Takes Two to Tango: The Fusion of Slow Fashion and Agroecology to Combat the Fast Fashion Industry

Sejal Krell
University of Denver

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Takes Two to Tango: The Fusion of Slow Fashion and Agroecology to Combat the Fast Fashion Industry

Sejal Krell

Economics Department: University of Denver

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Advisor: Dr. Chiara Piovani

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Abstract

Fast fashion has been around for longer than the world can remember, after all, there has always been a need for clothes. Nonetheless, it has not been until the past 50 years that fast fashion has become a titan within the industry. Many consider it to be the golden child of fashion with its low production costs, mass retailing, and low prices reaching consumers of all socioeconomic levels. However, the realities of this industry – specifically pertaining to the environment, economy, social sphere, and public health – reveal a different story, of injustice. After discussing the history and rise of the fast fashion sector, this paper plans to go into depth on just how inequitable fast fashion is in terms of social imbalance, the environment, economy, and public health. Toward the end, this paper will discuss how this problem is much like one that was faced in the agriculture sector, allowing for a more sustainable and equitable solution to be provided over the current “slow fashion” solution the world has today.

Key words: fast fashion, environment, economics, outsourcing, pollution, waste, health, agroecology, slow fashion
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1. Introduction

As far as scientists know today, Earth is the only planet that can sustain human life. However, the life humans lead today comes at a price, one of which entails destroying the very ground they have planted their roots in. That is why the Planetary Boundaries Framework has become a large contributor to the question and solution of what should occur when it comes how this perpetual damage can be stopped. The Planetary Boundaries Framework is the base of every question asked in Environmental Economics, it provides a range of operations that are safe for humans to partake in according to the biophysical processes of the Earth (Rockström et. al, 2009). This framework takes into consideration all different aspects of the environment from ocean acidification to land system change (Rockström et. al, 2009) and has become increasingly popular over the years. Nonetheless, even with its increasing popularity and its supposed insertion into all environmental considerations, it has not been taken that highly into consideration when looking at the fashion industry and its proceedings. This lack of consideration has now caused humanity’s ecological footprint to increase by 173%, exceeding the planet’s biocapacity by over 50% (WWF, 2020). By exceeding the planet’s biocapacity and the risks involved with this behavior, it is driving the destruction of the environment and all surrounding civilizations.

The fashion industry today is dominated by what is called “fast-fashion.” It was fortunate enough to arise from the Industrial Revolution: the flocking of masses towards the city and the increase in mass production through the invention of machines. Fast fashion is the idea of mass-producing clothing items at a low production cost (Crumbie, 2021).
This industry has maintained its dominance through how important clothing and fashion has become in society today. Human beings have evolved since the time of Neanderthals, needing clothes on their backs to survive; however, with quality comes a hefty price. As individuals, human beings tend to want and navigate towards the ‘best’ things, no matter the consequences. Society has a ranking, class system, and if humans can show off the money, they have then they will be better off. Therefore, the fast fashion industry has stayed on top through these ideals that society holds because they are not only mass producers of clothing items but are known to be mass producers of clothing items considered to be “high-end” at a cheaper price (Crumbie, 2021).

While it might seem like the fast fashion industry is a great idea for those of impoverished or low socioeconomic communities, it has the opposite effect. This industry runs on the concept of false efficiency and ideals, starting all the way from the cotton that is being produced in farmlands. The fast fashion industry is controlled by large corporations, controlling a large majority of the water and land in this world, allowing consumers to think their production processes are efficient and good for the world, when they produce less than organic farming and harm those of the less-fortunate population (Shiva, 2016).

These large corporations are known to contribute to negative environmental impacts in “developing” countries such as their large carbon footprint – in 2015, textile industry contributed to 10% of greenhouse gas emissions – and large water use – using 79 billion cubic meters to produce textiles and cotton (Niinimaki et. al, 2020). Additionally, there are over 15,000 chemicals used in just the manufacturing process of textiles and these chemicals are often leached into soils, groundwater, water, or the air adding to the pollution to Earth’s atmosphere and environment (Niinimaki et. al, 2020).
Not only has society been stuck in this perpetual cycle of negative externalities from the fast fashion industry but also a perpetual cycle of inequities within the labor industry. Fast fashion has contributed to many low-wage jobs with long hours leading to low quality of life/happiness, sickness, and possible death (Clark, 2008).

These negative externalities from the fast fashion industry display its negative contribution to the environment. Despite this alarming evidence, however, it does not seem like this cycle will end anytime soon. Rather, additional data reveals how global consumption of apparel is not going to decrease or stop anytime soon but increase to 102 million tons by 2030 (Niinimaki et al., 2020). This expected increase in consumption – with no regards to its environmental impacts – reveals the blatant disregard for any of the planetary boundaries to keep Earth able to function for future generations. Society is currently living outside of the planetary boundaries and needs to move back inside, starting with the fast fashion industry as it has become so necessary in people’s lives. Furthermore, it has not only become necessary, but a burden to the social welfare of so many lives. Individuals are being faced consequences to their health and face the overwhelming possibility of labor displacement daily. Therefore, how does one go about controlling such a large industry and, is it even possible?

When one looks at the fast fashion industry from start to finish – from farm to a person’s back – they notice something that would not be caught on a normal day: its production process is very similar to that of industrial agriculture. The fashion industry uses the same chemicals, and processes (such as large farmlands, and HYVs) to produce their clothing materials (cotton, polyester, etc.) as does the industrial agriculture sector. These similarities are not a coincidence as both sectors have become dominated by large corporations with the same ideals. However, there is a way to combat the negative externalities coming out of them; much like has been
talked about before with industrial agriculture, the fashion industry has the potential capacity to move in a sustainable direction by embracing agroecology. Agroecology is based on the ideas of restoring natural, organic, and small-minded ideals to the production process. In other words, agroecology is a way to return farmland back to local farmers, increase the biodiversity, and eliminate the chemicals that are being used to treat these organisms; all of which will help the world thrive (Shiva, 2016). The way agroecology can be translated onto the fast fashion industry will later be explored.

This paper is going to explore how fast fashion arose to such a dominant industry and how it has been able to stay in power for so long despite the blatant consequences it has on the economy and public health. This paper will also discuss recommendations on how to combat them by combining agroecology and slow fashion into one sustainable alternative. A case study on India and its transition to a more sustainable fashion industry through these measures will also be examined.

2. History and Rise of the Fast Fashion Industry

The world thought the Industrial Revolution to be the new modern era that brought some of the best new inventions yet; there was the ability for ready-to-wear garments and costs of production were lower than before. However, little did they know that this large step for mankind was a disastrous small step for Earth.

Fast fashion did not emerge out of nowhere, but rather slowly gained momentum during the 1900s, exploding across the world in 1980. Fast fashion became world-renowned in 1980 due to the creation of new technology (cameras, video cameras, etc.) and mass communication, which caused the high-end styles of the fashion industry to no longer be kept secret from the public (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). These new trends, clothing styles, and more were plastered in
every magazine one could get their hands on, allowing fast fashion corporations to cheaply make “designer knockoffs” (Cohen, 2011). Nonetheless, the irony of this rise is that the biggest culprit in all of this is not the technology that arose from the Industrial Revolution or even after, but rather the change in behavior of consumers themselves.

While it is true that these firms were fortunate enough to have the technology to produce clothing and have it for sale all within a few days, that is not what made it thrive. Fast fashion is known for its low-cost both during the production process and during retail. That is, the fast fashion labor-intensive production method is seen as a low-cost to the firms – focusing on production in ‘developing countries’ – allowing firms to increase demand and therefore sales by providing low prices at the retail level. In addition, many of the garments and clothes that are sold in fast fashion stores such as Zara, Uniqlo, H&M, etc. are modeled after high-end fashion pieces but at a much lower cost. This has allowed the fast fashion industry to not only appear but survive and rise because of its idea of stocking items in small amounts for lower prices which would then cause for individuals to return to the store sooner than normal (Taplin, 2014).

Up until around the 1980s, there has not been a problem with the way clothes were produced, distributed, and sold to consumers. The idea of mass production in a slow timeline seemed all fine and dandy, with staple pieces such as Levi jeans and a white t-shirt, but nothing good lasts forever (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010).

Around the 1980s/90s was a time of an identity crisis for consumers. Individuals were focused on the idea of an ever changing “mobile” identity, causing the ‘classic,’ timeless fashion styles to be thrown out the window, due to the consumer’s constant need of expressing oneself (Taplin, 2014). Consumer’s ‘identity crises’ caused for a shift toward a lifestyle that was not stuck in one place. While there were many other aspects that helped grow this idea into
existence, it truly was the change in consumer behavior that got this ball rolling. When one thinks about it, the 1960s-1970s were defined by some big, out-there fashion trends (think flower power, parachute pants, etc.). Not only that, but many young adults and adolescents would be the ones expressing themselves through their clothes. With this recognition and the idea that an identity is never solid, came the seed of fast fashion and cycling through clothes faster than the normal seasons.

![Figure 1: Data on Personal Consumption Expenditures Related to Fashion/Clothing](image)

**Figure 1: Data on Personal Consumption Expenditures Related to Fashion/Clothing**

Data Source: St. Louis FRED, 2023

It was not only this identity crisis to promote this industry. Consumer behavior as one knows is always changing and therefore, this caused for fast fashion companies to not only produce out items at a low cost to reflect the change in people’s lifestyles, but also to reflect how their demands were also starting to change (such as needing a dress for a specific occasion) (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). One may ask what happened to the normal, mass-production, high-end fashion companies? In short, these firms were not able to produce fast enough to keep up with
the ever-changing lifestyle of consumers. Additionally, while many think consumers could have gone to these ‘old’ companies for special event clothing; in reality, there was no competition anymore as the fast fashion industry had taken over: bringing in low prices to ‘high quality’ clothes (Taplin, 2014). Furthermore, as Figure 1 displays, throughout history – over more than twenty years – there has been an increase in the amount of consumption spent solely on items related to the fashion industry such as clothes, shoes, etc. The increase here can follow the ideas of mass production and buying based on the newfound “importance” of clothing today. This comes to reveal that fast fashion did not arise only because of its “efficient” production but consumers behaviors as well. Overall, the rise of the fast fashion industry can be seen as like that of industrial agriculture: a large swoop into the world, that no one saw coming, where a few benefited, but many worsened.

3. **The Reason for Change: The Negative Effects of Fast Fashion**

It is no secret how the new and upcoming fast fashion industry has benefited part of the world today. However, the area that has benefited from this industry is very slim. The capitalist system running through the lives of every individual has caused for only producers and consumers of fast fashion to benefit. Furthermore, many would say that if consumers benefit, then what is the issue? However, consumers may benefit from the cheap cost of clothing, but there are more consequences to them than they realize. Therefore, there are more negative effects generated by the fast fashion industry versus positive ones. These effects can be split up into two different categories: environmental effects and social/economic effects; while these effects can be split up in this way, they both work together in a conjunction to reveal a system full on inequality and inequity.
As mentioned before, one of the reasons that the fast fashion industry has become so popular is due to the ever-increasing changes in consumer demand and consumer preferences, in turn influenced by marketing and business target changes from the fashion firms. Nowadays styles come and go; a shirt is only “in-style” for at most two weeks. This constant shift in styles comes from firms creating for fashion trends – producing a larger quantity of garments in a shorter period (having more than the traditional two style season) -- and consumers to consume at a larger rate as well. In other words, since the start of the fast-fashion industry, consumers buy their clothing in bulks every few weeks. The constant turnover of purchases reveals how these items being bought are not being put to the use that they can be. While it is true that fast-fashion garments are made with cheaper materials and are not meant to last as long, a shirt can last for more than a few weeks. Nonetheless, producers and consumers are not concerned with the environmental impact of their purchases and actions; therefore, a large majority of the clothes from fast fashion shopping (after only being used limited times) is discarded and thrown away faster than they were purchased. Most of these garments end up in a landfill as their final destination (Linden, 2016). As an example, Americans are known to throw away around 80 pounds of their clothing each year (Chen, Memon, Wang, et al., 2021).

There is a misjudgment in the idea that having articles of clothing end up in landfills is better than having them sit in someone’s closet where they will not be worn. Neither one of these options are optimal, as these articles of clothing are made from non-sustainable materials (think plastics). This means that these articles of clothing take a long time to decompose in the landfills, revealing not only an increase in the waste problem of our environment, but also creating harmful pollutants/greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and soil. Hence, in general, the

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1 See section 3.1
The whole idea of fast fashion has put up a front, making everyone believe that is the next best thing, when it is wasting consumers money by how much they are continuously buying and hurting the planet through even the final stages of its life. However, this only scratches the surface of the injustice. Consumers have been known to go shopping on a more frequent basis than solely for necessity. For example, in a study on consumers in India, the majority of consumers indicated they went shopping for clothes “once a month,” however, it is probably more (Rathinamoorthy, 2021). These responses highlight how unlike before when the fast industry was not as prominent, people would only buy their clothes once or twice a year due to the number of “seasons” being limited to at most four (Cohen, 2011). However, as time went on and the fast fashion industry became the dominant force of fashion, people started to buy their clothes on a more frequent basis. This is due to how fast fashion has an increased number of seasons compared to the traditional fashion industry, jumping from four to fifty-two (Polizzi, 2021). It is this increase in fashion production that has caused for the economic, environmental, and public health consequences that are outline below.

3.1 Environmental and Economic Imbalances

The best way to portray these externalities is to start at the beginning of the production cycle. The two largest textiles in the fast fashion industry are those of polyester and “normal” cotton, while nylon also being a large competitor (Joy & Peña, 2017). These textiles are cultivated, cropped, and sent to production facilities to go through several processes even before it can be woven into an item of clothing. Each of these textiles are non-organic, meaning they are plastic fibers. Plastic fibers are detrimental to the environment, in fact, just within the cultivation period of production itself, these textiles cause a harmful amount of pollution (Claudio, 2007).
At one point in time, the cotton, polyester, etc. fields that are used today for the cultivation of clothing crops used to be owned by a small-scale group of local farmers. However, nowadays, with a large emphasis on economic growth and capitalism, these fields have come under the control of large corporations. These corporations are not centered where cultivation takes place; rather, large corporations such as H&M, Zara, Uniqlo, and more shape their models of production on outsourcing and subcontracts. For example, in a study done comparing 3 different retailers (A, B, and C) Arrigo was able to exploit the actual percentage of production that is globally outsourced to developing countries – due to capitalist economies’ idea of “efficiency” (Arrigo, 2020). While some companies do try and internalize (locally source) more than half of their production, the fast fashion industry is known for its minimization of costs wherever possible, which has caused for an increase in the amount of global outsourcing and contracting.

What many do not realize is that this outsourcing happens on multiple levels of the production process, not only the beginning of the cultivation period. This is due in part to how multinational corporations do not outsource to one location for the whole of a single garment’s production. Opportunity costs are to thank for this because according to neoclassical theory – which these multinational corporations follow through their ideas of “efficiency” and not considering social welfare – some countries have a greater opportunity cost to produce and/or participate in a specific sector of production process for good X over good Y. Therefore, multinational corporations have begun to outsource different sectors of the production process to different countries – fabrics produced in one country versus dyeing of clothing in another (Gustafson, 2005). Due to this increase in global sourcing at multiple phases of production, there has been an even greater detriment placed on the environment based.
When multinational corporations prioritize low costs, it negatively impacts the environment through the methods of production at even the most basic level. Rather than using all natural, sustainable products, the fast fashion industry has become one like the industrial agriculture industry: chemicals galore. Society can thank the concept of making unhealthy things cheaper for that.

When cultivating cotton and polyester crops, the individuals working have a lot of land to cover. Therefore, instead of using natural methods such as leaving it to nature to handle, workers have been instructed to spray toxins, chemicals, and other materials on these textiles to “help” with their growth. The chemicals that are used when cultivating these plants are stuck with the plant forever. That means that these toxins have made their way through the production process onto someone’s back (Ross & Morgan, 2015). Not only that, but these chemicals have also been known to leak into the ground and air after being applied to the plants, leading to a large percentage of greenhouse gases such as volatile organic compounds, particulate matter, and more (Claudio, 2007 and Shiva, 2016).

The farm is only the beginning of the pollution that is caused through the search for low-cost production. After fabric production is completed, the materials get sent to manufacturing facilities (Gustafson, 2005). At these facilities, there is the sub-step of dyeing any product that needs to be colored. Once again, the chemicals have come back into play. Nonetheless, this time it is not only the chemicals that are hurting the environment but rather an added water component. The dyeing process of the fast fashion industry is very wasteful; these manufacturing facilities use around 200 tons per used when it comes to one ton of fabric in this industry (Ranson, 2020). Not only that, but during the dying process, water is left with large amounts of hazardous chemicals inside, not having anywhere to be placed and leaving these companies
unaccountable (Ranson, 2020). The fast fashion industry is telling the same story in many ways environmentally: producing articles of clothing through different methods, using low-cost harmful products, but not having to pay the price. However, this now reveals that it is not only the pollution and the atmosphere that is affected, but also water. This planet is already suffering a water shortage – with around more than 850 individuals in the world going without access to safe drinking water in 2017 (CDC, 2021). Nonetheless, the fast fashion industry does not seem to think that they should stop their process, even though they see these individuals suffering first-hand.

It is time to take a step back though. Yes, the fast fashion industry has caused multiple environmental tragedies on the sublevel of its production process, but one must look at the bigger picture as well: transport and trade of materials. It has been made clear now that fast fashion industry is one focused on global sourcing, but what has not been discussed yet is that effect on the environment. When a company partakes in global sourcing that means there is a continuous activity of trade and transport between different areas, mostly different countries not close to one another at all. On average the amount of carbon that a plane exerts within one single mile is around 53 pounds (Clayton, n.d.). Now, this is only by assumption that these industries are not using any other methods of transport to get their materials where they need to go, because if there are more, then that rallies up the number even greater. If the shipping industry is annually responsible for over 900 million tons of carbon dioxide, and the fashion industry takes up to 10% of global carbon emissions, it could be estimated that out of the 900 million, 90 million tons come from the fashion industry alone. This is due to how a large portion of the products in the

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shipping industry are garments, either sent to consumers or other production facilities. There is no end to the carbon usage within fast fashion, it is around every corner.

**3.2 Public Health Implications**

Fast fashion’s decision to globally source, while beneficial for them, has been detrimental to the rest of society – especially those who work for these industries in this global world.

The pollution effects that were mentioned earlier are only the start of the issue these workers face. By using the chemicals given by these large companies, it has caused significant health decreases in the first-hand workers. Additionally, because many of these workers (when looking at the start of the production process) live on or near the farm, their family members also suffer these consequences – it has gone so far as to stretch to a pregnant woman whom her child was born with birth defects because of the chemicals used nearby that had polluted their resources (Ross & Morgan, 2015).

The concept of environmental (in)justice³ comes into play here. When the fast fashion industry decided to globally source their production, they did so in a place that would be of low cost to them. Of course, those areas would be the developing nations or developing cities within a developed nation. These developing areas are places of underrepresented individuals (usually individuals of color) that typically have a lower SES than the rest of the world. When these industries place their factories, farms, etc. here it has become a social justice issue because these individuals of lower SES, minority individuals, whatever it is are now the ones facing these environmental effects at an increasingly alarming rate compared to the rest of the world. These individuals have a lack of resources to be able to move out of these areas and these big industries

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³ Environmental Justice: the equal treatment of all individuals regardless of their race, ethnicity, income, etc. in terms of implementation and development of economic processes, laws, and policies (EPA, 2022)
know this. Therefore, there is an injustice within the social sphere as there is a rapid rate of minority individuals getting sick or dying compared to those of the upper-class white society. Nonetheless, even after the Rana Plaza Factory Collapse of 2013, which proved environmental hazards were real for individuals, there seems to be no change in the safety standards that are set in place for workers, extending to their family as well (Bick et al., 2018).

### 3.3 Social Imbalances

From first glance, it may seem as though the fashion industry employs an abundance of individuals. This may be true in the sense of within the United States the manufacturing industry for apparel employs around 123,000 workers; however, the population of the United States is 329.5 million people (Maloney, 2019). Therefore, some perspective is needed. In reality, the fast fashion industry has been known to displace many workers.

Much like the industrial agriculture industry, when the fast fashion industry became under the hands of the large companies such as Zara, H&M, and Forever 21, the steps of production consolidated to match this as well. When large industries, such as Monsanto having monopolies on land and seeds in developing countries (for example India), it consolidated all the small plots of land owned by families, firing some of the workers on those farms as well because they would no longer be needed (Ross and Morgan, 2015).

Monsanto is not just a company for itself, but it is a large contributor to the fast fashion industry as well. According to the fast fashion industry, the rise of new technologies has allowed for the decrease in actual human labor – decreasing the costs of their production as well. Therefore, going back to the Monsanto example, they only had a few individuals working the farms while the rest of the work was done by machines. This change in labor displaced many
workers from their jobs as well as their homes. Low cost was the name and chemicals were the game for these corporations, machines were the way to get this done.

Nonetheless, it was not only that these individuals were displaced from work, large companies like Monsanto with the large change that occurred caused for many companies to face crippling debt. This debt did not only occur in the families of those unemployed but also those who were still working for these large companies (Ross and Morgan, 2015).

For example, workers from developing countries employed by large firms, like Monsanto, face increasing demand, to a point where a switch has been made to more machine labor. Unfortunately, these workers cannot hold their own against these changes, increases in demand, and increases in land rent, causing them to go into debt. This debt has gotten so onerous for individuals working in this industry that Punjab, an area of India, now holds the records for highest ‘waves of suicide’ due to how for the last 16 years a farmer has been known to commit suicide every 16 minutes (Ross and Morgan, 2015). In general, it is not just about how much these individuals are paid – although they are not paid a living wage – but also how through their employment they are not given any basic human rights.

The fast fashion industry puts on a “happy smile” because if people knew the truth they would not partake in such activities. If people knew about the resource depletion, climate change, pollution, and increase in carbon concentrations there would be a different story being told right now (Fletcher, 2010). But alas, there is a want for more, a ‘need’ for more, but when will society have enough?

4. What Can be Done? A Discussion of Agroecology and Slow Fashion

The fast fashion and industrial agriculture industry are alike in more ways than one: they both are owned by a handful of large companies, displacing small business; follow the ideas of
mass production; and cause social, environmental, and economics impacts to the world today. The fast fashion industry follows the ideas of mass production using inequitable practices such as toxins, chemicals, and global sourcing to achieve its stronghold in the economy. This should not seem as that big of a shock due to how much like the industrial agriculture industry, there is a need to produce cotton, polyester, and other textiles (when thinking of fashion), and wheat, soy, corn, and more (when thinking of food) for individuals all around the world.

There is broad consensus that it is imperative to replace industrial agriculture with more sustainable patterns of farming and food distribution (i.e., agroecology). It is important to consider how the fashion sector can be made sustainable too.

The fast fashion industry (in some places⁴) has begun to take a more ethical approach to how clothes are made. On a broad scope, there has been focus from the farm all the way to the rack. However, this ethical and sustainable shift did not come out of nowhere, rather it developed from a similar idea from an industry that has been around long before fashion was prevalent – agriculture.

Several years after the second green revolution an idea bloomed out of the fashion industry termed “slow fashion” (Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013). Slow is the opposite of fast, and this has confused many throughout the fashion literature. Nonetheless, when it comes to slow fashion, slow and fast are not just opposites. The idea of slow fashion first developed in Milan, known to the world then as “slow design” (Ertekin & Atik, 2015).

Slow fashion is known as the production of season-less products on a slower scale than the fast fashion industry to create more durable, long-lasting products (Fletcher, 2010). This new concept brought in some sustainability concepts such as bringing in/switching to more organic

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⁴ Areas/Organizations of fast fashion industry moving toward sustainable production: Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) and Ethical Trading Initiative (Brewer, 2019)
and natural products – versus unnatural cottons and fibers; prioritizing local businesses and communities; plus, changing production method to more skilled/technical production (Clark, 2008). In other words, it has become more apparent that slow fashion does not solely mean a slower version of production on the same large scale.

Slow fashion has allowed for the larger community to see the differences that a more sustainable production process can make. This newfound concept has opened the eyes of many designers, retailers, and consumers on the imbalances and inequalities of the fast fashion industry from head to toe; however, examples of companies following slow fashion are rare (Ertekin & Atik, 2015 and Fletcher, 2010).

Agroecology has been around for a long time. Since the 1920’s there have been families farming their own land to earn a living. Local, family farm practices are what insinuated the idea of agroecology in the first place along with many campaigns to keep food and other resources sustainable and “green” for humanity. Agroecology is a type of science and behavior of farming/production that tries to eliminate the social injustices that have occurred in the world by multinational corporations causing for the decreasing bargaining power of developing countries. In simple terms, agroecology is a multidisciplinary approach that brings social and ecological concepts to the production of food and agricultural systems in general. That is, agroecology looks at the ways in which food is being produced today and how to make it more sustainable – for example, in not using as many nonrenewable natural resources all at once. Some of the habits that the agriculture

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has adopted based on this newfound approach are that of localization and an increase in biodiversity.

Within fast fashion, when one thinks of ‘localizing,’ it is often solely thought as supporting local businesses over global ones. Additionally, it has been mentioned to use local resources rather than other resources (Jung and Jin, 2014). Finally, there has been a concern of the need for a “distributed economy” which entails having the global fast fashion system be comprised on much smaller local systems (Clark, 2008). The fashion industry’s idea of “localizing” differs slightly from that of agroecology. Agroecology’s idea of localization entails a smaller-scale farming technique in which land is given back to those that previously owned it, increasing the idea of family farming, and making the production of textiles or crops more sustainable (Ackermen-Leist 2013). Therefore, unlike in agroecology, slow fashion does not bring up the idea of returning land to previous owners as a key part is missing restoring justice to landowners and farmers.

Another comparison that can be made between slow fashion and agroecology is its differences and similarities in textile production at a niche level. Slow fashion has increased the production and farming of natural textiles (such as cotton, wool, polyester, etc.). Furthermore, there has been a want in the increase of diversity throughout the products sold, but not in the same way as agroecology (Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013). That is, there has been little to research done on the fast fashion industry about decreasing/eliminating the use of chemicals within the farming process of textiles. Slow fashion does incorporate the necessity of organic/natural substances by transferring back to all natural organic substances, however within the slow fashion literature, there is no mention of how those textiles and crops are handled. On the other hand, agroecology puts an emphasis on an all-natural treatment of its products. That is,
agroecology hopes to increase output and biodiversity using natural inputs, lessening the cost of production. Agroecology allows for the increase in biodiversity due to how the plants are no longer genetically modified through science/chemicals which would kill natural pollinators. Additionally, without the genetically modified seeds, there allows for more types of plants to be cultivated, helping with the stability of crops because it can control the pests naturally. When putting an emphasis on biodiversity through localized food systems, it means harvesting crops with multiple seed varieties. However, it is important these seeds are a common resource to all to create a positive relationship between animals, plants, soils, and water to help produce in a sustainable manner (Shiva, 2016).

Right now, it seems that slow fashion is nothing compared to agroecology, but this is not the case. For one, both agroecology and slow fashion both consider consumer behaviors. For example, agroecology examines consumer behavior through individual’s diets (whether they are plant-based or not). By switching to a more plant-based diet, it decreases how often cattle are taken to CAFOs creating pollution (Schultz & Jacobs, 2017). Similarly, slow fashion looks at consumer’s behaviors in the sense of how often, how much, and when consumers buy clothes. Fast fashion has revealed that consumers tend to buy clothing in bulk quantities more frequently; therefore, slow fashion looks at how to slow down these purchases and create long lasting products (Brewer, 2019). Furthermore, slow fashion incorporates many different ideals of sustainable production: consumer behavior, quality products, and positive experiences for all, unlike eco-fashion and ethical fashion which only embark on one of these categories (Matušovičová 2020; Salcedo 2014; Beyer & Arnold, 2020).

Due to the similarities of the fast fashion and industrial agriculture sectors, there has been the ability to create sustainable avenues in each industry focusing on local communities and
limiting the usage of natural resources. Nonetheless, one has not been enough to combat the fast fashion industry. Solely participating in slow fashion has not gained much ground in the fashion world and it is evident why: there are many key aspects to a sustainable, equitable, ecological approach that are missing. Furthermore, slow fashion has not proved on its own yet that it can compete with the fast fashion industry.

Agroecology does not have to be only thought about in the world of food. Additionally, it does not only have to be thought about in farming because agroecology holds ground all throughout the production system. For example, when it comes to the fast fashion industry, agroecology principles could be implemented in areas of production related to farming of textiles, the dyeing of the garments, and even the shipping of products. There is no way to get rid of agroecology because there is no way to get rid of the harmful effects of fast fashion if the same production model continues to hold.

Agroecology and slow fashion combined can create a much more valuable approach to sustainable fashion. These two are the perfect balancing act through the idea that agroecology has been known to compete with the industrial agriculture industry, not only economically but in public health avenues as well; therefore, by combining the two it can create a stronger force against the problems that have arisen from fast fashion. The only question is how to combine the two and how will it truly help combat these problems.

The first thing to look at is the similarities and differences that were highlighted above. The idea of localization/localism is probably the largest and most important idea when it comes to creating a more sustainable approach to the fast fashion industry. Therefore, agroecology must first combine its idea of localization with slow fashion’s idea of localism.
Localization is known as a more localized food system. That is, rather than the traditional outsourcing of inputs and outputs through globalization of production, fashion production could instead focus on the localizing production through giving land back to local communities and using resources from the local community before trade. By giving back to locals – which in this industry are usually those of minority communities – it allows for the increase in power and voice that these individuals have (improving their social life). However, there is a caveat to only looking at localization. While this may be helpful, one must be weary of how no matter a globalized production or not, both methods of production are using natural resources that once used, cannot come back. Therefore, it is important to take this into consideration when thinking about what can be done to combat the environmental effects of fast fashion.

Furthermore, agroecology has this idea of wildcrafting. Wildcrafting is the idea of bringing in nonconventional food sources to the traditional food system; rethinking what it means for something to be food (Ackerman-Liest, 2013). While it is not possible to have wildcrafting completely transfer over and combine with fast fashion because of clothing and food are not synonymous, this idea can be adopted in a similar way.

The fashion industry can take the idea of wildcrafting and modify it to mean searching for ways to rebuild the fashion industry by not only using the same few textiles such as cotton, polyester, leather, wool, etc. That is, the fashion industry can find new resources and plants to use, such as coffee. For example, S. Café has done just this: using coffee beans to create the clothes on people’s backs. S. Cafés technology has created energy saving processes from local sources, that can be used on a plethora of clothing articles. This newfound use for coffee grounds reveals how there needs to be more education on the resources of this planet because

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coffee has been around for a long time, and it is now finally being used to produce clothing. The fashion industry can produce clothing out of coffee grounds, bamboo, and other materials if, like agroecology, producer’s change their mindset of what clothing is and what its boundaries are. By expanding the material boundaries of clothing, it not only decreases the greenhouse gas emissions mentioned before, but also brings in more biodiversity through incorporating more natural organisms.

The increase in natural organisms allows for greater stability within the environment through the sense that without the use of chemicals and pesticides, the natural food web can be restored back to balance. For example, while cotton is majority a self-pollinating plant, other organisms such as butterflies and flies also help with this process (Stockstad, 2021). Therefore, if pesticides and chemicals are used to treat these crops, or if these crops are genetically modified seeds, this affects the pollinators – in that their population decreases – causing a ripple effect to many other animal/organism populations. However, this can all be diverted through natural processes.

Furthermore, increasing biodiversity can also bring stability to the economy. While it may not seem conventional, the increase in biodiversity allows for a more stable job market (Murillo, 2012). This is due to how with an increase in biodiversity there is a presence of more natural processes and therefore, workers are no longer forced to live under such harsh working conditions or receive the negative effects of them – such as illness and death. Another way that a stable job market is created is due to how with the presence of a hands-off process (having nature do all the work), there is an increase in jobs available since jobs dealing with forestry, fisheries and more require such a healthy ecosystem.
Slow fashion and agroecology once again work better as a team even through the tiniest parts of the production process. Localization/creating locally sourced fibers and textiles is a large part of what can create a sustainable approach to the fashion industry, and this can go even farther than local communities. That is, it is entirely possible to bring production to a home-grown, specific level. In agroecology this would be considered gardening, such as growing one’s own tomatoes; however, to transition this into the fashion sector, one can think about home-sewn clothes. (Ackerman-Liest, 2013).

Think about colonial times when clothes had to be made for an entire family and there was no sewing machine invented. Additionally, think about when the sewing machine was invented -- around 1830. These individuals (mainly women – and the fashion industry is still predominantly women today) made their clothes from scratch inside the comfort of their own homes. There was no intention to export it out to other countries, and hardly much effort to sell it to anyone else; the clothing was meant for the family.

Home-sewn clothes is somewhat of a lost art in society today. While there are individuals who do still make and sell clothing from their house, or make a profit tailoring/doing patchwork, this idea is lost on most of the world, especially those who do not need to think about it. That is, individuals of high socioeconomic status do not think about creating their own clothes because they have the means to get new ones wherever they want, whenever they want. Therefore, by bringing back this lost art it can provide the ability to decrease the consumption of garments that are bought within a year, which in turn decreases the amount of solid waste produced by society. Furthermore, participating in this sustainable art form can allow for an increase in the satisfaction of life for individuals. The reason for this is because people who are more satisfied in their life tend to divulge into the culture more – especially in arts (Lee, Lin, & Hung, 2021).
There are many ways in which agroecology can combine with slow fashion to create a more sustainable fashion industry. Nonetheless, one of the biggest impacts is that of calling on the consumer; much like agroecology calls on the consumer to maintain a plant-based diet, slow fashion can call upon its consumers as well. Now, there has been research indicating this has already been done – calling on consumers to not purchase as many clothes at once/at all, and to not throw away clothes at such a fast rate (Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013). The consumer needs to be tied into the efforts of combining agroecology and slow fashion because personal behavior and trend/fashion are the two top reasons as to why individuals are purchasing new clothing (Rathinamoorthy, 2021). These two reasons go together due to how with the rise of the fast fashion industry, came those ‘identity crises’ in which individuals started to buy more clothes at random times. This corresponds to why trend/fashion and personal behavior are the two largest motivating factors because with the identity crisis and the want to look a certain way, fashion corporations started to mass produce at an alarmingly fast rate. With the increase of trends, it allowed for consumers to buy more than ever before: it is a personal behavior/habit to buy with the seasons, and now with 52 seasons it comes at an increasingly large rate.

Furthermore, there is an idea in behavioral economics called “the Paradox of Choice.” With this idea it states that when a consumer is faced with many options – say 10 jellies at a grocery store compared to 2 – it makes it harder for the consumer to decide which one he/she would like to purchase. This can fall into the idea of fast fashion as well due to how with the mass production of clothing that this industry partakes in, in conjunction with the increase in “seasons,” it can paralyze a consumer. That is, a consumer could then feel overwhelmed by the number of choices that – since consumers are not rational beings – they decide to buy more than they need because either they think they need it, or they simply cannot choose. This reveals that consumer behavior
needs to be looked at more carefully throughout the fashion industry as there is only so much that can be done in creating a sustainable production process; it is up to consumers in the end of how they will handle what is in front of them.

However, there can be more efforts in involving consumers. For example, there can be a push to incentivize and educate consumers on how to start shopping from locally owned stores rather than stores such as H&M, Zara, Uniqlo, and more. By incentivizing consumers, it allows for the ability to support local, small business that produce sustainably, and punish others that do not. The reason this consumer action is important is because society can tell consumers to stop buying as frequently, but there are a lot of consumers out there as clothes are a necessity; therefore, unless we cut off ties with fast fashion companies, they will never change because they will always be profiting from any business. Overall, to get to a more sustainable fashion industry, it requires a large-scale view that will not change overnight.

5. Turning a Green Leaf: Case Study of India

When recreating the fashion industry, it is important to not only keep in mind how to better serve the environment, but also how to better serve those contributing to the system as a whole – economically and public health wise. One way to think about how to achieve this is through the creation of a circular economy. A circular economy is one that is known to first use and then reuse local, sustainably grown products rather than resources that are made from non-natural treatments and have been outsourced to poor working condition areas (Beyer & Arnold, 2020).

India is doing just this to try and create a more sustainable fashion industry. Many South Asian countries have normally been considered a “throwaway society” in the sense that each year they produce a large, disproportionate amount of waste compared to other areas (Siddique, Begum, and Berndt, 2020). However, this no longer must be the case for India as the country has
been following an initiative called the “Circular Apparel Innovation Factory” (CAIF for short) that would help create a fashion industry based on a positive feedback loop (positive also meaning beneficial to the environment as well) (Kumar, Bauer, Khanna, & Jagasia, 2021).

Due to India being one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gases and pollutants, it has caused its government to create many different policies that reward or punish companies depending on whether they comply with the environmental standards that have been set in place when considering the disposal and consumption of textiles and garments (Arora et al., 2018). In other words, India is starting to move towards a more sustainable environment in the fashion industry through creating a positive atmosphere in the sense of decreasing the number of textiles bought and thrown away within a certain period. The way in which India is doing this is through CAIF and their implementation of a circular economy because it not only has environmental benefits but economic benefits as well (Kumar, Bauer, Khanna, & Jagasia, 2021). However, while implementing a circular economy may seem like all of India’s problems will go away, that is hardly the case as it will be very hard to compete with established, “low-cost” methods of production. This is especially true in a developing country such as India where many struggle to even obtain the basic needs for life; therefore, these individuals will take whatever is most accessible, which usually ends up not being sustainable.

India is also transitioning to a more sustainable fashion industry through incorporating zero liquid discharge ideals into their production manner, decreasing the large amounts of dye/chemicals flooding the streams and water sources around the community. To replace this, there is a movement towards a zero-tolerance policy in which textile production communities, such as Tirupur, India, recycle the water that is used through the production and dyeing process (Grönwall & Jonsson, 2017). By recycling the water and treating amount of wastewater used, it
reveals a beneficial effect on the environment through a decrease in the pollution in groundwater and other sources of water.

In addition to targeting a Zero Liquid Discharge (ZLD) policy and circular economy, Tirupur, at the beginning of its production process has also begun to become more sustainable through its incorporation of localization. India is one (if not the largest) producer of cotton, normally producing through the “conventional” method of large-scale farming with inorganic substances. However, as of late, India’s cotton fields have started to move towards a more sustainable production method, considered organic farming. This organic farming has provided a plethora of benefits such as lower production costs and high incomes to workers (Eyhorn, Ramakrishnan, and Mäder, 2007). Altogether India has been on a slow journey towards a more sustainable path for the fashion industry that combines processes of agroecology – through localization of farming – and slow fashion – through consumer behaviors. Nonetheless, are these efforts enough to keep up with fast fashion’s booming economy?

6. Endgame: Is This Enough to Beat Fast Fashion?

The short answer is yes, and it should be obvious why. Fast fashion is known as an industry full of injustices, inequalities, and inequities, only benefitting those who have pockets deep enough to hold an industry in it. Therefore, the fusion of slow fashion and agroecology should out-wit fast fashion in all areas dealing with environmental and public health issues.

To start, it is important to look at the environment in general: by transitioning to a sustainable production method, there is a decrease in solid waste and therefore pollution within the atmosphere due to how sustainable fashion limits its number of seasons to 2 per year rather than the 20-60 fast fashion was producing at. This reveals how a sustainable production model can beat fast fashion because by having less ‘seasons’ in fashion, it gives the earth more time to
rejuvenate/recover from any pollution, waste, or resources that could have negatively impacted it.

Another way sustainable fashion beats fast fashion is through its creation of a circular economy. Normally fashion industries create the product, sell the product, and discard of the product/any extra materials that were not used for sale. However, through the process of a circular economy it will increase the ability for those extras supplies to be reused so once again there can be less waste thrown into landfills and instead repurposed to make more clothing.

By building a circular economy and decrease in pollution, it allows for an improvement in individual health as well. Individual health and life satisfaction are improved through first off, the decrease in pollution. By decreasing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, it is allowing for cleaner air and water in the environment, therefore benefitting those especially living in communities of lower socioeconomic status. Traditionally, low socioeconomic (SES) communities have been known to live in areas closer to production facilities that use large amounts of chemicals during production, causing health defects (Ross and Morgan, 2015). Localizing production not only means less pollution, but it also means a decrease in the amount of chemicals used (decreasing all the way to zero); therefore, increasing the health of individuals because they no longer must worry about negative working conditions.

Besides the public health and environmental sectors, it is also important to consider whether this newfound sustainable alternative can compete against fast fashion economically. That is, whether a sustainable fashion alternative can hold up against fast fashion’s competitive, low-cost, low-price model.

For example, even with solely focusing on organic cotton farming and nothing else, there has been a 10-20% decrease in the production costs for fashion compared to the “conventional”
(industrial, fast fashion ways). Furthermore, this decrease in cost has also been accompanied by a 10-20% increase in incomes (Eyhorn, Ramakirshnan & Mäder, 2007). Therefore, it makes intuitive sense to assume that if a country is already seeing these kinds of economic benefits from focusing only on the fabric production step (while also only using slow fashion methods), that there will be an even greater increase when bringing it to the broad scale and combining with agroecology. Additionally, another benefit of sustainable fashion over fast fashion is how organic farming provides greater revenue to all by almost 10,000 INR/ha (Eyhorn, Ramakirshnan & Mäder, 2007). This reveals similar ideas to above where the only way to go is up with an increase in more sustainable efforts.

Besides cost effectiveness, sustainable fashion is much more economically efficient in the sense of availability of labor as well. As mentioned before, the fast fashion industry is known to displace many workers through its use of machines instead of labor. A sustainable fashion alternative would decrease the number of machines being used and therefore increase the number of labor/jobs available to individuals as it would follow the model of moving back towards community-based production. However, there is something that needs to be considered when looking at labor and employment for a more sustainable method of production: sustainable production has the potential to displace workers through the fact that there are more specialized and detailed labor needs in sustainable models of production. That is, unlike with fast fashion where assembly lines of unskilled labor in production plants is used, production for sustainable fashion is detailed oriented and technical (Clark, 2008). This in turn reveals how while there could be an increase in employment at the fabric production level, in higher up areas of the production model employment could decrease through a lack of education or training on specific
skills. Therefore, it is important to consider these ideas when coming up with policy solutions to combat fast fashion.

7. Conclusion

Slow fashion cannot combat the forever present industry of fast fashion; it is only one piece to this large puzzle. Fast fashion has been around for many years, always finding a way to make it out on top despite its negative effects towards society, the economy, and the environment. Much like industrial agriculture, the fast fashion industry is owned and controlled by only a handful of those corporations and sadly those corporations are in large capitalist benefitting countries. These are the countries that are known for exploiting ‘developing’ countries in all endeavors starting from the production sector to the livelihood of individuals. Therefore, while slow fashion cannot combat fast fashion alone, agroecology can come into play to provide some support as well due to the parallels in both industries. The support agroecology can play are through grass-root measures such as wildcrafting, homemade products, and localization; all of which will lead to a better livelihood for individuals and the environment in more than one area.

While it is important to notice how agroecology can help in these endeavors, there are possible limitations to creating an even more sustainable alternative to the fast fashion industry. Many of these limitations involve the labor sector – specifically in developing countries – when there is a transition to a more sustainable production system.

Take for example a developing country such as India. India is known to be one of the largest, if not the largest producer of cotton textile fabrics. However, their production products consist of different types of machinery, chemicals, and pollutants that ‘speed’ up the production process. Not only does it speed up the production process, but it makes the production less
technical for all the workers. In other words, it is much easier for unskilled labors to find work in the fast fashion industry because the work required to produce cotton, or even work in the factories to make the clothing does not require a lot of skill. Nonetheless, when there is a more sustainable alternative such as slow fashion and agroecology coming together to work as one, it creates a more intense production system compared to that of fast fashion. That is, the slow fashion and agroecology system – call it the dual system – requires many more skilled workers.

When there is this dual system for sustainability in the fashion sector, it gets rid of the ‘quick’ and ‘easy’ processes of production that occur in the fast fashion sector and rather create a requirement for more skilled labor. The reason that more skilled labor is needed is due to the localization of production and how much of the production will be done in one place, by a few people without the use of machines or chemicals to help bolster the process.

Sadly, by having this transition to a need for more skilled labor than what was needed in the fast fashion industry, it could also cause for the displacement of workers. This displacement of workers has a similar idea to the one of displacement caused by the fast fashion industry. For example, due to the transition to more skilled workers it causes for the displacement of workers because the unskilled workers are now out of work because they no longer have the skills to produce clothes in a manner that will also be consider sustainable. That is, these workers do not have the skills to create an entire article of clothing on their own without the use of chemicals and machinery.

Altogether, because of this possible decrease in unskilled labor (in which 44% of the population is unskilled labor), it decreases the livelihood of these individuals based on economic and social impact (Clark, 2020). While 44% might not seem like a lot of individuals in the world,
it is a large enough percentage of the world population to consider it a negative implication of the switch to a more sustainable alternative to fast fashion production.

Based on these implications and the solutions that are possible from this dual system of sustainable production, there are some policies that could be implemented to help further mitigate the negative effects that fast fashion has on the environment. While there could be polices such as cap-and-trade or a Pigouvian tax to combat these negative externalities, research has proven that those policies are too broad and not as effective as they could be. Therefore, there is a need for specificity when creating policies that could affect the livelihood of millions of individuals.

One of these policies could be capitalist-benefitting governments creating a waste-prevention program that would be a wide-ranging program that would not only hold the manufacturers accountable for the waste that they create but also hold consumers accountable as well. A way in which corporations and consumers could be held accountable is through having a tax/fee on the waste they are putting out if it is not sorted correctly and not being dealt with in a sustainable manner. In other words, if a corporation or a consumer were to try and throw cotton textiles into the landfill, then they would be charged a price to properly sort through the waste. This would benefit the environment through decreasing the amount of waste on a global level, but also decreasing the amount of pollution in the atmosphere, also helping the health of those from developing countries.

Another policy that could be implemented to help mitigate the negative effects of fast fashion is a policy focusing on the implementation of natural sources for clothing. In other words, there could be a policy that would ban or specify the type of inputs that are allowed to be used when producing and manufacturing textiles. This would mean the decrease, limit, and ban
on the use of toxins and pollutants, as well as genetically modified cotton to create clothing productions. By decreasing or banning these sources of pollutants, it decreases the greenhouse gas emissions and decreases the probabilities of individuals ending up sick.

Both policies mentioned above fall under the dual system that had been mentioned before. For example, the first policy brings in agroecology and slow fashion through putting it on the consumer to do what is right and changing the production method. Similarly, the second policy does many of the same things through trying to slow down the production process using natural resources as well as only using organic resources, whatever they may be (wildcrafting).

Overall, these policies are only the start to creating a more equitable and sustainable alternative to the fast fashion industry. There needs to be the addition of policies solely looking at workers conditions and wages to try and improve the livelihood of those most affected by the consequences spelled out in this paper. While implementing this dual system can bring about a significant starting change to what is currently dominating every corner of the earth, consumers hold the most power. That is, only so much can be done to create a sustainable production process and supply chain, but so long as consumers prefer cheap over sustainable, these efforts will be for nothing. Consumer preferences and behaviors are a tricky thing, they are even hard to model of a microeconomics level; therefore, even if policies surrounding consumers’ actions were made, it is not known how well they would work considering the irrational behavior consumers choose to act in. However, this is not a reason to give up because there are still so many injustices that need to be corrected and corporations to remodel. There is no planet B, there is no escape plan, action must be taken now, or the world can say goodbye to its dream future.
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