

**The slow burn of fast fashion:  
Unsustainable practices within the industry's supply chain**

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## **Abstract**

Fast fashion supply chains are highly efficient because they produce and sell products very quickly, resulting in minimized lead times and lower prices. Though the success of fast fashion is admirable from a supply chain perspective, it has also raised concerns about the industry's negative long-term effects. This process creates lower quality clothing, resulting in shorter product life cycles and increased textile waste. Due to this nature of production, many major brands lack strong ethics, leading to unfair working conditions, environmental damage, and involvement in other unsustainable practices that make the industry problematic. The COVID-19 pandemic created the need for consumers to purchase more of their goods from online retailers, resulting in unprecedented global market value growth for the fashion industry. Social media has significantly influenced the popularity of many fast fashion brands, and in turn increased their levels of production. This research provides insight on the ethical shortcomings of the fast fashion industry and explores the importance of sustainable practices in apparel production.

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## **Introduction**

The fast fashion industry is composed of brands who quickly produce and release clothes that are modeled after the most recent trends in the apparel industry. These companies often rely on cheap labor and materials, promoting unsafe work environments and creating poorly constructed products that are not made to last. The success of fast fashion is built upon extremely short lead times and is additionally based upon the idea that consumers will continue to buy clothes exponentially, both out of necessity and desire. The two main appeals for consumers to purchase from fast fashion companies are low prices and frequent availability of new products following trends. Social media influencers are often sponsored by these brands to promote various clothing items, and followers are presented with the opportunity to make a quick in-app purchase after seeing this content. Many brands only exist digitally and do not offer an option to return clothing, so influencers and consumers alike are left to dispose of products soon after receiving the goods. While fast fashion brands offer increased accessibility to clothing in a wide variety of sizes and styles, the ethical shortcomings of the industry have led to significant amounts of controversy surrounding their practices.

In 2018, over 17 million tons of textile waste were added to landfills, and the average amount of clothing and apparel waste continues to rise each year. (Environmental Protection Agency, 2020) To put this number in perspective, 17 million tons of textiles is about 45 times heavier than The Empire State Building. This is confirmation that the fashion and apparel industry is having a negative effect on the environment, so it is no surprise that it is one of the most wasteful industries in the world. In addition to having a major impact on the environment, the fast fashion industry has also had a negative influence on manufacturing and fulfillment work around the globe, with unsafe working conditions and unethical practices being some of the common denominators

in their business operations. The negative implications of this industry are detrimental to the working environment in a multitude of ways, and one would think that there would be proper regulations in place to stop the harm. Instead, the effects of fast fashion production have been a slow burn since the recent peak of the concept's popularity. The problems continue to grow, and just as landfills do not magically reach their waste capacity overnight, the solution to these problems with working conditions will not be discovered overnight either. The industry's list of problems may have accelerated in the past few years, but that does not mean that they did not have a lengthy problematic history pre-pandemic.

### **Background**

In order to understand how fast fashion works, it is necessary to look at the history of the fashion industry as a whole. Jonas (2021) explains that the concept of fast fashion dates back to the Industrial Revolution. The transition to modernized manufacturing in the late 1700s and early 1800s was a pivotable time period for the clothing and apparel industry. The rise of clothing factories and mass production that came with the invention of the sewing machine led to a new world for clothing consumerism. During this time, as combined household income increased, the average consumer had more spending money to put toward clothes, which led to companies creating more options for clothes that followed consumer wants and fashion trends. A wider variety of options available led to increased consumer power to make choices, and eventually the concept of brand loyalty based on trends and individual preferences. There have always been fashion trends, with specific styles and designers gaining popularity through word of mouth and eventually printed content. But the purchasing power that rose with the origins of mass production is truly what made the fashion industry all that it is today.

Over time, social media has completely shifted the way the fashion industry works. Less than 20 years ago, most fashion trends were still spread via printed media such as catalogs and magazines. With the rise of Facebook and Instagram, many consumers continued this pattern of purchasing the exact items they saw in photos, except it is now instantaneous via e-commerce. An Instagram user can purchase an item they see tagged in a photo and have it delivered to their door with just a few clicks. The revolution of social media has created a new age of social commerce, a term that encompasses the experience and interactions that lead up to a consumer making a purchase through a platform. (Murdoch, 2022) Social commerce is about the broader aspects that lead to purchase, as it is way more than just seeing an advertisement and visiting a website. Fast fashion rose to popularity through social media, as platforms such as Instagram and Facebook allow brands to advertise their products via reposts and promotional placement. Most fast fashion companies achieve the majority of their sales through e-commerce, either through their direct website or via social media referrals.

The process of fast fashion production incorporates short lead times and expedited planning, which requires materials sourcing specialists to find the cheapest options available within the shortest timeline. In most cases, these materials include fabrics such as rayon, polyurethane, and other synthetic fibers. (Jones, 2022) More commonly recognized materials include polyester and nylon, which are used in a variety of industries, not just the apparel and accessory market. The process of developing these materials has contributed to detrimental environmental effects such as pollution and deforestation, and the speed and frequency of fast fashion production have contributed to these effects to a great extent.

The problems with working conditions in the fast fashion industry's supply chain essentially remained a secret until about ten years ago, when the Rana Plaza disaster occurred. An

eight-story garment factory that housed facilities for fast fashion company manufacturing in Bangladesh collapsed on April 24, 2013, and structural engineering experts reported that the tragedy could have been prevented. Structural damages became visible on the day prior to the collapse, but management urged workers to continue working despite concerns, and even threatened people's jobs if they did not report for work. This building was home to five factories specializing in garment production, including some that were working for fast fashion brands. The International Labour Organization reports that at least 1,132 people were killed and 2,500 were injured. Noble (2020) gives insight into how this tragedy changed how the average consumer feels about the clothes they wear. This devastating event shed light on the poor working conditions and unmonitored practices of overseas garment production, making many people question what it really takes to produce an article of clothing. Any time there is a major incident with a fast fashion brand, whether it is an environmental or social issue, the severity of the problem does not seem to resonate much with those who are not directly affected by it. In response, attempts at activism are shared through social media platforms and on major news programs, but it does not stop people from purchasing from these brands that are ultimately causing harm to the world. Once the news of this tragedy became widespread, it also caught the attention of regulatory councils and ethical labor activists, who were able to take more concrete action to promote positive changes within similar facilities.

Agreements such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh are intended to ensure that facilities are safe and that workers are being treated fairly. While some improvements have been made within the industry, Rahman and Yadlapalli (2021) report that many of the so-called changes are only for show. Their 2018 interview with a Bangladesh manufacturer revealed that compliance only exists when audits are being completed, meaning that some of the same

unethical practices continue, even ones that have led to disasters in the past. This research establishes evidence that false practices continue to this day, and that they are not limited to just Bangladesh. Garment manufacturing factories that do not work within accordance with building protocols and lack proper maintenance remain one of the riskiest places to work.

Pollution, textile waste, and overproduction are just a few of the industry's faults. Brewer (2019) explains that there is no quick fix to the problems created by the fast fashion industry, as the adverse effects have built up over the past few decades and labor and property laws do not restrict companies enough, so it comes down to an ethical problem. Brands who have a strong sense of corporate social responsibility are ones who aim for ethical production- paying their workers higher wages, respecting the environment- but their production rate cannot compare to their competitors. When the business spends more of their time and energy on developing a quality product and ethical process, the profit margin quickly begins to diminish with the added costs that are incurred along the way. Essentially, it is up to individual companies to adopt more sustainable practices, and in turn set the standard for the long-term. Additionally, educating consumers is equally as important as holding companies accountable, as the public has the right to know what goes on behind the scenes with clothing manufacturers. There is an overarching theme with the spread of the term "supply chain" as a buzzword, which is the overall lack of fully understanding its complexity. It is normal to see a brand apologize for shipping delays due to supply chain problems now, because the buzzword has been seen frequently via mass media, but companies rarely provide detail about what supply chain disruptions they are facing specifically. It could range from a problem with sourcing materials, manufacturing products, fulfilling orders, or transportation. For the fashion and apparel industry, the lack of visibility in the fashion supply chain stems from its lack of accountability in manufacturing facilities, and absence of guiding



mission statements or values. While the process is not necessarily secretive, it is not fully transparent to the public either.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected supply chains everywhere, including those linked to the retail and fashion industry. Dewalska-Opitek and Bilińska-Reformat (2021) discuss the competition between companies and how this can affect product life cycles within this industry. The fashion industry is already extremely competitive, and the domain of fast fashion is even more cutthroat. Companies compete to produce and make items available for sale as quickly as possible to follow trends that spread instantly through social media. It is common to see multiple fast fashion sites selling very similar products, because they are all trying to provide consumers with the most up-to-date pieces. Since the products are so cheap, there are no barriers to purchasing from multiple retailers, giving customers a wide selection and the ability to order as much as they want, especially when shopping in brick-and-mortar store locations. The use of strategic marketing and advertising to reach customers is nothing new, as major fast fashion retailers such as Zara have been refining their market segments since the early 2000s. This is connected to their social media presence and brings in the element of widespread consumer acceptance of fast fashion supply chain practices. Additionally, the pandemic has been a catalyst for increased e-commerce sales, with more people shopping from home when stores closed their fitting rooms or closed altogether. Despite shipping concerns caused by supply chain disruptions and transportation delays, consumers have found success with finding clothes they desire through an e-retailer.

A common misconception within the fast fashion industry that many consumers believe is that fast fashion only exists through e-commerce and online retailers. This is not the case, with stores such as H&M, Old Navy, and Forever 21 being fast fashion brands who rely on physical brick and mortar stores to drive primary sales, but also use social media and influencer partnerships

to promote their products. Wright (2017) explains that the digital content produced by these companies is what helps them produce and sell clothing quicker than competitors. Visual content shared via social media can influence consumer viewpoints and have the potential to manipulate how they view a product, especially with the rise of influencer culture. While the digital content creators who promote these fast fashion brands are not personally responsible or liable for the practices of the companies they are contracted for, their public support of representing the brand could be perceived as compliance.

Shorter product life cycles are linked to lower likelihood of sustainability, as poorly constructed garments do not even last long enough to be resold or recycled. When the preliminary materials used in constructing an apparel item are not quality, then landfills become the only viable option for the end of their life. By producing a set number of products, some companies can avoid wasting garments while maintaining fast-paced product rotation. This is more effective for brands that only exist digitally, but it could be implemented for other companies if they caught on to these practices. This way, strategies are adaptable and can respond to consumer demand, making the supply chain more ethical and responsible both for the environment and for the labor force. Ultra-fast fashion is a business style where companies can maintain a high production speed while aligning their practices with higher ethical standards. In their journal, authors Lucas, Farias, and Marcia (2020) explain that the fix for fast fashion may not be to slow down, and instead to speed up the process to eliminate some of the problems that occur in the middle portion of the industry's supply chain. This brings an interesting perspective to the table, as many sustainability activists promote the idea of slowing down clothing production instead.

## Issue Development

The specific consumer-facing problems within the fast fashion industry can be attributed to the acceleration of sales via e-commerce and social media. A prime example of an online fast fashion retailer with a strong social media presence is Shein, a direct-to-consumer clothing empire. With over 23 million followers on Instagram, their rise to popularity has been made possible through influencer marketing partnerships and their mobile app that is ranked #2 in the Shopping category on the Apple app store. Shein's Instagram posts mainly feature digital creators and social media influencers wearing Shein products, along with a link to directly purchase the items worn in the photo through the Instagram shopping feature. Shein has had its fair share of scandals, which have included stealing designs from small artists (Cruz, 2020) and cultural/religious appropriation. In 2020, the brand came under fire for selling Muslim prayer mats as "frilled Greek carpets." (Gan, 2022) Other fast fashion brands have had similar scandals, ranging from situations that gain the attention of international news, to the quiet removal of a product from their site. When this occurs, the company will issue an apology and take the items off of their shop, but this continues to be a definite pattern among companies who are producing apparel accessories in this quick of a manner.

If fast fashion brands are unethical, why do consumers continue to shop from them? A select few consumers may not be aware of how detrimental fast fashion production is to the world. If they are not active social media users or do not keep up with current events, then the only information they intake about fast fashion is directly from the brands themselves. On the other hand, some consumers may be aware of the problematic practices surrounding fast fashion, but simply do not find them significant enough to stop shopping from the companies altogether. It is important to understand what motivates someone to purchase from a fast fashion website, before all the blame is placed on consumers for shopping from unethical companies.

Fast fashion products are appealing to many people because they are readily available to purchase online and follow the latest trends. (Gecseg, 2020) Because these items are produced so quickly, companies are able to eliminate the costs involved in creating a product from start to finish. They also offer a wide variety of styles, increasing the options for consumers who have difficulty finding a fit that they like from brands who only offer a limited selection of sizes. Another factor for people to favor fast fashion is price. Not everyone can afford average retail prices or is willing to pay them. For example, if someone is looking for an up-to-date outfit to wear to a specific event and they are trying to stay within a budget, they are going to look for the cheapest options on the market. And if they are only purchasing the clothes for a single use, then they are not going to order garments that are meant to last. Consumers who are looking for an outfit that is current, stylish, and priced low will find their desired product through fast fashion.

A common alternative to buying from fast fashion websites is to shop from local discounted stores or larger thrift stores such as Goodwill and Salvation Army. The process of thrifting clothes for specific needs is time-consuming and impossible in some scenarios. With the rise of thrifting popularity, there is now a major threat facing thrift store inventory, creating more barriers to consumers who wish to shop more sustainably: thrifting for digital resale. Individual resale platforms such as Depop allow users to sell their clothes, but some have taken it to the next level through thrifting hauls and buying items for the sole purpose of reselling them for profit. (Nguyen, 2021) Not only does this price-out those who primarily shop at thrift stores, it also leaves less desirable inventory in stores, because resellers are buying large quantities of items out of entrepreneurial spirit rather than necessity.

Online thrifting is a complicated process, and it has not yet gained enough popularity to become as streamlined as other platforms such as Facebook Marketplace, Poshmark, or The

RealReal. These used clothing resale platforms are consignment-based shops, where individuals keep the clothes and then send them off to a purchaser. While this saves on shipping costs, it does not allow for people to truly shop and select, instead it forces them to search and bid on specific items- and if there is nothing available for resale in their size, then there is no purchase.

Other advocates for sustainable shopping would suggest that consumers should limit their closet to only the necessary items, creating a capsule wardrobe. Capsule wardrobes are becoming more popular as people continue to work remote and begin to travel more, a prime example of having a collection of clothes that is lower in quantity, higher in quality. While this may be a viable solution for some, it is an unrealistic solution for people who have labor-intensive lifestyles that require more casual and economical clothes. Additionally, most people use fashion to express themselves, and do not want to limit their closet to just a few basic items.

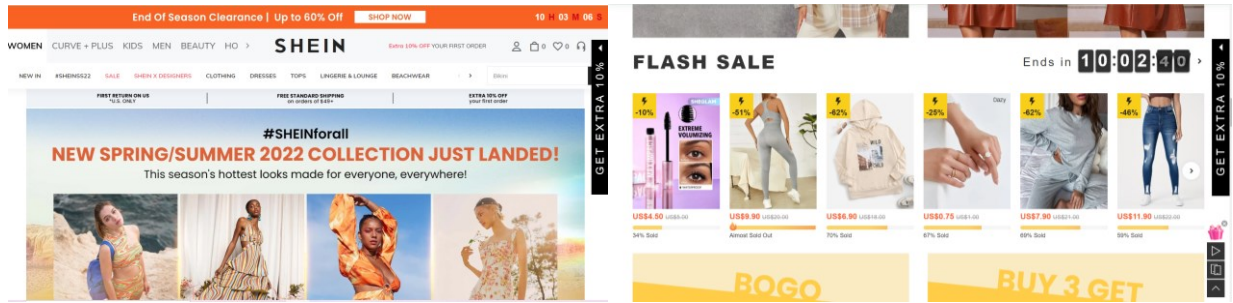
In the long run, fast fashion is not sustainable. But this could be said about a number of production processes globally, as fully sustainable practices are a rare find and nearly impossible to achieve in some enterprises. What sets the fast fashion industry apart from others is its appeal to trends, resulting in extremely high turnover rates. When the average consumer was no longer able to leave their house to shop for clothing and accessories due to lockdowns and stay at home orders, they turned to e-commerce. The act of buying clothes online is a simple and efficient process, and there are very few barriers to accessing a wide variety of digital retailers, even if one has never ordered garments online. This means that there is nothing stopping consumers from endlessly supporting fast fashion companies, because they are willing to accept a lower quality product because of the ease of purchase and low price. The average consumer is unaware of every step in the supply chain process, both because it is complicated and because there is very little media coverage of the behind-the-scenes of apparel production. There's a reason that it's not

broadcasted on the news, because the overall big picture is not pretty. Some might say that a fast fashion purchase constitutes acceptance of unethical practices, whereas others may acknowledge that these brands are unethical, but argue that it is impossible for a profitable company to be fully ethical. There is a great deal of shame placed on those who have no choice but to purchase from fast fashion brands, and this blame that is passed through social media does not account for those who do not have the resources to buy sustainable clothing

A major problem with the fast fashion industry overall is the lack of consistency. One key factor for variable consumer experience with online fast fashion retailers is the variance in garment manufacturing, leading to inconsistency in sizing throughout the available products from the online retailer. Additionally, there is no streamlined returns process present, meaning that the reverse logistics process for fast fashion businesses creates more problems than can be reasonably handled, leading to product disposal.

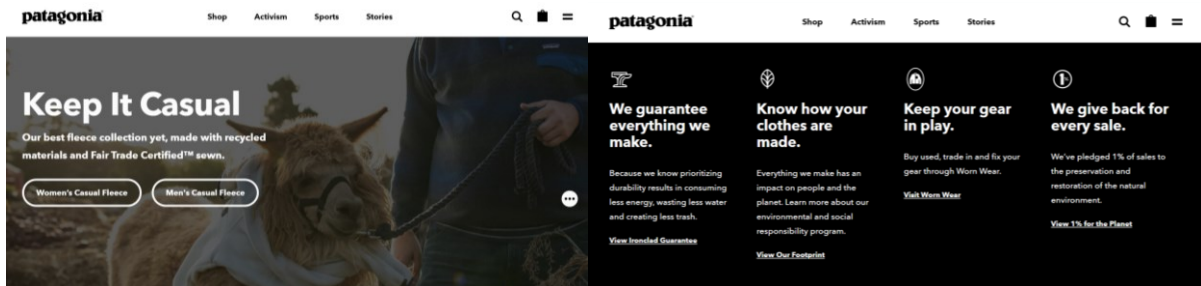
### **Social media and online presence**

A brand's image and voice are what creates a lasting impression in a consumer's mind, and this can be built up by the company's website and social media. For example, if a company's online visual presence is based upon an Earth-toned color scheme and minimalistic style, consumers will feel different from when they view a website or social platform that is full of pop-up ads and promotions. Fast fashion websites tend to highlight their low product prices, whether it be through promotional offers or via flash sales. Shein's website changes frequently, with flashy promotional taglines and visual emphasis on low prices, which could be overwhelming or enticing to the average visitor. Countdowns to the end of flash sales can be seen throughout the site, along with other numerical indicators of remaining inventory.



*Shein's website, screenshot captured on Feb. 24, 2022*

On the other hand, sustainable companies such as Patagonia put an emphasis on the quality of their products to best position themselves in the apparel and accessory market. By focusing on the company's process of developing products and their overall mission as a business, they translate their values into a visual brand identity.



*Patagonia's website, screenshot captured on Feb. 24, 2022*

Alternatively, there is the potential for a brand to develop its image in a way that could lead it to be perceived as more eco-friendly when it is marketed the right way, even if it is not. But this is not what makes a company truly sustainable, rather, it is the company's mission statement and values that lead it to be set apart from fast fashion by being ethical and eco-friendly through its practices. Company mission statements, values, and impact reports are a focal point for the websites of sustainable companies, whereas they are not present on the websites of fast fashion

companies. While Shein does have a mission statement, it is centered around customers and is not supported by any significant facts or figures. They have participated in global initiatives for positive environmental and social change, but their claims have been disputed by many ethics and conduct experts. (Mason, 2021) Shein's public statements have been called "misleading" and "deceptive" by Mason because there is no proof behind their claims, and it seems that their attempt at having a webpage devoted to their so-called initiatives is just an attempt to distract consumers from the truth of their behind-the-scenes malpractice.

### **Discussion and recommendations**

There are two supply chain shortfalls of the fast fashion business. The first is reverse logistics and the returns process. When a customer sends a product back to a fast fashion retailer, the products are rarely recycled or resold. The lack of a streamlined returns process implies that nothing is done to add the product back into inventory or recycle the materials. Companies who put an emphasis on their returns process offer a heightened level of customer care, such as Patagonia providing product repairs. Additionally, American Eagle and Target are two examples of companies who sell clothes that use automated software to manage their inventory restocking and reverse logistics.

The next shortfall of fast fashion is overall sustainability. By interviewing the founder of Svala, a company in the sustainable apparel and accessory industry, it was found that the mission of sustainable brands is what differentiated them from fast fashion from the consumer's viewpoint. Though their product prices are higher, their materials sourcing efforts show that they care about each step of the process, rather than cutting corners. There is a higher level of accountability in production in these companies, and they regularly complete audits of their factories and finances to ensure that nothing is hidden in the process.



Supply chain transparency is key to making a difference in the fashion industry. Many consumers are unaware of what goes on behind the scenes and how profit-hungry these industry leaders are. While it is unrealistic to ask consumers to completely avoid fast fashion, it is possible to make a change via consumer mindset. Consumers should be discouraged from overbuying to help keep inventory disposal costs low, and fast fashion companies should be held accountable for their manufacturing, fulfillment, and reverse logistics practices.

### **Reverse logistics**

Logistics involves the process of transporting goods through a customer, and reverse logistics is exactly what it sounds like: the backwards pattern of logistics. When a customer receives a product and is unsatisfied with it for any reason, most companies give them the opportunity to return it and receive a refund. Customers are able to conveniently print out shipping labels and, in some cases, drop off their package rather than paying for postage, which is the case with Amazon returns centers. When products are returned to fast fashion companies, the process begins to get much more complicated.

Dealing with excess product or overstocked items that are out of season can also be a major reverse logistics problem in the clothing industry. When businesses decide to sell excess products in bulk, it is a lengthy process to undertake. Shipping these items out becomes more complicated because when a product is not fully stocked, there must be a customer willing to buy the specific style and size of an item. If returns are offered for the remaining availability, it could take months for this product to finally reach its end customer. By this point, there has been unnecessary shipping and handling costs incurred on the company's behalf, not to mention the environmental impact of back-and-forth transportation. In some cases, companies with poor reverse logistical plans may

not even try to sell their leftover products because they do not want to spend anything extra investing in this process.

In addition to managing returns, reverse logistics can include reusing and recycling parts of products and their packaging. For some companies who offer product maintenance services, the goal of reverse logistics may be to repair an item and send it back to the customer. In the apparel category, this service assists in repairing everything from light wear and tear, or damages that have occurred during the product's useful life, and this may be complimentary or involve a small fee. Patagonia is one example of a brand that exhibits exemplary service in this area. By offering their customers guaranteed quality and item repairs, Patagonia is set apart from other clothing brands when it comes to experience and long-term relationships. Additionally, they offer a way for consumers to trade-in or buy used items through Worn Wear, a platform built to extend the life of garments and make purchasing used items more accessible. (Patagonia) They elevate themselves as a sustainable company by placing more emphasis on their people, product, and process, rather than just their profit.

Unfortunately, there is no perfect one size fits all solution to managing returns and leftover inventory, because each industry has its own unique challenges and processes. Even within the fashion and apparel category, brands have individual processes that they are likely unwilling to change because they have been in place for years. But with the right tools, it is possible to transition to a more long-term sustainable solution.

Optoro is one example of a reverse logistics software that helps redirect returned items away from landfills. Some of Optoro's users include Ikea, Target, and American Eagle- proving that refining reverse logistics is possible regardless of the category that a retailer specializes in. Optoro has proven that having a smooth returns process increases a customer's likelihood of

making a purchase from the brand again. (Optoro, 2022) Their returns management technology allows vendors and warehouse staff to cut costs and processing time through an integrated dashboard that displays all of the relevant data about returns in one centralized location.

## **Sustainability**

Right now, sustainable clothes are still in the luxury goods category. While there are some brands who are working to make their product more affordable, most people view an expensive item as unnecessary when they could just get a similar product for less, even if it will not last as long. Fast fashion products are far more accessible to the average consumer who does not have a lot of excess spending money. Additionally, some consumers do not see the value in buying a garment, such as a pair of jeans, that is built to last. If the jeans go out of style, no longer fit, or do not satisfy the customer for any reason during the product's useful life, then the higher price point does not feel as worth it.

Svala is a sustainable luxury brand based out of Los Angeles, California that specializes in handcrafted vegan handbags. With a reputation for living out their mission statement and a unique approach to production, their products have been featured in Vogue, Los Angeles Times, and other major publications. Their high-end selection of wallets and handbags range from \$50 to \$300 As a direct-to-consumer company, they do not have the traditional retail price markups. With no retail expenses, Svala is able to keep their price ranges affordable for the typical luxury accessory consumer. In order to better understand how supply chain processes can be influenced by a company's mission, an interview was conducted with Helga Douglas, founder, and CEO of Svala.

One aspect of apparel and accessory production that tends to be wasteful is overproduction, which occurs when a manufacturer creates more product than needed or desired, and in most cases

the items are eventually thrown away. Svala combats this by producing in small batches at their Los Angeles location.

“We do not follow the formal seasonal fashion calendar, which can often result in a cycle of waste and heavy discounting to get rid of unsold stock. Instead, we focus on timeless, classic styles that are evergreen in our line. We are also mindful of fabric waste in our cutting process and use the scraps for smaller styles such as mini card cases. Any other material waste is donated to fashion students or recycled.” (Douglas, 2022)

A major part of Svala’s success in sustainable product has been their research and development process. By conducting a global search for the best materials, their team has been able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each option, and eventually discover which would work the best for their business.

“We recently introduced BioVeg which is an innovative vegan fabric made in Italy with recycled polyester from plastic bottles and bio polyols, obtained from non-food and GMO-free corn crops. This fabric contains at least 75% biomass from renewable resources - one of the highest percentages available on the market.” (Douglas, 2022)

Svala’s mission as a company is aligned with Helga’s personal values, which are all centered around long-term global sustainability. By building a company that is socially and environmentally conscious, she has been able to combat some of the problems that other fashion brands ignore. These problems are not only detrimental to the natural environment, but also to the future of the fashion industry as a whole.

“Some of the issues are water pollution from toxic dyeing and tanning leather and exploitation of workers who are working for very little money in unsafe conditions due to lack of regulations. Deforestation is an issue also - a recent report by Stand.earth linked more than 100 fashion brands to deforestation in the Amazon rainforest, via their leather supply chains.” (Douglas, 2022)

Additionally, Svala incorporates cork and recycled polyester from plastic bottles into their products, resulting in far less waste and other environmental disruptions. By keeping their manufacturing local, Svala ensures that their employees are paid fair wages and have safe working conditions within their facilities. Having a transparent supply chain is important on the consumer-facing side of the business as well, which is why Svala is committed to providing customers with full visibility for their sustainable material sourcing.

As a company, Svala is experimental and explorative in the ways they can decrease their negative environmental and social impact. Their research and development process led them to use Piñatex. (Piñatex, 2022) This is an innovative material that consists of synthetic leather developed from pineapple waste, and Svala has begun to explore product opportunities with it such as handbags and wallets. Materials such as Pinatex require a significant amount of energy to produce, incurring a cost that fast fashion brands are not willing to pay, as their main goal is to keep costs low. But the combination of dedicated sustainability managers and conscious consumers can make a difference in the fashion industry when it comes to sustainability. While pineapple leather may not be the most realistic option to completely replace materials such as polyester and rayon, Svala’s process proves that it is possible for an apparel and accessory brand to have sustainable material sourcing practices.

## **Characteristics of sustainable clothing brands**

Sustainable garments are normally created by materials that are ethically sourced and higher quality, they tend to be more expensive because they are not purchased in the same mass quantities that a fast fashion garment's materials would be. Buyers do not want to pay higher costs for the materials, because it forces them to raise the price of the final product.

Consumers who are not well-versed in what makes a business sustainable may not understand that being sustainable is more than having an Earth-toned color scheme or a minimalist website design. Companies who truly work toward sustainability have the certifications to prove it, and they are willing to go the extra mile when it comes to obtaining the right ones. The Cradle-to-Cradle certification is one example of this, where a business receives a rating that scores their overall commitment to decreasing waste and increasing the amount that is recycled. Another certification that is more widely recognized by consumers is Fair Trade. (Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation Institute) Companies who are fair trade certified meet high standards for environmental and social practices throughout each step of their supply chain.

If consumers were willing to pay more per product and inevitably buy less product, then the fashion industry could return to its slow pace with time. This is both a mindset change that takes a lot of social activism to make consumers more aware of the true price of fast fashion, and an industry shift that requires supply chain managers to shift their overall priorities.

## **Conclusion**

By analyzing the unsustainable practices in the fast fashion industry, it is possible to identify areas where clothing companies can be held more accountable. The purpose of this paper was to explain the negative environmental and social impacts of the fast fashion supply chain, and how they have escalated over time. Social media and e-commerce have significantly influenced

the popularity of fast fashion, and the industry will continue to grow unless there is a greater level of accountability established. Though there are initiatives in place to hold apparel and accessory companies to a higher standard when it comes to production, there will always be loopholes where businesses can prioritize profit over ethics. Supply chain transparency and consumer awareness is key for a more sustainable and ethical future of fast fashion.

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## Appendix

Transcript of interview with Helga Douglas

**Q: What are the challenges you see in the fashion industry regarding long-term global sustainability?**

A: I think the main issue is that there is so much fashion being produced rapidly in a non sustainable way. Some of the issues are water pollution from toxic dyeing and tanning leather and exploitation of workers who are working for very little money in unsafe conditions due to lack of regulations. Deforestation is an issue also - a recent report by Stand.earth linked more than 100 fashion brands to deforestation in the Amazon rainforest, via their leather supply chains.

**Q: As a direct-to consumer company, how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your materials sourcing and production decisions?**

A: The pandemic gave us a chance to slow down and spend a lot more time researching and testing new, sustainable fabrics from around the world. We recently introduced BioVeg which is an innovative vegan fabric made in Italy with recycled polyester from plastic bottles and bio polyols, obtained from non-food and GMO-free corn crops. This fabric contains at least 75% biomass from renewable resources - one of the highest percentages available on the market. Our production did slow down due to the lockdowns in Los Angeles but once things were open again, there was not too much disruption.

**Q: How has your company been able to combat overproduction and material waste?**

A: Svala produces locally in Los Angeles in small batches to combat overproduction. Also, we do not follow the formal seasonal fashion calendar, which can often result in a cycle of waste and

heavy discounting to get rid of unsold stock. Instead, we focus on timeless, classic styles that are evergreen in our line. We are also mindful of fabric waste in our cutting process and use the scraps for smaller styles such as mini card cases. Any other material waste is donated to fashion students or recycled.

**Q: What inspired your company to support environmentally ethical decision making?**

A: I founded Svala as I was unable to find the kind of animal friendly, sustainably made bags and accessories that I was looking for so I decided to create my own. I wanted to create a brand that stood for the values that I was looking for so sustainability has been in the brand's DNA since the very beginning. We have searched the globe for the most sustainable, durable fabrics such as cork, BioVeg, Piñatex® (made from pineapple leaf fiber) and recycled polyester from plastic bottles. Our products are also made locally in Los Angeles by a manufacturer that pays workers a fair wage for working in safe, ethical conditions.