

Trends Cycling Out of Control :

Fashion's impact on the environment

By: A. Green



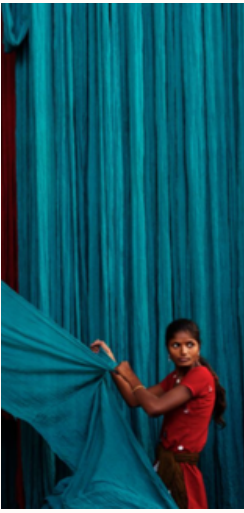
Trends cycle faster and faster; now, they are beginning to spin out of control. Trends have now evolved into a postmodern form. We now have subcultures for almost everything. Despite the marketing behind some of these subcultures, many are consumption-based identities that people pick up and discard when they no longer want to be a part of a niche group. The rapid cycling from trend to trend has taken a toll on our environment. These trends are not based solely on ideology like political groups or shared marginalized traits like affinity groups. They are based exclusively on the products you consume and how you present yourself. The Zara top you wear or the baggy thrifted jeans signal to the world that you align yourself with a specific aesthetic. These possessions signal exclusivity and membership to a group that others outside the subculture simply wouldn't understand.

This self-proclaimed membership can help individuals find community and a sense of belonging. It is essential to recognize the consequences of consumer-driven identities. These subcultures build identities around curating a specific image. They often exclude those not fitting into the primary racial, physical, and economic demographics. Curated subcultures impact individuals and the environment. Many of these subcultures become quickly trendy, which drives consumer demand and rapidly diminishes supply. So companies have refined their process to design and produce garments quickly. H&M, Zara, and SheIn are three major fast fashion giants that have reduced some of their production times to about 14 days (Hatch) from concept to production. Because of lower manufacturing costs and desirable presentation traits, many clothing companies use polyester and other synthetic fibers in clothing. Synthetic fibers may be cost-effective. However, they significantly damage our climate, harm textile workers, and can begin to infiltrate our waterways. To create a better future for the people on our planet, we must prioritize production methods that reduce carbon output.



IMPACT ON BANGLADESH

To produce textiles, natural or synthetic fibers must be obtained. Natural fibers such as cotton must be grown using a water, land, and energy-intensive process. Synthetic fibers like polyester are created using oils which are then turned into plastic and spun into thread. (Kadolph) This process relies on fossil fuels like petroleum in production. Each polyester T-shirt emits an average of 5.5 kg or around 12 lbs of carbon emissions. (Pirikani) The fibers must be woven into clothing, processed, dyed, and shipped to stores worldwide. While the impacts of fiber production often cannot be directly observed, the dyeing process usually has devastating effects that we cannot ignore. Dhaka, Bangladesh, one of the world's leading textile exporters, exported \$34 Billion of textiles and garments to the US and Europe in 2019 (Regan). The toxic waste that clothing dye leaves behind have poisoned the rivers and groundwater. In one study of the Turag River, BD showed that the improper dumping of textile wastewater contributed to damage to the river's ecosystems and led to detrimental health effects for the residents. From skin disease to gastric ulcers, the people living around the river face the consequences of the Western World's habit of overconsumption. (Halder and Islam) These issues only show the dark aspects of clothing production, the beginning stages in the life cycle of clothing but do not consider the impact of the end stages.



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IMPACT ON GHANA

After clothes have served their purpose to consumers, many trendy items once coveted are now considered trash. They are mostly donated to charities and thrift stores or thrown in the trash. When we discard clothing, they usually go to a landfill, where they'll live the remainder of their extremely long lives. Polyester and other synthetic fibers have the same beginnings as plastic water bottles and straws. Synthetic fibers are far too durable and have meager decomposition rates. To put this into perspective, polyester can take anywhere from 20 years to 200 years to decompose. (Close The Loop) Many of those tiny baguette bags still exist somewhere on this planet. However, this doesn't absolve thrift store donations. Unsold clothes in thrift stores often get shipped to overseas markets like Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana.

Kantamanto Market is one of the largest global markets for secondhand clothing. Receiving imports from mainly the US, UK, and Australia, many vendors make their money scrambling for the best quality clothing to resell and make a living. What seems like a noble effort to curb climate change is an example of Western countries dumping their waste on a developing nation. Kantamanto market is oversaturated with clothing, much of which cannot be sold due to the quality and quantity of clothing. In 2019 Ghana imported over 65 million tons of apparel, and 40% could not be sold. (Hyde) Many of these clothes find the same fate as if they were thrown out, ending up in landfills. Since Accra is a coastal city, much of the clothing resides in landfills and enters the sea. However, with more clothing than land to accommodate it, Ghana and other countries have turned to incineration, leading to a high output of carbon emissions.

From conception to disposal, the choices surrounding the clothing we consume have repercussions far beyond what we could imagine. While the prospects seem bleak and much of this feels like a dissonant issue that individuals can never tackle, that is far from the truth. Lowering consumption is the best way to stop contributing to this growing problem. Skipping the latest trend, purchasing pieces you love, and learning to repair your clothing can save tons of garments from contributing to our already severe climate crisis. We, as individuals, have the power to fight climate change through our closets.

