

The unsustainability of fast fashion

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The fashion sector

Europe has hundreds of companies and brands that employ thousands of designers, numerous prestigious design schools, new emerging designers, a thriving research sector, famous museums and renowned professionals. However, textile production itself continues to be Asia's domain. Textile imports to Europe grow year on year, and countries like China, Bangladesh and India make the clothes we buy from multinational corporations. Fashion is one of the most globalised industries in terms of design, chain of production and sales. A pair of trousers, for example, might have been designed in Barcelona but manufactured in Bangladesh from fabric produced in China; it might take a month for them to be shipped back to Barcelona, only to be sent to New York to be sold. It is hardly surprising, then, that the fashion industry is second only to the petroleum industry in the volume of pollution it generates.

More than 80,000 million garments are sold globally every year, and over 75% of clothes that are thrown away end up in landfills. A fifth of the toxins discharged into the world's waters are from the textile industry, which uses billions of litres of water to make all kinds of garments. Oceans are crowded with vessels that leave the ports of Shanghai and Hong Kong overflowing with containers of clothes made by the multinationals that dominate the market and the high streets of large European cities.

The structure of multinationals

The fashion industry is a long, tangled chain of production that involves extracting the raw materials, manufacturing the fabric, making the garment, transporting it, advertising and selling it, using it and finally recycling or disposing of it. The vast majority of multinationals and – since they mimic their larger counterparts – many small and medium-sized businesses work in the same way.

Fast fashion is generally accepted to have originated in the Inditex group, which revolutionised how clothes are distributed, manufactured and sold. The classic spring-summer and autumn-winter collections have given way to



a continuous production of new garments and new collections, which arrive in stores every week. This has had a direct impact on consumption, design, manufacturing and on all the agents involved in the various areas of the sector.

At the consumer level, the perception of buying clothes has changed: where once it might have been normal to buy sweater, a jacket or any other garment for the coming season, for some it is increasingly common to buy clothes on a weekly basis. Fashion is seen as a disposable commodity that is less durable and more affordable and has less added value than it once had. Clothes have become cheaper and companies need to produce them more cheaply, so they relocate production to countries like China, India or Bangladesh, where labour is cheaper and there is little or no environmental legislation or protection of workers' rights. Garments are more affordable so we buy more of them, and the revenue for businesses increases; at the same time, there is less social justice and more pollution in the countries where these garments are manufactured. It is a wheel that keeps spinning, growing more unwieldy over time.



At the company level, a similar operating cycle is used, as summarised in the figure below:

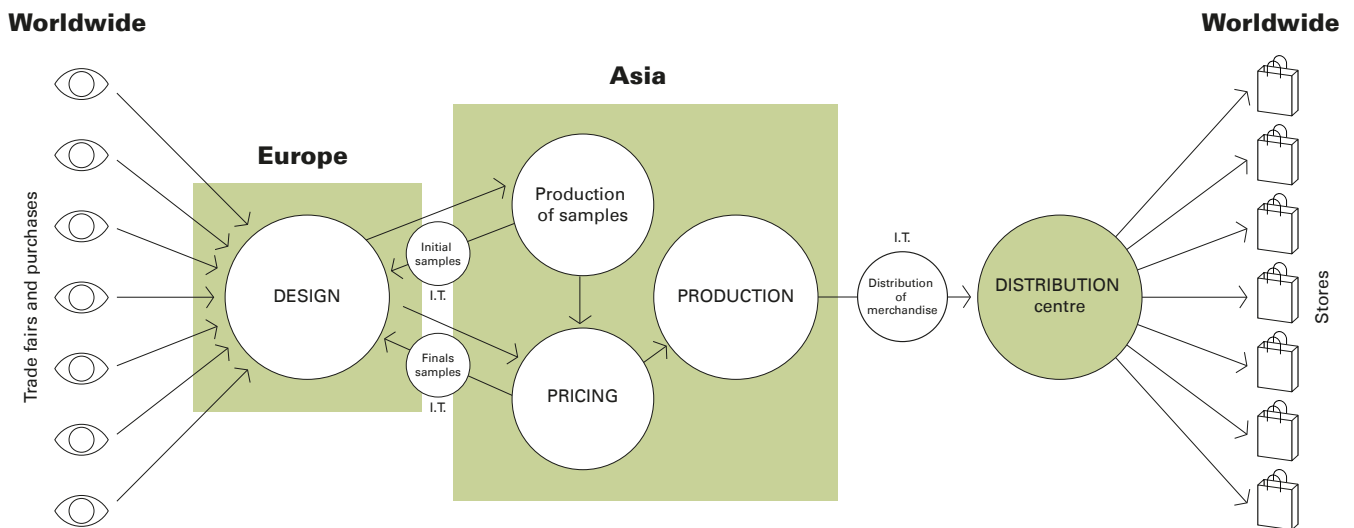


Figure 1. Stages in multinationals' operations. I.T.: International transport

All collections begin with designers travelling to international fashion and textile fairs and to the world's major capital cities, where they buy hundreds of garments and attempt to reproduce the trends being set by the main fashion houses. The information they gather is used to design the collections, and prospective suppliers send their proposals as samples to the design headquarters, which are usually located in Europe. Pieces are chosen for manufacture and entire teams of buyers and designers travel to the country of origin, which might be China or Bangladesh, to negotiate prices. These trips are usually physically and mentally exhausting for the buyers and designers and for



the suppliers who will later make the garments. Negotiations are arduous, the parties meeting in small hotel rooms for some 14-16 hours a day to determine how the supplier can deliver perfect production at the lowest possible cost.

Once the prices are settled, the supplier sends more samples to be approved for production. Consignments are shipped, as this is the cheaper option; they are only sent by air when they are particularly urgent, and often at the cost of suppliers if the delay is their responsibility. Once the garments arrive at the distribution centre, they are delivered to stores all over the world.

This cycle is not just repeated twice a year but occurs every time a new collection is conceived, which usually means every month, or even sometimes every two or three weeks.

The role of women in the fashion sector

Women are the backbone of the textile sector, except in the case of senior posts, which are still generally held by men. The vast majority of European multinationals and Asian companies are managed by men, while most of their workers are women. Demands are particularly high, especially for women, who are the lowest paid fashion workers but have the longest hours and are expected to be constantly available to prioritise work over family life. Between 75% and 80% of multinationals' employees are women, and their situations are



often difficult. By law, women are entitled to maternity leave and, optionally, to a reduction in working hours for a number of years after childbirth. The reality can be quite different, however, as some workers do not take up the maternity leave they are entitled to for fear of losing their jobs. Others reduce their working hours but find that, in time, the company suggests they return to a full working day and, in some cases, even tries to reach an agreement with the worker so that she leaves the company. These are not isolated incidents, they reflect common practices that are considered entirely normal by the multinationals in question. Many women do not dare to exercise their legal rights because they are worried about losing their jobs or being moved to another department.

Pollution and large amounts of waste

Fashion's environmental impact is considerable, given that consumption has increased by 400% in recent years and manufacturing has changed dramatically, leaving a huge carbon footprint. The cycle shown in Figure 1 gives an idea of the amount of resources used and the emissions, pollutants and waste generated. If we focus on the production chain, we find different types of pollution and/or waste in the stages of a collection's production:



Waste. There are two main types of waste, namely, the wastewater that pollutes river systems, land, etc., and solid waste, such as industrial waste, samples, garments that are rejected and clothes that end up in landfills after being used.

Pollutants. Dyeing and weaving processes produce large amounts of pollutants, many of them highly toxic, such as nonylphenol ethoxylates (NPEs), amines and phthalates. Pesticides and fertilisers are used in the production of cotton, which is the most widely used fibre in fashion.



GHG emissions. Most stages emit greenhouse gases, including shopping trips and acquisition trips to Asia, the sending of samples and manufacturing itself. Emissions are also produced at the design and distribution facilities and factories.

Exploitation of natural resources. A great quantity of resources, especially water, is used, as large amounts of water are needed to manufacture fabrics; land is also needed to produce cotton, linen, etc.; petroleum to produce polyester, nylon, etc.; and fuel for ships, aircraft, goods vehicles, etc.



The fast fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries. It would be impossible to list all the pollutants and waste it generates, because the industry comprises a variety of agents and because making just one garment involves dozens of stages. One of the most polluting stages is the cultivation of cotton, which is the most widely used fibre in the sector. Intensive cotton cultivation accounts for 2.6% of global water use and requires large amounts of pesticides and fertilisers, which pollute groundwater, air and soil. Nylon and polyester, which are also widely used, are made from petrochemicals. Therefore, they are not biodegradable and accumulate in rivers and oceans, leading to bioaccumulation in different species. During production, a great deal of energy is used and nitrogen oxides are emitted.

Then there is the transport sector: according to a study published in the journal *Environmental Science and Technology*, between 18% and 30% of global emissions of nitrogen oxides and 9% of sulphur oxides are produced by commercial ships. It also warns that just 15 cargo ships emit the same amount of pollutants as 760 million cars.

New initiatives and the future of fast fashion

Not only does fast fashion cause significant waste, pollution and emissions, it is also associated with gender discrimination, violation of workers' rights and inhumane working conditions in many countries. A devastating example was the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh, which killed over a thousand people and exposed appalling working conditions and social injustice: whilst in the West we buy T-shirts for three euros, on the other side of the world people work endless hours to make our clothes for a monthly salary of about 50 euros.

Some multinationals have taken the initiative and are beginning to make garments with organic cotton and producing so-called "conscious collections", others collect garments that are being thrown away and donate them to NGOs, and corporate social responsibility departments are starting to proliferate. These would be interesting developments if they represented more than just a tiny part of the sweeping changes that are really needed, starting with design and distribution centres in Europe and their role in improving conditions in Asian factories.

Fast fashion is the quintessence of consumer capitalism, and the change to another model of production in the sector should involve both companies and institutions and consumers. The latter as a group must seek to align their way of thinking with their buying habits, and demand that companies produce local, sustainable and socially just products. ●

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