The High Costs of Fast Fashion

Fast Fashion (noun):
the reproduction of highly fashionable clothes at high speed and low cost

Collins English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers

I. Video Comprehension Questions:
Watch the BBC Earth video and answer the questions below.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoiU8sprXpQ&app=desktop

00:10 – 00:17
1. The Earth is home to how many species of plants and animals?
__________________________________________________________________________

1:05 – 1:24
2. What are three negative effects of fast fashion on nature?
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

1:25 – 1:44
3. How many items of clothing are produced each year?
__________________________________________________________________________

4. How many items end up in landfills after only 12 months?
__________________________________________________________________________

2:10 – 2:24
5. What are six actions consumers can take to slow down fast fashion?
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

Figure 1. Shoppers in Westfield Stratford City (Harris, 2011).
II. Post-viewing Discussion Questions:

In pairs or small groups, share your opinions about the questions below.

1. Have you ever heard of the expression ‘fast fashion’ before? If so, where?
2. What is the oldest item of clothing you still wear?
3. Have you ever bought (or been given) an item of clothing that you have never worn even once?
4. Do you think ‘fast fashion’ is an issue in the U.A.E.?
5. Did the video change how you think about fashion? Will you change your shopping habits?

III. Pre-reading:

Until only very recently, shopping for clothes was a special event for many people. They kept each garment until it was either worn out or out grown. If the latter, it would often be given to younger siblings to wear when they grew into it. However, with the recent rapid economic development in many countries, shopping has become a regular routine and, in some cases, even an addiction (Sanghani, 2018). Many consumers in developed countries buy more clothing than they actually need, and, in some cases, they do not even wear an item even once. According to the Dry Cleaning Institute of Australia Ltd (2015), the average life expectancy of most clothes is between 2 to 3 years. However, as a result of the increased demand for newer and cheaper clothing, many consumers are discarding a garment after wearing it only several times, resulting in an unprecedented amount of textile waste. For example, the average American household now produces 38 kilograms of textile waste each year, making the annual total for the United States alone almost 5 million kilograms (Rodriguez, 2018). Unfortunately, this negative effect of fast fashion is not the only problem; far bigger issues are related to the social and environmental damage caused by the production of these products, particularly those made from cotton.

Cotton, a soft, fluffy fiber that grows on cotton plants, has a very long but dark history in human fashion. Although it has been used in Pakistan since at least 5,000 BCE, it did not become a staple fiber in global clothing production until the 18th century CE (“History of Cotton”, 2019). As western nations began to industrialize at this time, cotton became a very profitable fabric, but this popularity resulted in poor labour conditions for textile workers; companies paid workers low salaries, employed children, and demanded long, 18-hour work days to meet consumer demand. Moreover, in the U.S., the growth of this industry in the early 19th century
CE had a direct connection to the expansion of slavery (“History of Cotton”, 2019). Unfortunately, although these labour issues have been improved in western countries, with the current rise of fast fashion, cotton textile production has moved to developing nations, resulting in similar social problems. As textile companies try to maximize their profits by keeping costs down, they also ignore many safety rules, and, as a result, endanger the health of their employees. For example, in 2013, 1,138 textile workers died when the Rana Plaza clothing factory in Bangladesh collapsed due to poor construction (Parry, 2018).

Aside from these negative social effects, the use of cotton in fast fashion also causes serious problems for the environment. 43% of all clothing is made from cotton, and the processes used to make it include pesticides in the farming stage and toxic dyes during manufacturing (Sanghani, 2018). The repeated use of these chemicals is very damaging to the soil and water, killing wildlife species that live there and causing health problems for farmers and textile workers. Moreover, large amounts of water are used in both of these processes, resulting in major water shortages. For instance, from the cotton field to the dyeing factory, it requires over 15,000 litres of water to make just one pair of jeans (Sanghani, 2018).

However, there are some eco-friendly solutions that both textile manufacturers and consumers can adopt to slow down the negative effects of fast fashion. Large clothing manufacturers can choose to grow organic cotton without pesticides and conserve water by using drip irrigation watering systems. With regard to individuals, they can consume less or recycle their unwanted garments to family members and friends. As greater awareness about the environmental dangers of plastics has greatly reduced the amount of this waste in recent years, so too can education campaigns regarding the high costs of fashion influence people’s shopping habits.
IV. Video Comprehension Questions #2:

The Aral Sea, which is located between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, was one of the biggest inland seas in the world, but it has been shrinking dramatically since the 1960s due to cotton production. Watch the Encyclopaedia Britannica video and answer the questions below.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjtZ6T4g5sk&app=desktop

00:09 – 00:14
1. What was the Aral Sea’s ranking in the world as inland body of water? __________________________

00:28 – 00:57
2. Who governed the region since World War 2 (and which country is this now)? ________________________________________________________________

3. How was the land that was converted to cotton fields irrigated?
________________________________________________________________________

4. By how many feet had the sea’s water level dropped by 1989? ________________________________

1:08 – 1:14
5. How much more had it dropped by 2000? __________________________________________________

1:26 – 1:38
6. As the remaining sea became three times saltier, what happened to the wildlife and people?
____________________________________________________________________________

1:48 – 2:00
7. What has happened to the Southern Aral Sea since 2005?
__________________________________________________________________________________
V. Paraphrasing Practice:
*Summarize the following quotation from the BBC News article on fast fashion’s effects on the environment (Sanghani, 2018).*

“The few [dirhams] we spend for an item of clothing isn’t the true cost – the real cost is the millions of gallons of clean water that was used to grow the fabric, or the millions of gallons of fresh water that was polluted with toxic chemicals to dye the clothes.”

References


