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Dependence of Fast Fashion on Natural Resources and Cheap Labor: A Global Crisis

Purwidianti[1] ✉ | **M. Sarjan**[1]

[1]✉ Master of Natural Resources and Environmental Management, University of Mataram, 83115 Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara, INDONESIA

Abstract The fast fashion industry, defined by its rapid, low-cost production of trendy apparel, has become a dominant global economic force, igniting a critical conflict between its massive profitability and the severe environmental degradation and labor exploitation inherent in its business model. This study aims to systematically review and synthesize evidence on these dual crises, examining the industry's profound negative impact on natural resources and its systemic exploitation of labor. Following the PRISMA guidelines, a literature review of scientific articles from 2020-2025 was conducted, with findings synthesized through thematic analysis. The review confirms that fast fashion's production phase causes extensive environmental damage through high water consumption, CO2 emissions, and chemical pollution, while the use of non-biodegradable synthetic fibers creates a long-term post-consumer waste crisis. Furthermore, the findings establish that labor exploitation is a structural feature necessary to maintain low costs, resulting in a "global environmental injustice" where developing nations disproportionately suffer the consequences. As the current model is fundamentally unsustainable and ethically untenable, addressing this crisis requires a paradigm shift, including robust government regulation to mandate corporate accountability, an industry-wide transition toward circular and sustainable business models, and a collective consumer shift to more mindful consumption patterns.

Keywords: Fast Fashion, Resources, Impact, Exploitation, Sustainability.

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1. Introduction

The concept of fast fashion emerged alongside the industrial revolution of the 1980s and has since become a dominant trend in the global market. This industry model is characterized by the rapid production of trendy, low-cost clothing, which has experienced significant growth in line with dynamic market demand and yearly fashion trends (Bartl & Ipsmiller, 2023; Mukherjee, 2015). Fueled by digitalization and easy access to information via platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, the economic value of fast fashion is substantial (Rani et al., 2024). In 2022, companies in this sector generated profits of $106 billion, with estimates projecting a rise to $185 billion by 2027 (illuminem, 2024).

However, this explosive growth presents a critical and timely controversy: the conflict between massive profitability and the severe environmental degradation and labor exploitation it causes. This article is relevant today because these negative impacts are escalating (Olivar Aponte et al., 2024). The industry's production and supply chain—from fiber production and textile manufacturing to distribution and consumption—is a major source of CO_2 emissions (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Furthermore, the industry is heavily dependent on natural resources, particularly water (Bailey et al., 2022). For instance, producing a single pair of jeans requires approximately 10,000 liters of water, an amount that would take a person 10 years to drink. When these garments are discarded, the synthetic fabrics they are made from can take up to 200 years to decompose, releasing methane gas and polluting soil and water with harmful chemicals and dyes (Aldalbahi et al., 2021).

Alongside the environmental toll is the systemic violation of labor rights. The demand for cheap clothing creates intense pressure to minimize costs, leading to the exploitation of workers who often face wages below the minimum standard, unsafe conditions, and excessive working hours that do not align with their compensation (Anner, 2020). This issue remains urgent, as evidenced by a 2024 report that found cases of child labor within the supply chain of a major one of east asia fashion company (Hin et al., 2021). The Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh in 2013, which killed over 1,000 workers and injured 2,500, stands as a tragic example of the injustices and unsafe environments faced by garment workers, the majority of whom are women

Corresponding Author: purwidianti000@gmail.com

and children (Alam et al., 2017; Ali & Ruma, 2024; Tsujinaka et al., 2015). This cycle of harm is perpetuated by consumer behavior, where the desire to follow trends at low prices fosters an impulsive consumption ingrained in the subconscious .

To analyze this complex issue, this paper will utilize several key concepts and theories. The central theme revolves around fast fashion and the urgent need to transition towards sustainability. This transition is framed by international goals such as the United Nation (2023) Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG 12), which calls for ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns. The phenomenon of labor exploitation will be examined through legal frameworks, such as Indonesia's 1945 Constitution which guarantees fair compensation, and theoretical lenses like the Neo-Marxist perspective, which explains how class gaps between employers and workers lead to exploitation

This literature review also acknowledges existing debates and underexplored areas. There is significant resistance from business actors to adopting sustainable or circular economic models due to fears that such changes would increase production costs and end the cheap fashion cycle. A notable gap exists in governance, as employment policies are often reactive, formulated only after a crisis emerges in the public sphere. This highlights a need to explore proactive solutions. Therefore, this research uses a literature study method to examine the impacts of fast fashion and advocate for awareness among all parties to actively promote sustainable and responsible practices. Mitigating the negative effects requires the coordinated involvement of companies adopting sustainable technologies, consumers shifting towards more mindful consumption, and governments creating robust policies to regulate the industry and protect workers and the environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fast Fashion and the Need for Natural Resources

Textile production plays an important role in meeting our needs; however, it also causes environmental, climate, and social impacts due to the use of water, land, and chemicals that emit greenhouse gases and pollutants (Naqvi et al., 2024). The low-quality materials used have the potential to pollute the environment, such as synthetic fibers like polyester, which is a type of plastic made from polyethylene terephthalate (PET), derived from fossil fuels and therefore not biodegradable (Ardella, 2023). Most of the global water usage in fashion relies on cotton cultivation and wet textile manufacturing processes (bleaching, dyeing, printing, and finishing) (Niinimäki et al., 2020). In addition to causing water scarcity, the wastewater produced also contributes to ecosystem damage. The water flow used is approximately 44 trillion liters per year from irrigation, accounting for about 3% of global irrigation water usage, with 95% of it used for cotton production (Niinimäki et al., 2020). The production of organic cotton, which we consider the best option in the clothing industry, requires approximately 5,000 gallons of water in the processing of cotton for the production of t-shirts and pants (Ardella, 2023).

Global production is estimated to generate 2.9 Gt of CO2 equivalent emissions, two-thirds of which are related to synthetic materials during fiber production, textile manufacturing, and garment construction (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Here are some common pesticides used in cotton farming: Acephate, Chlorpyrifos, Cypermethrin, Deltamethrin, Endosulfan, Glyphosate, Imidacloprid, Lambda-cyhalothrin, Monocrotophos, Profenofos, and Thiamethoxam (Pestocide Action Network UK, 2017). There are over 1,000 active ingredients in pesticides, making them effective pest killers but also dangerous to humans. According to the Pesticide Action Network UK (2018), the toxicity of pesticides causes effects after exposure, whether oral or dermal, at a dose within 24 hours or through inhalation exposure for 4 hours. For example, from 35 studies, it was reported that 11.5% of children and adolescents, 17.5% of women, 40% of farmers, and 31% experienced general health problems due to exposure to pesticides used on cotton.

2.2. Labor Exploitation in Fast Fashion

The phenomenon of exploitation of workers, especially female workers in the garment industry, has rapidly developed (Akhter et al., 2019). Even today, well-known global fast fashion brands have emerged that do not pay attention to the justice of the workers The concept of fast fashion instills a stigma in consumers who want luxury brand clothing at low prices and can buy them repeatedly (Rani et al., 2024).

2.3. The Relationship Between Natural Resources and Labor in the Perspective of Sustainability

Recycling materials in the fashion industry for a circular economy becomes complicated because waste residues are mixed with various types of fibers, necessitating separation since the fibers have undergone shredding processes (Piu & Rossetti, 2021; Shamsuzzaman et al., 2025). The exploitation that occurs is not only experienced by the workers but also by the environment. There is a need to implement the SDG 12 concept for sustainable production and consumption as an initial step to ensure concern for the fulfillment of workers' rights and the environment sustainably. Employment policies for industrial workers should ideally not be reactive, meaning that such policies should not be issued spontaneously when issues arise in the public sphere.

3. Methods

This study was conducted as a systematic literature review following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 guidelines. This approach was chosen to ensure a transparent, structured, and replicable process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing all relevant research on the topic. The original research method for this paper was a qualitative literature study, which has now been improved by adopting the more rigorous PRISMA framework.

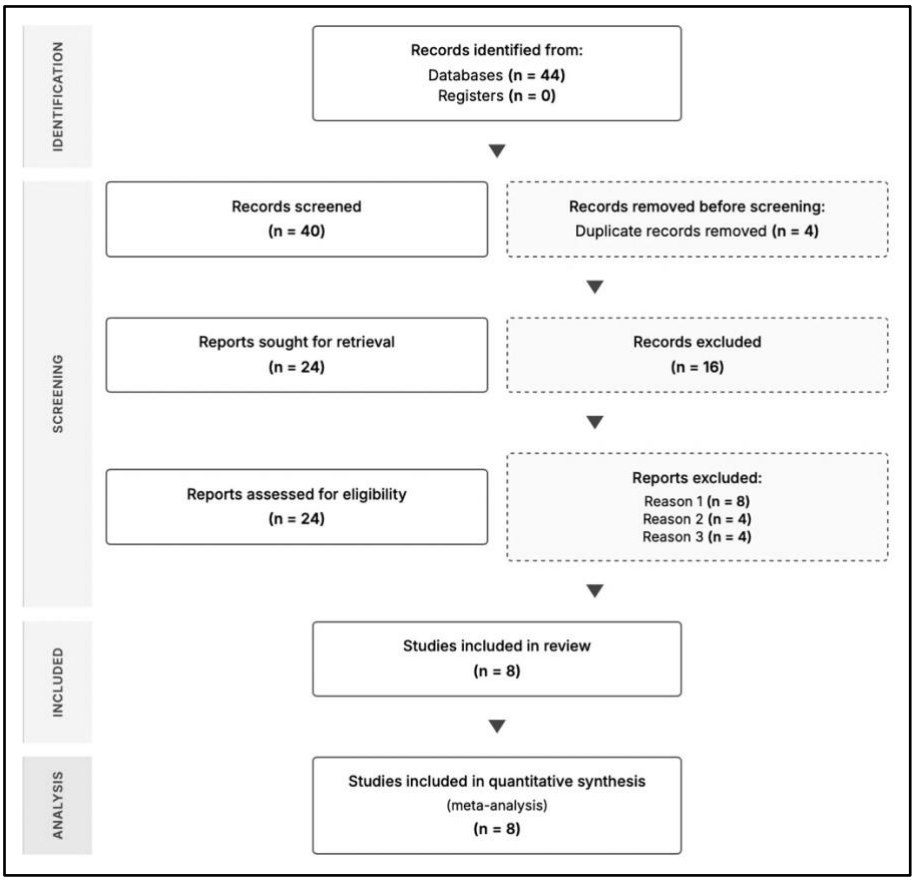

Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart for this study

2.1 Eligibility Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the reviewed literature, studies were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- **Type of Study:** The review included scientific articles with primary data sources.
- **Publication Language:** Only studies published in English were considered to ensure consistency in interpretation.
- **Publication Year:** The publication year was restricted to a range from 2020 to 2025 to capture the most recent and relevant findings in the field.

2.2 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted on Scopus identify relevant literature. The search strategy was developed and refined to precisely capture studies at the intersection of fast fashion, environmental impact, and labour issues. For example, an initial search using broad terms was refined to improve specificity, leading to the use of more precise keywords related to the core themes of environment and labour. This refinement resulted in the final, complete search string used for this review: ("Fast Fashion" AND "Environment" OR "Natural Resources" AND "Labor" OR "Cheap Labor" OR "Labor Exploitation")

2.3 Data Extraction Process

After screening the articles based on the eligibility criteria, relevant information from each selected study was systematically extracted and organized. The data extraction focused on capturing the following key details for each article:

- Author(s) and Year of Publication
- Research Objectives or Questions
- Methodology Used
- Key Findings and Conclusions

2.4 Data Synthesis

The data extracted from the selected articles was synthesized using thematic analysis. This qualitative approach involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The process included familiarizing ourselves with the data, generating initial codes from the key findings, searching for themes among the codes, and then reviewing and defining those themes. This method allowed for a comprehensive synthesis of the literature, enabling a deeper understanding of the multifaceted impacts of the fast fashion industry and the proposed solutions.

4. Findings

4.1 Article Gethering

This section presents the objective findings from the systematic literature review process. The initial database search identified 44 articles. Following a screening of titles and abstracts, this number was narrowed to 24 relevant articles for a full-text review. After applying the full eligibility criteria, a final selection of 10 articles was included for data extraction and synthesis. The primary characteristics of these 10 studies, including their methodologies and main findings, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies

Author(s) (Year)	Title	Method	Main Findings
(Olivar Aponte et al., 2024)	Fast fashion consumption and its environmental impact: A literature review	Literature Review	The primary environmental impacts occur during fiber production and wet processing stages, with cotton cultivation being a major contributor to water stress and toxicity.
(Ardella, 2023)	Fast Fashion and the Implementation of SDG 12.6.1 in Indonesia...	Normative Legal Research	Synthetic fibers like polyester are non-biodegradable plastics derived from fossil fuels. There is a need for mandatory corporate sustainability reporting (SDG 12.6.1) to address these issues.
Niinimäki, K., et al.	The environmental price of fast fashion	Not specified in abstract	Textile production generates significant CO2 emissions, with two-thirds related to synthetic materials. Recycling is complicated by mixed fiber types and material degradation from shredding.
(Táborecká et al., 2025)	Environmental Concerns Vs. Sustainable Clothes Purchases Among Various Generations of Females In Cee Countries	survey	Significant differences in concern for the well-being of clothing factory workers, animal species, future generations, and for the environment across the generational cohorts. Gen X demonstrates higher levels of concern for the well-being of future generations and environmental issues. Notably, Gen Z shows the lowest levels of engagement across all categories, suggesting a gap between attitudes and actual behaviour
(Ali & Ruma, 2024)	Rana Plaza collapse—Bangladesh: a social science perspective	Social science perspective / Case study	The Rana Plaza collapse was a result of poor structural design, use of substandard materials, and general negligence, which points to systemic administrative and organizational failures. The disaster was a catalyst for policy reforms aimed at improving workplace safety and security
(Hin et al., 2021)	Exploratory Study on Preventive Measures to Prevent Child Labour Exploitation in Belt and Road Countries from Perspective of Fashion Industry	Exploratory study	Individual stakeholder actions are insufficient to stop child labor. A comprehensive solution requires collaboration between companies, workers, and the Bangladesh government. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative might heighten exploitation risks. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and open dialogue are crucial for prevention.
(Bartl & Ipsmiller, 2023)	Fast Fashion Versus Circular Economy: An Exciting Match?	Communication / Argumentative analysis	Fast fashion and the circular economy are fundamentally incompatible. The core principles of fast fashion (speed, low cost) are at odds with the circular economy's emphasis on sustainability and ethical production. Tackling the issue requires more than just recycling; it needs a foundational shift away from the fast fashion model.
(Bhowmik & Anand, 2023)	From Models to Mannequins: The Oxymoronic Equation of International Labor Law Standards in the World of Fashion	Legal analysis / Law review	There is a critical and growing need for a specialized field of fashion law to address a range of issues including intellectual property, counterfeiting, and environmental standards. A significant gap in current labor law is the lack of specific protections for fashion models.

4.2 Formation of Thematic Analysis

Following the initial review and characterization of the articles, a thematic analysis was conducted to group the studies into distinct categories. This was achieved by systematically analyzing the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the 10 included articles to identify recurring concepts. The process did not involve interpreting the content, but rather mapping the primary focus of each study.

Keywords such as "environment," "CO2 emissions," "natural resources," and "pollution" were frequently encountered, leading to the formation of a theme centered on the production phase. A second, related theme was formed by identifying studies that focused on "waste," "landfill," and "decomposition," which pertained to post-consumer impacts. Similarly, articles

containing keywords like "labor," "exploitation," "workers' rights," and "injustice" were grouped into a theme addressing the social consequences. Finally, studies that discussed "consumer awareness," "policy," "sustainability," and "corporate reporting" were consolidated into a theme focused on drivers and potential solutions. This process resulted in the four thematic categories outlined in Table 2, which provides a clear map of which articles contribute to each theme.

Table 2. Thematic Grouping of Articles

Theme	Contributing Articles (Author, Year)
Theme 1: Environmental Impacts of Production	(Ardella, 2023; Niinimäki et al., 2020; Olivar Aponte et al., 2024; Táborecká et al., 2025)
Theme 2: Post-Consumer Environmental Impacts	(Ali & Ruma, 2024; Bartl & Ipsmiller, 2023; Niinimäki et al., 2020; Táborecká et al., 2025)
Theme 3: Labor Exploitation and Social Injustice	(Ali & Ruma, 2024; Bartl & Ipsmiller, 2023; Hin et al., 2021; Táborecká et al., 2025)
Theme 4: Drivers and Proposed Solutions	(Ardella, 2023; Bhowmik & Anand, 2023)

5. Discussions

This systematic literature review aimed to synthesize recent evidence on the environmental and social impacts of the fast fashion industry. The findings from the 10 included studies consistently demonstrate that the industry's current model, built on rapid production and low-cost consumption, is inextricably linked to severe environmental degradation and labor exploitation. The thematic analysis organized these findings into four key areas: the environmental impacts of production, post-consumer environmental impacts, labor exploitation and social injustice, and the drivers and proposed solutions. This section interprets these findings, discusses their implications, and outlines the strengths and limitations of this review, concluding with recommendations for future research.

5.1 The Dual Environmental Crisis of Production and Waste

The findings paint a clear and consistent picture of a two-pronged environmental crisis. The production phase, as highlighted by Ardella (2023); Niinimäki et al. (2020); Olivar Aponte et al. (2024); Táborecká et al. (2025), is fundamentally unsustainable. Its heavy reliance on fossil fuels for energy and as a feedstock for synthetic fibers like polyester directly contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. The intensive use of water and chemicals, particularly in cotton cultivation and textile dyeing, leads to resource depletion and ecosystem pollution. These findings are consistent across studies because they focus on the material and energy flows inherent to the modern textile supply chain, which are quantifiable and well-documented.

The crisis continues into the post-consumer phase. The research by Ardella (2023) underscores that the problem does not end when a garment is sold. The use of non-biodegradable synthetic materials creates a long-term waste problem, with discarded clothing leaching pollutants into landfills for centuries. Niinimäki et al. (2020) provide a crucial insight into why this waste stream is so difficult to manage, explaining that the mixed-fiber composition of many garments complicates recycling efforts. This identifies a critical gap in the literature and in practice: while the problem of textile waste is well-defined, scalable and economically viable solutions for a circular textile economy remain underdeveloped. The implications are profound: the industry is not only depleting finite resources on the front end but is also creating a legacy of pollution on the back end.

5.2 Labor Exploitation as a Structural Feature, Not a Flaw

The reviewed literature strongly refutes any notion that labor exploitation is an isolated or accidental issue within fast fashion. Instead, as argued Bartl & Ipsmiller (2023), it is a structural necessity of a business model that promises consumers impossibly low prices. To meet these price points, costs are aggressively cut along the supply chain, with labor being one of the primary targets. The consistency of these findings across different methodologies—from the case study of the Rana Plaza tragedy (Ali & Ruma, 2024) to broader literature studies—is striking and points to a systemic global problem.

The most significant finding in this theme comes from (Olivar Aponte et al., 2024), who frame the issue as a "global environmental injustice." This concept is pivotal as it connects the environmental and social consequences, arguing that the burdens of pollution, resource depletion, and hazardous working conditions are disproportionately borne by low- and middle-income countries, while the benefits of cheap clothing are enjoyed by high-income nations. This perspective elevates the discussion from one of isolated labor disputes to one of global structural inequality, providing a deeper and more critical understanding of the topic. A clear gap in the literature, however, is the lack of research evaluating the real-world effectiveness of proposed solutions, such as corporate codes of conduct or third-party audits, in meaningfully improving workers' lives.

5.3 A Disconnect Between Awareness and Action

The final theme reveals a consensus on the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to address the fast fashion crisis. The findings suggest that responsibility is shared among consumers, corporations, and governments. However, the literature also implicitly highlights a major disconnect between awareness of the problem and the implementation of effective solutions. For instance, while Táborecká et al. (2025) point to social media as a tool for raising consumer awareness, there is a gap in understanding whether this awareness translates into sustained changes in purchasing behavior. Similarly, while Ardella (2023); Bhowmik & Anand (2023) and Bick et al. (2018) call for stronger corporate accountability and government regulation, the

industry's continued growth suggests these pressures have yet to catalyze systemic change. This implies that while the "what" (the problem) is clear, the "how" (the effective solution) remains a significant area of debate and a critical gap for future research.

5.4 Implications of the Review and Future Research Directions

The findings of this review have significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they provide a powerful case study of market failure, where the true social and environmental costs (negative externalities) of production are not reflected in the price of goods. Practically, the evidence synthesized here offers a clear mandate for action. For policymakers, this includes the need for robust environmental regulations, laws mandating supply chain transparency and corporate accountability (in line with United Nation (2023) SDG 12.6.1), and stronger enforcement of international labor standards. For the industry, the implication is that incremental changes are insufficient; a fundamental redesign of the business model away from disposability and toward durability and circularity is required.

Based on the patterns and gaps identified in this review, several avenues for future research are recommended:

- **Effectiveness of Interventions:** There is a critical need for empirical research that evaluates the effectiveness of different interventions. This includes longitudinal studies tracking the impact of new policies (e.g., the EU's Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles) and comparative analyses of different regulatory frameworks.
- **Consumer Behavior:** Future research should move beyond awareness and investigate how to effectively drive long-term behavioral change in consumers. This could involve studies in behavioral economics and psychology to understand the drivers of impulsive consumption and test strategies to promote mindful purchasing.
- **Circular Economy Solutions:** Research is urgently needed to develop and test scalable and economically viable technologies for textile recycling and closed-loop production systems.
- **Amplifying Voices from the Global South:** To counter potential biases, future research should prioritize qualitative and participatory methods to amplify the voices and experiences of workers and communities in garment-producing countries, providing a more bottom-up perspective on the impacts and potential solutions.

6. Conclusions

This literature review confirms that the fast fashion industry, driven by a model of rapid and low-cost production, operates in a fundamentally unsustainable and ethically untenable manner. The evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that the industry's practices lead to a dual crisis: severe environmental degradation through extensive resource consumption, pollution, and non-degradable waste, and systemic labor exploitation, which functions as a structural feature of the business model rather than an occasional flaw. The findings reveal a "global environmental injustice" where the burdens are disproportionately placed on developing nations, while the benefits are concentrated in high-income consumer markets. Therefore, it is clear that the relentless pursuit of economic profit has been prioritized at the expense of human rights and ecological health. Addressing this complex issue demands more than incremental adjustments; it requires a paradigm shift involving robust government regulation, a fundamental transition in corporate business models towards circularity and sustainability, and a collective move by consumers towards responsible and mindful consumption

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Ethical considerations

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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