



PART 3

Read the text below and answer questions 27–40.

THE TRUE COST OF FAST FASHION

Fast fashion is often described as a triumph of responsiveness: designs move from catwalk or screen to storefront in weeks, prices appear unusually low, and consumers are offered a steady stream of novelty. Yet the system is better understood as an economic arrangement in which much of the cost is treated as an externality—borne not by the brand at the checkout but by workers, ecosystems, and public waste systems. The business model depends on rapid inventory turnover and “scarcity tactics” such as frequent drops that create urgency and fear of missing out. Social media accelerates this cycle by converting clothing into fast-moving content, shortening what counts as “current” and rewarding constant reinvention. Over time, consumers can be pulled into a hedonic treadmill: satisfaction is temporary, and the next purchase is framed as the quickest path back to feeling updated. The result is a market in which garments are valued less as durable goods and more as disposable signals.

Overproduction is the engine that keeps this system running. Retailers place large orders to avoid stock-outs and to ensure that a wide range of sizes and styles are always available, but the arithmetic makes waste unavoidable: when output is designed to exceed likely demand, surplus becomes structural rather than accidental. Unsold items may be discounted repeatedly, returned to warehouses, or in some cases destroyed to protect brand positioning and avoid secondary-market competition. A substantial share is exported as second-hand bales, often to countries with limited capacity to absorb the volume. While donation and resale can extend the life of individual items, these channels are frequently overwhelmed by the scale of production and by the low quality of many garments, which limits their resale value. In receiving markets, imported clothing can undercut local textile industries and flood informal systems that lack robust waste collection, shifting the disposal problem across borders.

Material choices compound these pressures. Many low-cost garments rely on synthetic fibres such as polyester, which are derived from fossil-fuel inputs and engineered for durability in ways that can become an environmental liability. During washing, polyester and other synthetics can shed microfibres that enter wastewater streams and contribute to microplastic pollution. Such particles may persist in rivers and coastal waters and, through bioaccumulation, can move through food webs. Cotton presents different trade-offs: it may require heavy water use and pesticide inputs depending on how it is grown and processed, and its impacts vary widely by region and farming practice. Blended fabrics—



common examples include poly-cotton mixes—are attractive to brands because they can hit a desired price point and texture, but they complicate circularity. Separating mixed fibres is chemically and mechanically difficult, and many blends cannot be efficiently recycled into high-quality new textiles, leaving downcycling or disposal as the default outcome.

Chemical use is another hidden cost, particularly during dyeing and finishing. Achieving colour fastness, softness, wrinkle resistance, or water repellency can involve large volumes of water and a complex suite of treatments. In regions where regulation or enforcement is weak, wastewater may be discharged without adequate treatment, releasing dyes and other contaminants into local rivers. Even when brands publish “restricted substance lists,” supply chains are often opaque and fragmented, with multiple tiers of subcontractors performing specialised steps. Monitoring every subcontractor consistently is difficult, especially when production timelines are compressed. As a result, compliance on paper can coexist with high environmental risk on the ground, and the harms are frequently concentrated in communities that have limited political leverage to demand remediation.

Labour conditions sit at the centre of the “true cost” debate because the speed-and-price model creates a race to the bottom. Garment work can provide crucial income and entry into formal employment, yet low unit prices and sudden design changes push factories to deliver more for less. During peak seasons, workers may face long hours, unstable contracts, and wage theft through unpaid overtime. The fragmentation of production can hide violations: unauthorised subcontracting may shift orders to unapproved sites that lack proper safeguards, allowing brands to claim ignorance while still benefiting from the output. Brands often point to audits and codes of conduct, but audits are snapshots in time. Factories can coach staff, tidy conditions temporarily, or move the most demanding work to locations that auditors do not visit. Moreover, purchasing practices can undermine ethical commitments: if a brand demands last-minute changes, short lead times, and lower prices, factories may meet the deadline by extending hours, cutting corners on safety, or outsourcing tasks beyond the approved chain.

Waste is where the system becomes most visible to the public, but it is also where easy solutions are most elusive. Clothing worn only a few times has a high footprint per wear, even if each item is cheap. Recycling is frequently promoted as a remedy, yet textile-to-textile recycling remains technically complex and relatively rare at scale. Garments contain mixed fibres, elastane content, zips, buttons, labels, and dye residues that complicate processing and reduce the quality of recycled output. Downcycling into insulation or cleaning rags can postpone disposal, but it does not produce an equivalent



new garment, meaning it does not close the loop. In effect, the volume of waste generated by fast fashion often exceeds the capacity of current recycling infrastructure, leaving landfilling and incineration as persistent endpoints.

Policy and business reforms are therefore gaining attention, especially mechanisms designed to realign incentives. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is one approach that attempts to shift some waste costs back onto brands by making them financially or operationally responsible for collection, sorting, and end-of-life processing. In theory, EPR encourages eco-design—greater durability, fewer mixed materials, and easier disassembly—because brands that create hard-to-manage waste would face higher compliance costs. Some companies also explore repair services, resale, rental, and take-back schemes, but their impact depends on logistics, consumer participation, and whether the economics work beyond niche markets. Critics argue that efficiency improvements alone will not solve the problem if total consumption keeps rising; without demand-side change, gains can be absorbed by continued growth in volume. The “true cost” question is therefore about trade-offs: cheaper clothing can help households with limited budgets, but it can also normalise disposability and externalise harm to workers and communities with little voice. A more sustainable system likely requires a combination of material innovation, stronger labour protections, transparent purchasing practices, and slower consumption so that value is measured across the full lifecycle of what is worn, repaired, and ultimately discarded.

Questions 27–31

Select the correct answer.

27 What does the passage suggest is the main reason fast fashion can appear inexpensive?

- A** Rapid stock turnover reduces the costs created by unsold clothing.
- B** Many labour, environmental and waste costs are borne outside the retail price.
- C** Synthetic fibres allow brands to avoid fluctuations in raw-material costs.
- D** Shorter supply chains enable brands to eliminate most logistical expenses.

28 What is one outcome of overproduction mentioned in the passage?

- A** Unsold items may be destroyed or exported as second-hand bales.
- B** Surplus garments may be stored until changing trends restore their value.
- C** Excess stock may be redirected into repair and rental schemes.
- D** Repeated discounting may prevent surplus clothing from entering waste streams.

29 Why are blended fabrics described as a problem for recycling?



- A** Their production requires more water than the processing of pure cotton.
- B** Their durability makes them unsuitable for conversion into lower-grade products.
- C** Their dyes prevent sorting systems from identifying their component materials.
- D** Their different fibres are difficult to separate into high-quality recycled material.

30 What limitation of factory audits is highlighted?

- A** They examine approved factories but exclude the purchasing decisions made by brands.
- B** They assess environmental compliance without examining working conditions.
- C** They capture conditions at one moment and may miss concealed or temporary violations.
- D** They are generally conducted outside peak production periods when workloads are lower.

31 Which approach is presented as an attempt to shift waste costs back onto brands?

- A** Mandatory targets for textile-to-textile recycling
- B** Extended Producer Responsibility
- C** Financial support for repair and resale services
- D** Restrictions on exports of second-hand clothing

Questions 32–36

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

32 The passage suggests that donation and resale can absorb the full scale of clothing overproduction.

33 The passage states that polyester garments can contribute to microplastic pollution through washing.

34 The passage suggests that cotton can have a lower environmental impact than synthetic fibres in some circumstances.

35 The passage suggests that brand purchasing demands can undermine ethical commitments in factories.

36 The passage states that textile-to-textile recycling is straightforward because garments are usually made of a single fibre.

Questions 37–40

Look at the following statements and the list below. Choose the correct letter.



37 The passage suggests that exporting surplus clothing can create problems

38 The passage indicates that pollution risks can arise during dyeing and finishing

39 The passage argues that factory audits may not ensure continuing compliance

40 The passage notes that textile recycling faces technical barriers

Sentence Endings

A because audits provide only a temporary view of conditions.

B because second-hand imports can overwhelm local markets.

C because mixed materials and components complicate processing.

D because wastewater may be discharged without adequate treatment.

E because brands can adjust purchasing practices that affect factory behaviour.

F because polyester production relies on fossil-fuel inputs.

G because downcycling postpones disposal rather than producing equivalent new clothing.

Answer Key

27. B

28. A

29. D

30. C

31. B

32. FALSE

33. TRUE

34. NOT GIVEN

35. TRUE

36. FALSE

37. B

38. D



39. A

40. C