

Who Gets to Be Fashionable?

Shopping and fashion have long been favorite American pastimes, with shopping malls slowly giving way to online shopping and the increasing ability to buy clothing seen on social media with a push of a button. Sadly, this love of buying clothes can lead to some significant consequences. In 2017 alone, the EPA estimates that 11.2 million tons of clothing and textiles ended up in landfills, which accounted for 8% of all landfill waste.¹ One of the main targets which often gets the blame for this problem is the industry known as “fast fashion.”

Fast fashion generally refers to large retailers of clothing that produce trendy, low cost items. They often borrow styles and looks from expensive designer brands, and make pieces quickly and affordably. Popular retailers include stores such as H&M, Gap, and Forever 21. To keep costs down, these companies produce lower quality and less durable items. There is, moreover, immense pressure to keep up with ever-changing trends and styles, some of which is generated by the companies themselves. A combination of these facts is leading Americans to discard clothing at striking rates. Furthermore, the production of fast fashion clothing is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental damage, and some of the brands have been accused of making their clothing in sweatshop-like conditions in developing countries.

But, defenders of fast fashion reply that brands like these make nice clothing available to many who otherwise would not be able to afford it. Even if one doesn't buy designer brands, more durable and more sustainable clothing can be prohibitively expensive. A recent Cosmopolitan poll found that two thirds of respondents don't buy from sustainable fashion brands, and 80% say that it is because the clothing is too expensive.² This is not to mention that finding out which brands are truly ethical and sustainable can take a great deal of time and research, and it's difficult to know if the higher cost is because the brand is truly more sustainable, or because they believe people will pay a premium if they feel their choices are more ethical. After all, what is expensive for some might not be expensive at all for others. The solution, some argue, is not to reduce affordable options, but instead to improve the recycling and re-use of unwanted clothing. Clothes can be donated instead of discarded, and some brands such as H&M offer recycling programs for old clothes to keep them out of landfills. It should not be a mark of privilege, some argue, to be able to dress well, and to make sustainable decisions about clothing.

But recycled and donated clothes don't always follow the path we might envision. Because the U.S. secondhand clothing market is flooded with donations, much gets shipped to developing nations, where the sale of such clothing potentially competes with the local economy, or ultimately ends up being burned or dumped. Unfortunately, the same fate awaits much of the clothing dropped into a recycling bin. Still, improving the reuse of clothing might be the better option than forcing up the price of all clothes, especially since no matter how much a person wants to buy more sustainably, they just may not be able to afford it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it unethical to buy fast fashion clothing? What if those are the only brands that one can afford?
2. Does wealth allow a person to make more ethical choices than if they were poor?
3. Do corporations in the fast fashion industry have a responsibility to make their clothing more sustainable, even if it means making their prices too high for much of their market?

¹ EPA, "Textiles: Material-Specific Data | Facts and Figures about Materials, Waste and Recycling"

² Cosmopolitan, "Sustainable fashion - is it only for the rich?"

