

Read to be **SURE**

Volume 1—2021/22



Exploring
multiple
perspectives.

Issue 1

FAST FASHION



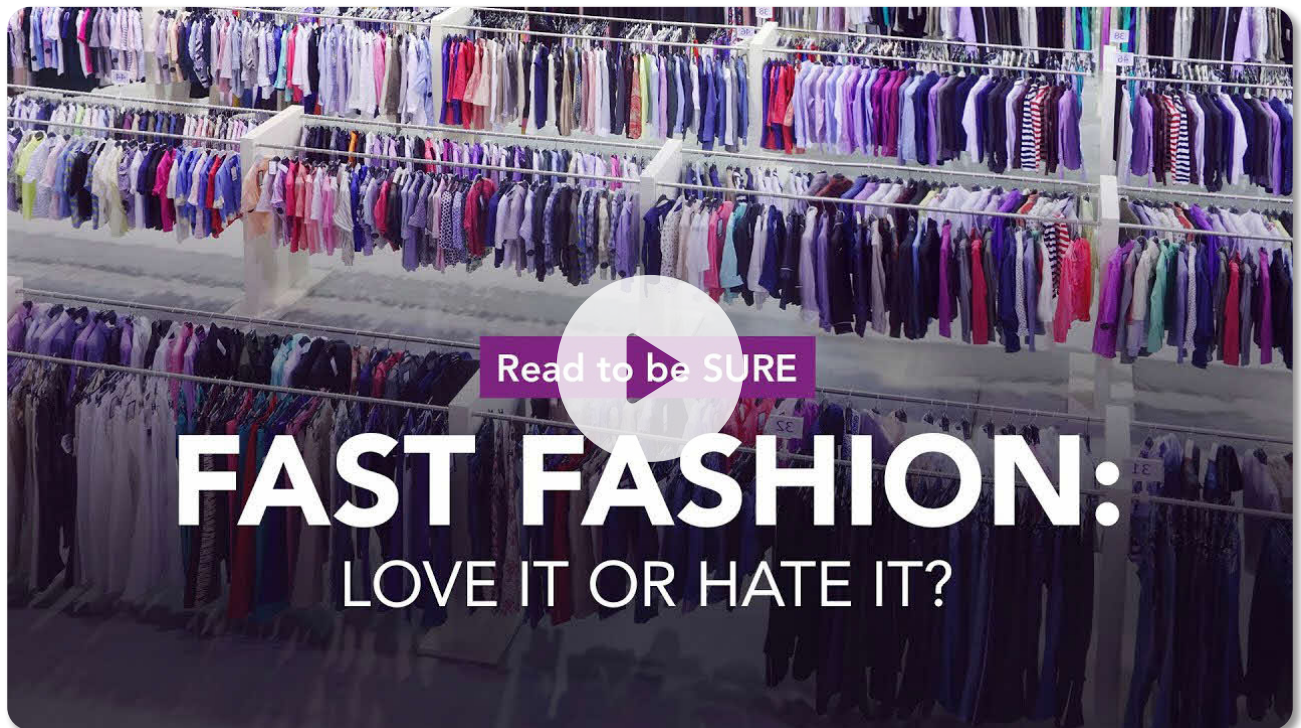
*All information and weblinks
are valid as of March 2025.*



Fast Fashion

Welcome to our inaugural issue of *Read to be SURE*, which examines the various aspects of the fast fashion industry.

Watch the video below for a quick introduction to the world of fast fashion, and view the [Conversations](#) video. Explore the different perspectives and their connections in this issue and dive deeper into the recommended resources.



Fast Fashion: Love it or Hate it?

It's the weekend and you've got some time and money. You browse your favourite clothing store but find nothing you like. No worries, you'll come back again next week. Chances are you'll find new styles on the shelves.

Pretty normal, right?

That didn't use to be the case.

Before, you would have to wait until the next season to find new items. There is a demand for readily available, trend-driven fashion, thanks to the world's growing middle class and their higher disposable income. Now, fashion companies are capitalising on fast fashion, the rapid production of trendy and cheap clothes in high volumes.

Is fast fashion worth it?

How does it change our economy?

Buying your next T-shirt could feed households and reduce poverty in many countries in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region, also known as "the clothing factory of the world". In 2019, 65 million people worked in the APAC clothing manufacturing industry — that's every seven out of 10 workers worldwide.

Fast fashion makes a lot of money for trend-driven fashion companies. It's almost a vicious cycle as more clothes are produced, the more consumers want to buy. No wonder the industry is key to the economic and social development of many developing countries.

Would this affect the price? Is there such a thing as cheap and good? Here's more to think about.



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Photo by Becca McHaffie on Unsplash

Want to know more about the economic impact?



- ▶ [How the Desire for Instant Gratification is Shaping Retail](#)
- ▶ [Fast-Fashion Giants Recovering From the Pandemic](#)
- ▶ [Shein is the Future of Fast Fashion](#)

How are prices kept low?

Getting your hands on the latest fashion trends within a short time seems too good to be true. Yet this is what the industry delivers, and at affordable prices to boot.

How do they do it?

Vertically integrated supply chains allow fast fashion producers greater control of everything from fabrics to logistics. Outsourcing manufacturing to low-cost countries offers bargain deals to consumers across the globe. Cheaper prices have been linked not only to cheap labour but child labour as well.

This industry continues to grow to keep up with rising demand and rapidly changing fashion trends. One has to stop and wonder: At what cost?

Want to know more about the price factor?



- ▶ [The Story of a £4 Boohoo Dress](#)
- ▶ [How Shein's Low Prices Are Setting Fast Fashion on Fire](#)
- ▶ [Ultra-fast Fashion is Eating the World](#)



Photo by Dollar Gill on Unsplash



Photo by Maxim Tolchinskiy on Unsplash

Is it part of climate change?

How many clothing items do you buy and get rid of within a year? A survey involving 1,000 Singaporeans revealed that we buy 34 pieces of new clothing on average and dispose of 27 items within 12 months. For almost every item we buy, we throw away another.

Do you remember how often you wore a shirt before throwing it away? Clothes were only worn 7 to 10 times before being thrown out. Landfills are being filled with textile waste, generated through this throw-away culture.

From the production of raw materials to the disposal of clothes, the fast fashion industry consumes large amounts of chemicals, water and energy. It is a source of pollution for both air and water, accounting for 10% of all global carbon emissions. That's more than the international flights industry and the maritime shipping industry combined.

The demand to be "on trend" leads to clothes churned out faster than we can wear them out. What would that mean to workers in the fast fashion factories?

Want to know more about the environmental impact?



- ▶ [Fulfilling Our Fast Fashion Fix](#)
- ▶ [New Economics: Fast Fashion](#)
- ▶ [A Monstrous Disposable Industry](#)
- ▶ [Following a T-Shirt From Cotton Field to Landfill](#)

How are the working conditions like?

We know all about fast fashion's great economic impact. While that may be true, the industry has long been plagued by low wages, modern slavery, child labour and poor working conditions.

Factory workers in developing countries often work extremely long hours in harsh and dangerous conditions with a severe lack of occupational safety and health measures. Over a thousand workers were killed and another 2,500 plus were injured on 24 April 2013 when Bangladesh's Rana Plaza building, which housed five garment factories, collapsed.

That's not even including unethical business practices. During the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, many high street fashion retailers simply cancelled their orders as shops were closed and consumers stayed at home. Almost overnight, thousands of people lost their jobs and their source of income.

But it's not all bleak in the world of fast fashion. As consumers are becoming more aware of these hidden costs, fashion designers and retailers are beginning to implement more sustainable initiatives.

Want to know more about the different business practices?



- ▶ [Who Made My Clothes?](#)
- ▶ [Wardrobe Crisis: Beyond Rana Plaza](#)

Is Sustainable Fashion the solution?

You head down to a store to get your fashion fix. Immediately, some clothes nearby catch your eye. You spot the tag and are taken aback by the high price. When you look closer, you spot it — a sticker labelled "Sustainable Fashion".

This is why sustainable fashion may not be trendy or affordable. They tend to be more expensive due to their small batch production, additional manufacturing processes, ethical sourcing and fair wages. Some consumers are more likely to pay premium prices for going eco-friendly. There is also a lack of size inclusivity in sustainable fashion, with consumers facing difficulty finding the right fit.

Finally, you decide to buy a sustainable shirt. On the way home, you suddenly spot headlines of the brand being exposed for child labour. Weren't they supposed to be 'sustainable'? Research might be required as some companies use misleading marketing tactics and false sustainability claims to get you to buy their products.

Want to know more about sustainable fashion?



- ▶ [The Top Benefits of Sustainable Clothing](#)
- ▶ [Fast Fashion's Waste Model is Going Out of Style](#)
- ▶ [Click here](#) for more resources on Fast Fashion

Photo by Rio Lecatompessy on Unsplash



Conversations

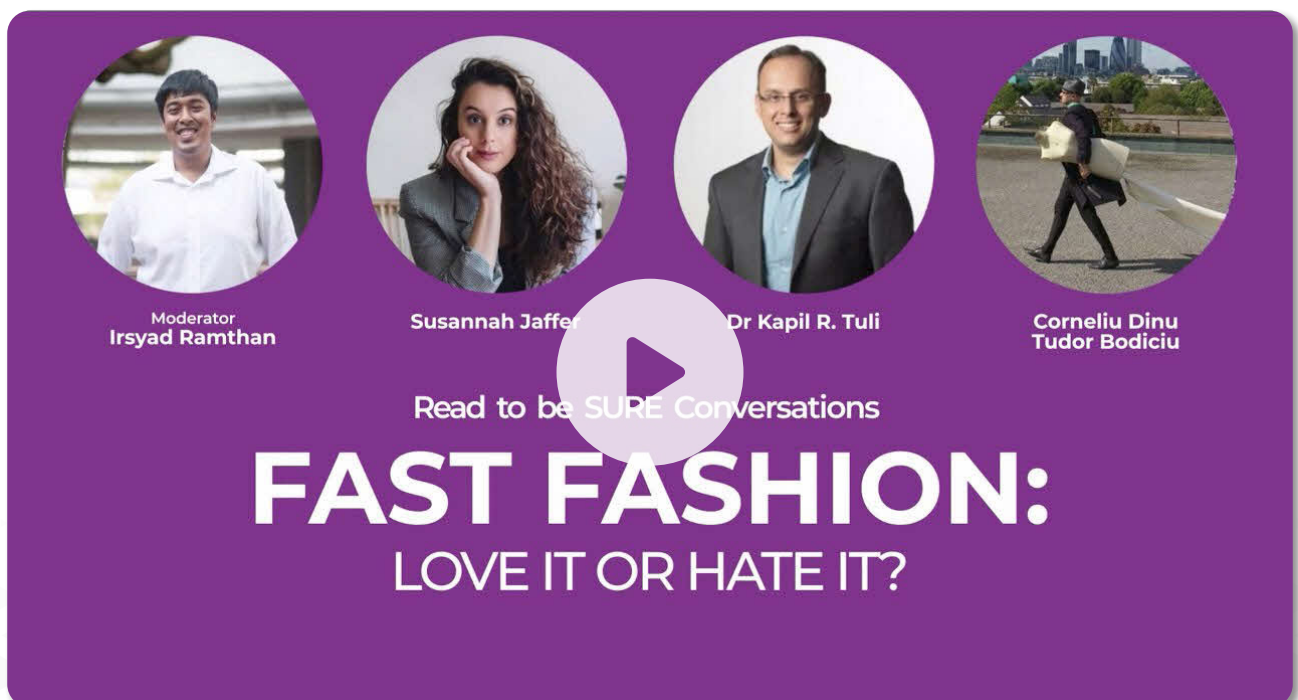
In our **Read to be SURE Conversations**, we invited guests from all walks of life to share their expertise and perspectives on trending issues that matter. In line with one of NLB's LAB25 key roles of nurturing an Informed Citizenry, we hope that the **Conversations** will help broaden and deepen your mindsets.

With cheap prices and easy access to various outlets, fast fashion has grown exponentially over the years as consumers flock to them for their apparel needs. Is fast fashion necessarily bad? Is sustainable fashion the only solution?

Watch the highlights of the Conversation event on 8 Dec 2021:



Watch the full recording:



Here's a visual map of the different perspectives:



A Deeper Dive into Fast Fashion

Why fast fashion is hot: Imagine looking luxe for the price of a latte

Fast fashion is the norm now — because who doesn't like being spoilt for choice, purchasing dirt-cheap shirts and supporting brands that celebrate diversity?

Go on, take a look at your closet. When was the last time you bought clothes? Where was it from and why did you choose to buy it?

Asia's next top sidewalk model

Fast fashion brands quickly replicate a large variety of design trends from social media and fashion runways for low prices, allowing every single one of us to purchase them. With a significant reduction in the lengths of clothing production cycles, we now have the luxury of browsing fresh and new styles every week.

For instance, Thai fast fashion brand Pomelo Fashion pushes out two launches of new arrivals every week on its website and physical stores. Producing fast and affordable designs that incorporate Seoul's streetwear styles, Pomelo Fashion lives up to its brand mission "Fashion born in Asia. On Trend.

Online. On The Go." Its loyal customers are able to look swanky round the clock as its streamlined supply chain syncs up with the volatile trend cycle, churning out clothing pieces swiftly.

Many millennial and Gen-Z customers purchase from fast fashion brands when they look up to the brand's ambassadors, in hopes of emulating these celebrities' fashion styles. Combined with influence from real-time trends on the Internet, this impulsive shopping culture is fuelled by our urge to keep up with celebrity culture and, by relation, our insatiable demand for ever-changing styles. For example, Singaporean influencer Andrea Chong successfully collaborated with local fast fashion brand Love Bonito for several runs of her &REA collection. By targeting customers who are drawn to Chong's elegant image, the collection enjoyed immense popularity among young women who look up to her effortless styles.

Looking like riches, paying for rags

Fast fashion allows us to buy fashionable clothes for as little as S\$1 per piece. You might not believe it but these ultra-cheap clothing pieces are so chic that you can be dressed to the nines for the price of next to nothing, at the snap of your finger.

Fast fashion expedites supply chains and lowers costs in order to accommodate consumers' rapidly changing tastes. Shein monitors their customer data from social media platforms, and mass produces selected popular styles in real time, that in turn reduces the cost per garment and lowers their selling prices. This low-cost production then feeds back into the cycle of attracting more customers and securing a constant demand for large amounts of garments.

There is a science behind why we hanker after sales prices. Shopping panders to our appetite for instant gratification as it triggers our brains to produce a rush of positive emotions. Despite the inferior quality and inaccurate sizing of cheap clothing, we cannot stop ourselves from hunting for the next too-good-to-be-true fashion bargain because we are addicted to shopping.

Fast fashion is faster than ever today, with sale promotions running at any given time of the day. E-commerce has shaped the sale phenomena, where special sale events like Black Friday and Singles' Day are marketed as limited-time deals that everyone snaps up. Alibaba's Singles' Day shopping festival in 2021 bears testament to this — with more than S\$114 billion in gross merchandise volume and 900 million shoppers browsing through 14 million steep discounts on e-commerce platform Tmall. The rise of e-commerce platforms has indeed made shopping extremely affordable with periodic discounts and sales events.

Every body deserves cool clothes

Fast fashion retailers are often the only size-inclusive brands that produce extended-size clothing lines that most people can afford. As they have greater economies of scale in their production lines to produce the same clothing range in several sizes for marginal costs, these brands make stylish clothes accessible to people of diverse body types. The same cannot be said for smaller sustainable brands who do not mass produce their plus-size lines at the scale of fast fashion brands due to the uncertainty of these lines' saleability, therefore selling their plus-size pieces at higher prices. To put these words into figures, this simple straight-sized striped dress costs a whopping S\$162 from ethical brand Everlane and just S\$24 on UNIQLO's racks.

Positioned as a technology-centred fashion company "made for all", Japanese brand UNIQLO sells essential modern styles in extra sizes that run from XS to 3XL for both men and women. Their low prices can be attributed to the brand's ability to place high-volume orders with their manufacturers and partner factories. This is only possible with UNIQLO's brand strategy of mass appeal, as they market their minimalist and high-quality casual

wear to shoppers of all sizes. To embrace body positivity, UNIQLO has released the Uniqlo U Future Lifewear collection that feature versatile essentials such as the U wide-fit curved pants — trousers that cinch in at the waist, with a tapered wide-leg fit that looks flattering on multiple body types including petite and plus-sized figures.

Ultimately, we find ourselves stuck in a Catch-22 situation — we can look chic without burning a hole in our pockets, only if we purchase clothes from unsustainable fast fashion brands.

Think about who might lose out from the value that fast fashion brings to consumers.

Further reading:

- ▶ What if we just forgot about fashion? (Science Focus)
- ▶ If fast fashion disappeared... (The Finery Report)



Photo by Jess @ Harper Sunday on Unsplash

Fast fashion giants

Fast fashion giants: Big Data, bigger inventory, biggest profit

Brands from Zara to Shein have revolutionised fashion consumption. With a different style to shop for every time you set foot in their stores or open your browser, these brands keep up with trends with shocking speed. One giant has emerged as reigning champion with bags of profit in tow — Shein and its almighty algorithm.

How often do you feel like you need a wardrobe update? Are there many options for you to do so?

Take a walk through the streets and most people have on either a Uniqlo T-shirt, or something you have seen on ASOS. Before this homogeneity, there were the eclectic styles (and questionable graphic T-shirts) brought to us only by the brandless stores in Bugis Street or Far East Plaza — and maybe blogshops.

Fast fashion's prescient ability to keep up with the latest trends has almost wiped out small-scale and independent shops. Amidst quickly developing data technologies, brands like Zara and Shein have revolutionised fashion consumption, saturating consumers with affordable styles almost every other week.

Goodbye Bugis Street, hello H&M!

In 2011, H&M opened its flagship store in Orchard Building. Hundreds of people lined up to be the first to enter the store. Since then, H&M had a hold on Singapore shoppers. Queues — some 3 days long — would form every time there was a drop, whether it was for the Kenzo or Balmain collaboration. By offering trendy luxury labels at affordable prices, H&M dominated fashion retail in Singapore.

Besides H&M, brands like Zara, Forever 21 and Topshop soon became staples in the modern city-dweller's wardrobe.

Dubbed retailers of "freshly baked clothes" for their perishable styles which survive fashion trends for around just a month, the likes of H&M and Zara analyse the latest fashion trends, mass produce these styles in weeks and fill their racks with runway-inspired looks.

"Trends" teams camp out on blogs, while cameras are set up in more fashion-forward Shanghai, New York and Tokyo offices, to catch the beginnings of fashion trends, with no need to attend fashion shows. Production can match trend analysis speeds due to highly streamlined supply chains and automated distribution facilities.



Photo by neiezhmakov on Adobe Stock

A reactive design process allows quick turnaround time. While traditional fashion houses might drop a collection once every three months, fast fashion brands can do it once every three weeks, and at dramatically lower prices.

Further, a lot of labour is outsourced overseas where labour protection is weak, such as in India or China where most manufacturing factories are, allowing round-the-clock manufacturing at low cost. With such a 365/24/7 production model, Zara can bring clothes from design-to-rack in just 15 days.

You want it? You got it.

Zara follows trendsetters, and according to them, that trendsetter is you — their customer. When different customers in 2015 asked for a pink scarf and there were none, 500,000 pink scarves were dispatched to more than 2,000 Zara stores globally in just one week.

Radio Frequency Identification Technology (RFID) is also used to track inventory to quickly assess which items or styles sell best. Instead of employees manually scanning each and every item that is sold, RFID allows headquarters to know which item is running low and needs replenishment. Completing inventories every 6 weeks, Zara produces over 450 million items annually.

Besides data collection and analysis, brands are also harnessing the power of the celebrity to come up with consumer-savvy designs. Kim Kardashian, the "Balmain Barbie", was and is the world's biggest influencer. With the world catching onto Kardashian-esque styles, H&M launched a collaboration with Balmain, which sold out in days after a 3-day queue for its drop.

Data collection and targeted marketing are not only maximising profit margins, but may also be necessary for fashion brands' survival.

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, get AI

The fast fashion industry is cut-throat. Despite its relative youth, Chinese online fashion retailer Shein is hogging the market — as of June 2021, it accounted for 28% of all fast fashion sales in the US, almost equivalent to H&M's and Zara's sales combined. It raised US\$10 billion in sales in 2020, a 250% leap from 2019.

The secret to its rapid growth? A proprietary internal management software. Shein's software is the pinnacle of a desire sensor with a singular purpose — ensuring it and its suppliers are "more efficient and profitable", as described by a Shein spokesperson when Rest of World asked about the software.

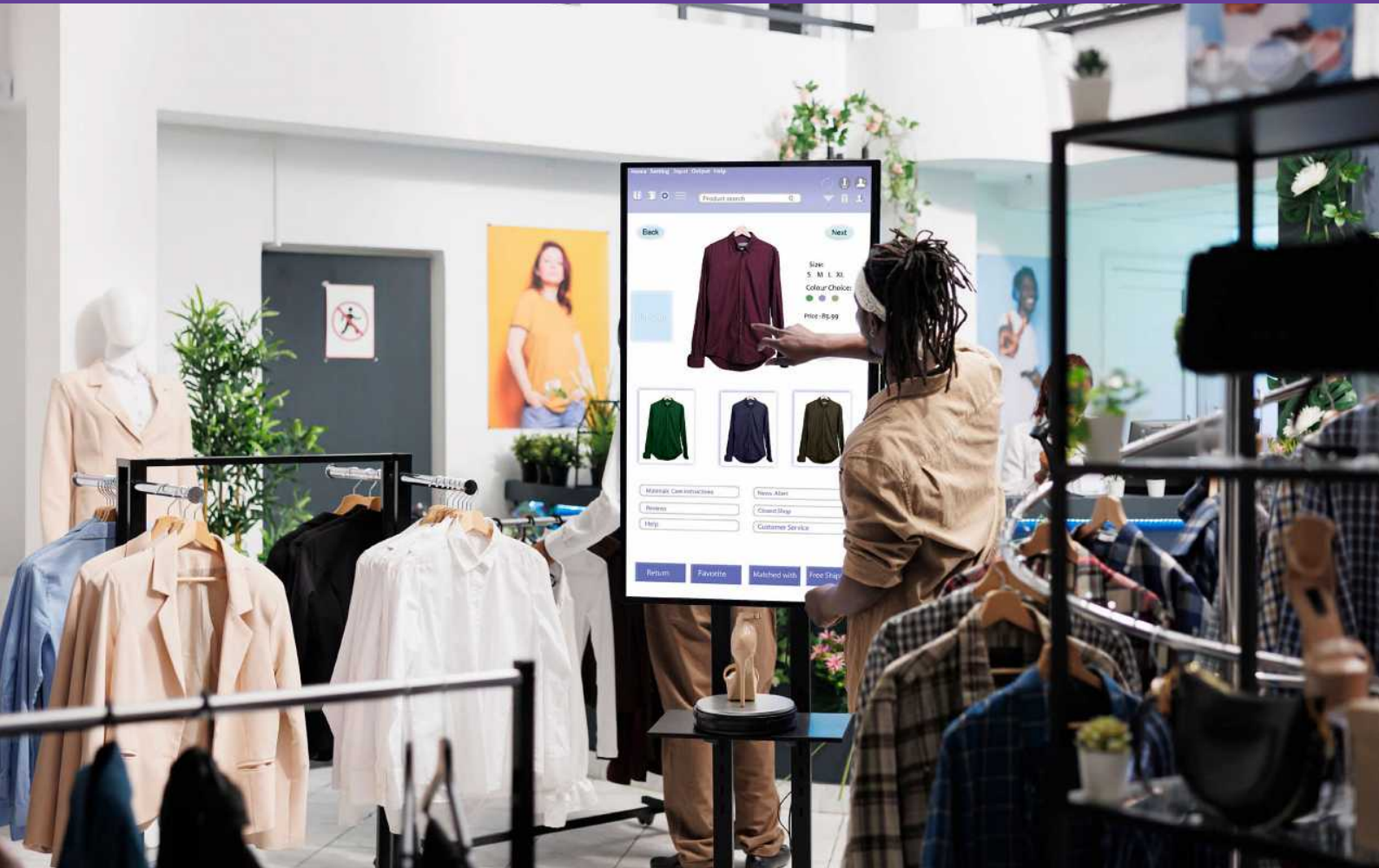


Photo by DC Studio on Adobe Stock

With the help of this software, the middleperson — trend offices or merchandising departments — are cut out. Lead times needed from design to delivery are slashed. In this way, Shein adds as much as 2,000 to 10,000 individual styles to its approach day.

“Everything is optimised with big data,” Lin Zhen, a leading Chinese clothing manufacturer and Shein supplier, explained to [Rest of World](#). Every supplier has an account on this software’s platform.

As every aspect of the Shein business has been integrated into the software, data collection and analysis is immediate. “You can see the current sales, and then it will tell you to stock up more if you sell well and what you need to do if you don’t sell well. It’s all there.” In other words, consumer feedback in the form of sales returns directly to the factory through the software.

Further, it provides simple design specifications so manufacturers can get on production ASAP. Unlike other brands, Lin explains that even “a typical university student” can get to designing, further ramping up production speeds while keeping costs low.

By the time you click the add-to-cart button, Shein’s algorithms have already successfully identified and designed items you would like and is getting to work on the next design thanks to your purchase.

Fast fashion retailers are hungry for hungry consumers. With their eyes, ears and software all focused on what makes a customer fork out cash, they — especially Shein — are hard at work keeping you coming back for more styles than you could possibly want.

The speeds at which they produce clothes are far from sustainable, but the customer is always right, right?

Is using data this way always beneficial for consumers? How does it affect the way we consume or behave?

Further reading:

- ▶ [The Conversation — Explainer: what is surveillance capitalism and how does it shape our economy?](#)
- ▶ [The Nation — Is “Big Data” Actually Reinforcing Social Inequalities?](#)

Go even deeper:

- ▶ [Journal of Physics: Conference Series 2020 — The Impact of Big Data Analysis on Consumer Behaviour](#)
- ▶ [William Mitchell Law Review, Volume 40, Issue 2, 2014 — The Costs of Lost Privacy: Consumer Harm and Rising Economic Inequality in the Age of Google](#)

When shopping becomes your personality

When shopping becomes your personality: FashionTok and overconsumption

Although flash sales, point rewards and aggressive marketing are popular sales tactics, it's often a familiar (or attractive) face that rakes in the most cash. With the rise of social media, everyone can be an influencer. Hopping on trends to get views, many TikTokkers show off Shein hauls and styles that last as long as a TikTok trend cycle — that is, barely a month.

Where do you get your style inspirations from?

Social media's ubiquity makes it seem like it should be somewhere in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The power of its influence is far-reaching — in the UK, about half of online fashion shoppers shop based on social media inspirations reported the same.).

Users, influencers and celebrities are constantly posting fit pics to flex their taste in fashion. Instagram now even has a shop feature, replacing where the notifications tab once was. Social media platforms and their influencers are transforming the way people shop, and often in unhealthy ways.

With so many driven to shop the latest trends to carve out their own personal brand, our sense of identity is inevitably moulded by our pocket computers.

#OOTD

The phenomenon of the influencer — becoming popular from shopping a lot or posting haul videos — tells us that consumption has become a personality trait in and of itself. Dressing up for the 'gram, and by extension shopping, is now a fundamental mode of self-expression and communication.

Many brands have caught on that the most powerful advertisement is a friend's recommendation (or maybe a rival's flex). Of course, what a "friend" means is stretched on social media. Nowadays, many form parasocial relationships with influencers and celebrities, whose life updates appear alongside our friends' on the same feed while lending their eponymous influence toward brands they wear.

Fast fashion brands are tapping into this influence on social media. For instance, Fashion Nova decking influencer Kylie Jenner out in their products or even developing an entire collection with rapper Cardi B, all posted on Instagram.

Besides celebrities, influencers are notorious for their product promotions and sponsored posts. Sent public relations (PR) packages from shops like Shein, they wear free clothes in exchange for posting a cute fit pic on the 'gram. Zara, for instance, featured influencer Teesh Rosa, garnering over 300,000 views.

Consequently, followers' feeds are a series of fast fashion drip — a quick class on what is hot this week — and these brand names.

Marketing in this form instead of full-blown campaigns is considerably effective. The influencer market industry was worth US\$9.7 billion in 2020, a figure expected only to grow.

This market is certainly impacted by a new social media player: what do cottagecore, normcore, and goblincore have in common besides their suffixes? They are all fashion trends (inspired by the aesthetics of rural living, functional normality and, well, goblins, respectively) from TikTok, now a major player in fashion trendsetting.

This one my #sheinhaul

TikTok, arguably one of the most influential social media platforms today with 1 billion active users in 2021, is saturated with #sheinhaul videos — TikTokkers buying hundreds and thousands of dollars' worth of fast fashion items and flaunting them.



Photo by buritora on Adobe Stock



Photo by Artem Beliaikin on Unsplash

Yes, even people who are not sponsored are doing haul videos and tagging brands. Haul videos are popular for both creator and consumer. With algorithms that reward focusing on niches and consistency, content creators are hauling in views, TikTok fame and sometimes even money. Meanwhile, viewers get to keep up with trendy items at basically no expense.

The problem, however, is that these haul videos result in intense trend turnover. While trend cycles used to last 20 years from introduction, rise, acceptance, decline to obsolescence, they are now squeezed into just about 20 days.

Mandy Lee, a trend analyst and fashion writer (@oldloserinbrooklyn on TikTok) explains the “microtrend” phenomenon to Lithium Magazine. Since brands send out PR packages in one big push with influencers having a limited time to post their fit pic, “you can definitely notice it on your Explore page: where is this yellow leather fur-trimmed set coming from that’s here for a week and then never seen again?”

More than that, haul videos are normalising overconsumption. “They’re just glamourising it,” Lee notes. She explains that even counter-responses to such fast fashion haul videos, like “Trends I Hate” videos or thrift hauls can contribute to overconsumption. Such content simply forms yet another stylistic or trend niche which will suffer the same rapid turnover.

I buy, therefore I am

Platforms like TikTok prey on our need for self-affirmation. Allowing users to express their

individualism offers a sense of identity security that keeps them addicted.

Psychologist Paul Verhaeghe explains in his book What About Me? The Struggle for Identity in a Market-Based Society the phenomenon of an “economic social Darwinism” in a consumptive society. It is selection of the fittest, with fittest being the one who has the ability to display a desirable social status.

Displaying social superiority comes down to expression of taste, which ultimately boils down to what you buy. With quick trend turnovers and fast fashion’s ubiquity, it’s becoming about *how much* you can buy.

With this in mind, media becomes avenues for identity-construction and self-presentation. Social media allows people to look for styles to incorporate into their repertoire, while flaunting their latest acquisitions — whether it’s a \$20,000 watch or a sleek slit dress. Putting up a sort of online façade, users are incentivised to keep posting and scrolling to build that stylistic identity they have found.

Beyond that, it has been shown that Facebook and Instagram are designed to be addictive. By hogging your attention and offering a (faux) sense of identity security through style replication, these platforms are perfect breeding grounds for influencer marketing campaigns from the likes of Fashion Nova and Missguided, as well as profits for all — except the user.

What responsibilities should social media platforms have when it comes to issues of consumer behaviour?

Further Reading:

- ▶ Facebook Delays Instagram App for Users 13 and Younger (The New York Times)
- ▶ There is a Dark Side of Social Media, and It Is Data Privacy and “Second Order Consent” (University of Texas)

Go even deeper:

- ▶ Social Media Influence on Consumer Behaviour: The Case of Mobile Telephony Manufacturers (MDPI)

The Real Price Tag of Fast Fashion

Affordable clothing should be accessible to everyone. But when the world buys too much and too often, who is really footing the bill?

What was the last item of clothing you purchased? How often have you worn it so far?

In one of pop culture's most enchanting moments, Cinderella's fairy godmother waves her wand and conjures a sparkling, ethereal ball gown. Fashion is the stuff of dreams, but real clothes don't materialise from nothing. Instead, they are frequently produced at a nightmarish, decidedly unmagical cost to workers and the environment.

Item 1: Lower Wages and Fewer Worker Protections

Global clothing consumption has reached unprecedented levels. And thanks to cheap and abundant fast fashion, our insatiable appetite for clothes is only set to grow.

To churn out garments fast while keeping prices competitive, factory workers from developing countries are underpaid and overworked in unsafe conditions. Outsourced manufacturing means that giants like Sweden's H&M and Spain's Zara can avoid direct accountability for employee abuses. Without oversight, third-party suppliers have perpetrated wage theft (Sri Lanka), violent crackdowns on protests (Myanmar), and even (Lesotho) against workers.

The oppression of garment workers intersects with gender-based violence in many cases. Women living in poverty, many of whom have children as well, are more likely to accept poorly paid work and be exploited. "The brands benefit from this model and its lower production costs," explains researcher Bobbie Sta Maria.

Factory workers in Indonesia, 2020. An estimated 80% of garment workers worldwide are women, often from countries where they have fewer legal rights or protections against gender-based violence.

In turn, workers have begun to organise in cross-border unions such as The Asia Floor Wage Alliance, to demand that mega-corporations such as H&M be held responsible for their supply chains. However, with the sizable legal budgets that these companies have, it remains to be seen whether such positive changes will materialise.

Item 2: Poisoned Ecosystems

Garment workers also disproportionately bear the environmental costs of fast fashion. The production of clothing in enormous quantities creates unmanageable amounts of byproducts, which pollute local ecosystems and create health hazards for garment workers and their communities. The UN estimates that fashion accounts for one-fifth of industrial water pollution. China and Bangladesh, the world's largest exporters of clothing, have seen rivers once used for drinking, bathing, and cooking choked lifeless with toxic fabric dyes.

Landscapes are permanently altered by textiles that will not quickly biodegrade if at all; an easily avoidable crisis that will now persist generations. "[Our] kids get sick if they stay here because of the water," explains one Bangladeshi garment worker of his choice to send his children and grandchildren far away from the mills where he is employed.

When it comes to the destruction of their natural surroundings, garment workers once again confront a frustrating lack of accountability from the companies they work for.



Photo by Светлана Мищенко on Adobe Stock

Item 3: Disposable Clothing Culture

In safe and clean Singapore, such devastating effects of fast fashion can be hard to grasp. Because most of us live far away from the factories and landfills where clothes are manufactured and destroyed, "consumers are unable to see the connection between clothing consumption and the resultant waste that they produce", explains environmental engineer Nuramirah Suyin Zaihan.

As tiny as Singapore is compared to other countries population-wise, all of us are capable of generating shocking amounts of clothing waste.

For example, a 2016 survey of 1,000 Singaporeans revealed that the average consumer bought 34 pieces of clothing and disposed of 27 items of clothing annually. Between 2008 and 2016, Singapore's textile waste soared 61.52% from 93,300 tonnes to 150,700 tonnes. This increase is largely owed to social media and a proliferation of fast fashion brands enabling more consumption. Unfortunately for us, the technology and infrastructure for clothes recycling has not kept pace.

In 2020, only 4% of Singapore's 137,000 tonnes of textile, fabric, clothing, and leather waste was recycled. Our remaining waste gets incinerated or dumped in landfills, and due to burgeoning consumption, Singapore's only landfill on Semakau island is projected to reach capacity by 2035, one decade sooner than originally predicted.

Some would suggest trading the garbage bin for a donation bin. Although thrift stores are designed to offer affordable secondhand clothing for those with fewer means, our current supply of secondhand clothes far outstrips demand, to the extent that there may be little real difference between donation and garbage bins.

Singapore's charities, among them the Salvation Army, Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVP), and Gift Appeal Foundation, are used to receiving more clothing donations than they can handle. If these surplus clothes are not redirected to landfills, they are instead exported to other countries of greater presumable need, with an emphasis on "presumable".

Item 4: Overflowing Landfills

The sheer quantity of unwanted clothing exported for resale or as trash has caused landfills in places such as Accra, Ghana to overflow, with many undesirable impacts.

Exporting clothes in shipping containers further contributes to fashion's already significant carbon emissions. Oversupply of cheap, literally disposable clothing makes reselling less cost-effective and also decimates local clothing makers who cannot afford to compete with rock-bottom prices.

Discarded clothing and shoes made from synthetic materials can cause microplastic runoff and harm wildlife. Fabrics derived from plastic account for around 60% of all clothing produced today.

Merchants also claim that the quality of second-hand clothing has steadily decreased. "[People] think [that in] Africa here... we are not like human beings," says Ghanaian importer Emmanuel Ajaab, "Even if somebody knocked [on] your door [to beg], you cannot just ... pick something from your dustbin. In this case ... they're doing this to us".

It's a sobering pill to swallow. Since the 1970s, people around the world have been encouraged to reduce, reuse and recycle to save the environment. While our efforts at the latter activities must continue to grow, they remain insufficient solutions to the problem of clothing waste. Reducing the number of clothes we buy may ultimately be the most efficient — and cost-effective, as our wallets would likely attest — means of making a dent in the fast fashion crisis.

Based on the information presented, what will you do with your next item of unwanted clothing, and would your choice have been different prior to reading this article?

Further reading:

- ▶ I got hired at a Bangladesh sweatshop. Meet my 9-year-old boss ([HuffPost](#))
- ▶ The troubled second life of donated clothes ([ScienceLine](#))
- ▶ I Gave Up Shopping for a Year – Here's How ([InStyle](#))

Photo by Lightly Stranded on Adobe Stock



The Fast Fashion Crisis

The Fast Fashion Crisis: Is There a Way Out?

From exploitative labour practices to environmental destruction, the fast fashion industry seems to be a giant red flag for our planet. Governments, businesses and consumers alike have started looking towards more ethical solutions to bridge the sustainability divide.

How have you tried to shop more sustainably when it comes to fashion?

The planet is spiraling into crisis mode due to our incessant need to update our wardrobes.

The fast fashion industry is responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions worldwide. Overconsumption and overproduction also mean that 92 million tonnes of textile waste are sent to landfills annually, while 93% of fashion brands do not pay their workers a living wage.

Fast fashion has clearly brought the world to a tipping point, but is there a way out of this crisis?

Fighting Back Against Fast Fashion

The 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh which killed over 1000 garment workers brought to the forefront the disastrous consequences of the fast fashion economy.

Governments around the world are responding by implementing legislations that will hold fashion brands accountable for unethical supply chain practices. For example, the German government is introducing a 'due diligence' law that enforces legal penalties against German companies for labour abuses and a lack of compliance against environmental standards in their global supply chains.

Female garment workers demanding for compensation for the survivors of the Rana Plaza factory building collapse. The factory took only over 90 seconds to collapse, with unions referring to the event as a "mass industrial homicide."

In the battle against fast fashion, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also play a salient role in pushing for greater oversight and accountability from commercial juggernauts.

The Hong Kong-based environmental NGO, Redress, uses public education campaigns and art installations to draw attention to broader issues in Asia's fashion industry. They also work closely with industry partners, from designers and garment manufacturers to retailers, to drive change towards a more sustainable direction.



Photo by Maren Winter on Adobe Stock

Fashion Goes Green

Consumers are increasingly calling out greenwashing practices from fashion brands and demanding them to take action for unsustainable production processes. According to the South East Asia Fashion Sustainability Report 2021, 80% of consumers in the region prefer to purchase from brands that are committed to social and environmental causes.

While the sustainable fashion movement is still in its infancy in Singapore, advocate Raye Padit agrees that local consumers are warming up to sustainable fashion options. As the founder of The Fashion Pulpit, a Singapore-based clothes-swapping platform, Raye believes that clothes swapping can offer a viable solution to the waste generated by fast fashion.

"Swapping helps you extend the lifespan of your clothes. This means we can reduce on average 20% of textile waste, water usage, carbon emissions and land use per person. Swapping also lets you explore your personal style through 'new-to-you' garments, without generating more waste," shares Raye.

Raye's journey in sustainable fashion started in 2013 when he realised that the fast fashion economy was producing at such a rapid rate that clothes were being thrown away as quickly as they were made. A budding fashion designer himself, Raye wanted to be "a part of the solution instead of the problem".

In 2021, Raye launched his own fashion line, PeyaRework, which repurposes some of the excess secondhand clothing that comes through The Fashion Pulpit into statement pieces. Their first collection was centered on upcycling jeans into a customisable denim vest that can be worn as a top, and each piece is made-to-order to minimise wastage.

"Fashion will not go away, but we can make it more responsible, ethical and sustainable," says Raye.



Photo by Ekaterina on Adobe Stock

Giving Clothes a Second Life

Combating the woes brought on by fast fashion giants might seem like a David meets Goliath situation, but consumers like you and me can create a huge impact by making more sustainable choices when it comes to our fashion purchases.

We spoke to Angelyn Tan, 21, who is doing just that by giving a second lease of life to clothes through her online vintage store. She visits a local warehouse once every two weeks to source for good-quality secondhand pieces which she sells via the Instagram handle, [@gma.vtg](#).

What sparked Angelyn's interest in secondhand clothes was her desire to find her own unique style. Vintage clothing seemed to offer her an alternative where she could break free from the homogeneity of fast fashion.

"Everyone buys fast fashion, so it's hard to differentiate yourself from others," she shares. "That's why I decided to wear more vintage (pieces). First, it's sustainable and second, it's pretty affordable."

Angelyn is not alone. According to a [survey](#) conducted by DBS, 7 in 10 Singaporeans are open to upcycling, recycling or swapping their clothes. The global secondhand market is also [projected to double](#) from 2021 to 2025, reaching a record-high of S\$104 billion. In buying secondhand, consumers are not only extending the lifespans of their clothes, but they are also investing in quality pieces over mass production and variety.

Despite the availability of options, it's still hard for Angelyn to avoid purchasing items from fast fashion brands but she makes sure that each piece she buys is maximised in its utility. "I come up with a (visual) board to make sure that I can style it with the other pieces in my closet. I also like to chat with sellers, and ask about sizing and how the quality is so I don't regret my purchases."

Education and awareness can also help to bridge the gap and enable consumers to transition into making more sustainable choices when it comes to fashion. Angelyn shares, "It's really just about questioning the choices when it comes to clothes. Do you really need that much clothing? How sure are you that these are not going to go out of trend? That's what I think about when I buy clothes."

How can the fashion industry be more sustainable and ethical with regards to its supply chain practices? What can you as a consumer in Singapore do to support the move towards sustainable fashion?

Further Reading:

- ▶ [The Myth of Sustainable Fashion \(Harvard Business Review\)](#)
- ▶ [The State of Size-Inclusive Sustainable Fashion \(Teen Vogue\)](#)