NO PREP

Fast Fashion and the Cost of Cheap Clothing

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

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How Clothing Got So Cheap So Fast

For most of human history, clothing was expensive and owning much of it signaled wealth. A single shirt represented hours of spinning, weaving, and hand sewing, and garments were repaired, remade, handed down, and eventually cut up for rags. That relationship broke in the last few decades. Fast fashion describes a business model built on producing large volumes of trend-driven clothing very quickly and very cheaply, and it

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For most of human history, clothing was expensive and owning much of it signaled wealth. A single shirt represented hours of spinning, weaving, and hand sewing, and garments were repaired, remade, handed down, and eventually cut up for rags. That relationship broke in the last few decades. Fast fashion describes a business model built on producing large volumes of trend-driven clothing very quickly and very cheaply, and it works by compressing the time between a runway idea and a rack in a store from many months to a few weeks. Traditional fashion operated on roughly two to four seasons a year. Fast fashion retailers effectively run dozens of micro-seasons, releasing new items continuously so that shoppers who visit twice in a month find different merchandise both times. The strategy depends on newness rather than durability, since a garment that will be replaced in two months does not need to survive two years. The scale is enormous. Research compiled by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation found that global clothing production roughly doubled between 2000 and 2015, while the average number of times a garment was worn before disposal fell by around thirty-six percent. Both numbers moving in opposite directions at once is the entire story: more clothing produced, each piece used less. The result is that clothing has become one of the least expensive things a person buys and one of the most expensive things a society disposes of.

The Environmental Bill

The costs that do not appear on the price tag begin with water. Growing conventional cotton is water intensive, and widely cited estimates put the water required to produce a single cotton t-shirt at roughly two thousand seven hundred liters when irrigation, processing, and dyeing are counted together, which is comparable to what one person drinks over more than two years. Textile dyeing and finishing require

large volumes of water and chemicals, and in regions where wastewater treatment is weak, untreated dye effluent enters rivers directly. Synthetic fibers introduce a different problem. Because a large share of clothing produced today is polyester or another synthetic, and because those fibers shed microscopic fragments during washing, laundry has become a significant source of microplastic pollution, with fragments small enough to pass through wastewater treatment and enter waterways and food chains. Disposal closes the loop. The United States Environmental Protection Agency has estimated that of the roughly seventeen million tons of textile waste generated in 2018, more than eleven million tons went to landfill, with additional volumes incinerated and only a modest share recycled. Synthetic garments in a landfill do not biodegrade in any meaningful timeframe. Donation is helpful but is not a solution by itself, since charities receive far more clothing than domestic resale markets can absorb, and much of the surplus is baled and exported, shifting the disposal problem to countries with even less infrastructure to handle it.

The Human Bill

Cheap clothing also depends on cheap labor, and the garment industry employs tens of millions of workers worldwide, a large majority of them women, frequently in countries where wages are low and labor protections are weakly enforced. The event that forced this into public view was the collapse of the Rana Plaza building outside Dhaka, Bangladesh, in April 2013. The building held garment factories producing for a number of international brands. Cracks had been discovered in the structure the previous day and the building had been evacuated, but workers were ordered back inside. It collapsed the following morning, killing one thousand one hundred thirty-four people and injuring thousands more, making it the deadliest garment industry disaster in modern history. The aftermath produced real changes, including the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, a binding agreement signed by many international brands that funded independent factory inspections and remediation, and it made supply chain transparency a mainstream consumer demand. It also revealed how little most companies knew about their own production, since several brands initially could not confirm whether their clothing was made in the building. Progress since has been real but uneven, and the underlying economic pressure has not changed: when a retailer competes primarily on price and speed,

that pressure travels down the supply chain and lands on the people with the least ability to refuse it.

Cost Per Wear: The Math That Changes Decisions

The most useful tool for thinking about clothing purchases is a calculation that takes about five seconds and contradicts almost every instinct a shopper has in a store. Cost per wear divides the total cost of a garment by the number of times it will realistically be worn. A twenty dollar shirt that is worn five times before it pills, twists, or falls out of favor costs four dollars per wear. An eighty dollar shirt worn one hundred times costs eighty cents per wear, meaning the expensive shirt is five times cheaper by the only measure that reflects actual use. The calculation also exposes the opposite case honestly: an expensive item bought for an occasion that never comes has a terrible cost per wear no matter how well it is made, which is why the formula is not simply an argument for spending more. It is an argument for buying deliberately. Applying it requires being realistic about the second number rather than optimistic, since most people dramatically overestimate how often they will wear something they are excited about in a fitting room. A useful discipline is to ask where and when specifically the item will be worn in the next month, and to treat inability to answer as information. The calculation also makes visible the value of everything else in this unit, because repairing a garment, washing it correctly, and storing it properly all increase the denominator, which lowers the cost of something already purchased.

What Actually Helps

Individual choices do not restructure a global industry, and pretending otherwise leads people to give up when their tote bag fails to fix anything. What individual choices do accomplish is reducing personal cost and personal waste, and shifting demand at the margin. The highest-impact action is simply buying less and keeping things longer, because roughly speaking the most sustainable garment is the one already in a closet. Caring for clothing properly extends life measurably: washing in cold water, washing less frequently, line drying, and repairing rather than discarding. Buying secondhand keeps garments in circulation and costs a fraction of retail, and resale platforms and thrift stores have made this substantially easier than it was a decade ago. When buying new, construction quality can be assessed in the store in under a minute by checking a few things: seam allowances wide enough that the seam

will not pull apart, stitching that is straight and dense rather than sparse, patterns that match across seams, buttons sewn with a shank, and fabric that recovers rather than staying creased when squeezed in a fist. Reading the fiber content tag matters here too, since a blend containing elastic will have a shorter life than a stable natural fiber. Finally, it helps to recognize greenwashing, which is marketing that implies environmental benefit without substantiating it. Vague claims like conscious or eco mean nothing without specifics, while a company disclosing supplier lists, certifications, or measured material percentages is making a claim that can actually be checked.

Key Information: The True Cost of Cheap Clothing

Detail	Information
Fast Fashion	High-volume, trend-driven clothing produced quickly and cheaply
Micro-Seasons	Dozens of releases a year instead of two to four seasons
Production vs. Use	Output roughly doubled 2000-2015 while wears per garment fell ~36%
Cotton T-Shirt	Commonly estimated at about 2,700 liters of water to produce
Microfibers	Synthetic fragments shed in the wash and pass through treatment
Rana Plaza	2013 Bangladesh factory collapse; 1,134 killed
Cost Per Wear	Total price divided by realistic number of wears
Greenwashing	Vague environmental marketing with nothing measurable behind it

Case Study: Grace Does the Math in the Store

Grace has ninety dollars of birthday money and a cart holding four twenty-dollar tops from a fast fashion store. Her older cousin, who works retail, asks what she is going to wear them to. Grace says she is not sure, they were just cute. Her cousin makes her run the numbers from her FACS class on her phone. Grace estimates honestly and admits she wore the last three shirts she bought there about four times each before they twisted at the side seams. Four times twenty dollars, worn four times each, is five dollars per wear across sixteen wearings. She puts three back and buys one. With the rest she buys a secondhand wool coat for thirty-two dollars that she will wear all winter, and a spool of thread. She texts her cousin that night: I did not spend less money, I bought fewer things, and if I wear the coat a hundred times this winter it comes to thirty-two cents a wear.

1. Explain how the cost per wear calculation changed Grace's decision, and why her honest estimate mattered more than the price.

2. Grace says she did not spend less money but bought fewer things. Using the reading, explain why that still counts as the higher-impact choice.

Multiple Choice

1. What does the term micro-seasons describe in fast fashion?

    a) Fabric produced in unusually small batch sizes

    b) Short-lived weather patterns that drive local demand

    c) Continuous releases replacing two to four yearly seasons

    d) The brief period before a garment goes on markdown or clearance

2. What happened at Rana Plaza in 2013?

a) A brand published its full supplier list for the first time

b) A dye spill contaminated a major river system

c) A garment factory building collapsed, killing 1,134 people

d) A trade agreement removed garment import limits

3. How is cost per wear calculated?

a) Total cost multiplied by expected years of ownership

b) Price compared against the same item at other stores

c) Original price minus any discount at purchase

d) Total cost divided by realistic number of wears

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ fast fashion	A) A garment's total price divided by the times it is actually worn
2. ___ micro-season	B) Synthetic fragments shed during laundering that reach waterways
3. ___ microfiber pollution	C) A continuous product release cycle replacing traditional seasons
4. ___ cost per wear	D) Environmental marketing claims with nothing measurable behind them
5. ___ greenwashing	E) Producing trend-driven clothing at high volume, speed, and low cost

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Global clothing production roughly _____ from 2000 to 2015.

2. The 2013 factory collapse in Bangladesh happened at _____.

3. Unsubstantiated eco marketing claims are called _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why does the reading say rising production and falling wears together tell the whole story?

2. Explain why donating unwanted clothing is helpful but not a complete solution.

3. Name three things a shopper can check in a store to judge construction quality.