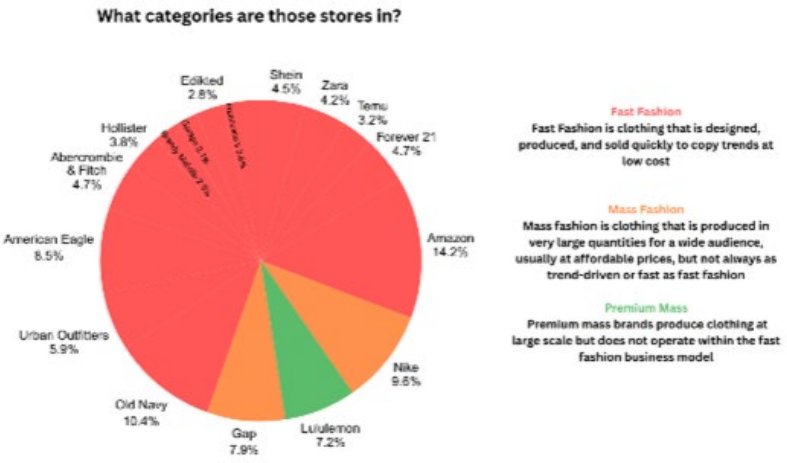
The Cost of Staying on Trend

By Olivia Vance



A cotton T-shirt costs $3-10, less than your daily coffee, to produce and appears in stores within 10 days of designing. It feels easy to buy, easy to replace, and easy to forget, but behind that low price tag lies a global system built on political decisions, economic inequalities, and environmental sacrifices. What we call “fast fashion” is not simply the fashion industry responding to trends rapidly. This industry buzzword that sounds harmless describes the practice of creating and consuming cheaply made clothes that fill not only our closets, but landfills. It’s based on a political structure that determines who profits, who labors, and who bears the costs for convenience, sustained by trade policies, lax labor laws, and weak environmental regulations, all of which allow corporations to produce massive quantities of clothing at minimal cost. Governments often support the $150.82-billion industry for its ability to stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and stimulate consumer spending, yet the support for leading fast-fashion brands like Shein, H&M, Zara, and Gap Inc. (the retail conglomerate that includes Gap, Old Navy, and Banana Republic) comes at a steep price.

By exploiting both producers and consumers, fast-fashion brands contribute to environmental degradation, labor abuse, and mounting textile waste. As activists advocate for legislation aimed at slowing overproduction, global attention is shifting towards the true cost of trends. The ramifications of fast-fashion extend far beyond personal style as it shapes lives, landscapes, and labor across the world and even in our own community. Its low price and instant gratification create the illusion that fashion is universally accessible. However, the price tag hides a far more expensive reality.

Fast fashion is a major contributor to environmental destruction, producing high levels of greenhouse gas emissions while consuming large amounts of water and natural resources. According to the European Parliament, producing a single cotton T-shirt requires approximately 2,700 liters of fresh water, enough to meet one person's drinking needs for 2.5 years.
The industry also generates enormous amounts of textile waste. Roughly 63 percent of garments are made from polyester and synthetic fibers, derived from petrochemicals, materials that are difficult, if not impossible, to recycle effectively. Polyester and other synthetic fibers were originally developed by the DuPont Corporation during World War II for use in parachutes and other military equipment. After the war, corporations chose to repurpose these materials for mass consumption and everyday clothing, allowing them to cut costs and grow their profit margins. What began as a wartime innovation has evolved into a global disposal crisis, revealing how synthetic convenience creates lasting consequences far beyond the point of purchase.

For one example, today, in Accra, Ghana, the Kantamanto market receives an estimated 1,500 tons of secondhand clothing each week. Those garments contain synthetic fibers that break down into microplastics. The fabric is burned for fuel, which releases toxic, carcinogenic chemicals into the air. Fast-fashion brands flood the market with inexpensive garments that outlive trends but last much longer in landfills (and in the atmosphere and our bodies). The practice of "waste colonialism," Western nations exporting their waste to less developed countries, causes extreme health concerns to people who generally don't reap the benefit of this corporate behavior.

The short lifespan of trends, partially driven by social media and industry's ability to deliver new styles to consumers faster than ever, has transformed wardrobes into revolving doors of consumption. Clothing is no longer treated as a luxury good, but a temporary product meant to be worn a handful of times before being discarded. This cycle is not simply the result of over-consumption; it stems from the product model that rewards volume over value and speed over sustainability. Quality is sacrificed to maintain rapid turnover; corporations remain dependent on constant sales.

In hopes of cutting back on manufacturing costs, major fast-fashion corporations outsource production to countries where labor laws are weak and wages are low. This business model relies on factory workers, often women and young children, enduring unsafe working conditions. According to The Guardian, these "insufferable" environments cause illness. Workers face "breathing issues, migraines, skin infections, and even cancer. Many factory

owners do not prioritize worker safety. The risks are even higher in bleaching and dyeing units, where laborers handle toxic chemicals such as sulfuric acid with their bare hands…" While consumers in high-income countries benefit from cheap clothing, the true cost is absorbed by workers who lack legal and labor protection. This shields corporations from accountability while preserving profit.

The impact of fast fashion is not confined to factories and landfills in developing countries. It is also reflected within our own community. A trends survey sent out to the Altamont School students and faculty reveals how normalized fast-fashion consumption has become, with many participants reporting purchases from brands such as Amazon, Nike, Old Navy, Shein, Zara, and Gap Inc. The brands most frequently named still rely on high-volume production models tied to overconsumption and rapid turnover. This data does not suggest personal irresponsibility. It does, however, reveal corporate irresponsibility and how deeply embedded fast fashion is in everyday consumer culture. Our local patterns mirror global ones, demonstrating how accessibility, affordability, and convenience quietly sustain so many problems. Recognizing the connection allows communities, like ours, to begin to inform awareness our everyday choices.

Ultimately, fast fashion thrives on the illusion of choice. Consumers believe that they are freely choosing what to buy, yet their options are shaped by corporations that prioritize profit over people and the environment. Rather than reflecting trends, fast fashion reinforces global inequalities by giving power, profit, and protection to corporations and governments. Understanding the system is the first step towards challenging it and recognizing that what we wear is never just about style.

The fashion industry stands at a crossroad. Slowing trend-turnover, regulating supply chains, and demanding transparency might seem drastic, but they are necessary steps towards a system that values human lives and environmental safety and sustainability. Fashion and trends will always change, but the systems behind them do not have to remain the same, either. So, the question is no longer whether the system causes harm, but will society continue to accept it as the price of staying on trend.