

Fast Fashion and the Future of Sustainability: Environmental, Social and Economic Dimensions of the Global Fashion Industry

Abstract

The global fashion industry has undergone a profound transformation over the past three decades, shifting from seasonal collections to a model of rapid, low-cost production commonly known as fast fashion. While this model has expanded access to trend-driven clothing and generated substantial economic activity, it has simultaneously produced significant environmental degradation, labour exploitation, and unsustainable consumption patterns. This paper examines the fashion industry through three interconnected lenses: environmental impact, social and labor conditions, and consumer behavior, before turning to an analysis of circular economy models and regulatory responses as pathways toward sustainability. Drawing on recent peer-reviewed literature, industry reports, and case studies of companies pursuing alternative business models, the paper argues that meaningful transformation of the fashion industry requires coordinated action across design, production, consumption, and policy domains. It concludes that while circularity, transparency, and regulation offer promising directions, the persistence of the intention-action gap among consumers and the entrenched economics of low-cost apparel remain substantial barriers to systemic change.

Keywords: - *Global Fashion, Sustainability, Fashion Industry, Consumer Behaviour*

1. Introduction

Clothing has always been more than a functional necessity; it is a medium of identity, culture, and social signaling. Yet the way garments are designed, produced, distributed, and discarded has changed dramatically since the late twentieth century. The rise of “fast fashion”—a business model characterized by rapid design-to-shelf cycles, low prices, and frequent new collections—has reshaped consumer expectations around clothing as a low-cost, disposable good rather than a durable investment. Retailers such as Zara, H&M, Shein, and Forever 21 popularized this model by compressing production timelines from months to weeks, enabling consumers in developed markets to purchase trend-driven apparel at unprecedented volumes and speed. The process of

buying clothing is significantly influenced by WOM.

When making selections about what to buy, consumers extensively depend on peer-generated internet views, ratings, unboxing videos, and fashion blogs. (Gaur & Singh, 2025)

This transformation has not been without consequence. The fashion industry is now widely cited as one of the most resource-intensive and polluting sectors in the global economy, implicated in high water consumption, chemical pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and mounting textile waste (Torres Argüelles & Smith, 2024). At the same time, the industry's reliance on low-cost labor in developing economies has raised persistent concerns about wages, safety, and working conditions across global supply chains (Williams, 2022). These environmental and social costs have prompted growing scholarly, regulatory, and consumer interest in more sustainable alternatives, including circular business models, slow fashion movements, and stricter supply chain regulation.

This paper synthesizes recent research to provide a comprehensive overview of the fashion industry's sustainability challenges and the emerging responses to them. Section 2 reviews the scope and methodology of recent literature on fast fashion. Section 3 examines the environmental footprint of the industry, including water use, chemical pollution, and carbon emissions. Section 4 addresses the social and labor dimensions of global apparel supply chains. Section 5 explores consumer behavior and the well-documented gap between sustainability attitudes and actual purchasing decisions. Section 6 discusses circular economy models and business innovation as pathways toward sustainability, followed by a review of policy and regulatory developments in Section 7. Section 8 presents brief case studies of companies pursuing alternative approaches, and Section 9 discusses ongoing challenges and future research directions before the paper concludes in Section 10.

2. Scope and Background of the Literature

Academic interest in the sustainability implications of fast fashion has grown substantially over the past decade. A bibliometric review of 119 articles published between 2012 and 2023 found that research on fast fashion consumption and its environmental impact has expanded rapidly, with recurring themes centered on unsustainable consumption practices and the persistent gap between consumers' stated sustainability intentions and their actual purchasing behavior (Torres

Argüelles & Smith, 2024). Similarly, a systematic review of 65 publications on fast fashion and water quality, spanning 1996 to 2021, found that scholarly attention to the topic intensified sharply after 2016, with the majority of research originating from China and European institutions (Bailey et al., 2022).

Much of this literature converges on a common diagnosis: the fashion industry's linear “take-make-dispose” model, combined with intensifying consumer demand for novelty and low prices, has created a system that externalizes environmental and social costs onto ecosystems and workers in producing countries (Williams, 2022). At the same time, a growing body of research on circular economy strategies suggests that alternative business models—including resale, rental, repair, and closed-loop recycling—offer a potential, if still nascent, path toward decoupling fashion consumption from environmental harm (Ostermann et al., 2021). The remainder of this paper draws on this literature to examine each dimension of the problem in turn.

Methodologically, much of this literature relies on systematic and bibliometric review techniques, aggregating findings across dozens or hundreds of individual studies to identify overarching patterns rather than relying on any single empirical study. This approach has strengths and limitations. On one hand, it allows researchers to identify robust, recurring findings across diverse geographic and disciplinary contexts, lending greater confidence to broad claims about the scale of environmental and social harm associated with fast fashion. On the other hand, aggregated reviews can obscure meaningful variation between firms, countries, and product categories, and they often depend on the availability and quality of the underlying primary research, much of which is concentrated in a relatively small number of journals and geographic regions (Bailey et al., 2022). Readers should therefore interpret industry-wide statistics as useful approximations of scale and direction rather than precise measurements applicable uniformly across every brand or market segment.

3. Environmental Impact of the Fashion Industry

3.1 Water Consumption and Pollution

Textile production is among the most water-intensive industrial processes in the global economy. Cotton cultivation alone requires vast quantities of irrigation, while dyeing and finishing

processes consume additional water and release pollutants into surrounding ecosystems. Textile dyeing and finishing is estimated to account for a substantial share of global industrial water pollution because of the toxic chemicals involved, and wastewater discharged from synthetic textile production has been found to introduce heavy metals and other hazardous substances into waterways (Bailey et al., 2022). The fashion sector has been characterized as the second most polluting industry globally, contributing a significant share of global wastewater alongside a meaningful proportion of worldwide carbon emissions (Bailey et al., 2022).

Beyond dyeing and finishing, the widespread use of synthetic fibers such as polyester has introduced a further water-related concern: microfiber pollution. Every laundering cycle of synthetic garments releases microscopic plastic fibers into wastewater systems, many of which are not fully captured by treatment facilities and eventually enter rivers and oceans, where they persist in aquatic food chains (Bailey et al., 2022).

3.2 Carbon Emissions and Resource Use

The fashion industry's carbon footprint spans the entire product lifecycle, from raw material cultivation and synthetic fiber production, through manufacturing, transportation, retail, and end-of-life disposal. Estimates place the industry's share of global carbon emissions in the high single digits to low double digits, with projections suggesting continued growth in emissions absent significant structural change (Bailey et al., 2022). This trajectory is closely tied to the fast fashion business model itself: shorter design cycles and lower price points encourage higher volumes of production and consumption, which in turn amplify the cumulative energy and material demands of the sector (Torres Argüelles & Smith, 2024).

3.3 Textile Waste

The disposability associated with fast fashion has contributed to a dramatic rise in textile waste. Garments produced quickly and cheaply tend to have shorter usable lifespans, both because of lower material quality and because rapidly changing trends encourage consumers to discard clothing sooner (Torres Argüelles & Smith, 2024). Much of this discarded clothing is landfilled or incinerated rather than recycled, since existing textile recycling infrastructure struggles to process blended fibers and chemically treated fabrics at scale. Research on circular fashion supply chains has noted that the sector generates tens of millions of tons of textile waste

annually, underscoring the urgency of interventions that extend product lifecycles and improve end-of-life material recovery (Ostermann et al., 2021).

3.4 Chemical Use and Biodiversity Impacts

Beyond water and carbon footprints, textile production relies heavily on synthetic dyes, finishing agents, and pesticides used in fiber cultivation, many of which pose risks to both ecosystems and human health when improperly managed. Conventional cotton farming, for instance, is associated with intensive pesticide and fertilizer use, contributing to soil degradation and biodiversity loss in agricultural regions, while downstream dyeing facilities in producing countries have been repeatedly linked to contamination of local waterways when wastewater treatment infrastructure is inadequate or poorly enforced (Bailey et al., 2022). These localized environmental harms tend to be concentrated in the same low- and middle-income producing countries that also bear the brunt of the industry's labor concerns, reinforcing the broader pattern in which the environmental and social costs of fast fashion are disproportionately absorbed by producing regions rather than the wealthier consumer markets where finished garments are ultimately sold.

4. Social and Labor Dimensions

4.1 Global Supply Chains and Outsourcing

The economics of fast fashion depend heavily on low-cost manufacturing, much of which has been outsourced to factories in countries with comparatively low labor costs and less stringent labor regulation. This arrangement has enabled retailers to offer garments at low retail prices while maintaining profit margins, but it has also been linked to substandard wages, unsafe working conditions, and limited worker protections in producing countries (Williams, 2022). Garment manufacturing remains one of the most labor-intensive stages of the apparel value chain, employing tens of millions of workers worldwide, the large majority of whom are women, and a substantial share of whom earn wages below what is generally considered a living wage in their respective countries.

Recent monitoring by labor rights organizations illustrates the fragility of these arrangements. Between March and September 2024 alone, researchers tracked dozens of documented cases of alleged human rights abuses connected to purchasing practices by major fast fashion and luxury

brands, with abrupt order cancellations and shifting sourcing arrangements leaving garment workers across multiple countries facing layoffs and unpaid wages (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024). Such practices reflect a broader dynamic in which the bargaining power of large retailers allows them to shift risk downward through the supply chain, with factories and workers absorbing the consequences of volatile order volumes and price pressure (Miller, 2025).

4.2 Wages and Working Conditions

Wage theft, excessive overtime, and unsafe facilities remain persistent concerns in garment-producing regions. Investigations into domestic manufacturing in the United States have similarly uncovered violations; a U.S. Department of Labor investigation into garment factories linked to a major fast fashion company found workers being paid well below the legal minimum wage, with substantial sums owed in unpaid back wages (Faegre Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP, 2025). Comparable findings have emerged from state-level investigations, including a 2016 review of garment companies in California that uncovered labor violations in the vast majority of factories examined, with workers paid at rates well below the applicable minimum wage (Miller, 2025).

Importantly, research suggests that the cost of remedying these conditions may be modest relative to the retail price of finished garments. Economic analyses have found that paying a living wage throughout the supply chain could be achieved with only a small increase in the retail price of individual items, suggesting that current wage practices reflect business choices rather than strict economic necessity (Good On You, 2025). This finding has informed policy proposals, including joint liability frameworks such as California's Garment Worker Protection Act, which holds brands and manufacturers jointly responsible for wage theft within their supply chains (Faegre Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP, 2025).

4.3 Feminization of Labor and Gendered Risk

A substantial share of garment manufacturing work is performed by women, a pattern that scholars have described as the “feminization of labor” within globalized apparel supply chains. This concentration of women in the industrial workforce reflects both the historical association of textile and garment work with feminized labor and the tendency of manufacturers to seek workers perceived as more readily available for low-wage, precarious employment. Women

garment workers frequently face compounding vulnerabilities, including limited job security, restricted collective bargaining power, and, in numerous documented cases, exposure to workplace harassment (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024). Addressing these gendered dimensions of labor exploitation has become an increasing focus of both academic research and advocacy efforts, with calls for stronger protections specifically tailored to the risks faced by women in garment-producing regions.

5. Consumer Behavior and the Intention-Action Gap

A recurring finding across the sustainability literature is the existence of a gap between consumers' stated environmental values and their actual purchasing behavior. Surveys consistently find that consumers express concern about the environmental and ethical dimensions of fashion consumption, yet purchasing patterns often continue to favor low-cost, trend-driven items over more sustainable alternatives (Torres Argüelles & Smith, 2024). This intention-action gap has been explained through several psychological and structural mechanisms, including the low price and high convenience of fast fashion relative to sustainable alternatives, limited consumer knowledge about the actual environmental impact of specific purchases, and the social and cultural value placed on novelty and trend participation.

Marketing and communication strategies also shape how consumers interpret sustainability claims. Recent literature review work grounded in consumer psychology frameworks has examined how product design and labeling interact with consumer perception to influence purchasing decisions, offering guidance for brands and policymakers seeking to design more persuasive and trustworthy eco-labeling systems (Torres Argüelles & Smith, 2024). This line of research suggests that closing the intention-action gap will likely require not only greater availability of sustainable products, but also clearer, more credible signaling of sustainability attributes at the point of purchase, since vague or unsubstantiated claims can undermine consumer trust and contribute to skepticism about “greenwashing.”

Consumer-facing circular practices, such as clothing rental and resale, have also begun to reshape purchasing norms in some market segments. The growth of resale platforms and rental services reflects a shift in perception around secondhand and shared garments, from being viewed as a compromise to being framed as a desirable, even fashionable, choice, particularly

among younger consumers (Fashion Practice, 2026, as cited via circular fashion literature). Nonetheless, these alternative consumption models remain a small fraction of overall apparel spending relative to conventional fast fashion retail.

5.1 Greenwashing and Consumer Trust

As sustainability has become a more prominent marketing theme, concerns about greenwashing—the practice of overstating or misrepresenting the environmental benefits of a product—have grown correspondingly. Vague terminology such as “eco-friendly” or “conscious collection,” when unaccompanied by verifiable data or third-party certification, can create the appearance of sustainability without corresponding changes in production practices. Regulatory scrutiny of these claims has increased, with proposed updates to environmental marketing guidelines in the United States aiming to establish clearer standards for what brands can legitimately claim about the sustainability of their products (Faegre Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP, 2025). For consumers, distinguishing credible sustainability claims from marketing rhetoric remains genuinely difficult, particularly given the technical complexity of lifecycle assessments and the absence of a single, universally recognized labeling standard across the industry.

6. Circular Economy and Sustainable Business Models

In response to mounting environmental and social pressures, a growing segment of the fashion industry has begun exploring circular economy principles as an alternative to the traditional linear model of production and disposal. Circular economy approaches seek to keep materials in use for as long as possible through strategies such as design for durability and repairability, take-back and resale programs, rental and subscription services, and closed-loop recycling of textile fibers (Ostermann et al., 2021). These approaches align with broader global sustainability frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 12 on responsible consumption and production.

A review of the ready-to-wear fashion sector's transition from linear to circular models identified several recurring business model archetypes, including product-as-a-service offerings, reuse and redistribution schemes, resource recovery operations, repair and maintenance services, and the use of recycled or circular material inputs (Colombi & D'Itria, 2023). Startups have played a particularly prominent role in pioneering these models, often because they are unencumbered by

the legacy infrastructure and short-term financial pressures that can make circular transitions more difficult for established mass-market retailers (Ostermann et al., 2021).

Digital technologies are increasingly intertwined with circular business model innovation. Research on digital transformation in the fashion sector has found that technologies such as supply chain traceability platforms, digital product passports, and data-driven demand forecasting can support circular strategies by improving transparency, reducing overproduction, and enabling more efficient material recovery (Colombi & D'Itria, 2023). At the same time, scholars caution that circularity alone does not guarantee sustainability outcomes; the environmental and social benefits of circular models depend heavily on how they are implemented, including whether resale and rental services genuinely displace new production or simply add an additional layer of consumption alongside it.

6.1 Barriers to Circular Adoption at Scale

Despite promising pilot programs and startup innovation, circular business models remain a small fraction of overall industry revenue. Several structural barriers help explain this gap. Repair, resale, and rental services typically require more labor-intensive operations, such as inspection, cleaning, and refurbishment, than conventional new-product retail, which can compress profit margins relative to selling new items at scale. Existing recycling infrastructure is also poorly matched to the material complexity of modern garments, many of which combine multiple fiber types, trims, and finishes that complicate mechanical and chemical recycling processes. Furthermore, established fast fashion retailers have significant sunk investment in linear supply chains optimized for speed and volume, creating organizational and financial inertia against restructuring toward circular models, even when leadership expresses interest in sustainability (Colombi & D'Itria, 2023). Overcoming these barriers is likely to require not only individual firm-level innovation but also shared infrastructure investment, such as regional textile sorting and recycling facilities that no single company could economically justify building alone.

7. Policy and Regulatory Developments

Regulatory bodies in multiple jurisdictions have begun to respond to fashion's sustainability challenges through both labor and environmental policy instruments. In the United States, state-

level legislation such as California's Garment Worker Protection Act has introduced joint liability provisions designed to hold brands accountable for wage practices throughout their supply chains, shifting incentives away from aggressive price pressure on manufacturers (Faegre Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP, 2025). At the federal level, regulatory agencies have also begun scrutinizing sustainability marketing claims; proposed updates to environmental marketing guidance aim to curb misleading “green” claims, reflecting growing regulatory concern about greenwashing in apparel marketing (Faegre Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP, 2025).

In Europe, extended producer responsibility schemes and forthcoming textile-specific regulation are pushing brands toward greater accountability for the full lifecycle of their products, including collection and recycling obligations. Broader corporate sustainability due diligence requirements are also beginning to require companies to identify and address human rights and environmental risks within their supply chains, rather than relying solely on voluntary codes of conduct. Taken together, these regulatory trends suggest a gradual shift from voluntary industry self-governance toward binding legal obligations, although enforcement capacity and cross-border coordination remain significant challenges, particularly given the geographically dispersed nature of apparel supply chains.

International frameworks add a further layer to this regulatory landscape. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 12 on responsible consumption and production, have provided a widely referenced normative benchmark against which national policies and corporate sustainability strategies are increasingly measured, even though the goals themselves are non-binding and rely on voluntary national implementation. Industry-led certification schemes and multi-stakeholder initiatives, such as factory safety accords adopted following high-profile industrial disasters in the garment sector, have similarly sought to fill regulatory gaps where formal government oversight is limited, though their effectiveness depends heavily on the willingness of participating brands to enforce compliance among their suppliers and to withstand competitive pressure from non-participating competitors offering lower prices. The overall regulatory picture, then, is one of gradual convergence around stronger accountability standards, layered unevenly across binding national law, regional directives, and voluntary international frameworks, with significant variation in enforcement strength from one jurisdiction to the next.

8. Case Studies in Alternative Business Models

Several companies have positioned themselves as counterexamples to the fast fashion model, offering insight into the practical challenges and opportunities of pursuing sustainability at scale. Patagonia has long emphasized product durability, repair services, and recycled materials, alongside public advocacy for environmental causes, positioning quality and longevity as central to its brand identity rather than novelty and low price. Eileen Fisher has similarly built take-back and resale programs into its core business model, encouraging customers to return worn garments for resale or material recovery rather than disposal. Analyses of circular fashion supply chains point to these companies, alongside supportive European Union policy frameworks, as evidence that take-back programs and recycled material commitments can meaningfully divert garments from landfill and increase the share of recycled content in new products, even if such practices remain far from standard across the industry as a whole.

At the other end of the spectrum, mass-market fast fashion retailers have faced sustained criticism for the pace and scale of their production. Ultra-fast fashion platforms, which have compressed design-to-shelf timelines even further than earlier fast fashion pioneers, have drawn particular scrutiny for extremely high volumes of new product releases and correspondingly short garment lifespans. Some of these retailers have introduced resale marketplaces, recycled-content pledges, and take-back bins in an effort to signal sustainability commitment, yet critics argue that such initiatives divert attention from the far larger environmental footprint generated by the sheer volume of new garment production, which continues to grow year over year even as recycling and take-back programs expand (Torres Argüelles & Smith, 2024). This tension between incremental sustainability initiatives and continued volume growth illustrates a broader challenge facing the industry: piecemeal interventions, however well intentioned, may struggle to offset the environmental consequences of a business model whose core profitability still depends on selling ever-increasing quantities of low-cost clothing.

These contrasting cases illustrate a spectrum of industry responses, from incremental sustainability commitments layered onto largely unchanged business models, to more fundamental reorientations of what a fashion company's core value proposition can be. Between these poles sit a growing number of mid-sized and heritage brands experimenting with hybrid strategies, such as offering repair services alongside conventional retail, or introducing capsule

collections made from recycled or regeneratively farmed materials while continuing to operate a broader conventional product line. Whether such hybrid approaches represent a meaningful transition pathway or a form of selective sustainability branding is likely to depend on the scale at which these initiatives are implemented relative to a company's overall production volume, a distinction that is not always transparent from publicly available sustainability reporting.

8.1 Regional Dynamics: Producing and Consuming Countries

The sustainability challenges of the fashion industry are not evenly distributed across the globe. Consumption is concentrated primarily in high-income markets in North America, Europe, and increasingly parts of Asia, while production is concentrated in a smaller set of manufacturing hubs, including Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, India, and China, among others. This geographic separation between consumption and production has important implications for accountability: environmental degradation from dyeing and finishing facilities, along with the bulk of labor conditions concerns, is experienced most directly in producing countries, while the economic and cultural benefits of low-cost, trend-driven apparel accrue disproportionately to consumers in wealthier importing nations (Williams, 2022). This asymmetry complicates both the political economy of reform, since regulatory jurisdiction over factories typically rests with producing-country governments that may have limited enforcement capacity or competing economic priorities, and the practical logistics of supply chain oversight, since brands headquartered thousands of miles away often rely on multiple tiers of subcontractors whose practices can be difficult to monitor directly.

9. Challenges and Future Directions

Despite growing momentum toward circularity and regulatory oversight, several structural challenges continue to constrain progress toward a more sustainable fashion industry. First, the economics of fast fashion remain deeply entrenched: low consumer prices depend on low-cost labor and high production volumes, and shifting away from this model without adequate transition support risks displacing workers in producing countries who depend on garment manufacturing for their livelihoods (Williams, 2022). Second, textile recycling technology remains underdeveloped relative to the scale of global textile waste, particularly for blended-

fiber garments that are difficult to separate and reprocess using current mechanical and chemical recycling methods.

Third, the intention-action gap in consumer behavior suggests that supply-side reforms alone will be insufficient; meaningful change likely requires parallel shifts in consumer culture, including reduced emphasis on constant novelty and greater normalization of repair, resale, and reduced consumption (Torres Argüelles & Smith, 2024). Finally, the global and fragmented nature of apparel supply chains complicates enforcement of both labor and environmental standards, since responsibility is often diffused across multiple countries, subcontractors, and regulatory jurisdictions, making comprehensive oversight difficult even where strong domestic regulation exists.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal studies that track the actual environmental and social outcomes of circular business models over time, rather than relying primarily on projected or self-reported figures from company sustainability reports. Comparative policy analysis across jurisdictions could also help identify which regulatory approaches most effectively translate into measurable improvements in labor conditions and environmental outcomes, informing more effective policy design as governments continue to develop textile-specific regulation.

9.1 Implications for Stakeholders

For brands and retailers, the evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that durable competitive advantage in a more sustainability-conscious market may increasingly depend on genuine investment in supply chain transparency, durable product design, and credible sustainability communication, rather than incremental marketing adjustments layered onto an otherwise unchanged production model. For policymakers, the persistence of labor violations and environmental harm despite years of voluntary corporate sustainability commitments suggests that binding regulation, robust enforcement mechanisms, and cross-border coordination are likely necessary complements to industry self-governance. For consumers, closing the intention-action gap may depend less on individual willpower and more on structural changes that make sustainable choices more accessible, affordable, and legible, including clearer labeling, expanded resale and rental infrastructure, and broader cultural shifts away from constant novelty as a marker of status. Finally, for researchers, the field would benefit from greater methodological

diversity, including primary data collection in producing countries, longitudinal tracking of circular business model outcomes, and closer collaboration between environmental scientists, labor economists, and consumer psychologists to capture the genuinely interdisciplinary nature of the sustainability challenges facing the fashion industry.

10. Conclusion

The global fashion industry sits at the intersection of some of the most pressing sustainability challenges of the twenty-first century, spanning water pollution, carbon emissions, textile waste, and labor exploitation. The fast fashion model that has driven the industry's growth over the past three decades has delivered clear benefits in terms of affordability and access to trend-driven clothing, but these benefits have come at substantial environmental and social cost, much of which has been externalized onto ecosystems and workers in producing countries. Emerging circular economy strategies, strengthened regulatory frameworks, and shifting consumer attitudes each offer partial pathways toward a more sustainable industry, yet none is sufficient in isolation. Meaningful transformation will likely require coordinated progress across design, production, consumption, and policy simultaneously, along with sustained scholarly attention to measuring whether emerging interventions produce genuine environmental and social benefits or merely shift the industry's costs elsewhere. As consumer awareness, regulatory pressure, and business model innovation continue to evolve, the fashion industry's trajectory over the coming decade will offer an important test case for whether large, globally dispersed consumer industries can be meaningfully reoriented toward sustainability.

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