

Teaching Middle School Students About Fast Fashion and how to Avoid it

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The shift towards a consumer culture of fast fashion in developed countries over the last 30 years has had a significant impact on both the conceptualization of fashion and its purpose as well as the economic structure and human rights violations of people who work in the industry. Fast fashion came about in the United States around the same time millennials became teenagers and had buying power. Millennials, as defined by people born between 1981 and 1997, are making less than previous generations and have much more student loan debt and less equity in houses and mortgages (Boone 2019). This decrease in wealth within the American middle class has not surprisingly coincided with the rise of cheap clothing and knockoffs produced for a fraction of the price. As the economy has fluctuated in the last 20 years, stores like Forever 21, have grown and taken over vacant space in malls and have increased floor space to hold a large amount of clothing (Debter & Gross, 2019). Recently, retailers have moved to a larger online presence after seeing little benefit from maintaining and expanding floorspace as evidenced by Forever 21 (Debter and Gross, 2019).

The increase in online sales can even further hide the low quality of clothing produced through the use of deceptive or inaccurate images. It is also difficult to compare quality and material when purchasing an item online. This is in stark contrast to how major clothing retailers previously released around two new lines each season, and would anticipate trends much farther in advance due to the length of production time. In 2017, fashion from a traditional lifestyle brand typically took around 36 weeks from design to delivery, compared to the four week average for a fast fashion company (Berg et al. 2019). Large retailers like Zara and H&M produce and release new lines similarly quickly, getting product on shelves around once a month, in order to increase profit margins (Crewe & Goodman, 2000). Fast fashion has made a dramatic

impact on the fashion market sector, with revenue growing by 8.2% in 2017 in comparison with the overall fashion market which grew by 3.5% (Berg et al. 2019). Fast fashion has become deeply entrenched in the American economy and seems to be gaining a strong foothold.

Unfortunately, the negative impacts of fast fashion have impacts that are far and wide reaching.

In 1991, Jeff Ballinger released an expose on the consequences of Nike's labor practices in Indonesia, including evidence of low wages and poor working conditions (Robertson, 2020). After public outcry against Nike, the company has been able to rebrand itself as a sustainability leader and supporter of ethical worker treatment (Robertson, 2020). While Nike has significantly increased monitoring and audits performed at factories as well as increasing the minimum age of workers, they have also distanced themselves from the Workers Rights Consortium, an independent organization focused on evaluating the sustainability of companies' labor and production practices (Robertson, 2020). While the Human Rights Consortium provides valuable feedback, it has its limitations. For example, even when companies are being upfront about labor practices in their production, they may still be purchasing fabrics or other materials that are being sourced or produced unethically ("Human Rights", n.d.). Human rights injustices happen even in developed countries which have labor laws and protections for workers. One such case was a sweatshop in Los Angeles where Fashion Nova was responsible for \$3.8 million in unpaid wages and where workers, often undocumented, were making on average \$2.77 an hour (Kitroeff, 2019). What these work place violations boil down to are human rights violations made profitable by consumer culture.

As younger generations are exposed to fast fashion, it is unlikely that they will remember the days before it was a ubiquitous part of the middle-class lifestyle. We are doing them a disservice by not providing them with the cultural awareness of the consequences of an act as

mundane as purchasing a new t-shirt. Young people today are more aware of social injustice and tend to have more progressive views, but also spend much more time online (Parker & Igielink, 2020). They tend to spend the most time on Youtube, Instagram and Snapchat (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), all of which market cheap clothing using algorithms that target viewers based on age, race, gender and other demographics. Middle school aged kids are at the right age to begin thinking about social injustice and also how their future consumer habits will affect others. At a time when they are most focused on both fitting in and standing out, ethical based decision making will likely mesh well with their world view and value system. For example, people born after 2007 are more keenly aware of race relations and injustices in the United States (Parker & Igielink, 2020). Furthermore, learning about social justice issues that are happening in the world now will help the content stay relevant to their lives and develop their sense of their impact on the world.

According to Human Rights Watch, a well-documented and covered catastrophe captured international attention: workers in Bangladesh have been subjected to conditions that are in violation of many human rights injustices such as being harmed by factory owners for being part of a labor union (2015). Working conditions in a large sweatshop were brought to worldwide attention when a large multi-story sweatshop, called Rana Plaza, collapsed (2015). Workers and employers were warned of the building's structural instability due to large cracks the day before when workers were ordered to leave the building but were threatened with losing their jobs if they did not return the following day (2015). Rana Plaza collapsed killing 1,100 people and injuring 2000 (2015). In response to the backlash, the Bangladesh government encouraged the creation of labor unions through legislation (2015). However, there have been continued reports that individuals who tried to exercise their right to form unions were beaten, fired or not paid

owed wages (2015). Remaining workers become reluctant to join unions after seeing the horrible consequences and the lack of support from the government in protecting them (“Whoever”, 2018). The consequences of poor worker treatment make it unlikely that working conditions will change any time soon without some kind of outside pressure.

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is not upheld when employers use scare tactics to prevent workers from unionizing. For example, keeping workers from unionizing and scaring them into submission through physical force goes against the right to form and join trade unions in Article 23 (United Nations, 1998). Furthermore, lack of safety and threats of unemployment when working conditions are not safe is also expressly mentioned in article 23, as well as the lack of pay for hours worked due to joining a union (United Nations, 23). The situation in Bangladesh has been relatively well-documented following the horrific events of the Rana Plaza collapse and a series of fires which also killed and injured workers (“Bangladesh”, 2015). However, poor worker treatment happens across the board in many countries who rely on cheap materials and cheap labor. In Malaysia, women were being forced to take birth control and pregnancy tests to avoid getting fired (“Triple Discrimination”, 2018), contrary to article 25 which focuses on the protections of motherhood (United Nations, 1998). Another huge problem is the fashion industry’s substantial reliance on child labor (Moulds, n.d.). Children are being denied the special care and assistance provided to them in article 25 as well as a right to education as provided to them in article 26 (United Nations, 1998).

Methods and Materials

Preparing a curriculum to teach middle school aged students about the fashion industry’s current impact on workers around the world should be done with care. Helping preteens to develop a deeper awareness right around the time that they become more independent and able to

shop on their own as well as being at the age where many fast fashion brands will be targeting marketing towards drawing them in as consumers can help to combat the growth of this sector. Since preteens are particularly drawn towards social justice causes, increased awareness of the plight of workers responsible for providing them with fashionable clothing along with some suggestions on fashion mindfulness can begin to change the conversation and consumption of fast fashion. A gradual release of instruction for a lesson on fast fashion is outlined below, consisting of an hour-long lesson for middle school aged students. One piece of clothing for every two students is suggested, with tags indicating that it is from a well-known fast fashion brand and a tag identifying the country where it was made.

The anticipatory set begins with a quick discussion of the instructor's background with fast fashion. For example: "I remember when I got my first job babysitting my next-door neighbor's kids, and my friend and I were so excited that we would have money to spend because I didn't get an allowance. We would ask our parents to drop us off at the mall and head right into Forever 21, a giant two-story store that was brand new in our mall. Every time we managed to get there; it was as if the entire store was filled with entirely new clothing. As we both agreed, clothing was a way to communicate how edgy and cool we were to the world. We wanted new things that shocked and awed our classmates, but once the initial shock wore off, we didn't really want to wear them anymore. This was good because often after a few wears they looked way more worn out than the clothing our mothers insisted on buying us from what I imagined were old people stores. We didn't know it at the time, but although our clothing habit was costing us very little money, it was costing other people their rights!"

Objective/Learning goals

I will know what the definition of fast fashion is and how to avoid it

I will be able to determine if something was likely made unethically

I will have strategies to think through a purchase to determine if I will get a lot of use out of it.

Guided Teaching

Say: something as simple as putting on our clothing in the morning is something we do automatically. You might think about what to wear, but I bet you never wondered who made your clothing or about the long journey it made to get to your closet. Many people, an estimated 40 million, work to sew and create clothing for us to wear. Many of these people are women, and also work in unsafe and unsanitary conditions for very little money. Today we are going to read a short passage translated from Bengali into English, so that we can learn what it is like for these workers.

“My name is Shuma Sarkar, I am a garment factory worker. I have a son and I am a widow. My husband died in a garment factory fire. In my family we are three sisters and one brother and my father and mother living together. I work on trousers (pants) in the garment factory. Primark, Tesco, and Sears are some of our buyers. In the factory I work in, the conditions are very poor. The bathrooms are unclean, the drinking water is bad. The pressure of production is so high that workers are unable to drink water. Not being able to drink water causes a lot of the workers to fall ill. Some girls get jaundice, kidney problems and other illnesses. (blood pressure and heart problems are mentioned) Some parts of the factory have too much light whereas other parts don't get enough light at all this affects the eyes of many workers. The noise level in the factory is so high that it causes a lot of workers to suffer hearing problems. The inside of the factory is extremely hot and the windows are small allowing no air ventilation. The suffocating heat also causes a lot of the workers to fall sick. Many of the materials used in the factory contain

harsh and toxic chemicals which cause many workers to suffer from skin problems especially on their hands. In the place where I live the conditions are very bad because of the meager salary I receive. I am unable to afford decent housing. I am forced to live in a slum which is extremely unhygienic and causes many problems. With the salary on which I live, it is not possible to change housing. Only if my salary is increased. I can move with my family to a decent house and live with them. I joined a trade union because it is one of my rights and I also wanted to learn about the rights I am entitled to. Because the factory conditions are so poor I wanted to know more about my own rights as a worker and what should be done about these conditions.” (Sarkar, 2009).

We are now going to look at two articles of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

This is what we decided were the things that every person in the world deserved.

The first is article 23.

“Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests” (1998)

The second is article 25

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control” (1998).

Modeled

Teacher will share one example of a connection of a human rights violation that Shuma talked about and where it is found in one of the articles. For example: Shuma talked about how her husband died in a fire at a garment factory. In article 25 it is stated that she has a right to security in the event that she is widowed. We know she does not because she says she makes so little money she cannot support her family.

Shared Instruction

Ask students to give examples of what they heard from the video and how it connects to one or both of the articles from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

Guided Instruction

Fast Fashion is when clothing producers create new outfits very quickly for very cheap. The speed and low prices they want rely on factories like the one Shuma works in. Now we are going to talk about what we can do and how to identify fast fashion. The three parts we are going to focus on are looking at clothing labels, researching brands and mindful buying.

Independent Instruction

The teacher will project a clothing label onto the board. On the label, the teacher will point out the country that the piece of clothing was made as well as the material it is made from. The teacher will list the most common countries where workers are exploited using figure 1 (“Top Four”, 2019). The teacher will then show students how to look the brand of the clothing up on the website Good For You and guess based on the rating if it is fast fashion or not.

Figure 1

TOP FOUR COUNTRIES	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
CHINA	21%

VIETNAM	14%
BANGLADESH	14%
INDIA	12%

The teacher will ask students to pair up. The teacher will pass out a piece of clothing such as a t-shirt to each pair of students. The students will be asked to identify if it came from one of the top countries. Next students will be asked to look at the item and see if it has any tell-tale signs that is low quality like being abnormally thin, having uneven seams, or loose threads. Teacher will then have students look up the brands on the Good For You website to see if it is a fast fashion item.

Wrap up

Finally, students will be told to imagine they that they are buying this item. Teacher will ask students if they think that they will wear this item 30 times before they get rid of it. Items that look too flimsy to last 30 wears or items that are too trendy to wear often both fall into the do not buy category. If the item falls into either category, chances are that it was made in a fast fashion factory. Tell students that even if they choose to buy items from fast fashion retailers, wearing the item more and buying less create less demand for new items to be produced. These practices slow down the need for brands to keep speeding up their production lines at workers' expense.

Summary

Remind students of the working conditions that fast fashion creates and how this violates people's human rights. Tell them that there are many ways that they can impact the chain of production by being aware of where their clothing comes from. Ultimately, buying less often and

wearing clothing more creates less demand, and buying from clothing companies that can prove that they are ethically sourced also supports the goal of reducing fast fashion consumption.

As we have moved towards late-stage capitalism in most developed countries, the need for more clothing at a faster pace and lower cost has become a reality. It hurts workers who provide us with these clothes and it violates their rights. Despite global action and laws in countries where these abuses are happening, it is clear that often the profit still makes it worth exploiting people. Despite the various loopholes and lack of oversight, it is becoming more and more clear that individuals will be able to drive, or at least nudge the market in a more ethical direction. Starting with pre-teens when they are newly able to start participating in the fashion economy and are also very sensitive to human injustice can create change quickly. Furthermore, teaching students about this in a developmentally appropriate way has been outlined to show how this can also broaden their understanding of human rights. Many generational statistics suggest that preteens today may be much more open to hearing this discourse and that they are more likely to want to take action. Providing them with resources and tools to learn about how they can identify unsustainable clothing when they are shopping can also help them to feel like they have concrete steps to opt out of condoning these practices.

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