Waste Couture: Fast Fashion

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Introduction

Fast fashion is the term coined by manufacturers for trends that are moved quickly from the runway to stores. This method is based off of the Quick Response systems from the early 1990s, and has continued to gain popularity throughout the past decade. Fast fashion calls upon factories to produce more merchandise than ever before and expect shorter lead-times. The pressure is then placed upon the factory workers who are the only variable manufacturers have to change on such short notice. The second largest fast fashion retailer is H&M, which has come under scrutiny the past few years.

So What’s Wrong with Fast Fashion?

The Ethical Fashion Forum compares fast fashion to fast food. They state, “it’s cheap, addictive and unsustainable” (2010). Fashion houses are offering more lines than ever before and consumers are hungry for the latest thing, with some trends lasting less than a week. Consumers are buying one-third more than they have in the past, and are paying less for it.

Two years ago H&M was discovered discarding unworn coats, socks, and gloves amidst a record cold winter in New York. A graduate student at a local university found stacks of bags full of slashed and purposefully cut, unworn, tagged merchandise thrown away in the alley. When she attempted to contact H&M, she was met with silence. It was only after the New York Times ran the story that an H&M representative came forward and stated that the policy was to donate all unsold merchandise and discard only those items
that were deemed unfit for sale or had been recalled. Yet the next week, more bags were in
the alleyway.

“The revelation comes as New York experiences one of its coldest winters in years
and the city endures a deep recession with high levels of unemployment and homelessness.
The discovery was made by Cynthia Magnus, who attends classes at the Graduate Center of
the City University of New York on Fifth Avenue.

She noticed the piles of discarded clothing as she walked to the subway station AND
was horrified at the waste. Miss Magnus lugged some of the bags home, hoping that
someone would be willing to take on the job of patching the clothes and making them
wearable. She told the New York Times about her find: ‘Warm socks. Cute patent leather
Mary Jane school shoes, maybe for fourth graders, with the instep cut up with a scissor.
Men’s jackets, slashed across the body and the arms. The puffy fiber fill was coming out in
big white cotton balls’” (Daily Mail, 2010)

In one article, a member of a charity stated that he reached out to H&M and was
willing to take the clothing to collection locations. The average family throws away about
177 pounds of clothing away each year (planetsave.com), and the problem is growing.
Most man-made fabrics are non-biodegradable and those that are emit harmful greenhouse
gasses. The mere production of the additional clothing is putting a strain on resources with
2000 liters of water needed to produce a single pair of jeans, for example.

This drive for profit has devastated third world countries and derogated factory
workers. “[A company] must do well, while doing good” (Klein 2010). Factory workers
work well below the minimum wage and long hard hours and are at times not afforded the
most basic quality of life needs. Some factories in China have installed nets below balconies
to prevent suicides.

In 2010, there was a factory fire in Bangladesh causing the deaths of 21 people
because of faulty fire extinguishing equipment and blocked exits. The long hours and stress
put on factory owners to produce high numbers has caused them to be more negligent and
lax with safety issues and procedures.

**Violated Ethics?**

While it can be argued that some of these items are more of a question of corporate
social responsibility (CSR), H&M clearly went against some of the principles outlined in the
Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative. H&M was focusing on consequential ethics. Huhmann (2012)
explains the problems with consequential ethics as “the ends, [profit] justify the means
[wasteful production].” Specific ethical principles were violated:

- *Accountability:* the evasion of H&M’s spokespeople when presented with
accusations of factory mishaps and discarded “donate-able” merchandise
• **Respect:** the wages of workers may not be under direct control of H&M, but the factories they choose are.

• **Viability:** While H&M may be providing monetarily to their stockholders, the damage to natural resources may be insurmountable.

H&M has, however made strides to improve its image by becoming more transparent and came out with a *Conscience Collection* this July. The *Conscience Collection* is made up of a few items that are mostly organic and floral themed. However, this twenty piece set is disappointing in respect to how it is promoted.

H&M recently teamed up with UNICEF and seems to be on damage control. There is now an entire page on the H&M website dedicated to ethical practices, it can be seen here: https://www.hm.com/us/customer-service/faq/our-responsibility.

Lucy Siegel (2012) concludes, “Full marks for ambition. But do I buy H&M as an ethical paragon? Not quite yet. They are still clinging to too many parts of the fast-fashion supply chain to bring anything revolutionary.” And I would have to agree.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Can H&M claim to be the new home of ethical fashion?

2. Do you believe retailers should be held responsible for treatment of factory workers’ quality of life?

3. What can H&M do to become ‘more’ ethical?
References


