What Is Fast Fashion, Anyway?

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A Closer Look At The Definition And Why It’s Time To Slow Down

The phrase “fast fashion” has become a buzz phrase recently, but what does it *really* mean? In order to move past fast fashion and into a more sustainable industry, we all have to be on the same page about what exactly we’re pushing against. Here are three proposed definitions:

*Fast fashion can be defined as cheap, trendy clothing, that samples ideas from the catwalk or celebrity culture and turns them into garments in high street stores at breakneck speed.*

*"Fast fashion” is a term used by fashion retailers to describe inexpensive designs that move quickly from the catwalk to stores to meet new trends. As a result of this trend, the tradition of introducing new fashion lines on a seasonal basis is being challenged. Today, it is not uncommon for fast-fashion retailers to introduce new products multiple times in a single week to stay on-trend.*

*An approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers.*  
  
To understand and define the phrase, it’s important to first give the phenomenon context. The fashion industry, up until the mid-twentieth century, ran on four seasons a year: fall, winter, spring, and summer. Designers would work many months ahead to plan for each season and predict what they believed customers would want. This method, although more methodical than fashion today, took away agency from the wearers. Before fashion became accessible to the masses, it was prescribed to high society and there were rules to be followed.Of course, the Industrial Revolution planted seeds for what we know fashion to be today. It wasn’t as drastic as the current climate until [things picked up around the 1960s](https://fashionista.com/2016/06/what-is-fast-fashion). From the swinging decade, the industry only quickened its pace and lowered its costs. However, according to the *Sunday Style Times*, it reached a point of no return a few decades later, ‘it particularly came to the fore during the vogue for "boho chic" in the mid-2000s.’

Fast fashion utilizes trend replication, rapid production, and low quality materials in order to bring inexpensive styles to the public. Unfortunately, this results in harmful impacts to the environment, human well-being, and ultimately our wallets.

Trend Replication And Increasingly Rapid Production

Nowadays fast fashion brands produce about 52 “micro-seasons” a year. This means at least one new “collection” every week. [According to author Elizabeth Cline](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/5-truths-the-fast-fashion_b_5690575), the ever-popular Zara started the craze by shifting to bi-weekly deliveries of new merchandise back in the early aughts. From then on, it has become the norm to have a towering supply of stock at all times. This model has kept businesses like Next, Charlotte Russe, and Wet Seal from having to encounter running out of a certain style and isolating different customers.With the amount of clothing that each retailer has, there are few young people left out of their target market. Today, companies like “[H&M and Forever21 both get daily shipments of new styles, while Topshop introduces 400 styles a week on its website.](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/5-truths-the-fast-fashion_b_5690575)” Most of the companies that fall under the fast fashion category are currently replicating streetwear and fashion week trends as they appear in real time. This means the lead time can often be less than a couple of weeks. By creating new, desirable styles weekly, these brands are able to create massive amounts of clothing and make sure that the customer never tires of their store’s inventory.Many people debated what came first—the desire for fresh looks at an alarming rate or the industry’s top players convincing us that we are behind trends as soon as we see them being worn. It’s hard to say, but there is no doubt there is a thirst for the “next best thing” every day of our consumer-driven lives (*10 Things I Hate About You*, anyone?)

Low Quality And Even Lower Costs

With the increased rate of production there are corners that have been inevitably cut. For that trendy bomber jacket to land on the Forever21 store floor before it’s deemed too late, there are some consequences. Because clothing is made in such a rushed manner, brands are selling severely low-quality merchandise. There isn’t enough time for a proper quality control or to make sure a shirt has the right amount of buttons when there is such urgency from the brand to get clothing to their crowd of customers.The fast fashion manufacturing process leaves a lot to be desired and pieces are often thrown away after no more than a few wears. Each rapidly produced garment isn’t built to last and is made to seem as ‘easy come, easy go’ as possible.The same urgency that throws quality out the window also keeps the costs of these garments incredibly low. Companies such as H&M and Zara are greatly concerned with their bottom line and are banking on the “[ocean of clothing](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/5-truths-the-fast-fashion_b_5690575)” they churn out for their profit. These brands are able to earn millions while selling pieces cheaply because of the sheer number of items they sell daily, no matter the cost or markup. This means that garment workers putting together fast fashion items are undoubtedly being paid well below the minimum wage. Lucy Siegle, author and journalist, summed it up in the documentary *The True Cost*. “Fast fashion isn’t free. Someone, somewhere is paying.”

Environmental Impact And Human Rights Violations

All of the elements of fast fashion: trend replication, rapid production, low quality, and competitive pricing, add up to a large impact on the environment and the people involved in its production.The environmental damage, which the fashion industry continues to create, is in large part due to fast fashion. Brands like Forever21 use toxic chemicals, dangerous dyes, and synthetic fabrics which seep into water supplies in foreign countries (where the clothing is made) and at home when the clothing is washed.Each year, the clothing that is simply thrown away amounts to about [11 million tons in the US alone](https://www.rubiconglobal.com/blog-statistics-trash-recycling/). These garments, full of lead, pesticides, and countless other chemicals, almost never break down and spend their life releasing these toxic chemicals in the air. Fast fashion’s carbon footprint is giving huge industries like air travel and oil a “run for their money.”Along with the effects fast fashion has on our earth, these processes affect the humans who wear them, and the humans who make them. Some garments and accessories even have dangerous amounts of lead in them, and exposure to [lead increases one’s risk of infertility, heart attacks and more](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/5-truths-the-fast-fashion_b_5690575). Skin is the largest organ of the body and putting on these poorly made items on it is dangerous all on its own.This danger only grows in the factories, towns, and homes which are used to produce these items.A garment worker’s health is constantly being jeopardized through their long hours, lack of resources, exposure to harmful chemicals, and often physical abuse. The people who make fast fashion clothing have been confirmed to be underpaid, underfed, and pushed to their limits because there are often few other options.

The Rise of Slow Fashion

Although the fashion industry as a whole is guilty of committing many crimes against people and the environment, it is most evident when it comes to fast fashion. Slow fashion is a movement towards mindful manufacturing, fair labor rights, natural materials, and lasting garments. Conscious fashion means there are brands, communities, and individuals who are fighting for the safety of our earth and fellow humans. Buying a garment from a responsible brand ensures that you have agency over your personal style, are getting a quality product, and are protecting those that need it most.