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There is No Future Without Sustainable Fashion

When looking for a new garment, you can immediately see the style, cost and fabric of the garment, but its environmental impact is not clear. What is the fabric made of? How much water does it waste? How much waste is generated by creating these clothes? We must ask ourselves more questions when we go shopping. It is true that fashion is one of the most polluting industries in the world. The consumption of fashion is too great and has created great problems for the environment. The future is in danger because of the fashion industry. One sector of the industry is the most problematic: fast fashion, including such brands as Shein, Pretty Little Thing, and Cider. You can buy a dress that costs about \$15 and shirts that cost around \$8. It is true that they are very affordable but these clothes will destroy the environment. The workers of brands that make fast fashion do not receive livable wages, the quality of these clothes is not good, and the clothes become waste. Our environment needs new methods of creation to improve the fashion industry's carbon footprint. There is one option that can help us: sustainable fashion.

Sustainable fashion is fashion created from ethical resources by ethical means. Being sustainable doesn't just mean being made from materials with a lesser environmental impact or recycled material—it also means that the garments are made by well-compensated workers under safe conditions and not made in excess. Sustainable clothing should be made in accordance with demand instead of mass-production. In his paper “Consumer's Awareness on Sustainable Fashion”, (as a part of Subramanian Muthu's “Sustainable Fashion: Consumer Awareness and

Education”), R. Rathinamoorthy describes the concept of sustainability in fashion being based on an “economic pillar,” “social pillar,” and an “environmental pillar” (3). This clearly separates sustainable production into three different factors that can help brands break down their practices and begin to fix any of the aspects preventing them from being sustainable.

These pillars are important because they seek to keep brands accountable through multiple aspects of their production stages. While the environmental aspect of sustainability will be discussed in more depth later in this essay, the “social pillar” discusses aspects of production such as “reducing poverty,” “human rights,” “children’s rights,” and “labor rights” (Rathinamoorthy 3). Even if a brand uses all recycled materials and uses all waste products in the production, it can’t be considered sustainable if they are using child labor, not paying their workers a livable wage, or have created an unsafe work environment. The “economic pillar” encompasses how a brand can be financially sustainable, in terms of “interest,” “employment statistics,” or “productivity” (Rathinamoorthy 4). Financial sustainability is dependent on the other two aspects discussed by the author and a brand can be sustainable in this way if and only if it also can be considered socially and environmentally sustainable.

Sustainable fashion can not only help with labor rights and financial stability in a brand, but also can help a brand’s carbon footprint and decrease its overall environmental impact. In her essay “Why Fashion Needs to Be More Sustainable,” Renee Cho discusses the current impacts of the fashion industry as it is now and how detrimental it is, such as the fact that “20 percent of clothing in the US is never worn” and the fact that “the fashion industry produces 1.2 million metric tons of CO₂ each year” (Cho). Cho also states that, “Fashion is responsible for 10 percent of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions and 20 percent of global wastewater,” in addition to consuming an unsustainable amount of clean water (Cho). Fast fashion is the main culprit for

these offenses against the environment. According to “The Impact of Fashion on the Environment” from Princeton University and contributor Ngan Le, synthetic materials used by fast fashion companies release “plastic microfibers [into] our oceans” which “cannot be removed” and they “end up in the human food chain through aquatic life, causing many negative health effects” (Princeton). However, these materials continue to be used because of their low cost. Because fast fashion garments are made from cheap materials and because of the high production rate, in addition to being poorly constructed, many garments end up becoming waste and having a short life. In fact, “57% of all discarded clothing ends up in a landfill” to later be incinerated (Princeton). The incineration also presents a new set of environmental hazards and dangers to the human body.

Specific materials, like cotton and viscose, are particularly detrimental materials used by fast fashion companies. According to Cho’s article for Columbia University, cotton uses and wastes an alarming amount of clean water, to the extent that “one kilogram of cotton used to produce a pair of jeans can consume 7,500 to 10,000 liters of water—the amount a person would drink over 10 years” (Cho). Cotton can also present other environmental issues, in the terms of production. Cho also states that “production also requires pesticides and insecticides, which pollute the soil” and then make their way into nearby bodies of water (Cho). Materials like viscose are equally guilty. Viscose (also called rayon) is made from wood pulp and consumes 70 million trees worth of wood annually (Cho). Viscose is a replacement fabric for cotton and it is cheaper, making it ideal for fast fashion garment production (Princeton). Like cotton, viscose releases harmful chemicals and presents other problems to the environment. This material contains “carbon disulphide that is used in viscose fiber production leads to lethal health side effects on workers,” which violates both the environmental and social pillars discussed earlier in

this essay (Princeton). These are only two examples of unsustainable materials used in fast fashion mass production that both require replacements for a more sustainable future.

Sustainable materials are the answer to such problems. Brands like Reformation, based in Los Angeles, use new methods of creating materials like cotton that are less detrimental for the environment. Garments include dresses, tops, jeans, and some outerwear as well. According to the sustainability reports put out by the brand, Reformation garments use 52% less CO₂ than the average brand, which is 21,022 metric tons instead of 43,916 metric tons, using data from 2021 in their third quarter (Reformation). In terms of water and waste savings, Reformation produces 2,041 gallons of wastewater as opposed to the average of 4,070 (Reformation). They also choose to make as many garments as possible with materials like Tencel, deadstock fabrics, or recycled cotton. In terms of waste, their generation of 1,395 metric tons is a 4% reduction from the average of 1,453 (Reformation). On the other hand, brands like Lafaille, based in Montréal, use old, recycled garments to upcycle them and use the old material to make completely new garments. According to their website, one of the purposes of the brand is “to salvage garment wastes and ethically repurpose them” (Lafaille). Their main items of production are tops, pants, blazers, dresses, and corsets. Prominent examples of upcycling include an off-the-shoulder dress made of out scraps of denim cut from different old pairs of jeans with a repurposed old leather belt laced through or old t-shirts sewn together to produce new tops, dresses, and even skirts (Lafaille). By using completely recycled materials, Lafaille does not need to create or generate any new fabric, which is a completely viable option for the future of fashion.

In my accompanying fashion thesis collection, entitled “Confluence,” I decided to try the main practice of Lafaille by upcycling clothing. For my thesis, I bought all the materials used in my thesis from Goodwill or St. Vincent de Paul stores or they were donated to me by friends or

family members. I primarily used old men's button-down shirts, t-shirts, and old jeans. In addition to being a more sustainable option, using only thrifted garments for material was far less expensive than buying enough new fabric to make six looks. The garments I bought for this collection ended up costing around \$190 and there was still fabric left over. One corset I made consists entirely of the discarded collars and cuffs of the button downs. I decided to make my collection as close to a zero-waste production method as I could, saving any scraps unused in the collection for material in another collection. Every time I trimmed threads, clipped a seam to achieve a smooth edge, or serged a seam, I saved every last thread bit. I used embroidery strengthening material underneath and on top of scraps and sewed over all three layers, later dissolving the strengthening material away in water, to create new fabric from thread ends and tiny fabric scraps, used in two corsets and the tote bag. For jeans and my ruched patchwork dress, I cut scraps of t-shirts and sewed them together like a quilt in order to create new fabric. One corset featured denim and stretch-knit scraps layered together in order to make a stiff material for a corset. I plan on using recycled materials for all my collections from now on.

Despite the environmental benefits, many brands still choose to not employ any aspects of methods of making sustainable fashion, due to the fact that it does have its disadvantages. According to a CNN article entitled "The problem with 'sustainable' fashion," the sustainable practice of using more organic cotton "does not address the water stress placed on cotton-producing regions in countries like India and China" (CNN). This problem makes it difficult to determine if these more sustainable materials can ultimately even be made in a sustainable way. Another disadvantage of sustainable fashion, in the eyes of a consumer, is the often more expensive price that accompanies ethically-made garments. According to the article "Why Isn't Sustainable Fashion More Affordable?" written by Emily Chan for Vogue, "less than

a third of consumers are willing to pay more for eco-friendly product,” which would make a brand be less-inclined to change their practices if many of their customers would no longer be willing to buy their garments (Chan). It can be very difficult to find a middle ground between ethically-made garments and prices that reflect the amount of extra labor that goes into making sustainable garments without having prices too far out of many customer’s budgets.

In summary, the most beneficial thing brands can do is at least start to make changes or pledge to have more sustainable practices by a deadline. Brands can pledge to become carbon neutral by a certain date, use only more organic and less water-wasting fabrics, or begin to use recycled fabrics and materials or fabrics made from recycled waste products such as plastic. For myself as a designer, I would like to gradually become a fully zero-waste designer and find a way to even use plastic packaging that tools and zippers come in. I will also continue to exclusively use recycled garments for my fabric, occasionally using deadstock fabric as long as I get it from thrift stores or if it is donated to me. These are necessary changes, as proven earlier by the disheartening statistics referenced earlier. Our environment is beginning to reach its physical breaking point and it is the shared responsibility of both brands and consumers to promote the production and consumption of more ethically-made garments in terms of their environmental, social, and economic effects.

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