

FASHIONING INEQUALITY

THE SOCIOECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF FAST FASHION'S GLOBAL REACH

JACOPO BATTISTI

Università degli Studi di Firenze

jacopo.battisti@unifi.it

Orcid 0009-0002-7328-5951

ALESSANDRO SPENNATO

Università degli Studi di Firenze

alessandro.spennato@unifi.it

Orcid 0000-0001-6259-5714

Copyright: © Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

DOI: 10.36253/fh-2708

Abstract

Fast fashion, a phenomenon born in globalisation and consumer capitalism, represents a meeting point of commerce, culture and exploitation. Characterised by the rapid replication of catwalk trends and the relentless pursuit of profit, it has revolutionised our approach to clothing consumption. However, behind the lure of fast fashion lies a darker reality of economic imperialism and exploitation. Outsourced production in developing countries, driven by the search for cheap labour and resources, perpetuates a cycle of dependency and inequality. Furthermore, the cultural appropriation and commodification of indigenous designs further underline the colonial mentality inherent in the fast fashion industry. Navigating the complexities of globalisation and consumerism, it becomes imperative to critically examine the impacts of fast fashion on individuals and societies. By understanding the underlying forces that drive consumer behaviour and the systemic inequalities perpetuated by the industry, we can begin to challenge the status quo and imagine a more equitable and sustainable future.

Keywords: *Fast fashion; Inequality; Globalisation; Hyperconsumption*

INTRODUCTION

In an era of rapid globalisation and consumer capitalism, fast fashion is a testament to the intersection of commerce, culture, and exploitation. Fast fashion, characterised by its swift replication of runway trends and its relentless pursuit of profit, has revolutionised how we approach clothing consumption. Originating as a response to the demands of an increasingly fashion-conscious market, fast fashion has transcended mere industry trends to become a pervasive force shaping consumer behaviour and global economic dynamics.

At its core, fast fashion represents a paradigm shift in the fashion industry, marked by accelerated production cycles and the democratisation of style. Enabled by technological advancements and

outsourcing manufacturing to low-wage countries, fast fashion has blurred the lines between fashion seasons, offering consumers a constant stream of new designs at affordable prices. This model of hyperconsumption has fostered a culture of disposability, where clothing is treated as transient commodities rather than enduring expressions of personal style.

However, behind the allure of fast fashion lies a darker reality of economic imperialism and exploitation. Outsourcing production to developing countries, driven by the pursuit of cheap labour and resources, perpetuates a cycle of dependence and inequality. Workers in garment factories, predominantly women, endure exploitative working conditions and meagre wages while Western corporations reap the benefits of their labour.

Moreover, the cultural appropriation and commodification of indigenous designs further underscore the colonial mindset embedded within the fast fashion industry. By capitalising on exoticism without acknowledgement or compensation, fashion brands perpetuate power differentials and erode cultural heritage, all in the name of profit.

As we navigate the complexities of globalisation and consumerism, it becomes imperative to examine fast fashion's impacts on individuals and societies critically. By understanding the underlying forces driving consumer behaviour and the systemic inequalities perpetuated by the industry, we can begin to challenge the status quo and envision a more equitable and sustainable future.

DEFINITION OF FAST FASHION AND OVERVIEW OF ECONOMIC IMPERIALISM

Fast fashion, as defined, is a contemporary term used by fashion retailers to acknowledge the process of imitating trends and styles from the runway to the fashion-conscious consumer (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015). According to a New York Times article titled Fast Fashion, fast fashion can be described as an industry defined by many groups whose purpose is to provide the latest fashion trends into the market as quickly and inexpensively as possible (Schlossberg, 2019). This is done so consumers can wear current clothing styles at a reduced cost. This has led to an increased rate of consumers purchasing new clothing to augment their current wardrobe. A higher rate of disposal of old clothing also contributes to an increase in purchasing more fashion-conscious items - all brought forth by fast fashion (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009).

Offshore manufacturing has led to a new industry trend, fast fashion, in which the time taken to design, produce and distribute products to consumers is significantly reduced. Many modern retailers have used fast fashion to capitalise on the latest fashion trends. It enables mainstream consumers to purchase trendy clothing at an affordable price. The inability of traditional retailers to move rapid products to the market in response to changing consumer demands has given rise to a market of diverse, easy-to-access stores with simple and easy purchases.

To achieve fast production, the central concept that was pushed onto firms was production outsourcing.

The low cost of manufacturing in third countries and the greater availability of workers led to an influx of work being moved out of Europe and America. This concept was driven by the fashion industry's global nature and inter and intra-firm comparative advantage (Caniato et al., 2015). A firm would compare its relative costs of doing business across countries, giving an incentive to have some company activities done in other countries. This would then impact other similar firms to change locations to stay competitive. Fast fashion relies on IT technological advances such as electronic transfer of production information and management, enabling dispersed supply chains to function effectively and leading to production fragmentation and an increase in outsourcing tasks to contractors in distant countries (Gereffi et al., 2005).

Economic imperialism in the modern world is the conjunction of different relations of dependence into one, all-embracing system, in which the economic control of the developed countries is extended through various mechanisms on less developed countries. It is identified by the allocation of resources from the development of one country to another in a manner that benefits the developed countries and is detrimental to the development of the underdeveloped countries. Imperialism has been persistent throughout many different periods. The feudal societies, which encompassed the 14th and 15th centuries, experienced a form of imperialism where the more developed countries at the time, such as the mighty Roman Empire, took control of the less developed countries to colonise the countries to increase their resources and power. This form of imperialism was also exhibited by the British Empire, which played a massive role in the underdevelopment of India. This historical context is important because India is now known as one of the largest exporters of textiles in the world. In understanding the role of fast fashion in reshaping economic imperialism, it is essential to fully understand what it is and what it entails, as well as consider how the many different countries affected by imperialism are still feeling the effects today (Battisti, 2022).

Globalisation and the modern technological era have brought a new wave of ideas in the fashion industry. Many old cultural survival practices undergo a very complex amalgamation with modern life. It has liberated societies from many of the old rural traditions and facilitated the rise

in living standards worldwide. It has also enabled the spread of Western consumer culture, which highly emphasises individualism and material wealth. It is a culture that is said to be wrapped up in the ideal of 'freedom', most notably the freedom of expression. Therefore, the fashion industry, a constituent of consumer culture, has significantly benefited from globalisation's spread of 'free' trade and ideas through various cultures and societies across the globe.

Fashion was previously created in four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter. The market would have to wait six months until the new design of clothing was deemed necessary. Fast fashion eradicated the waiting time. It made the fashion industry global and moved the direction of fashion towards low-cost, high-volume global clothing. Economic imperialism is the state of mind that is passionate about improving other peoples' financial conditions, specifically in the West. This is still taking place in today's business world. A clear example is how fast fashion has affected the countries in which it is produced. Fast fashion is "the quick response of European and American fashion producers to the new designs coming out of Paris, Milan, London and New York" (Tokatli, 2007, p. 68).

One perspective of globalisation in the fashion industry has to do with the idea of dissonance. 'Dissonance' can be defined as the forcing of independent solutions to common global structural problems, which were previously resolved through common institutions. The dissonance perspective stresses that the increased interactions between societies have resulted in an ability to produce and reproduce more social life across national and local boundaries, social life in all its complexity (Oxoby, 2004). This complexity of social life is due to modernisation, which has facilitated the rise of fashion. Modernisation is often linked with Westernization, a process of Westernization being a global diffusion of modern ways of life that originated in the West (Heath, 2004). The dissonance perspective is a multi-layered point of view, but the essential notion it puts forth on fashion is that style previously restricted to a particular local or global elite can now be culled from societies at various social levels worldwide.

CONSUMER NEEDS FOR HYPERCONSUMPTION

The fast fashion textile supply chain is widely

acknowledged for its reliance on labour-intensive processes and substandard working conditions. This approach is often adopted to minimise costs and maintain competitiveness in the dynamic fashion market. Unfortunately, many consumers are unaware of the social implications tied to their purchases, driven solely by external factors. This rampant consumerism often overlooks the origins and ethical considerations behind the remarkably low prices, mirroring those flaunted by affluent figures. Despite widespread documentation of abuses within fast-fashion production hubs, Western consumers tend to exhibit apathy towards the plight of foreign workers and show reluctance to alter their buying habits (Araujo et al., 2020). This poses an ethical dilemma, as consumers are indirectly supporting these exploitative practices through their purchasing decisions. An understanding of the driving forces behind consumer behaviour in fast fashion is essential for the industry's participants if they are to make an informed response to the impacts of this phenomenon. These participants include consumers and stakeholders, such as retailers, marketers, policymakers, and international agencies. Understanding these forces will assist stakeholders in identifying the key areas where interventions can be made to lessen the negative impacts of fast fashion consumer behaviour effectively. Lipovetsky describes hyperconsumption as a new stage of consumer capitalism, the hyperconsumption society (Lipovetsky, 2010). Fast fashion has enabled this clothing consumption through the quick turnover of low-cost, trendy items. Hyperconsumption of fashion is fueled by several complex factors, primarily through retailers' manipulation of consumer psychology and the shift in consumer behaviour. High-volume purchasing of fast fashion results from consumers needing clarification about their actual needs for apparel and their wants for the latest trends (Stanev, 2017). This confusion has been identified due to the deconstruction of the traditional fashion seasons, as labels now produce monthly or fortnightly 'micro-seasons'. This has led the consumer to feel that their current wardrobe needs to be completed, as the previous concept of purchasing a seasonal wardrobe is now redundant (Van de Peer, 2014). This has created a consumer mindset that to be adequately dressed for any given moment one must constantly purchase new items. A study demonstrated how culture would profoundly

impact a person's buying behaviour (Lee & Kacen, 2008). Step one in impulsive shopping is to make an unplanned purchase, which is often more accessible online, where one can quickly browse and compare items, effectively leading to higher levels of online impulsive buying than in-store (Kacen & Lee, 2002). This ties in with another study showing that solid cultural values that promote impulsive and compulsive buying behaviour will lead to higher levels of compulsive buying (Lee & Park, 2008). An observation from these studies is that an increase in fast fashion consumer behaviour can be expected in cultures with pre-existing impulsive buying tendencies, this is an important consideration given the increasing global reach of Western-based fashion trends. These stakeholders' collective responsibility is to address these issues and work towards a more sustainable fashion industry. In today's culture, consumers are exposed to more information about the fashion industry than in previous generations. The fashion industry and clothing have exploded as a topic of interest in the modern era. An increasing number of consumers are following and observing fashion blogs and message boards for information, believing this to be a source of information closer to reality than a glossy magazine (Yaacob et al., 2021). As previously stated, consumers regularly encounter fashion advertising, whether intentional or subliminal, through music videos, film, and the media; this has altered the perception of 'realistic' clothing for consumers who may seek to emulate their style icon. Major fashion events and catwalks across the globe, occurring multiple times a year, are no longer the interest of an elite minority. These have become global events reported in close to real-time and disseminated to an enormous viewing public. Fast fashion companies are quick to emulate designs from these events and produce near-identical pieces at a fraction of the cost to the consumer. This will leave people with the desire to have the most recent catwalk looks at an affordable price and will quickly dispose of an item made to look outdated.

The marketer and capitalist functions in modern Western society have led to an increased need to create consumer 'wants' and the more traditional 'needs' for products. This is because it is generally accepted that consumers will make impulse purchases based on want; the fast fashion industry profits highly from this. If the average consumer is bombarded with numerous tempting offers to purchase regularly, their expenditure on fast

fashion will increase. With improvements to the ways, we can access the internet from mobiles, laptops, tablets, and modernised applications from retail businesses, consumers can be reached 24/7. These marketing methods manipulate impulsive shoppers to purchase at any time and place (Varghese & Agrawal, 2021). An individual may see someone else's new purchase up close through social media, leading to envy, status, and a need to compete regarding their social appearance with others. This will call for regular spontaneous purchases to maintain or enhance their image. Fast fashion can be associated with a high turnover of clothing, in which consumers are disposing of vast amounts of textiles. Stores need to clear out stock and make room for new lines regularly; this is done through heavy discounting near the end of a season, potential loss of revenue and donations of excess clothing to other countries.

Consumers nowadays are looking for quick, regular updates of new trend designs through increased competition from retailers and the globalisation of innovative information and trade. Fashion has been an important and noticeable part of popular culture and how our attitudes, desires, and needs are expressed. It is argued that it is the nature of fashion to change; more recently, the speed at which it changes has increased. In societies dominated by consumerism, it is essential for companies to keep their products fresh, and consumers involved at cutting-edge costs.

RESHAPING ECONOMIC IMPERIALISM

The fast fashion industry's relentless pursuit of profit undermines social sustainability, defined as the ability of a society to meet the needs of current and future generations while fostering equitable opportunities for all (Barron et al., 2023). By prioritising short-term gains over long-term social welfare, fast fashion perpetuates poverty, inequality, and social instability in producer countries.

The race to the bottom in terms of labour costs drives down wages and labour standards, trapping workers in cycles of poverty and exploitation. This violates their fundamental human rights and impedes their access to education, healthcare, and other essential services (Junya Yimprasert & Hveem, 2005). Furthermore, the environmental degradation associated with fast fashion production exacerbates vulnerabilities in marginalised communities, contributing to social unrest and displacement.

Undeniably, fast fashion has a significant relationship with economic imperialism. The globalisation of the fashion industry and the oft-lamented race to the bottom that global production networks allow are not independent of longer-term, historical processes associated with imperialism (Junya Yimprasert & Hveem, 2005). Sometimes, the terms globalisation and imperialism are used interchangeably. The latter is a contentious term that, since the 1970s, has been the subject of much debate. Although generally employed by critics of global economic structures, the term 'globalisation' assumes an arguably neutral process in its impact. It is helpful to distinguish between globalisation as a meta-historical context of growing global interconnectedness and interdependence and the global economic structures that have emerged since the 1970s and represent the current phase of that broader process. This essay contends that recent changes in the global economy have increased the disposability of the labouring poor and the debt-driven consumption by the working classes in the developed world – leading to social and economic fragmentation between and within countries. This is not to say that these recent changes result from a conspiracy by some group of capitalists to the detriment of the rest. This study attempts to discern the unintended consequences of the agency of various groups in a rapidly changing global economy, with a particular focus on the fast fashion industry.

At the heart of the fast fashion industry lies a colonial mindset deeply rooted in historical power imbalances. Former colonial powers established global trade networks that continue to shape today's fashion supply chain. These networks exploit countries in the Global South, often former colonies, by extracting cheap labour and resources to fuel the insatiable demand for inexpensive clothing in the Global North. This dynamic perpetuates a cycle of dependence and exploitation, where wealth flows from the periphery to the core, echoing patterns of colonial economic exploitation (Infante-Amate & Krausmann, 2019).

Moreover, the colonial mindset manifests in the cultural appropriation and commodification of indigenous designs and traditions (Battisti, 2022). Fashion brands often capitalise on exoticism, appropriating cultural symbols and aesthetics without acknowledging or compensating the communities from which they originate (Park & Chun, 2023). This further entrenches power differentials and reinforces stereotypes, eroding

cultural heritage while enriching Western corporations.

Outsourcing production to low-wage countries is a cornerstone of the fast fashion business model. While this practice promises cost savings for brands and affordable clothing for consumers, its human cost is immense. Workers in garment factories, predominantly women, endure abysmal working conditions, including long hours, low wages, and exposure to hazardous chemicals. Many are denied fundamental labour rights such as collective bargaining and safe working environments (Chang, 2020).

Moreover, the industry's subcontracting and informal labour arrangements obscure accountability and perpetuate exploitation. Brands often distance themselves from direct responsibility for labour abuses by subcontracting to third-party suppliers, allowing them to evade scrutiny and accountability for the conditions in which their garments are produced (Caro et al., 2021). This opacity in the supply chain enables brands to prioritise profit margins over the well-being of workers, perpetuating a system of modern-day slavery.

CONCLUSIONS

In the era of globalisation and consumer capitalism, the rise of fast fashion has become a stark symbol of the intricate interplay between commerce, culture, and exploitation. This industry, with its rapid replication of runway trends and relentless pursuit of profit, has transformed clothing consumption, leading us into an era of hyperconsumption and disposability. However, beneath its surface allure, a harsh reality of economic imperialism and exploitation is hidden, demanding our immediate attention.

Outsourcing production to low-wage countries has perpetuated cycles of dependence and inequality, echoing historical colonial economic exploitation patterns. Workers, predominantly women, endure exploitative working conditions and meagre wages while Western corporations reap the benefits. Furthermore, the cultural appropriation and commodification of indigenous designs underscore the colonial mindset embedded within the industry, eroding cultural heritage for the sake of profit. As we grapple with the complexities of globalisation and consumerism, it is crucial to critically assess the effects of fast fashion on individuals and societies. The industry's relentless pursuit of profit undermines social sustainability, perpetu-

ating poverty, inequality, and social instability in producer countries. This cycle of exploitation can only be broken through collective action, with consumers playing a pivotal role in demanding change from retailers, policymakers, and international agencies.

By understanding the systemic injustices embedded within the industry, meaningful change can be achieved towards a more just and sustainable fashion ecosystem. We can envision a future where fashion is stylish, ethical, and equitable only by challenging the status quo and prioritising social and environmental responsibility over profit maximisation.

REFERENCES

- Araujo, M.J., Araújo, M.V., & Carvalho, M.A. (2020). Unsustainability in the Current Fast-Fashion Industry: The Social Pillar. *International Journal of Environmental Science*, Volume 5, 285–291. <http://www.unifoa.edu.br>
- Barron, P., Cord, L., Cuesta, J., Espinoza, S. A., Larson, G., & Woolcock, M. (2023). What is Social Sustainability? In *Social Sustainability in Development: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century* (pp. 25–72). The World Bank. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1946-9_ch2
- Battisti, J. (2022). Decolonizzare gli archivi di moda: Sfidare il white gaze per promuovere narrazioni inclusive. *AND Rivista Di Architetture, Città E Architetti*, 42(2).
- Caniato, F., Crippa, L., Pero, M., Sianesi, A., & Spina, G. (2015). Internationalisation and outsourcing of operations and product development in the fashion industry. *Production Planning & Control*, 26(9), 706–722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09537287.2014.971524>
- Caro, F., Lane, L., & Sáez de Tejada Cuenca, A. (2021). Can Brands Claim Ignorance? Unauthorised Subcontracting in Apparel Supply Chains. *Management Science*, 67(4), 2010–2028. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2020.3679>
- Caro, F., & Martínez-de-Albéniz, V. (2015). Fast Fashion: Business Model Overview and Research Opportunities. In *Retail Supply Chain Management* (pp. 237–264). SpringerLink. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-7562-1_9
- Chang, A. (2020). The Impact of Fast Fashion on Women. *Journal of Integrative Research & Reflection*, 3, 16–24. <https://doi.org/10.15353/jirr.v3.1624>
- Gereffi, G., Humphrey, J., & Sturgeon, T. (2005). The governance of global value chains. *Review of International Political Economy*, 12(1), 78–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290500049805>
- Heath, J. (2004). Liberalisation, modernisation, westernisation. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 30(5–6), 665–690. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453704045760>
- Infante-Amate, J., & Krausmann, F. (2019). Trade, Ecologically Unequal Exchange and Colonial Legacy: The Case of France and its Former Colonies (1962–2015). *Ecological Economics*, 156, 98–109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2018.09.013>
- Junya Yimprasert, B., & Hveem, P. (2005). The Race to the Bottom: Exploitation of Workers in the Global Garment Industry, Occasional Paper Series 01/2005. <https://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/contentassets/c1403acd5da84d39a120090004899173/2005/race-to-the-bottom.pdf>
- Kacen, J. J., & Lee, J. A. (2002). The Influence of Culture on Consumer Impulsive Buying Behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 12(2), 163–176. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327663JCP1202_08
- Lee, J. A., & Kacen, J. J. (2008). Cultural influences on consumer satisfaction with impulse and planned purchase decisions. *Journal of Business Research*, 61(3), 265–272. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2007.06.006>
- Lee, Y. J., & Park, J.K. (2008). The Mediating Role of Consumer Conformity in E-compulsive Buying. *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol 35, 387.
- Lipovetsky, G. (2010). The Hyperconsumption Society. In *Beyond the Consumption Bubble: Vol. 1st Edition* (p. 12). Routledge.
- Morgan, L. R., & Birtwistle, G. (2009). An investigation of young fashion consumers' disposal habits. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 33(2), 190–198. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2009.00756.x>
- Oxoby, R. J. (2004). Cognitive Dissonance, Status and Growth of the Underclass. *The Economic Journal*, 114(498), 727–749. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2004.00241.x>
- Park, J., & Chun, J. (2023). What does cultural appropriation mean to fashion design? *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*, 10(3), 295–310. https://doi.org/10.1386/fspc_00049_1
- Schlossberg, T. (2019, September 3). How Fast Fashion Is Destroying the Planet. *New York Times*.
- Stanev, V. (2017). Advertising in the age of hyper consumption. *Trakia Journal of Science*, 15(Suppl.1), 186–190. <https://doi.org/10.15547/tjs.2017.s.01.034>
- Tokatli, N. (2007). Asymmetrical power relations and upgrading among suppliers of global clothing brands: Hugo Boss in Turkey. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 7(1), 67–92. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbl017>
- Van de Peer, A. (2014). So Last Season: The Production of the Fashion Present in the Politics of Time. *Fashion Theory*, 18(3), 317–339. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174114X13938552557880>
- Varghese, Mr. S., & Agrawal, Ms. M. (2021). Impact of Social Media on Consumer Buying Behavior. *Saudi Journal of Business and Management Studies*, 6(3), 51–55. <https://doi.org/10.36348/sjbms.2021.v06i03.001>
- Yaacob, A., Gan, J. L., & Yusuf, S. (2021). The Role of online consumer review, social media advertisement and influence endorsement on purchase intention of fashion apparel during Covid-19. *Journal of Content, Community and Communication*, 14(7), 17–33. <https://doi.org/10.31620/JCCC.12.21/03>

