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Persuasive Writing and Speaking

Automation and the Fashion Industry

Adeline is a college student from Omaha, Nebraska. Whether it's shoes, bags, or even hats, Adeline loves fashion. When she first moved into college years ago, her mother said that she was bringing enough clothes for a family of three. One day, she got invited to an off campus birthday party at the Kappa house. The party was in one week and she knew that a guy that she just started dating was going to be there. This was huge! Naturally, Adeline gathered all her friends together in her dorm room and they tore through her closet to find the perfect outfit. "What about a pair of black skinny jeans, a milkmaid top, and a pair of platform doc martens?" said Adeline's friend Taylor. "Taylor, are you crazy? No one wears skinny jeans anymore and the milkmaid look is from 2 seasons ago." Taylor rolled her eyes, looked at Adeline and said "Well, why don't you wear that outfit that you wore to that Alpha probate from a few months ago. That was really cute." "No girl, I can't wear that. Everyone already saw me in it and I already posted a picture of me wearing it on Instagram. " "Okay, well I know Fashion Nova is having a sale right now and they always have really cute bodycon dresses. Usually everything is under \$20. Maybe you should look there." Later that night, Adeline fills her cart and completes her order with overnight shipping.

Most people have been in the same predicament as Adeline. You need an outfit to wear for a night out or even a casual brunch ,but when you look at your closet it seems like you have no clothes. Everything is either no longer on trend or washed out and falling apart at the seams. The odds are that if you have purchased any clothing in the past few years,it has come from a fast fashion brand. Forever 21, Fashion Nova, and Zara are just some examples of fast fashion brands that hit the ground running and haven't stopped since. The stores seem to show up almost out of the blue and become the norm in every strip mall, fashion mall, and outlet mall from state to state and ocean to ocean. They capitalize on trendy fashion culture and prey on young people who can't afford to spend more on higher quality clothing. These brands make a killing ,but at what cost?

In the 1950's if a man wanted a ready made pair of pants for a special occasion it would cost about \$7 dollars and that person would have to search through multiple catalogs, order the pants, and wait for them to be sent to his house through the mail. Now a man can shop online at Fashion Nova, buy a pair of pants for \$10 ,and have them shipped to him the next day. This is the phenomena of fast fashion.

Fast fashion is a commonly used phrase in 2021 ,but what is it? As described by The Good Trade, fast fashion is a “designing, manufacturing, and marketing method focused on rapidly producing high volumes of clothing.” In short, it is clothing made with the end in mind. It primarily focuses on creating clothing that is low quality and can be produced at rapid rates. Fast fashion gives retailers the ability to create products that

keep up with the latest trends and do so with minimal production time. These types of brands rely heavily on outsourced and underpaid labor. The majority of the factories are seen overseas.

According to consumer behavior specialist Michael Solomon, "It's not just about clothing, it's about a disposable society." Solomon said that fast fashion is a direct byproduct of globalization and the "logistical efficiency of the 21st century (Chua,2019)." Fast fashion retailers thrive on creating clothing that is both cheap and disposable.

Before the rise of fast fashion, in the fashion industry there were only four seasons for collections. Designers would start prepping collections months ahead of time and would try to predict what styles would be the most wanted for the upcoming season. Now fast fashion brands produce clothing for "52 'micro seasons' a year" or basically one collection for each week of the year (Seigle,2019).

Zara set the blueprint for what is now fast fashion. They created a business model that had designs ready to go to retail in under 5 weeks while also incorporating up to 20 different collections each year. (CORESIGHT) Zara started receiving deliveries of merchandise bi-weekly which increased the quantity of their products. Because of this, Zara never had to worry about running out of merchandise on the shelves. Newer fast fashion brands took this model and ran with it. According to a study done by Coresight Research, online brands like Misguided release around one thousand new products every month. One of the largest fast fashion retailers, Fashion Nova, releases anywhere

from 600 to 900 new styles every week. Brands would replicate styles from off the runway as they appeared in real time. Retailers push out new merchandise faster and faster which only makes consumers want to shop more and more. According to Fast Company “apparel companies make 53 million tons of clothes into the world annually. If the industry keeps up its exponential pace of growth, it is expected to reach 160 million tons by 2050. (Stanton,19)”

The demand for more clothes has only increased the rate of production and forced brands to cut corners at alarming rates. Garment workers are paid well below a living wage and are subjected to gruesome conditions in the garment factories. For years, garment workers have had to strike in order to obtain some sort of human rights in these sweatshops. Recently, garment workers in a Nike sweatshop unionized after being subjected to long hours, lack of resources, physical abuse, and unfair wages on top of other unspeakable conditions.

Many brands continue to crank out low cost clothing that comes at a high cost for the environment. Fast fashion brand Boohoo has been known to use “toxic chemicals, dangerous dyes, and synthetic fabrics that seep into water supplies (Seigle,2019).” Garments from fast fashion retailers are oftentimes “full of lead pesticides, and countless other chemicals (Stanton,19).” The main problem is that all of these harmful chemicals and waste sit in landfills and release toxins into the air. The carbon footprint of fast fashion is comparable to the oil industry.

It's impossible to dissect the fast fashion industry without also acknowledging social media's role in the issue. Social media has completely changed the way that companies market their products to consumers. Instagram and influencers play a huge role in the prevalence of fast fashion. Now, it's easier than ever for consumers to stay up to date with current trends. Years ago, if a celebrity was wearing a piece of clothing the average person wouldn't even dare to dream about owning the same piece. Clothes worn by celebrities were too expensive and overall not accessible to the common person. Now celebrities partner with fast fashion brands to promote the brands clothes and even in some cases have their own line through the retailer. When a fan sees Gabrielle Union wearing a pair of sweatpants, chances are the pants are from her collection with Fabletics and will likely cost under \$30.

Like Rapper and Fashion Nova brand representative Cardi B said, "I can rock designer ,but this Fashion Nova fits." The brand is known for their tight fitting, knock off runway clothing. Consumers are choosing to buy cheap clothing over more expensive luxury pieces. In 2017, they were one of the most Googled brands along with luxury brands like Louis Vuitton and Gucci. CEO Richard Saghian said, "There aren't many companies that are creating clothes as fast as we are. There aren't many companies that post on social media every 30 minutes. We bring so many trends every day (Seigle,2019)."

In 2018, Kylie Jenner was seen wearing a pink glitter mini dress to her 21st birthday party. Within 24 hours, a fast fashion retailer ,Fashion Nova, created a knock off of the dress and it sold out immediately.

Fashion Nova is just one of the many fast fashion brands that utilize Instagram, influencers, and coupon codes to move large quantities of their products. The brand was described as a “made for social media” brand meaning that all of its clothing are “meant to be worn once. Maybe twice, photographed and discarded (Fashion Revolution).”

Brands like Fashion Nova are known to be disposable brands. The clothing is so trendy that after a season what is seen as “in” has changed so drastically that the clothes are likely not in style anymore. This generally wouldn’t be a problem, but fast fashion culture teaches that every outfit must be on trend at all times. Now the fashion world is smaller and once an outfit is worn and posted once it is seen as no longer wearable. A survey done by The Cut found that “one in ten shoppers admit to buying clothes to post photos on social media and then returning them (Fashion Revolution).”

Not only do brands use celebrities, but now brands have started to utilize micro celebrities or influencers to push more products. It is a common practice to see brands paying influencers to produce content wearing their clothes and some will even seal the deal with a discount code. Things like the swipe up feature on Instagram make it convenient for consumers to buy an influencer’s entire outfit with as little as 3 taps. Freelance brand and social media expert Rupert Esdaile said “Fast Fashion labels target the audiences where influencers reign. Engaging people on Instagram is key to selling these products and the influencers are the best tool (Fashion Revolution).”

In order for fast fashion companies to produce their clothing they must partner with a manufacturer. In this process, the clothing brand puts out a request for certain pieces and gives a time frame for the production of said pieces. Then the manufacturers get picked via a bidding system. With the ever changing trends in fast fashion, brands are looking to manufacturers to have pieces done faster and cheaper than ever. In an attempt to decrease prices and increase productivity, some factories have started to automate some of their processes. There are multiple different types of fashion automation, but some of the most common are robosewing, supply chain optimization, and fashion on demand.

Robosewing is one of the newer and more labor intensive processes. It was developed by SoftWear Automation at Georgia Tech. The robot reduces labor input and increases productivity. This process requires a more complex system because most fabric is soft and hard to control. For this reason, robosewing is not commonly used in factories.

Supply chain optimization involves atomizing processes that are most commonly done by human laborers like robo cutting, finishing, adhesive gluing, and knitting. This type of optimization is most commonly used. Robo knitting was recently used to create the Nike Flyknit line. Using this process reduced material waste by 80%(Stanton,2019). Fashion on Demand is a practice that is most commonly seen being used by luxury retailers. In this process, retailers will use artificial technology to show mock ups of the clothing and virtually eliminates ready made clothing.

Tianyuan Garments Company is a garment factory that makes clothing for Reebok and Adidas. In 2019 they opened a factory in Arkansas and employed 330 robots instead of people. This was done to shorten the supply chain and reduce costs. They also did this to dodge “notoriously high” American labor costs by removing humans from the occasion. Doing this cut labor costs compared to traditional human based production by 50 percent and increased productivity by 70 percent. Now the factory is estimated to be able to create 23 million shirts a year for 33 cents per unit. (Price,2018)

Tuntex is a garment manufacturing factory that makes clothing for Nike and Puma. Stanley Kang, who is the deputy general manager at the factory said, “Automation and digitalization are changing everything and when things change, we have to change. Whoever can respond fastest to the big retailers will win.” Tuntex has started the process of investing towards new technology to keep up with other industry leaders ,but equipment is expensive and would result in reallocating funds from other places. Kang said, “We have to be smarter, like a tech company. We need labs, intelligent systems. Every year, we have grown 15% to 20% in sales and profit, but the costs of labor, energy, technology, they just keep getting higher, and demand for speed increases. It’s getting tougher all the time.”

Though automation has the power to shift the working conditions in garment factories, the shift in the industry can do more harm than good. It is a double edged sword. On one hand, automation can help increase efficiency in garment factories and help reduce waste and carbon emissions. It can also help high labor costs. Processes like Fashion on Demand could help in ending the mass production of clothing and limiting the

amount of clothing that would inevitably end up in a landfill. On the other hand, automation would drastically change the economies of garment production economies and would primarily impact countries in South and Southeast Asia. These economies are ill prepared to absorb a large number of workers leaving behind the industry if automation pushes them away. There are real people that assemble the clothes that we wear on our backs and to completely remove them from the equation would be immoral. By incorporating robots, clothing loses the human touch that we have come to know.

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