is not environmentally feasible or humanitarian. Some alternatives are simpler than others but implementing them poses a bigger challenge. One of the biggest issues when attempting to dismantle the ‘business as usual’ model is finding an incentive for companies and consumers to do so. Business owners who want to become more sustainable are not as willing to transform their operations because the switch can be costly and the response unpredictable. Consumers sometimes favor fast fashion brands because they have exceptionally low prices and worldwide accessibility. Even when consumers are aware of the environmental and humanitarian impacts, they might not be able to support sustainable brands due to their high prices. Capitalism governs the world, and it is more challenging for small businesses to thrive under this model because they do not aim to grow endlessly. Finding secure alternatives has been the subject of many environmentalists’ journeys, and I believe many have merit. Admittedly, it is unrealistic to believe that the fashion industry will become fully sustainable because providing clothes for nearly 8 billion people requires extensive materials and processing. Nonetheless, there are significant strides that can be made to ensure the industry does not continue to cause such extensive harm. In this chapter I will identify avenues that can lead to healthier mindsets, alternatives and regulation in the fashion industry, and policy recommendations that should be implemented by governments and international organizations. For these recommendations to be effective, stakeholders like the consumers, small business owners, major corporations, and policy makers have to be involved.
Changing Individual Mindsets. The way we view ourselves and nature is a discussion that will aid social responses to the renewal of the fashion industry. Usually, we separate ourselves from the environment, which should not be the case. As humans, what we produce immediately becomes part of nature, and this includes economics. Under this ideology that nature and humans are the same, it exposed the contradiction in the capitalist economic system when reassuring that continued and unlimited growth will fix all. Capitalism does not care for nature and the environment, evidenced in their unlimited growth mindset that does not prioritize the well-being of humans or the environment. Conversely, if we believe the environment and us are all one in the same, the thousands of garments we create would be appreciated the same way we respect the natural wonders of the world (Monbiot, 2017). Instead of prioritizing profit, we would instead prioritize ourselves. In practice, this culture defends the environment and humans under the same standards and is a pathway towards the regenerative economic model. The best way to popularize this idea is to start having discussions in your community, between your friends and family, and at the academic level as well. Spreading awareness is a simple yet essential step towards a more sustainable future. Changing mindsets at an individual level leads to a change in consumer behavior. If consumers change their attitude towards fast fashion, then demand will change too and with it, fashion brands’ output.

Changing consumer behavior is not an easy task. Current consumption patterns suggest that people are increasingly interested in purchasing from sustainable companies. Even though 84% of consumers worldwide accept that sustainability influences their purchasing decisions, few follow through. According to the EY Future Consumer Index “73% say high prices deter them from buying sustainable products” (Rogers and Cosgrove, 2021). We must also consider that sustainability looks different across countries. For instance, in India the Index discovered
that citizens prioritize health and wellbeing over climate change, while in the US people are more interested in sustainability relating to the climate crisis. The initiative I propose will define sustainability as encompassing both issues: the environmental and humanitarian. I believe one cannot be prioritized over the other as nature and humans are part of the same world.

Greenwashing tactics have been extremely successful in promoting products and increasing sales. Some strategies include claims of incorporating programs directed towards reaching net zero emissions, not specifying the steps in the supply chain, and publishing misleading labels that cannot be backed up by credible sources (Greenwashing, UN). This strategy is popular among fast fashion brands as companies realized that these statements influence consumer behavior, evidence in Andreoli and Mincotti’s study (2023). However, skepticism has grown as sustainability efforts have been flooded with misinformation. According to the IBM Institute for Business Value research “only 20% say they trust the statements companies make about environmental sustainability, down from half just two years ago” (“How Can Companies Promote Sustainable Consumer Behavior,” 2023). This is a gross and deceptive strategy that should not be allowed to continue. To combat these marketing strategies, transparency has to be at the forefront of regulations so that consumers can be aware of the history of the item they are purchasing.

Social media plays a huge role in influencing purchasing decisions, as previously stated in Chapter 4. Algorithms exist to cater to each individual’s interests, and they are determined through data collection and online behavior. China has completely banned any foreign social media platforms, and this management has taken precedence in the country since the Ming dynasty with the enforcement of “Haijin” or “sea ban” (Suciu, 2024). Historically this isolation coming from China was led by goals of controlling information and deterring foreign influences.
Even with technological developments and globalization, China has been able to hold on to their autonomy by prohibiting access to alien websites. In 2024 alone there have been multiple talks on potential technological bans in the US. The most high-profile being governmental conversations on banning the TikTok app. President Joe Biden has confirmed that if this bill is passed by the Senate and reaches his desk, he intends to sign it. Since the Chinese company ByteDance has professed that under any circumstances they are against selling their holdings to an American company, if the bill is approved then the app will no longer be present in the US (Suciu, 2024). This goes to show that if governments are passionate about information distribution efforts, large-scale policies can be achieved. In Chapter 4, I discussed the prominence social media has on consumerism. If the app is banned in the US, it will impact purchasing trends significantly. Concerns of misinformation are nothing new in the US. The founding of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), an American agency with the purpose of limiting unfair commercial competition, has recently been occupied with ensuring truth in advertising (Hogue, 2023). It is not unimaginable that the FTC and similar international agencies can use their authority to pursue regulation on fictitious green advertising or greenwashing, and instead emphasize the exposure of small businesses and brands that meet sustainable standards like those who strive to advance the UN Development Goals. To guarantee accurate reporting on fraudulent advertising and stop the predominance of fast fashion brands, workers in already established companies like The Slow Factory, the Commons App, and the Apparel Institute Initiative can employ workers to report propaganda, pictures, and websites to the FTC and agencies like it around the world. The effect this reporting will have on individual mindsets and consumer behavior could be momentous. I believe that this is a great start into sustainable
influencing, but this considerable burden should not fall solely on these sustainably driven companies and especially not on consumers.

Often, the task of mitigating the impacts of climate change falls on the general public. This idea has been instilled by big corporations themselves to shift the blame away from them. Consumers feel it is their responsibility to reduce their “carbon footprint” by taking shorter showers, recycling, or carpooling more often. There is power in individual activism that leads to popularizing sustainable practices. A lifestyle that incorporated greener activities might include shopping less, giving new life to pre-worn clothing through thrifting, boycotting fast fashion giants, and upcycling or repairing clothes in one’s closet. These initiatives are still important and do have an impact, but the true burden of carbon emissions falls on the fossil fuel industry’s shoulders. BP, the oil mega company, hired a marketing team in 2004 that helped better their image. They came up with the clever idea of a “carbon footprint calculator” that allowed the public to see how much they personally contributed to greenhouse gas emissions based on their lifestyles. It was clever because it diverted the attention from big fossil fuel companies to individuals. Now, the carbon footprint of companies is everywhere when assessing sustainability (Schendler, 2021). To ensure this happens, regulating how fashion brands operate is a huge adjustment that needs to be implemented. I will explore how this can become a reality in the following section.

*Changing Brands’ Output.* It is true that big fashion corporations, i.e. Shein, H&M, Zara, etc., generate hundreds of jobs for low-income workers, but they do so at the cost of the environment and factory workers. As discussed in Chapters 1 through 4, the consequences of fast fashion are clear and have a global impact, but those who are contributing the most to the climate crisis, i.e. fossil fuel companies, climate-denying politicians, and fast fashion brands, are not held
accountable for the role they play in the destruction of the planet and violation of human rights. As previously stated, the textile industry relies mostly on fossil fuels for manufacturing and discards massive amounts of waste in a manner that is extremely detrimental to the environment and people. To change brand’s output my first implementation to change consumer’s mindsets has to occur. This will inevitably lead to a change in how brands produce as demand will go down. More than that, the economic system in which brands and all other businesses work must change to truly reach a regenerative model.

In Chapter 3, I discussed commodities and the capitalist system. The main takeaway being that material commodities, like clothing, are held to much higher value economically and socially than they should. Simultaneously, humanitarian, and environmental rights are undervalued in the capitalist system. The definition of a commodity should also not be solely material. A commodity is having a good quality of life, being able to benefit from ecological services, and have a healthy life. Fast fashion does not provide these types of commodities to their workers and indirectly to the global population because they are polluting the environment and decreasing the odds of a safe future. It is essential to move away from the profit and growth above all mindsets. Additionally, it is impossible for businesses to continue as usual. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the impossibility theorem according to ecological economist Herman Daly and adapted by Magdoff and Foster as the idea that “continuation for any length of time of capitalism, as a grow-or-die system dedicated to unlimited capital accumulation, is itself a flat impossibility” (2011, 7). With the projected population of nine billion, the earth will physically be incapable of providing for all at the rate we are consuming. There are not enough resources to do so with the current obsession of capital accumulation. Therefore, this is evidence that both the economic system and current consumer behavior needs to change. The average economist would
also argue that environmental and humanitarian impacts are an externality and an afterthought that can only be repaired with unconstrained economic growth. This insatiable desire to continue growing has encouraged completely unnecessary creations by designers that have been led to believe this is their only way to survive. Small businesses are the prime example that it is possible to work under a system that is not focused on growth. These businesses aim to produce at a normal and safe rate to fulfill current needs without wanting to expand. After reading about Kate Raworth’s Doughnut Economics model, she points out that one of the biggest misconceptions the public has adopted is that a business without a growth model cannot survive. This recommendation, then, is changing from the destructive and unequal cycle that capitalism enforces and instead follow to a regenerative and distributive cycle. A circular economy would “keep resources in a loop for as much time as possible, try to maintain their value while in use, and repurpose for generation of new products at the end of utilization” (Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020). This way, fashion brands can continue to thrive but with a deeper commitment to the environment and labor rights.

This type of economy offers every human on the planet a decent quality of life and opportunities. Doughnut economics, as Kate Raworth writes, “rather than accept growing inequality as a law of economic development, an inevitability that must be endured, twenty-first century economists will regard it as a failure of economic design and will seek to make economies far more distributive of the value that they generate” (Raworth 2017, 140). To follow her proposed diagram, we must again apply the new mindset to our relationship with the environment as mentioned in the previous section. Then, also considering what humans do and create as part of nature suggests that economic activity is also included. So, it brings us to the conclusion that the economy, society, and the environment are embedded. From this perspective,
what we do economically works for the benefit of society and nature. The goal for doughnut
economics is to fall within the doughnut where it creates a safe and just space for humanity.
Here, all social foundations would be met, and the economy would not surpass the ecological
ceiling. This is a healthier way to navigate how communities, schools, governments, workplaces,
and everything in between are managed because one would never dare to damage their own
selves and resources. This model attempts to address the inequality between wealthy people and
the poorest people on earth. It proposes to follow a distributive design that would also
proportionately distribute wealth among everyone. This inequality is astounding with “the richest
1% have snatched-up almost twice as much as the rest of the world combined” (“Survival of the
Richest”). These billionaires like Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk, have driven a
wider gap between the rich and poor because they fundamentally follow capitalism. They strive
to amass wealth at a never-ending rate which is harmful to the planet because it drives the
economy “out of the doughnut.” While these billionaires continue striving for growth, low-
income people continue fighting for a decent life because they are missing basic resources.

Redistribution of income has been a topic since the late 20th century. Attempts to do this
include taxes, protection of minimum wage, and providing public health and education. These
efforts have been met with criticism from neoliberals. Now in the 21st century the issue has been
revisited and some initiatives include the Asia Wage Floor Alliance that “is demanding a living
wage for garment workers across Asia” (“AFWA”). This initiative is meant to distribute income
between factory workers and owners. However, some economists also argue that redistributing
income is not enough but “democratizing the ownership of wealth,” meaning that property, such
as land among others, must change who it belongs to to really tackle the issue from the root.
Standards for fashion companies is another goal that can lead to a more sustainable economy. This would entail companies to move away from synthetic fibers that get ruined quickly when used in a garment and move to ethically produced materials that last longer. Production has a lot to do with this initiative and it would mean that workers would focus on the quality of the garment instead of how many they can produce in a day. Moving away from paying workers based on the number of pieces they make is another aspect for this standard. As seen in Chapter 2, historically, garments were meant to last multiple years and these people were able to do this because the pieces were carefully and purposefully manufactured. The practice of making clothing has turned from being a craft to a growth tactic.

**Trade Regulations.** Shifting people’s perceptions on fashion and consumption can only take the movement of sustainable fashion so far. Regulation is needed to hold companies accountable and make sure proper procedures are being followed. Additionally, economists and international policy experts, like Robin Cleveland who is part of the U.S. Economic and Security Commission, have expressed their worry with the influence Shein and other international companies have in the U.S. She explained in the *Impact x Nightline: Unboxing Shein* documentary, that Shein has taken advantage of trade loopholes that help them avoid paying certain international tariffs for shipping merchandise overseas. The issue with this is that there is a lack of transparency from companies to governments and NGOs. Therefore, companies who are exploiting their workers are left unnoticed. With stricter regulations, we avoid this from happening and ensure that garment factories are up to standards.

The European Union has put in place a comprehensive model since March 2022. The Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) “establishes a framework to set ecodesign requirements for specific product groups to significantly improve their circularity,
energy performance and other environmental sustainability aspects” (“Ecodesign,” 2022). This regulation makes companies based in the European Union follow a circular economic model, similar to the principals discussed by Raworth. Additionally, the ESPR proposes aid for partnering countries and third world countries as well by removing trade barriers and decreasing the high costs of sustainable products. These efforts will serve as incentives for foreign manufacturers to shift to greener practices. Another interesting proposal is the new “Digital Product Passport” which will allow easy access to a product’s history, manufacturing process, and environmental sustainability. This initiative addresses a lot of the issues mentioned in the past chapters and I believe that it is a great model to start the international sustainability and transparency movement with. The Cradle to Cradle (C2C) approach is another regulation that ensures companies meet current environmental and humanitarian standards. The C2C Certified Standard Version 4.0 was released in 2021, making it one of the most comprehensive regulations in the market. This certification is awarded only to products that have been made while keeping water and soil clean, have had a social fairness and product circularity focus, and have used regulated materials that do not affect the health of people in their surroundings and globally (Materials Market Report, 2022). The C2C Products Innovation Institute website provides detailed information about their certification and products that have been granted this certification. My overarching proposal integrates these three initiatives (ESPR, Digital Product Passport, and C2C Certification) and attempts to make this a worldwide effort. The ESPR has proven its success and has gained credibility, so their standards should be implemented globally to all corporations. The Digital Product Passport will ensure that transparency is at the forefront of trading and will allow the isolation of those companies that do not meet such standards. Finally, the C2C Certification will be a “gold-star” type of branding that will not only help
businesses sell their products but will also protect the environment and human rights around the world. C2C also addresses the economic approach as it requires companies to prioritize quality over quantity and works towards a circular economy which is located within the doughnut at the safe and just space for humanity. Further on, it would be ideal for taxes and incentives such as subsidies to distribute money towards humanitarian aid and public services that improve the environment.

*Humanitarian Aid.* Throughout this paper human rights violations in the fashion industry have been discussed. To mitigate the impacts of the industry, a partnership between international organizations and local governments needs to happen to fund reparatory efforts in impacted countries. The Global South has received a lot of funding in the past and in recent years, however, much of this funding has been directed towards developing economic systems that have an unlimited growth mindset. Instead, capital should be aimed at first, addressing the humanitarian needs of the Global South and second, improving the infrastructure in these countries so that no worker must be fearful of structural integrity in their workplace. Not only that but developing technology in both the Global North and Global South that is greener and sustainable.

Another type of humanitarian aid that can be implemented is action through education. Our future lies in younger generations and generations that are still in the workforce or college. They will be the ones to shape the world’s economy and have to deal with the impending climate crisis. This recommendation is based on improving academic programs around the world, not only in the Global South as many initiatives have focused on. According to the World Bank statistics, in 2022 the final consumption expenditure (FCE) in USD for these top five countries was: United States ($21,081,821), China ($9,523,793.56), Japan ($3,284,785.61), Germany
($2,980,357.21), and the United Kingdom (2,559,415.27) (World Bank 2022). Using data on the FCE is helpful when deciding where to target education programs because it indicates the countries that have the most private and government expenses combined. My reasoning behind this is that primary and secondary education on the impacts of fast fashion, and climate change in general, has the potential to shape the way students consume. It’s never too late to learn and get involved in environmental issues, but it would be even better if there was early exposure to sustainable practices. From the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations (UN), education is number four on the list. Specifically, the goal is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (“Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs”). Having a curriculum with the aid of international humanitarian organizations I believe that this goal can be achieved.

According to the UN, “84 million children and youth will be out of school” if additional measures are not implemented by 2030. This is an incredibly high number of children who will lack the resources to learn about the world around them and discover what their paths can lead to in the future. This is a humanitarian right that should be enforced worldwide. It is a tool to empower marginalized or disadvantaged groups everywhere, namely women. Through education, children and young adults escape exploitative labor conditions and recruitment from dangerous groups (“About the right to education”). However, to this established goal by the UN I propose to add a core requirement relating to sustainability. A lot of UN branches state that education will allow people the opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty and be able to become an active member of their communities. This has capitalist underpinnings because, as mentioned in Chapter 3, it follows the generic path that after graduation the goal is get a job that will pay well. Moving away from this path is challenging because we live in a capitalist society
that does not endorse people who stray from it. Instead, access to decent education will hopefully propel people to make a change in their society. Not only this, but it will encourage the creation of more small businesses which will also provide more job opportunities under a circular economy.

This policy to incorporate green practices and sustainability in early education draws from Earth Work Group’s initiative of encouraging people to consume more consciously. They do not exaggerate the impact this would have because they also recognize the “powerlessness of consumers… and instead thinking about how to reconstitute the entire mode of modern production politically in one systematic transformation to meet ecological constraints” (Luke 1997, 119). Essentially, in this proposal education will provide the tools for people to choose what they want and not force them to comply with the capitalist ideals on how to live a perfect life. I am also hoping to inspire people to move away from overconsumption with this proposal.

Overconsumption and overpopulation are tied together. The evidence behind this is that if there are more people, there is more demand, thus requiring more resources to sustain the population. As mentioned in Chapter 1, at the current growth rate that population is going, the earth will not be able to sustain this amount of people. With more education the issue of overpopulation will go down because when, women specifically, have a higher level of education and countries have a good literacy rate, there are bound to be less pregnancies. With sexual education incorporated into the system, overpopulation, and by association overconsumption, will decrease.

Conclusion. Throughout this paper I have presented information from multiple academic journals, book, and articles that expose the real cost of fast fashion. In the Introduction, I explain that fast fashion is a system that produces clothing at faster rates and cheaper price tags. It is also mentioned that the impacts of this model are not only environmental, but social as well. The film
Confessions of a Shopaholic is also mentioned in the introduction which was the inspiration for the title of the thesis. The first time I watched the movie it immediately resonated with me. I too have been complicit in overconsumption and been driven by ads to buy things I do not necessarily need. I confess I have contributed to fast fashion by buying from Zara, H&M, Gap, and more—thankfully never from Shein. Being on social media platforms forces us to engage with advertisements that promote consumption, and it is nearly impossible to avoid. I acknowledge that as a college student and as a person that wants to fit into the latest styles, limiting shopping has been challenging. But I also realize that it is possible to lead a more sustainable life and managing the temptation to shop with little daily efforts like spending less time on social media, indulging less in unnecessary purchases, and donating clothing to people who would appreciate and need it more.

In Chapter 1 the environmental impacts of fast fashion such as its contribution to climate change, pollution from discarded textiles, and the post-consumer wasteland that further contaminates the surrounding environments and atmosphere by releasing methane and other GHGs were discussed. Moreover, I highlighted how this industry affects the people who work in it through dehumanizing treatment and dangerous working conditions. Thanks to the EJM, the disproportionate impacts that vulnerable communities face has been exposed and grassroots organizations have set the groundwork to fight these injustices. Environmental justice has also been extremely useful in recognizing that countries in the Global South are much burdened with the repercussions of climate change even though the Global North contributes significantly more to the environmental crisis. With regards to labor conditions, the instances in Rana Plaza and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire are prime examples of how management ignored the infrastructure in the workplace. Shein has one of the most obscure reports on labor conditions
and have gotten away with it through greenwashing by publishing statements claiming they are committed to the safety of their workers. However, through first-hand accounts from their workers, it is evident that no efforts to improve the conditions have been implemented.

Chapter 2 analyzed the history of trends and manufacturing processes. In the 19th century fashion was much slower than it is now. Quality was prioritized over quantity and the trend was to wear a carefully designed piece many times. Even with the Industrial Revolution and the development of the spinning wheel, the process of making clothing took longer and was made with more natural, raw materials than now. In the 20th century we see the development of fashion brands and their authority in the industry as they defined trends and styles. Feminism, prohibition, and the Gilded Age in the US were monumental movements that transformed what fashion meant. And now, with globalization and incredible advancements in technology humans across the world are connected through fashion. We have been able to learn from cultures through clothing, make statements of status or style, and have found innovative ways to produce. In this chapter we also see the uniqueness of the 21st century with online stores like Shein, shipping worldwide, and the use of synthetic, cheap fabrics. With social media, trends can be shared as well as discarded faster than ever. There is always a new trend, whether it is “Y2K,” “Old Money,” or even “eclectic grandpa.” However, this has also created an unsustainable consumer behavior. Overconsumption is rampant and it is an unrealistic way of life that few people can keep up with. Fast fashion has promoted these behaviors by creating low-priced items that are easily disposable, which further contribute to the environmental and humanitarian issues discussed in the first chapter.

Chapter 3 broadly discusses economics and how the capitalist theory is an impossibility due to the earth’s limited resources and the increasing demand with the growing population.
Doughnut economics is also introduced in this chapter as a model for regenerative and distributive economics. It aims to address all afflictions from the ecological to social. Some critiques like the metabolic rift between the economy and nature are discussed. It attempts to show that business as usual cannot continue for environmental, humanitarian, and even economic issues. Chapter 4 analyses marketing tactics, social media, and consumer culture. Clothing hauls on social media and influencers have a huge role in promoting fast fashion. Shein’s case is discussed as being extremely smart, but harmful. It also aimed to uncover the innerworkings at Shein by describing and analyzing the ABC News documentary, *Unboxing Shein*. Finally, Chapter 5 recommends trade regulations and collaborations with established organizations to mitigate the impacts of fast fashion.

This thesis was done in a limited time frame which did not allow me to go into every discipline as in depth as initially desired. Being a college student also posed some limitations for Chapter 5 in coming up with policy recommendations. For future research it would be interesting to address the psychology behind shopping. Studies have shown that there is a dopamine release after purchasing an item, and brands have also played into this by creating catchphrases like “Newphoria” by Apple. Additionally, sustainable fashion is far from being a perfect system. Many of the renowned ethical brands like Patagonia, Stella McCartney, and Reformation have done great work in the field, but here is still an issue with affordability in this sector. Much of the ethical clothing made is very expensive and not accessible to all. Accessibility is another issue that still has to be tackled. Increasing popularity in thrifting has taken away clothing from people whose primary source of clothes are second-hand stores. With more experience, time, and knowledge a more comprehensive policy recommendation approach could be developed. Overall, writing this thesis has been an extremely eye-opening experience in which I learned a
lot on an important topic that affects the entire world. It has sparked my interest in the fashion industry and would like to be part of the sustainable fashion revolution.

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