

# Fast Fashion

Ethically meeting the  
modern fashion demands



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# Overview

## Fast fashion: The mass production of clothing

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Fast fashion has dominated the clothing industry in recent years. The rise of influencers on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram has created a buying culture like no other. Comment sections are filled with people asking where they got a particular outfit, and TikTok users can add links to their bios to speed up the consumerism process, and even see a percentage of proceeds (Herrman).

In order to meet the increasing demand for clothing, companies have started to export labor overseas, as well as use sweatshop labor within the United States. If people are seeking clothes, they're getting them at incredibly reduced prices. These prices are a result of these factory workers being underpaid, and often in hazardous working conditions.

Companies want to spend less money, people want more clothes, and it is a vicious cycle of trying to keep up with demand in a way that won't break the bank.

It is important to note the environmental consequences of fast fashion as well. With this type of rapid consumerism,

people are much less likely to hold on to one article of clothing for very long, as things quickly go in and out of style (Greenwood).

This means that clothing that people no longer want is filling up landfills and creating waste problems. The textile industry is also responsible for using a lot of water and polluting it with dyes and other toxic chemicals as well (Europe). While we are mainly focusing on the ethics of fast fashion, it is still important to consider the environmental impact throughout the approaches in the booklet.

The solutions to the issue of fast fashion are outlined in this booklet. They include regulating big businesses, government investment in ethical fashion, and shifting cultural expectations on fashion. These approaches range from governmental actions, down to the actions of the people.

We recommend reading through our booklet, and really weighing the pros and cons of every approach. While there may not be one perfect solution, it's important to consider what is important to you as a consumer, and what you're willing to trade in order to get it.

# Approach 1: Big Businesses Should be Directly Regulated

## REGULATING FAST FASHION: IS IT THE SOLUTION?

Regulating the activities of the large companies that dominate the fast fashion industry could be an approach to solving the arguable ethical issues of the industry and the practices of the companies. Many fashion companies utilize the practice of outsourcing in order to reduce the costs of business activities. However, this is not a new business practice, as we have seen this method be used since the 1960s. During the 1960s, Mexico built factories called 'Maquiladoras' that allowed the parent company's administrative facility to be in the United States. This helped companies lower expenses and it greatly increased the number of people employed in Mexico. This caught the eyes of other countries and they also began outsourcing production under Mexico's Maquiladora system as well as other countries like India or China.

This practice allows fashion companies to produce clothing quickly by hiring third parties overseas to handle the manufacturing of their products. However, this had led companies to seek further ways to reduce costs. Companies may underpay workers that they outsource and put little effort into ensuring safe working conditions in overseas factories. There are also environmental impacts to be addressed as companies that outsource production in countries with few regulations contribute to higher carbon emissions and more pollution.

For years, policy experts expected the fast fashion industry to 'regulate itself' upon the rise of environmental problems, human rights violations, and poor working conditions. However, there has been no sign of these questionable business practices slowing down. According to Pietra Rivoli, a professor of Finance and International Business at the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University, the government should look toward labor rights and child protection regulations as the current business practices of fast fashion companies are not sustainable. However, we should not just be looking at possible regulations on companies' oversea practices, but also what occurs domestically within the fast fashion industry. While some may argue that moving production from foreign to domestic is more ethical, the same issues can still occur domestically. The U.S. Department of Labor found that over 50,000 immigrant women work in Los Angeles' clothing production industry and that 85% of factories violate labor, wage, and hour laws.



Regulating the fashion companies is a possible approach for responding to the ethical issues surrounding the industry. Many fashion companies outsource, or pay third parties for certain services, allowing fashion companies to produce and sell clothing more quickly. This is a popular business practice because reduces the costs of manufacturing and makes the process move faster. However the practice has been the center of controversy due to it often resulting in human and labor rights violations.

## Summary

- Outsourcing began in the 1960's with Mexico's "Maquiladora" system, and it helped to increase employment in Mexico and lower costs
- Experts previously thought it best for the fashion industry to "regulate itself," however, many of these business exploit human rights and laws.
- Now, experts advocate for government intervention, such as Pietra Rivoli, a professor at Georgetown University.

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## Pros

- Worker and laborers benefit from higher pay and better working conditions
- Advancement of human rights and expansion of personal freedoms
- Better material used for the environment
- Clothes will be of better quality and will likely last longer

## Cons

- Will take time; governments must form and create legislation, and firms then must change how they run business
- Companies will likely make less profits, as the cost of production increases
- Cost of clothes will increase
- Highly complex problem and highly complex solution



# Approach 2: The Federal Government Should Educate and Regulate

## Action 1: Apply Previous Laws to Fast Fashion

Previously the government had a program called The Sustainable Action Program which asked companies to commit to a waste reduction of -3.5% by 2020, however there was only a -2.3% reduction. The companies were not punished for failing to meet their goal. One way to implement this solution would be to reintroduce this program in a bill similar to the United Kingdoms' Waste Prevention Programme. This program allows the government to regulate construction, textiles, furniture, electronics and electrical equipment, etc. This bill would give the government the ability to set the standards on the durability of clothes and the amount of recycled content. They have also produced a voluntary agreement that would ask signees to commit to lowering their carbon emissions.

U.S. Senator from New York, Kirsten Gillibrand introduced the FABRIC act that mirrors the U.K. act. The FABRIC act recognizes that 97% of garments are made out of the United States. This act establishes a \$40 million Domestic Grant Manufacturing Support Program that would encourage the restoration of local manufacturing, improvement of safety, and workforce development.

This act would guarantee minimum wage for garment workers, creates accountable wages up and down the supply chain, introduces recordkeeping and transparency, incentives companies to return their manufacturing to America, and creates a grant program that revitalizes the garment manufacturing industry.

One step the government can take is to create an agency like EPA that will enforce ethical practices. For example, France has a minister of fashion that has worked to prevent fashion companies from destroying unsold merchandise and has proposed a zero waste law. There are a few downsides to this approach. One is that none of these options will cause a radical change. A huge part of this issue will still fall onto the consumers. Another issue is that these all require funding from American taxpayers.

## Action 2: Create and fund educational programs and research

Along with adapting previous legislation and creating new ones, the government can create new programs that educate the public and create awareness.

Many Americans, especially those without social media, are not aware of the moral and environmental issues that many major brands cause. Fashion is the second largest polluter, following the oil industry (Junginger).



The European Union has already begun public-education programs that the United States can model. For instance, the European Commission has funded the “SMART Textile and Garments” project which is a Pan-European campaign that’s raising awareness of environmental, moral, and social consequences of fashion (Henao). The fashion industry represents a very large part of our economies, with a value of more than \$2.5 trillion and employing over 75 million people (“Environmental Sustainability”). It’s unrealistic to expect the country to completely stop the buying and use of unethical clothing.

An approach the U.S. can take is putting funding into research for innovative methods of producing clothes and collecting pollutants. The government can put funding into research for alternative textiles that are just as cheap as plastic-based textiles but are environmentally friendly.

Also, a model we can follow is the E.U. which has created the “Strategy for Sustainable Textiles” which is part of the wider “European Green Deal.”

This plan has the goal of reducing the impact of fashion on the environment by adopting a new Circular Economy Plan, and they aspire to achieve high levels of separate textile waste collection by 2025 (Henao).

But if the government were to create and lead educational programs or research, where would this funding come from?

Realistically, they would have to take funding out of another sector of government or find new methods of sourcing funds which might lead to public opposition.



### **Action 3: Join and Create Alliances for Ethical Production**

The United States can also take a less direct approach by supporting and communicating with international initiatives. The U.N. has created the Alliance for Sustainable Fashion which was designed to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals of the organization through coordinated actions in the fashion sector (“What Is the UN Alliance”). The U.S. government can support this group along with other groups formed by reliable national and international organizations.

The government can also create an alliance that companies can join if they can prove they are ethical, regarding the environment and work-sourcing, and meet specific requirements set by the government. These companies will receive perks such as governmental funding and promotion. Although with this action, it’s important to consider the boundaries that the government can’t cross in the market and with U.S. companies.

Also, if the nation were to join an international alliance, they would have to hire or move personnel to be a delegate for the U.S. which can be tedious and requires time and money.



#### SUMMARY

- U.S. government can apply previous laws for small businesses and environmental laws to specifically fast fashion
- U.S. can model laws and policies that have been implemented by other countries, as well laws that have been implemented in cities or states in the U.S.
- Government can fund programs that educate the public or fund research to find environmentally-friendly alternatives
- U.S. can join international alliances or create national ones for American fashion companies that have goals of ethical production and sustainability

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#### PROS

- U.S. government is very influential and has a large reach across the nation
- U.S. joining international organizations might encourage other large nations to join
- Putting funding into research now will have long-time impacts
- The U.S. taking legislative action will help make fast fashion a legitimate and urgent issue

#### CONS

- New laws will most likely not create radical changes
- Any changes will most likely fall on consumers (higher prices)
- Government would have to take funding from another area or get new funding (taxes)
- Government would need to hire more employees that focus on fast fashion or to be the U.S. delegate in international initiatives
- The fashion industry is a large sector of the world economy (one small change can be disruptive)



# Approach 3: Shift Cultural Perceptions of Fashion

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## FAST FASHION IN POP CULTURE

News articles flood the screen when you search "fast fashion", all discussing the dangers of the recent cultural phenomenon. Each of them recognizes the harm to not only our environment but to each other, with each other as the inhumane treatment of workers becomes commonplace in fashion companies. Who is to blame for this? Companies? Governments? In all reality...we are the problem.

According to Open Access Government, a digital publication organization devoted to covering key issues around the world, notes: "[we are] accelerating fast fashion culture through constantly changing trend cycles." With such trends as fashion hauls where people display the large amounts of clothing they bought at once. Further micro-trends like the "Dupe" trend have contributed to the perpetuation of fast fashion culture. Social media apps, which have remained a primary outlet of pop culture contribute to this too. Social media influencers fail to promote the issues with fast fashion and continue to glorify it. Social media is a powerful tool for spreading advocacy but also works against such efforts by promoting harmful companies.

## THE DEATH OF MALLS

One place that promoted the ideals that would be effective in combating fast fashion is malls. They promote slower fashion principles as well as encouraging consumers to think more about their purchases. However, with the growth of online shopping as well as the shutdown of most shops during the COVID-19 pandemic, malls are failing. This is partially due to the lack of customers from COVID causing not enough money to maintain the mall making many appear run down, further discouraging customers. A blog by Forrest Morgenson, an assistant professor of marketing at the Michigan State Board College of Business discusses how while the impacts of COVID are lessening, which is causing a rise in the prevalence of brick and mortar shopping, the availability of online shopping is causing a long term problem for small shops and malls.





## SOLUTIONS

To combat this, we should push money to revitalize the malls, giving them the luster that once drew in customers. We also need to encourage them to shop sustainably via education either in schools or on social media. Social media specifically should be used as a tool to boycott brands that practice inhumane treatment of workers and spread helpful messages, not promote fast fashion. When put together, we could shift the cultural ideas of fast fashion and make sustainable, environmentally friendly, and slow fashion popular. Ultimately the issue begins with our views on fashion and thus must end in the same place, with our views changing to something more sustainable for the future.

## PROS

- Social media can be used to boycott and encourage brands to manufacture sustainably.
- Getting the issues of fast fashion taught in schools would massively spread awareness on the issue.
- Pushing money into malls to revitalize them would encourage brick and mortar and slow fashion.
- Encouraging people to shop sustainably or second hand from thrift stores would help combat fast fashion.
- Encouraging people to find their own style and not give into micro trends starting with influencers would be massive in combating bad practices.

## SUMMARY

- Fast fashion is perpetrated by social media and pop culture.
- There isn't enough education on the problems with fast fashion.
- Online shopping and COVID 19 made malls and other brick and mortar retailers face issues.
- Inhumane working conditions are a big problem.
- Social media can be a platform for advocacy but isn't being used effectively.
- There is a focus on quantity versus quality when it comes to fashion.
- People aren't looking to closet staples.
- Sustainable shopping isn't being practiced.

## CONS

- Boycotting is not possible for everyone, especially those of lower socioeconomic status and there is no guarantee on effectivity.
- Changing curriculum is extremely difficult and finding a spot for the discussion is also difficult.
- Money going into malls and brick and mortar shops would need to come from taxes or cuts in other areas.
- Thrifting by people who can afford to pay more brings up the prices on people who need lower priced clothing.
- Changing social media popular ideas takes lots of time, like it did with making body positivity popular.

# Conclusion

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## APPROACH 1 - REGULATION

In approach 1, we discussed government regulation of fast fashion. This solution would bring higher pay and better working conditions to workers. The quality of clothes would also increase drastically. This solution would likely decrease companies' profits, causing an increase in the price of clothes. It would also be very complex, as different countries would have different regulations.

## APPROACH 3 - CULTURE SHIFT

In approach 3, we conversed about creating a culture shift regarding fashion. This solution leaves the power to create change with the people. They are responsible for their own decisions. If successful, the ethical fashion industry built by it would be very strong. One negative of this solution is that it would be harder for people of lower-economic status to participate in. High-quality, ethically produced clothes are expensive. Another hurdle with this solution is convincing enough people to take part; it is easy to keep participating in the culture of fast fashion, so people will need to be convinced to change their mindset.

## APPROACH 2 - INVESTMENT

In approach 2, we talked about government investment in sustainable/ethical fashion. One positive of this solution is its ease. The U.S. government has enough money and influence to bring about change in an industry if it wants to. The U.S. taking a stand against fast fashion will also likely lead to allied nations considering the same changes. One con is that like approach 1, this would likely raise prices for consumers. The money used to invest would also either be reallocated from a different sector of government or received by increasing taxes.



# Survey



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**Conclusion:**

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