

12. Environmental impact: why fast fashion is bad for the environment

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This case examines the environmental impact of fast fashion from the perspective of a consulting assignment, namely, a UK-based environmental charity's efforts to reduce fast fashion consumption among three key target demographics.¹ The charity plans to conduct a targeted research study and launch a behaviour change campaign to discourage people from buying fast fashion items as Christmas presents or for holiday parties. To promote cultural change, students must develop a campaign to educate various audiences about the impact of fast fashion. Students, acting like consultants, must conduct independent research and prepare a presentation or a report about their approach for a client, a well-known environmental charity.

This was created as a 'raw case'. Raw cases are open-ended, multi-perspective studies that can include a wide range of relevant materials for students to investigate and evaluate, such as environmental reports, regulatory documents, news articles, company reports and interviews with key commercial, government and NGO representatives. This style illustrates how managers must assess and analyse data to make informed business decisions. The raw case is complex, allowing students to focus on management, organisational behaviour, change management, ethics, CSR and environmental issues. The case also lets students practise presenting consultancy briefs, pitches, presentations and reports on a complex issue. The case could be used in a wide range of consulting and management courses. The issues explored in the case include:

- the impact of fast fashion on the environment
- corporate social responsibility
- cultural and behavioural change.

How to cite this book chapter:

Sallai, Dorottya (2025) 'Environmental impact: why fast fashion is bad for the environment', in: Sallai, Dorottya and Pepper, Alexander (ed) *Navigating the 21st Century Business World: Case Studies in Management*, London: LSE Press, pp. 177–184. <https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepress.nbw.1>

Guidance on how to write a case analysis can be found in Chapter 1, 'Business cases: what are they, why do we use them and how should you go about doing a case analysis?'.

Introduction

When people update their wardrobes at the beginning of a new season, they may not realise that the manufacturing of only one simple cotton T-shirt requires approximately 2700 litres of water.² Although adhering to the latest fashion trends appears to be an unwritten societal expectation in many educational and business contexts, the detrimental impact it causes to the environment goes far beyond the benefits it offers. Would social rules change if people were aware that thrown-away clothing results in the discharge of half a million tonnes of microfibres into the ocean every year – the equivalent of more than 50 billion plastic bottles?³

Fast fashion – which has made trends more accessible to consumers globally through high-volume business strategies – is considered the primary cause of the rise of mass consumption and environmental pollution. According to studies, by 2030, 69 per cent of global textile production will be based on polyester, nylon and other synthetic fibres, and only 25 per cent will have a natural origin.⁴ While the industry is increasingly bringing sustainability into focus, as long as consumers buy cheap clothes, balancing ESG initiatives with commercial objectives will be challenging. This case study explores this complex topic from the perspective of a consultancy assignment, focusing on a UK-based environmental charity's efforts to reduce fast-fashion consumption in the general population.

What is fast fashion?

Fast fashion refers to cheap clothes that are produced en masse and distributed quickly to consumers for the purpose of maximising recent fashion trends.⁵ The fast-fashion industry has changed the way people buy clothing. Fast fashion's affordability, convenience, and trend-based nature make it a fast-growing industry despite its negative impacts on the environment and garment workers. This is not a surprise since fashion is also a highly profitable business. The fast-fashion industry has increased significantly in the past decades, with the global fashion market valued at \$1.7 trillion in 2023,⁶ employing more than 300 million people across the different global value chains. As a result of this drastic rise of fast fashion, clothing production doubled between 2000 and 2014, while the number of items of clothing people buy per capita increased by about 60 per cent.⁷

Although in the 1990s fast fashion was only a growing trend, it has evolved into a norm in the global fashion market. In 2024, fast fashion was out-paced by the phenomenon of ‘ultrafast fashion’, which allows consumers to update their wardrobes at an unprecedented pace. The rise of social media and extremely low prices led to a culture of over-consumption and an even more accelerated disposal of fashion items that are often ‘barely worn before being dumped’.⁸ For example, in 2023, Shein, a Chinese fashion brand, produced around 7200 new product models every day,⁹ pricing them significantly cheaper than established fast-fashion retailers. Shein’s average unit price is \$14, compared to H&M’s \$26 and Zara’s \$34.¹⁰ Fast-fashion retailers like Shein and Temu have enjoyed staggering sales as they become popular due to their ability to quickly produce and sell trendy, affordable clothing. In 2024, 40 per cent of US and 26 per cent of UK consumers shopped at these retailers.¹¹ Zara, the Spanish multinational fashion designer, updates its range twice a month, while its parent company, Inditex, has doubled its share price just within the last two years.¹² Fast fashion is a controversial topic, evoking strong emotions, not only because of its impact on the environment but also because of its impact on self-identity and values.¹³ Some argue that consumers should be responsible in their consumption and make ethical decisions on which fashion labels they support with their purchases. On the other hand, others see fast fashion as a symptom of globalisation, capitalism and consumerism, and call for more systemic change, including government regulations and the introduction of sectoral interventions as a more effective way of tackling the issue. Ultimately, fostering inclusive and empathetic conversations is crucial for promoting sustainable fashion practices.

The impact of fast fashion on the environment

Fast fashion contributes to substantial waste and environmental damage. The fashion industry has contributed more to climate change than international flights and maritime shipping combined.¹⁴ This is not surprising, given that the textile industry accounts for 20 per cent of all industrial water pollution,¹⁵ and fast fashion is responsible for 10 per cent of global carbon emissions due to energy consumption in production and distribution. To put this into context, the process of manufacturing and washing a single pair of jeans releases an equivalent amount of carbon dioxide as driving 69 miles.¹⁶ According to the European Environment Agency, clothing purchases in the EU generated around 270kg of carbon dioxide emissions per individual in the year 2020 alone.¹⁷

Out of the total annual production of 100 billion garments, around 92 million tonnes are disposed of in landfills. This indicates that clothes equivalent to the capacity of a bin lorry are disposed of in landfills every second.¹⁸ In the United States alone, an estimated 11.3 million tonnes of textile waste, or 85 per cent of all textiles, end up in landfills each year. That equates to around 37kg per person each year, just in the US.¹⁹

There has also been a shift in the way people dispose of old clothing, with more people choosing to throw it away rather than donate it. Less than 50 per cent of second-hand clothing is collected for reusing or recycling, and only one per cent of used clothing is recycled.²⁰

Clothing sales have increased substantially worldwide. For example, in France fashion sales have risen by nearly 50 per cent in a decade.²¹ North Americans are the world's largest textile users, consuming an average of 37kg per user per year, followed by Australia (27kg), western Europe (22kg), and developing countries such as Africa, India, and southern Asia (with just 5kg each).²² The average European consumer uses approximately 26kg of clothes a year and disposes of approximately 11kg of them.²³ In Europe, British shoppers buy more clothes than any other nation.²⁴

Sustainability versus profit

To address climate pressures and regulatory changes, many fashion companies are integrating sustainability into their business models. This includes appointing executives with ESG experience to oversee sustainability strategies. Fashion companies like Shein call for the fashion industry's 'urgent transformation' on sustainability, while others such as H&M offer customers discounts on purchases in exchange for used clothes for safe disposal or recycling.²⁵ Fashion companies are moving away from the old linear model of extraction and disposal and towards circular business models that emphasise recycling.

Regulators around the world are evaluating possible interventions in industry to protect the environment. EU member states, for instance, have considered introducing restrictions on textile waste exports as much of the disposed fashion-related waste is transported to countries such as Ghana and Kenya, causing environmental damage locally. The French parliament is debating a bill that would impose serious new restrictions on fast-fashion brands. Under the legislation, firms would face fines of up to €10 per item sold if they fail to address environmental damage from discarded products.²⁶

Nevertheless, companies have little reason to change, and despite all the environmental concerns and regulatory efforts, investment in fast fashion is growing, and people are spending their money on low-quality clothing that goes out of fashion in weeks. The question that the industry should be really worried about is when fast fashion will go out of fashion.

Preparing the case

In preparing the case analysis, imagine that you are the consultant at a UK-based consultancy company. Your first client is a well-known charity that specialises in environmental protection. You have been asked to research current trends in the fast-fashion industry and develop a strategy for a change project. Based on your research, design a behavioural change campaign

strategy aimed at reducing fast-fashion consumption among three key target groups. The campaign should focus on individuals who may be inclined to purchase fast fashion as Christmas presents or for Christmas parties. Outline your research and the recommended approach by writing a report or preparing a presentation²⁷ for reducing fast fashion, taking into account the perspectives of the three key target audiences below:

1. **A grandparent buying Christmas presents for their grandchildren**
Sarah is a 68-year-old who would like to buy her 18-year-old granddaughter some new clothes for Christmas. Sarah has heard her granddaughter talking about ISAWITFIRST and has been looking online for some trousers and a jumper.
2. **A gap year student who needs a variety of outfits for a Christmas party**
Helen is a 23-year-old who is travelling around the world after deferring her gap year because of the pandemic. She is due home for Christmas and wants to buy a few new cheap dresses to wear for the different reunions she is having with friends.
3. **Someone requesting gym clothes from their partner's present list**
Albert is a 35-year-old who is looking for some new sportswear for Christmas. As it is just for the gym he uses at home, he does not want his partner to spend too much money.

Some links to start off your research:

- ABC News (Australia) (2018) 'The wastefulness of "fast fashion" and how some in the industry are fighting back', YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGPMJyuh3eA>
- Abelvik-Lawson, Helle (2023), 'How fast fashion fuels climate change, plastic pollution and violence', Greenpeace, 3 April. <https://perma.cc/K7GJ-ME5M>
- Adeogun, Joy (n. d.) 'Fashion forward: How to combat climate change through clothing', Imperial College London. <https://perma.cc/U7X3-54KS>
- Fenech, Céline; Walton, Dr. Bryn and Majury, Alan (2023) 'The Sustainable Consumer, Understanding consumer attitudes to sustainability and sustainable behaviours', Deloitte. <https://perma.cc/P7G3-HWGY>
- Green Transition Support (n.d.) Good practice database: Measures, technologies and good practices'. <https://www.clustercollaboration.eu/green/database>
- McDaniel, Amber (2023) '11 Slow Fashion Brands Fighting Back Against Fast Fashion', Sustainable Jungle, 27 September. <https://perma.cc/3GPQ-VE4X>
- Murphy, Liam (n. d.) 'The Fightback against Fast Fashion', Aim2Flourish. <https://perma.cc/JWF8-D3DF>

In preparing your report or presentation, you should reflect on the following questions:

1. The excessive use of water, chemical pollution and waste produced by the fast-fashion industry has a devastating impact on the environment. What can or should fast fashion companies do to make the fashion industry more sustainable? How can fashion companies reduce the negative impact on the environment? Which organisations have campaigned recently against fast fashion?
2. The fast-fashion industry's reliance on low-wage labour raises ethical concerns. What are the social implications of fast fashion on workers in the supply chain? What ethical obligations do you think fast fashion companies have?
3. Even though consciousness of sustainable fashion is increasing, consumer behaviour is still driven largely by trends and costs. Can consumer behaviour shift towards more sustainable fashion choices in the short term, and what would it take to achieve this?
4. Some social media influencers either advocate for sustainability or support fast fashion by promoting the latest trends online. What is the role of influencers and social media in promoting or discouraging fast fashion?
5. The efficiency of sustainability initiatives in the fast-fashion industry has been mixed. Explore some of the current campaigns and policies in reducing fast-fashion consumption in your own country or globally and evaluate their effectiveness.

References

- ¹ The author would like to thank Alirity Consulting for their support in preparing this case.
- ² The Conscious Club (2019) 'Water & Clothing', 15 May. <https://perma.cc/Q7J4-7AMJ>
- ³ Crumbie, Alex (2024) 'What is fast fashion and why is it a problem?', 9 April. *The Ethical Consumer* <https://perma.cc/CE3E-3MEL>
- ⁴ Sciorilli Borrelli, S. (2024). 'Fast fashion: "We aren't doing enough to fix the problem"'. *Financial Times*, July 13. <https://www.ft.com/content/f0be47ca-dd6f-44d5-8be8-80012ed4b725>

- ⁵ Maiti, Rashmila (2024) 'The Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion, explained', earth.org, 20 January. <https://perma.cc/FJJ5-MPQ7>
- ⁶ McKinsey & Company (2023) 'The State of Fashion 2024: Finding pockets of growth as uncertainty reigns', 29 November. <https://perma.cc/W5KX-EEWJ>
- ⁷ McKinsey & Company (2025) 'What is fast fashion?', 23 January. <https://perma.cc/VCK2-PYYY>
- ⁸ Mundy, Simon (2024) 'Is time running out for fast fashion?', *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/d07d6818-060a-4afe-903a-3afb110b0dd9>
- ⁹ Sciorilli Borrelli, S. (2024)
- ¹⁰ McKinsey & Company (2025)
- ¹¹ McKinsey & Company (2023)
- ¹² Mundy, Simon (2024)
- ¹³ Sierra, Brittany (2024) 'The Psychology of Fast Fashion: Why Conversation About Fast Fashion Evokes Such Strong Emotions In Us', the sustainable fashion forum, 2 February. <https://perma.cc/FJL6-3CMZ>
- ¹⁴ Shirvanimoghaddam, Kamyar; Motamed, Bahareh; Ramakrishna; Seeram and Naebe, Minoo (2020) 'Death by waste: Fashion and textile circular economy case', *Science of The Total Environment*, vol. 718, 20 May. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.137317>
- ¹⁵ The Conscious Club (2019)
- ¹⁶ Shirvanimoghaddam, Kamyar; Motamed, Bahareh; Ramakrishna, Seeram and Naebe, Minoo (2020)
- ¹⁷ European Parliament (2020) 'The impact of textile production and waste on the environment (infographics)', 29 December. <https://perma.cc/2WXT-2YQU>
- ¹⁸ Igini, Martina (2023) '10 Concerning Fast Fashion Waste Statistics', earth.org., 21 August. <https://perma.cc/RMH4-BWM8>
- ¹⁹ Igini, Martina (2023)
- ²⁰ European Parliament (2020)
- ²¹ Mundy, Simon (2024)
- ²² Shirvanimoghaddam, Kamyar, Motamed, Bahareh, Ramakrishna, Seeram and Naebe, Minoo (2020)

- ²³ European Parliament (2020)
- ²⁴ Stallard, Esme (2022) 'Fast fashion: How clothes are linked to climate change', *BBC News*, 29 July. <https://perma.cc/54LW-5C85>
- ²⁵ Sciorilli Borrelli, S. (2024)
- ²⁶ Simons, Angela (2024) "Major breakthrough": French parliament votes in favour of crackdown on ultra fast fashion, *Euronews*, 15 March. <https://perma.cc/8JPP-FKRP>
- ²⁷ Note for instructors: Please give students more specific instructions on the requirements of their report or presentation, i.e. length, word-count, etc.