Fast Fashion and the Environment

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The rise of fast fashion has fundamentally altered the way the world produces and consumes clothing. Over the past three decades, major retailers have slashed production costs by manufacturing garments in developing countries and releasing dozens of new collections each year. The result is a culture of **consumerism** in which clothing has become effectively **disposable** — bought cheaply, worn briefly, and discarded without a second thought.

The environmental consequences of this model are severe. The fashion industry is responsible for approximately 10% of global carbon dioxide emissions — more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined. Water consumption is equally alarming; it takes roughly 2,700 litres of water to produce a single cotton T-shirt. Many garments are constructed from **synthetic** fibres such as polyester and nylon, which are derived from fossil fuels and can take hundreds of years to decompose.

A particularly insidious problem is the release of **microplastics**. Every time a synthetic garment is washed, thousands of microscopic plastic fibres are shed and flow directly into waterways. These particles are too small to be filtered by conventional wastewater treatment plants, meaning they accumulate in rivers, oceans, and ultimately in the food chain. Scientists have detected microplastics in fish, shellfish, and even in human blood, raising urgent public health concerns.

Beyond environmental damage, the fast fashion model depends on exploitative labour practices. Workers in countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Ethiopia are frequently paid poverty wages and denied basic rights. Factories prioritise speed and volume over safety, creating conditions that have led to catastrophic incidents, most notoriously the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka, which killed more than 1,100 garment workers.

Addressing these interconnected crises requires systemic change at both the industry and consumer level. Calls for **sustainable** fashion — clothing designed to last, made from recycled or biodegradable materials, and produced under fair conditions — are growing louder. Governments are beginning to introduce extended producer responsibility legislation, while a growing number of consumers are choosing to buy secondhand, rent garments, or simply buy less. Whether these efforts will prove sufficient remains to be seen.

A. Vocabulary

1. consumerism ____	a. factory where workers endure unsafe conditions and earn wages far below a living standard
2. disposable ____	b. able to break down naturally through bacterial or environmental processes
3. synthetic ____	c. process of becoming outdated, unfashionable, or no longer useful
4. microplastics ____	d. made from chemically produced materials rather than natural substances
5. sustainable ____	e. capable of being maintained long-term without depleting natural resources or causing lasting
6. exploitative ____	f. total greenhouse gas emissions caused by a person, product, or industry
7. biodegradable ____	g. cultural tendency to equate personal well-being with the purchase and accumulation of good
8. obsolescence ____	h. designed to be used briefly and then thrown away rather than kept or repaired
9. sweatshop ____	i. tiny plastic fragments under 5mm that contaminate ecosystems and living organisms
10. carbon footprint ____	j. treating people or resources unfairly in order to gain profit or advantage

B. True or False

___ 1. Fast fashion brands typically release only two clothing collections per year.

___ 2. The fashion industry produces more carbon emissions than all international aviation and maritime shipping combined.

___ 3. It takes approximately 2,700 litres of water to produce a single cotton T-shirt.

___ 4. Synthetic fibres such as polyester decompose naturally within a few decades.

___ 5. Conventional wastewater treatment plants can effectively filter out microplastics from wash water.

___ 6. Microplastics have been detected in rivers and oceans but not yet found in the human body.

___ 7. The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka killed more than 1,100 garment workers.

___ 8. The fast fashion industry is estimated to account for roughly 10% of global CO_2 emissions.

___ 9. Workers in fast fashion supply chains are generally well-paid and protected by strong labour laws.

___ 10. Extended producer responsibility legislation is one policy tool governments are exploring to address fast fashion.

C. Fill in the Blanks

Word Bank: biodegradable, disposable, exploitative, microplastics, obsolescence, sustainable, sweatshop, synthetic

1. Fast fashion brands treat clothing as essentially _____ — designed to be worn a few times and then thrown away.

2. Polyester and nylon are _____ fibres derived from fossil fuels that can persist in landfills for centuries.

3. Tiny plastic particles known as _____ are shed from clothing during washing and accumulate in marine ecosystems.

4. An increasing number of consumers are choosing _____ alternatives, such as secondhand clothing and ethically produced garments.

5. A _____ is a factory where workers endure unsafe conditions and earn wages far below a living standard.

D. Comprehension Questions

1. Why does the fast fashion model contribute to such high levels of water consumption?
2. How do microplastics from clothing eventually enter the human food chain?
3. What combination of industry-level and consumer-level changes does the passage suggest are needed to address fast fashion?

E. Discussion Questions

1. Do you think individual consumer choices can have a meaningful impact on the fast fashion industry, or is systemic government regulation the only truly effective solution? Why?
2. Some argue that affordable fast fashion allows lower-income consumers to participate in trends that were once exclusive to the wealthy. How should we weigh this social benefit against the environmental and ethical costs?

Answer Key

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A. Vocabulary: 1-g, 2-h, 3-d, 4-i, 5-e, 6-j, 7-b, 8-c, 9-a, 10-f

B. True/False: 1-F, 2-T, 3-T, 4-F, 5-F, 6-F, 7-T, 8-T, 9-F, 10-T

C. Fill Blanks: 1-disposable, 2-synthetic, 3-microplastics, 4-sustainable, 5-sweatshop

D. Comprehension:

1. Fast fashion relies on mass production of natural fibres like cotton, and producing even a single cotton T-shirt requires approximately 2,700 litres of water.
2. When synthetic garments are washed, microscopic plastic fibres are shed, pass through conventional wastewater treatment plants, enter rivers and oceans, and are ultimately ingested by marine life such as fish and shellfish, which humans then consume.
3. The passage argues that industry changes — such as designing durable, sustainable clothing and adopting extended producer responsibility — must be matched by consumer shifts toward buying secondhand, renting garments, or reducing overall consumption.