ENVIRONMENT

Fashion or *Exploitation?*

A question to the younger generation



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The fashion industry, which contributed around 1.6% of the world's total GDP in 2025, is one of the most significant industries, with a market worth of around 1.84 trillion dollars. Known for its massive growth and the job opportunities it offers to upcoming generations, it employed around 430 million people globally in 2025. Yet, although the industry is blooming, it has its own constraints.

The term "fast fashion" first came into the limelight through The New York Times in 1989; the same newspaper later described it as "throwaway fashion." Leading fashion companies such as Zara and H&M have planted in young minds the habit of changing one's wardrobe once or twice a month. Clothes became available at cheaper rates because their quality was compromised. This excessive production and consumption has turned the fashion industry into one of the world's greatest polluters.

THE HIDDEN COST

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, **the fashion industry is responsible for 10% of yearly global carbon emissions**. Around 60% of the material used in its products is oil-based (polyester or nylon). It contributes around 35% of the microplastic pollution in the world's oceans, making it the largest known source of marine microplastics. In Asia, 70% of fresh water is contaminated by waste disposed of in water bodies. Washing clothes alone releases 500,000 tonnes of microfibres into the oceans, equivalent to 50 billion plastic bottles.

A total of 92 million tonnes of textile waste is produced every year. This waste is either burned, polluting the atmosphere, or shipped to underdeveloped and developing countries, where it is dumped in open areas. According to Watson and Wolf, 60,000 tonnes of clothes have been dumped in Chile's Atacama Desert.

Adding to the problem, fashion is the second-largest water-consuming industry: producing a single cotton shirt requires about 2,700 litres of fresh water. Around 85% of the textiles produced end up in landfills, and less than one per cent are recycled.

“So the question is: is the article cheap, or are we paying the cost through the health of our environment?”

With this question in mind, let us not harm our planet. Let us take simple measures such as recycling and re-using instead of throwing clothes away, and let us not allow the rapidly changing trends imposed by fashion brands to thwart our attempts to save the planet. ■



Mountains of discarded clothing: textile waste dumped in open land. Source: National Geographic

THE COST OF FAST FASHION, BY THE NUMBERS

10% of yearly global carbon emissions *UNEP*	**35%** of microplastic pollution in the world’s oceans *UNEP*	**92 mn t** of textile waste produced every year	**2,700 L** of fresh water to make one cotton shirt	**<1%** of textiles produced are recycled

Is the article cheap, or are we paying the cost through the health of our environment?

NANCY SHARMA



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