

The Environmental Price of Fast Fashion

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Abstract

Fast fashion is defined as fashion trends that change often. It is a linear system that includes creating new designs, production, distribution, and marketing. Fast fashion's introduction has had severe environmental consequences. Every production stage has an environmental impact due to water pollution, carbon dioxide emissions, and textile waste. A survey was conducted in the Delhi NCR region to comprehend customer behaviour. The study pointed out several important aspects and trends among people. The survey found that although people are aware of the term fast fashion, they do not have a proper understanding of it. They do not follow a particular trend in their consumption, indicating that they only make purchases when necessary. People also tend to discard their clothes frequently, unconscious of environmental impacts. Therefore, raising awareness about this issue and encouraging an upcycling business model in the fast fashion industry is imperative. The goal is to recycle fast fashion apparel, raise awareness, and develop sustainable clothing brands.

Keywords: Fast Fashion, Apparel, Environment, Sustainability

Introduction

Climate change is no longer a hypothetical issue nowadays; it is a rapidly developing global disruption brought on by local consumer-centric strategies like fast fashion. Fast fashion has lately become more popular due to the expanding trends and the modern era's ongoing pressure on the generations to change. It is a linear system that includes fresh design, production, distribution, and marketing. People are now inclined to dress according to the most recent market trends, easily accessible on any

social media networking platform. The rapidly expanding fashion industry is a result of the capitalistic nature of the sector, which depends on people's desire to integrate into society.

As the urge to foster a *feeling of belongingness* in society grows, so does the desire to be accessible and join in on the latest fashions. Numerous international fast-fashion businesses, like Zara and H&M, have discerned these communities' requirements and capitalised on their aspirations. The upcoming generation wants high-street style, but their budgets might be unable to cover the cost of such expensive items. As a result, quick fashion has emerged, offering cheap and affordable fashionable clothes. Fast fashion attempts to make it a little less expensive to look good, enabling the fashion business to thrive. Inexpensive clothing has encouraged the practice of 'impulse buying', which in turn increases consumption.

The fast fashion industry has created employment and a thriving economy in many developing nations like India, Bangladesh, and so on. Still, it comes at the cost of environmental degradation and sustainable growth. The practices involved in the fast fashion industry's supply chain and the product itself have caused large-scale environmental destruction. From the fast fashion clothing's initial production stage to its final disposal, the quantity of environmental pollution that occurs at each stage can be monitored to determine the influence on the environment.

Review of Literature

The emergence of the fast fashion industry in the last 20 years has been investigated by many. Fairhurst's (2010) concept of *Here Today and Gone Tomorrow* has led to a shorter product life cycle and a bigger profit margin from

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the sale. The fashion industry's changing dynamics have led retailers to prioritise low costs, creative flexibility, quality, and speed to market as important tactics for remaining profitable in a competitive market. The author also considered fast fashion from the perspectives of suppliers and customers.

Fast fashion's growth in the apparel retail industry was examined by Jain (2016). He investigated compulsive purchasing behaviour in the Indian apparel business. He concluded that apparel marketers could adopt the best positioning strategy by understanding the ethics, morality, and psychographics of the target client segment. Compulsive buying causes consumers to buy frequently, usually without controlling their desire, and this is a phenomenon the world-over, spreading rapidly.

Anguelov (2020), in his study, probed the global fashion industry, the regulatory landscape, the carbon footprints of the textile industry, and the social cost of cheap apparel. The globalisation, promotion, and integration of the garment industry into our social and political scene were highlighted in this study. It also investigated an overview of the garment business, highlighting the urgent reality of the sector's labour and environmental issues.

The issue of waste produced by the textile and apparel industries was addressed by Valentina Jacometti (2019), who explained how it has grown to be a severe issue. The apparel business is acknowledged as one of the most polluting due to its high energy and water consumption, usage of chemicals, and worker abuse. Consequently, there is a strong push within the fast fashion sector to increase the sustainability of every stage of manufacturing and switch to a circular fashion model. It is abundantly clear that the existing *take-make-dispose* linear economy model has significant limitations and falls short of sustainable development goals.

Niinimäki et al. (2020) also expressed concern about the environmental burden brought on by a sharp increase in textile production and fashion consumption. They demonstrate how the advent of fast fashion influences the environment at every stage of manufacturing due to waste generated from textile manufacture, chemical pollution, water pollution, and CO₂ emissions. As a result of the rise of fast fashion, the sector is growing despite the frequently reported adverse environmental impact. Generally, the garment sector depends on routine consumption, inexpensive manufacturing, and

temporary clothing use. The clothing business generates 92 million tonnes of waste annually, emits significant amounts of carbon dioxide, and uses more than 79 trillion litres of water globally. Reducing manufacturing and implementing sustainable practices along the entire supply chain are two drastic changes that must be made to the garment industry's business model. Additionally, a shift in consumer behaviour in favour of less frequent cloth purchases and longer garment lives is necessary. From this point on, 'slow fashion' may be the solution to environmental damage.

According to the demands of the globalised world, Kaikobad (2015) highlighted the fashion industry's marketing, recycling, and environmental challenges. The problem, according to him, can be solved by recycling used clothing, which would improve the sustainability of the global environment. Nonetheless, a new business, the *second-hand garment industry*, has also emerged as an effective means for the marketing, recycling, and disposal of used clothing. In addition to helping the world economy, this has raised sustainability-related understanding on a global scale.

The environmental impact of the fashion business and the legal framework's potential to stop it from harming the environment were both explored by Mark K. Brewer (2019). He concluded that the law does not move quickly enough to promote sustainability. As he confronts outmoded beliefs prevalent in businesses, the study pushes for more responsible business behaviour and enhanced governmental monitoring. The slow fashion movement, as the study argues, offers an alternative paradigm to the fast-fashion model, because it more closely connects suppliers and producers with customers, enhancing sustainability and corporate responsibility.

The most recent representation and analysis of UK consumers' attitudes towards the sustainability of fast fashion products were undertaken by Zhang, Zhou and Yaozhong (2021). After analysing some variables, they concluded that consumer attitudes towards sustainability could be affective, behavioural, or cognitive. It further noted that various factors influence attitudes, such as money, price, gender, culture, religion, age, and others. Accordingly, while the cognitive and behavioural components are consistent across nations and beliefs, the affective component is still substantially culturally and religiously different. Employment status, decision-making, awareness, and even gender, all impact it.

Objectives of the Study

The fast fashion industry's development over time, its effects on the environment, and ways to mitigate those effects have all been the subject of several studies. However, there is a dearth of literature discussing consumer awareness of fast fashion and its damaging effects on the environment. To bridge this knowledge gap, the primary goals of performing this research are the following:

- To study the current fast fashion trends and practices being followed by consumers.
- To understand the sustainability of the fast fashion industry.
- To study consumer awareness regarding the fast fashion industry in Delhi/NCR.
- To identify the consumption and expenditure pattern of fast fashion.
- To study the feasibility of upcycling fashion material and generating awareness about the issue.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The research methodology adopted for the study is based on primary data. This data was collected in the first trimester of 2022 through a Google Form-based consumer survey. It was circulated among a group of people belonging to middle- and upper-class segments of society, to analyse the consumer behaviour to fast fashion. A majority of the surveyed were from the Delhi NCR region.

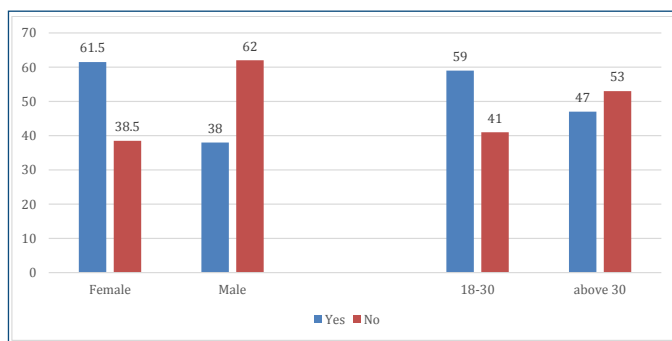
There are 232 responses received from the respondents. This data is analysed and understood using simple graphical analysis. The goal is to explore several facets of the current study, including consumer and purchasing trends for clothing, fast fashion awareness, and fast fashion's environmental impact. Table 1 highlights the demographic distribution of respondents according to their age and sex. In our survey, 75 per cent of the respondents were female, and nearly 72 per cent were between the ages of 18 and 30. Thus, in a way, it represents the women respondents in the age group of 18-30 years who are very conscious about fashion trends. Consequentially, our main findings will analyse the results on an aggregate basis, irrespective of the categorical distribution (except otherwise stated).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

	Percentage of People Belonging to the Age Group 18-30 Years	Percentage of People Belonging to the Age Group 30 Years and Above	Total
Male Respondents	23	2	25
Females Respondents	54	21	75
Total	77	23	100

Source: Self-calculated from survey responses.

Fig. 1 seeks to find from the respondents if they are aware of the concept of *fast fashion*. The figure suggests that most women (approximately 61 per cent) are more aware of the term fast fashion than their male counterparts. The highest proportion is because females are likelier to accept the newest fashion trends than males. Two-thirds of the males included in the survey were unaware of this terminology. As noted earlier, since the survey has turned out to be women-centric, the age distribution expectedly marked that the younger lot in the age group 18-30 years is relatively more aware of the term.



Source: Self-calculated from survey responses.

Fig. 1: Awareness of the Concept of Fast Fashion (in %)

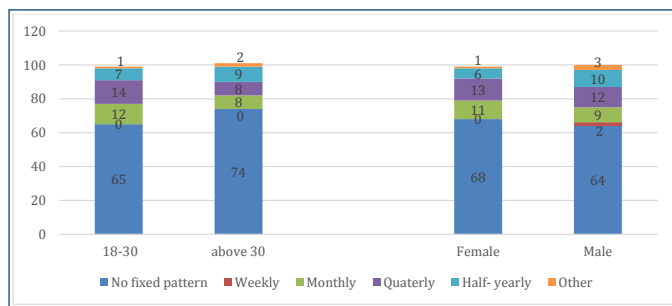
The meaning of the term fast fashion was another question the respondents were asked. More than 50 per cent of the respondents said that it was a trendy fashion on social media; and others said it was low-priced stylish clothes and easily disposable garments (25 and 17 per cent, respectively). This indicates that there has to be more consumer awareness because most respondents inadvertently engage in fast fashion in their daily lives but are unaware of the phrase (Fig. 2).



Source: Self-calculated from survey responses.

Fig. 2: Perceptions of Fast Fashion (in %)

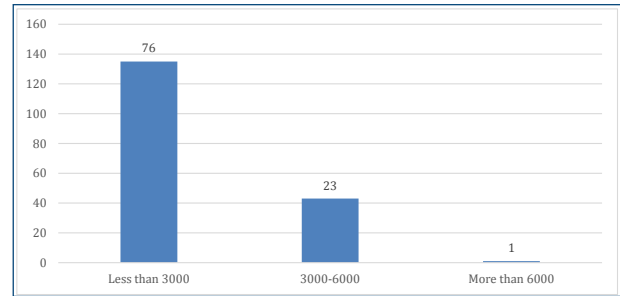
It is evident from Fig. 3 that a majority of the people (two-thirds) across the age group and gender categories do not have a fixed pattern when it comes to fast fashion consumption. This demonstrates that buyers do not follow a set pattern when they shop; instead, they act as per their requirements and forthcoming events. Since events inevitably occur, having no established pattern is not desirable from an environmental or waste management standpoint. It is also revealed that there is a monthly and quarterly fast fashion consumption pattern. Even though this proportion is not very noticeable, it exacerbates the already problematic matter of environmental degradation.



Source: Self-calculated from survey responses.

Fig. 3: Fast Fashion Consumption Pattern (in %)

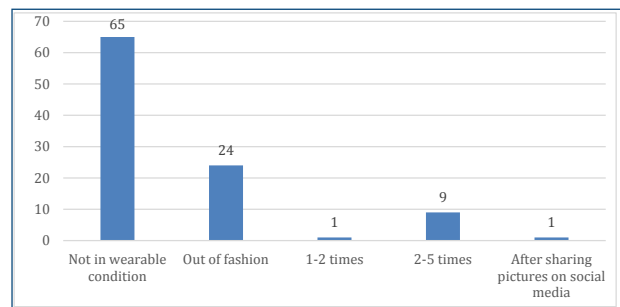
The data further explores the average monthly expenditure of respondents. The lower cost would imply people making fast fashion more prevalent and a trend. The expenditure pattern has been divided into three categories: monthly expenditure of less than Rs. 3,000, between Rs. 3,000 and 6,000 and more than Rs. 6,000. The result highlights that most respondents, nearly three-fourths of our data, spend Rs. 3,000 per month, followed by Rs. 3,000 to Rs 6,000 (Fig. 4). This suggests that more consumers are regularly spending money on fast fashion as a result of its low cost.



Source: Self-calculated from survey responses.

Fig. 4: Average Monthly Expenditure Pattern of Consumers (in Rs.)

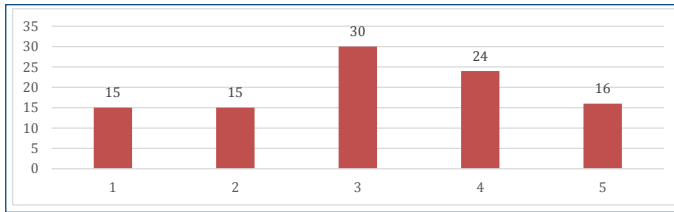
Fig. 5 represents the pattern of discarding clothes among the respondents. This is a serious issue concerning the impact on the environment and disposable waste management. A higher frequency of disposing of clothes leads to more waste generation. Unfortunately, our findings indicate the same. Two-thirds of the respondents tend to dispose of their clothes when not in wearable condition; however, a severe trend is emerging where the remaining one-third dispose frequently. The data suggests that a significant number of people have a tendency to change clothes either when it goes out of fashion or by wearing them only twice or thrice.



Source: Self-calculated from survey responses.

Fig. 5: Pattern of Discarding Clothes (in %)

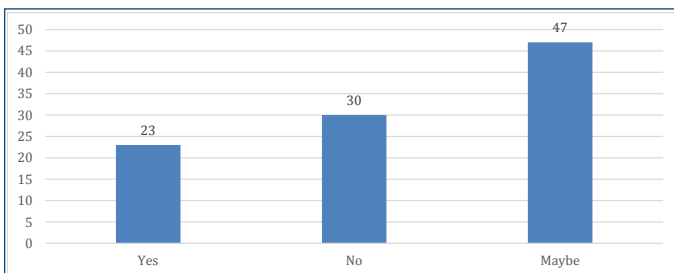
The respondents were asked about their understanding of how rapid fashion affects the environment (Fig. 6). The question was based on a scale of 1 to 5, with five being fully aware and one not being aware. It is pertinent to note that most of them have little to no awareness of fast fashion's tragic effects on nature. As seen in the graph, only 16 per cent are fully aware of it. Had people been educated about the consequential environmental impacts, more could be done to help alleviate the problem. It raises the need to spread awareness and take stringent action to curb the problem.



Source: Self-calculated from survey responses.

Fig. 6: Awareness of the Environmental Impact of the Fast Fashion Industry (in %)

Utilising thrift stores to buy clothing is one way to combat the issue of fast fashion. A thrift shop sells used articles, especially clothing, to benefit a charitable organisation. Fig. 7 suggests an unfortunate trend, as most do not fully understand it. The survey indicates that 30 per cent are unaware of the term. Another 47 per cent do not understand it completely. The lack of knowledge about thrift stores also adds to the problem emanating from fast fashion. Thus, there is a need of the hour for education about thrift shops and other second-hand shops among all people. Nonetheless, sanitation and health issues are the main worries encountered when shopping at thrift stores, although these issues can be resolved by proper disposal and upcycling techniques.



Source: Self-calculated from survey responses.

Fig. 7: Awareness of Thrift Stores

From the survey, some additional findings were also noted. Most respondents are familiar with brands like Zara, H&M, Lifestyle, and others, but are unaware of their sustainability. To add to it, a majority of people do not fully comprehend the notion of sustainability. Moreover, fast fashion has grown to be highly significant among students. They experiment with their appearance, try out new things, and are generally adaptable to change.

Potential Solutions

The discussion above emphasises the necessity of developing strategies to reduce the damaging effects of

fast fashion on the environment. Following is the proposed potential solution model that may raise the necessary awareness and transform the fast fashion consumption pattern into a more sustainable one.

Presently, government intervention is one method that might work. The other option could be the creation of initiatives by suppliers and customers. The suggested solution here is the upcycling business model for the fashion sector. Upcycling is the process of altering a used item or piece of clothing to create a brand-new item. That is, it is a technique that uses old clothing and apparel to convert them into valuable goods. Through the model, consumers, non-profit organisations, and fast fashion manufacturing facilities can serve as sources of raw materials that supply used clothing to the collection centres. The designing consultants are the middlemen or the central business unit, who help redesign the discarded material and provide upcycled product designs to the customers. The material and design are then sent to the partner skill development centres, which can provide labour services for stitching and producing the upcycled garment, which is then sold in the market.

Applying this approach will have several advantages and assist in addressing the problems facing the sector. An organisation already employing the upcycling business model is *Fabscrap*, founded in 2016 in New York. It was started to end commercial textile waste and maximise the value of unused articles. The business model has pickup services around the city to collect fashion waste, segregate, recycle, and upcycle the material. It has also helped create awareness among customers as they can even choose to volunteer with the organisation. This organisation now utilises materials that would have usually ended up in landfills and wastelands to help create new designer articles.

As apparent from Fig. 8, the following parties are part of the upcycling business model:

- *NGOs Committed to Skill Development and Providing Employment:* Partnering with them can help create and stitch upcycled items.
- *Clothes Donation Centre, Climate Action NGOs:* They can serve as collection points to obtain second-hand fast fashion clothing at lower prices as raw materials.
- *Designing Consultants:* These experts offer their knowledge in revamping discarded items and provide sustainable design concepts to production units.

- **Customers:** The consumers are the ones who purchase these recycled goods. Customers can assist the business by donating their used fast-fashion clothing so that it can be recycled into new goods.

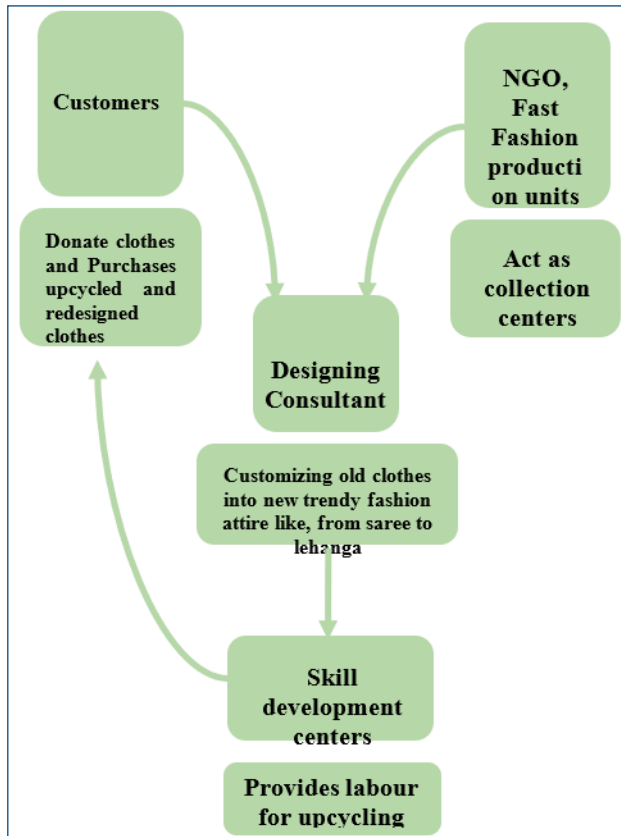


Fig. 8: Flow Chart for the Upcycling Model

The most significant advantage of the above model is that it is *sustainable*. Because used clothing is recycled to create a new product, the method is far more environmentally friendly as well. It does not require extensive material degradation or the creation of clothing from scratch. The model is economical as well. Since most of these items are already discarded, it saves input costs, as purchasing raw materials is not required. The bare minimum raw material costs, labour costs, and transportation costs will be included in the price of production. Therefore, the product will be unique and have added value alongside sustainability. Furthermore, each product can even be customised according to the particular needs of the buyers as well. This model has the additional benefit of being a zero-waste model, since it involves upcycling and recycling the fast fashion disposed articles which usually end up in a landfill. Through this model, the waste generated during production is reutilised for the production of another garment, making it a minimal

or zero-waste model. For example, the small patches of clothing which cannot be used to create an entire garment can be used as an accessory to design other articles as a patchwork. It is a typical design method in India and appeals to market preferences.

Additional Strategies

In addition to the proposed upcycling model, other steps are required to raise awareness of the adverse environmental effects of the fast fashion consumption pattern.

- **Carbon Tax on Clothing:** It is a tax on greenhouse emissions in the fashion industry's supply chain. There is a direct connection between the tax imposed and the environmental damage caused. One of the ways by which the government can promote upcycling could be by *waiving the goods and service tax on upcycled clothes and thrift stores*.
- Waste management and pollution caused by fast fashion industries can be controlled further by proper regulation through different sustainable and automatic technologies at different stages of production of raw materials, processing, and waste disposal. The amount of waste disposed by these sectors should be under the control and regular inspection of the government-regulated textile agency. In coalition with *EARTHDAY.ORG*, the *New Standard Institute* announced the Fashion Act, which was legislated by the New York State Senate and House of Representatives. It suggested that companies be actively engaged in improving their production and supply chain standards to address the environmental impact of fast fashion.
- Another government strategy that can help promote sustainable fashion and awareness could be the certification for brands indulging in sustainable fashion production. According to an IBM study, over a third of the shoppers think about environmental concerns before purchasing and are willing to spend more for goods that align with their values. Certification will increase the credibility and authenticity of such brands and gain public trust.
- Awareness campaigns in association with eco-clubs and social welfare societies: According to the present study's findings, it is evident that the younger generation is more prone to purchase items from fast fashion retailers due to their affordability and trendy

nature. As a result, there is a need for an increased understanding of the effects of their consumption. One of the methods to raise awareness among this group is by organising awareness campaigns and events in collaboration with other eco-clubs and societies trying to create a sustainable future. Webinars, marathons, conferences, and seminars are a few examples of awareness campaigns and events. Social media sites like Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter can be utilised to promote public awareness more engagingly.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study has attempted to capture an exceptionally relevant current issue that requires immediate attention. For this reason, a basic survey was done in a limited way in the Delhi NCR region. The survey must examine a wider geographic area to comprehend the issue from a better perspective. In this study, male participants made up one-fourth of the respondents, which was much less than female respondents (three-fourth). Therefore, the poll has to include more participants, including a larger percentage of male respondents.

The study suggests the following in light of the concerns arising from fast fashion on the environment. It recommends an upcycled way of disposal of fast fashion products to generate sustainable products and create awareness regarding the impact of fast fashion on the environment. This model not only caters to upcycling the existing product, but also introduces another line of sustainable fashion. It helps connect fast fashion consumers to businesses that can help them re-create new products from existing ones with the help of skill development centres. It is not only an upcycling model, but also creates employable opportunities for consultants and workers in skill development centres. In addition, NGOs and small rural communities should receive benefits and subsidies if they participate in sustainable development activities like upcycling clothing. Nevertheless, customers must assume responsibility for promoting sustainable fashion. Lastly, social media platforms must be utilised to make thrift stores and upcycled garments a trend.

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