

The Ethics of Fast Fashion

Walk through any high school hallway today, and you'll see students wearing clothing from Shein, Temu, and other fast fashion retailers. These brands have changed how younger generations buy apparel, offering trendy styles at ultra-low prices through a gamified shopping experience. However, as fast fashion has become a massive industry worth hundreds of billions of dollars, serious questions have emerged around issues ranging from labor practices and environmental sustainability to human rights violations. Debating the ethical implications of fast fashion is particularly relevant for teenagers, who make up a significant portion of fast fashion customers worldwide.

Supporters of the industry argue that fast fashion retailers provide real value by delivering budget-friendly options to consumers with limited disposable income. Their aggressive pricing model allows teens who might otherwise be unable to afford fashionable clothing to buy new outfits more often. According to a 2022 analysis of womenswear prices in the United States, “Shein’s pricing of jeans, dresses, tops, outerwear, footwear, and accessories averaged 50 percent below H&M, and even further from Zara” (Harvard Business Review). Additionally, the wide product selection offered by these companies gives teens access to diverse styles that they may not find in local stores or with traditional vendors. Fast fashion brands can leverage their superior technology and economies of scale to quickly copy the latest trends and offer virtually infinite choices, from retro pieces to modern streetwear. This dynamic makes it easier than ever for young people to try out different looks and express their personalities through their wardrobes.

Industry critics, however, claim that the true cost of fast fashion goes far beyond what customers pay with their wallets. The cheap prices that make their products so appealing to the masses are largely possible through dangerous work conditions, unfair trading practices, cost-cutting measures, exploitation of garment workers, and, in some cases, even child labor. Furthermore, many companies rely on misleading marketing tactics, such as Temu's “Shop Like a Billionaire” ads, which create unrealistic expectations about status and consumption. The low quality of the items on sale is another source of concern. In fact, clothes purchased from fast fashion brands tend to fall apart after just a few wears, generating more waste and costing individuals more money in the long run. The heavy dependence on polyester, a synthetic fiber derived from petroleum, is equally troubling, since it not only harms the environment but also poses health risks to textile workers and wearers alike.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do the benefits of fast fashion justify the potential exploitation of workers throughout the supply chain?
2. Do consumers have a responsibility to learn more about the social and environmental impact of the brands they purchase from?
3. Is it ethically wrong for people to purchase fast fashion if that is their only option for purchasing fashionable clothing?
4. How can young people balance their desires for self-expression with the hidden costs behind the fast fashion business model?

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