

## Global Trade and Economic Growth: A Critical Analysis of Labor Precarity and Environmental Impact through Documentaries *China Blue* and *The True Cost*

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### Abstract

This paper examines global trade, emphasising that a thorough understanding of its complex structure and dynamics is crucial due to its role in economic growth and its associated socio-economic and environmental challenges. This paper examines the impact of global trade on ecological sustainability, labor precarity, and structural inequality. It utilizes visual narrative and documentary analysis, specifically focusing on the documentaries *China Blue*<sup>i</sup> (2005) and *The True Cost*<sup>ii</sup> (2015), to critically analyse the intersections of global trade, precarious labor, and environmental degradation. The research employs documentary analysis and content analysis to examine the narratives presented in these films, demonstrating how multinational corporations, consumer demand, and weak labor regulations contribute to widespread exploitation and environmental harm.

**Keywords:** Global Trade, visualization, film, labor, environment, sustainability, inequalities

### Introduction

Global trade catalyzes economic growth, enhancing efficiency, stimulating innovation, and uplifting living standards worldwide. It empowers nations to specialize according to their comparative advantage, which is fundamental to effective resource allocation, minimizing production costs, and broadening consumer access to a

diverse range of goods and services. Through trade, countries can export and import commodities and services they might not produce economically.<sup>iii</sup>. This concept, popularized by classical economists in the 18th century, posits that when countries specialize in producing goods, they become relatively more efficient at producing and trading with others, and global welfare increases (Krugman, 1989). Specialization and trade foster innovation, enhance productivity, and enable countries to focus on creating high-value products while importing what they cannot produce efficiently (Howse, Eliason, & Trebilcock, 2005). Furthermore, Mercantilism, the dominant economic system of the 16th and 17th centuries, aimed to maximize exports and minimize imports through the use of protective tariffs. Protectionism, a modern trade policy emerging in the 19th century, was a manifestation of mercantilist principles, though it often hindered economic development by restricting trade. Post-World War II, trade liberalization efforts led to the establishment of GATT, which subsequently evolved into the WTO. These institutions promoted global trade by lowering tariffs and establishing rules to govern international commerce (Vijayasri, 2013).

Consumption is a core economic activity. Purchasing apparel, such as clothing, is a way for consumers to manage stress and express their identity, thereby contributing to society through industrial activities. Fast fashion, characterized by weekly seasonal changes instead of biannual ones, is also known as 'cheap fashion' and has notably influenced consumer lifestyles (Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2017; Sung, 2021). Globalisation and free trade offer significant economic benefits but also pose persistent challenges, especially for underdeveloped nations. In these regions, trade can worsen environmental damage and economic disparities. Documentaries such as *'The True Cost'* (2015) by Andrew Morgan and *'China Blue'* (2005) by Micha X. Peled highlight the ecological impacts and exploitative labor practices inherent in global trade.

These films provide significant perspectives on the issues and systemic flaws within the contemporary global trading system, particularly in the fast fashion industry, textiles highlighted in *China Blue*, and the textile industry and environmental destruction examined in *The True Cost*. These films/documentaries elucidate the effects of international trade on the economy, environment, society, and people. This paper focuses on the points presented in these documentaries and connects them to the overarching issue of international business, emphasizing the pros and hazards of globalization. It underscores the necessity of including ethics in trade policy formulation to optimise the anticipated welfare gains.

In this respect, the Structural analysis of countries is a critical topic for economists and policymakers globally, particularly in the context of international trade. The theory of comparative advantage highlights the benefits of trade, which are amplified by trade liberalization. This process leads to increased national productivity and lower prices for global consumers (Krugman, 1989). In the same vein, trade liberalization has enhanced the welfare of people worldwide, as they can now access goods and services that they would otherwise be unable to afford (Anderson & Winters, 2008).

Nevertheless, whereas trade yields economic advantages, it also presents considerable drawbacks. The proliferation of global trade has established an interlinked framework wherein production frequently transpires in developing countries that may lack stringent labour and environmental restrictions. *The True Cost* exemplifies this dynamic within the fast fashion industry. Reduced production costs in nations such as Bangladesh and Cambodia enable Western consumers to get affordable apparel, but to the detriment of workers who face inadequate wages and hazardous working environments (Catsoulis, 2015). This reflects a broader trend in which trade benefits accrue disproportionately to multinational corporations while vulnerable workers bear the costs. Moreover, international trade can exacerbate environmental degradation, as evidenced by the agricultural practices depicted in *China Blue*. The methodological approach comprises documentary films that emphasise critical elements of international trade, namely in the fast fashion, textile, and commodity industries.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Thematic analysis is employed to discover recurring patterns and themes within the documentary. Essential concerns such as labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and the unequal distribution of trade benefits are analysed through the lens of World Systems Theory, Dependency Theory, Political Ecology, and environmental justice to critically assess the connections between global trade, labour precarity, and environmental decline. The World-Systems theory explains global economic hierarchies and the core nations' exploitation of peripheral regions. In this regard, Wallerstein's method introduces a model for the structure of this world system. The modern world system is, first, unique. Its uniqueness is that it emerged and developed as a world economy that was not transformed into a political empire like ancient Rome (Leiss, 1977). The key point for Wallerstein is constructing a world economy without an enduring, centralized political empire. The second important aspect of the model is its conception of the structural differentiation of the 'parts' that make up the world system. Nations and regions relate to each other as representatives of three categories: core, periphery, and semi-periphery (Leiss, 1977). Further, wage labor and self-employment were becoming dominant in the core, slavery and feudal relations were in the periphery, and sharecropping was in the semi-periphery. Finally, two other factors, in combination with this structural differentiation, were necessary conditions for the emergence of the modern world system: the expansion of the geographical size of the system and the creation of strong, bureaucratic state organizations in the core areas (Wallerstein, cited in Leiss, 1977).

In addition to this debate, Dependency theory is a development method that gained popularity in the 1960s, primarily due to the efforts of a group of social scientists who studied or worked in Latin America. It challenged dominant Western notions of development, asserting that the persistence of antiquated institutions and systems in the global South caused their underdevelopment. The 'modernisation' concept posits that the global South will progress by adopting 'modern' institutions, perspectives, and values, emulating the industrialised, 'developed' West. Dependency theorists critiqued the modernisation paradigm for its failure to acknowledge that the dynamics between various global regions, particularly through colonisation, significantly influenced the 'underdevelopment' of Southern countries, in contrast to the development observed in the industrialised world (Hout, 2023, p. 162).

In this regard, Andre Gunder Frank stated that the '[e]conomic development and underdevelopment are not just relative and quantitative, in that one represents more economic development than the other; economic development and underdevelopment are relational and qualitative, in that each is structurally different from, yet caused by its relationship with, the other' (Frank, 1969, p. 9; Hout, 2023, p.62). Consequently, the concept of 'other' is central to dependence theory, and the Global South exemplifies the dichotomy between developed and undeveloped economies, which is vividly reflected in the documentaries.

Further, the dependency theory emerged from the structuralist contributions of development economists. Many dependency theorists, influenced by structuralist concepts from development economics, also incorporated structuralist Marxist and neo-Marxist ideas regarding imperialism. Classical Marxist theories, articulated by figures such as Rudolf Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg, Nikolai Bukharin, and Vladimir Ilich Lenin, emphasised the exploitative characteristics of the global capitalist system. Neo-Marxists, like Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, and Arghiri Emmanuel, provided concepts on crises, external dominance, monopoly capital, and unequal exchange that were crucial in formulating dependency theory (Hout, 2023, p.62). Additionally, although various interpretations of dependence theory exist, they uniformly assert that developed nations (the center) derive advantages from the existing global framework to the detriment of developing nations (the periphery). Kvangraven (2021) argues that global economic development is polarizing, not equalizing. This perspective is based on four principles: a global historical approach, theorizing the polarizing tendencies of global capitalism, focusing on production structures, and examining the specific constraints of peripheral economies (Kvangraven, 2023, pp. 148-149).

Therefore, the classical Marxian analysis is predominantly situated in production and reproduction. The capitalist mode of production is defined not by individual capitalists' intentions but by the constraints imposed by the relations of production. As a counterargument, 'what was gained in that debate is that it is necessary to look at the difference in average national wages as well as the difference between the organic composition of national capitals, which is extremely important' (Dussel, 2001, p. 208). Marx did not contend that social relations of production and unequal trade relations should be seen as mutually exclusive concepts, as both are essential for comprehending uneven development (Kvangraven, 2023, p. 157). Classical Marxian and Neo-Marxist Dependency theory have been subjects of discussion.

Therefore, developing countries have significantly integrated production into global value chains (GVCs). Nonetheless, the global trade structure continues to perpetuate ties of dependency, leaving workers in underdeveloped nations particularly vulnerable during the crisis. Instead of enhanced efficiency (Grossman & Rossi-Hansberg, 2008). Several developing countries, particularly those in South Asia, have transitioned to manufacturing, primarily just-in-time manufacturing, which is characterized by a high reliance on companies concentrated in the center and relatively low-skilled and low-tech work. In contrast to numerous peripheral countries that are currently investigating unsophisticated, standard products with limited potential for upgrading, China has made substantial strides in upgrading within GVCs. Nevertheless, China has significantly increased its manufacturing exports because of its integration into global value chains (GVCs). This expansion has been characterised by a significant reliance on foreign direct investment (FDI), the denationalisation of the export-oriented manufacturing sector, and relatively low levels of domestic innovation in exports (Ferrarini & Scaramozzino, 2015; Kvangraven, 2023).

In this debate, Samir Amin's conceptualisation of imperialist rent and dependency theory, which have been extended to account for global financialisation, can be particularly beneficial in explaining the hierarchical character of global monetary and financial relations (Amin, 1974). Further, the mechanical nature of the dependence theory necessitates attention, as it is impossible to elucidate uneven development solely by examining individual actors and the local level. The extreme version of the theory also fails to account for the intricate interrelations of international and national forces throughout history. The national question is another critical theoretical and methodological concern underpinning these dependency discussions. The tradition has been criticised for excessively emphasising the nation-state as a unit of analysis, even though the nation-state is subordinate in a global hierarchy. The absence of intersectional analysis is another conceptual shortcoming identified in dependency theory, because of the strong emphasis on class. Even though sections of the dependency literature do investigate ethnic inequalities, gender is rarely addressed (Kvangraven, 2023; Johnson, 1981; Cardoso, 1977; Blaney, 1996; Evans, 2009; Palma, 2016; Casanova, 1965; Cotler, 1967; Scott, 1995).

Regarding the neoliberal economic policies, the global political economy of development since the 1960s falls into three phases: national developmentalism from the postwar to the 1970s, the Washington Consensus from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, and the post-Washington Consensus from the mid-1990s to the present. Each phase and its development model underwent considerable restructuring to address significant crises threatening its legitimacy and viability. Every crisis forces the capitalist mode of production to innovate and modify itself to maintain hegemony through 'creative destruction' or new political layers and interventions (Juego, 2012, pp. 25-26).

Adding to this debate, since the 1970s, there has been a pronounced shift towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and ideas. Deregulation, privatisation, and the state's withdrawal from numerous domains of social provision have become common. Neoliberalism is a political-economic theory that promotes human well-being by giving individuals entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within a framework of substantial private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The state's duty is to provide and maintain an institutional structure appropriate for these practices (Harvey, 2005, p.2).

Moreover, proponents of the neoliberal paradigm currently hold significant positions of influence in education, media, corporate boardrooms, financial institutions, essential state entities, and international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which oversee global finance and trade. Neoliberalism has attained hegemony as a discursive framework with remarkable succinctness (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). Neoliberal theory argues that Bremer's initiatives are necessary and sufficient for creating wealth and enhancing population well-being. The concept that individual freedoms are protected by market and trade freedom is central to neoliberal philosophy and has long dominated the US's global position. The Neoliberal State in Theory posits that the autonomy of firms and corporations, legally recognised as individuals, to function within the institutional framework of free markets and free trade is considered a fundamental virtue (Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberalism appears to be problematic as a dominant theory for contemporary capitalism. The stability and sustainability of the capitalist system hinge on its capacity for robust capital accumulation, which encompasses both economic expansion and technological advancement (Kotz, 2000). Globalization is typically characterized as a rise in the magnitude of transnational economic exchanges and resource flows, resulting in a qualitative transformation in the relationships among national economies and between nation-states (Baker et al., 1998). Three economic connections have significantly escalated in recent decades: merchandise trade flows, foreign direct investment, and cross-border finance transactions. The paramount characteristics of contemporary globalisation include significantly augmented international trade, heightened money flows over national borders, manufacturing, extractive industries, and finance, which function globally while predominantly maintaining a distinct foundation in a singular nation-state (Kotz, 2000). Consequently, Neoliberalism seems to be contentious as a framework for capitalism, especially consumer capitalism. This technique generates multiple socio-economic and environmental challenges. Developing nations are victims of rapid fashion, inexpensive production, and capitalism.

In this regard, environmental justice arose as a critique of environmental policies that disproportionately adversely affect marginalised populations. Many scholars argued that environmental deterioration transcends ecological concerns, representing a social and political dilemma entrenched in structural imbalances. The discourse of the disproportionate burden on marginalized communities, particularly in South Asia and other developing countries, indicates that industries, hazardous waste sites, and polluting factories are frequently situated in low-income and racially marginalized communities, hence perpetuating environmental racism (Bullard, 1990). This injustice comes from institutional discrimination, as official policies disregard the environmental issues faced by marginalised populations (Pulido, 2000). Further, environmental justice must encompass not only distributional inequality but also recognition and procedural justice by underscoring the necessity of both redistribution and culture and identity-based justice within environmental policies (Schlosberg, 2007; Fraser, 2009).

Moreover, from the perspective of neoliberalism and the privatization of nature, the market-oriented approach to environmental governance involves the privatization of natural resources and their transformation into commodities, resulting in displacement and inequality (Harvey, 2005). Further, the carbon markets, ecotourism, and corporate conservation frequently function as greenwashing strategies that advantage businesses at the expense of indigenous and local communities (Buscher et al., 2012). In addition, Vandana Shiva contends that women in the Global South endure a combined burden of environmental degradation and gender-based oppression, as they serve as the principal stewards of natural resources (Shiva, 1988). Indigenous people underscore land sovereignty and ecological wisdom, contesting capitalist extractivism that jeopardizes their rights and livelihoods (Escobar, 1996). Regarding capitalism and ecological degradation, John Bellamy Foster argued that the 'metabolic rift theory' contends that capitalism engenders an unsustainable disjunction between human cultures and the natural environment (Foster, 2000). Capitalism abuses labor and inexpensive natural resources (land, water, energy) to maintain accumulation (Moore, 2015). Global politics, governments, and companies frequently rationalize land confiscation under the pretexts of 'development' and 'green energy' (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). Political ecology challenges state-sponsored conservation initiatives that displace indigenous populations under the pretext of safeguarding biodiversity (Robbins, 2012).

Thus, the intersection of capitalism, supply chain, environmental justice, social justice, and political ecology demonstrates that ecological problems are not merely environmental concerns but fundamental social, political, and economic conflicts in developing countries, particularly South Asia. Mitigating poverty and ecological problems necessitates technological innovation, systemic governance, and changes in business and justice. Consequently, the documentaries '*The True Cost*,' and '*China Blue*,' address the themes of inexpensive labor economics, lowest-paid workers, supply chain dynamics, the fashion industry, agricultural industrialization, ecological impacts, seed monopolies, health concerns, and various other difficulties.

### **Documentaries and Visualisation of Global Trade: In Search of a Perspective**

The documentary '*The True Cost*', directed by Andrew Morgan and released in 2015, was made by a globally recognised director renowned for highlighting narratives that promote a more promising future. It focuses on illuminating the detrimental environmental and social consequences of the fast fashion business. It examines the trajectory of apparel, encompassing 'what we wear, the people involved in its production, and the industry's impact on the globe.' Throughout the years, as clothing prices have consistently declined, human and environmental costs have escalated. *The True Cost* reveals the concealed reality, prompting viewers to consider: Who genuinely bears the cost of our clothing? this is the fundamental question of this documentary.

The documentary explores the world, transitioning from luxury fashion runways to destitute slums. It includes interviews with prominent individuals, such as Stella McCartney, Livia Firth, and Vandana Shiva, to expose the hidden expenses associated with the fast fashion industry. Further, *The True Cost* underscores how the fast fashion business model emphasizes minimal production expenses to optimize revenues. This frequently leads to substandard working conditions, inadequate wages, and labor abuse in developing and underdeveloped countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India. The film highlights the contrast between significant fashion firms' or Industry profits and workers' remuneration, emphasising the inequitable allocation of economic advantages within the global supply chain, a fundamental element of international trade. In the contemporary global context, the role of international trade in the fast fashion business depends on the global supply chain to minimise costs and maximise profits. Countries like Bangladesh, India, and Cambodia are key centers for garment production due to their lower labor costs and less stringent regulations compared to Western countries. This trend is driven by global trade agreements and trade liberalization, which enable fashion brands to outsource production to developing nations for reduced costs.

Therefore, the exploitation of people due to fast fashion and capitalism, for example, the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh, which resulted in the deaths of over 1,100 garment workers owing to hazardous working conditions, is a direct outcome of the drive to reduce costs in global trade. Further, the Punjab region of India illustrates the catastrophic consequences of pesticide application in (BT cotton) cotton agriculture, which has resulted in mental illness affecting several children in the country. This underscores the environmental and health repercussions prompted by worldwide cotton consumption.

Despite efforts to maintain prominence in the global textile industry, Cambodia faces challenges, including low salaries and poor working conditions, which concurrently sustain exploitation, inequality, and environmental deterioration. Similarly, international trade dynamics significantly impact underdeveloped nations like Haiti, where, despite job creation, benefits are often overshadowed by job precariousness, insufficient earnings, extended working hours, child labor, substandard living conditions, and detrimental environmental impacts.

The social costs of environmental degradation are linked to fast fashion, a significant aspect of international trade. Fast fashion components, such as polyester, are derived from petroleum and significantly impact the environment through their manufacturing and transportation processes. Fast fashion exemplifies the global supply chain that leads to the depletion of natural resources and adversely affects the environment through the accumulation of textile waste. Much of this trash is disposed of in underdeveloped countries, exacerbating environmental degradation. *The True Cost* illustrates how international trade facilitates the movement of products across borders

while neglecting the environmental and societal costs of production. Consequently, '*The True Cost*' of making items is obscured from consumers, resulting in unprofitable economic and environmental consequences. The themes of 'Ralph Rising' illuminate the consumerist triangle and its worldwide ramifications; the film interrogates the concepts of consumption and international trade. Therefore, the True Cost offers a perspective on labour economics, environmental concerns, and inequality issues. The interconnection of domestic and international business, manufacturing processes, and consumer attitudes highlights the necessity of integrating ethical considerations into global trade.

The documentary '*China Blue*' critically examines China's denim industry, tracing a pair of jeans from production to retail. It highlights the experiences of adolescent girls in factories, exposing the human cost of globalization and materialism. Directed by Micha X. Peled, the film reveals how Western design firms' demand for lower production costs in China leads to exploitative conditions at factories like Lifeng Clothes Co. Ltd. The documentary follows young workers Jasmine and Orchid, who endure harsh conditions to support their families, and the factory owner Mr. Lam, illustrating diverse perspectives within the manufacturing hierarchy.

*China Blue* depicts the experiences of rural girls who have departed from their families to seek employment in factories in southern China. The conditions are severe, with twelve girls occupying a single dormitory and laundering their garments in plastic buckets (hot water incurs an additional charge). The corporation supplies meals, subtracting the expense from their already insufficient salaries, which frequently take months to be disbursed. Under the strain of substantial orders and stringent deadlines, employees often succumb to sleeping at their sewing machines or atop stacks of pants. The organisation depends on young girls, primarily from rural regions, to comply in return for a monthly remuneration of approximately \$60. The documentary implicates the entire global 'free trade framework,' where affluent Western consumers benefit from cheap labor in developing countries, while middlemen profit. The film focuses on 16-year-old Jasmine, a farmer's daughter aspiring to be a martial arts princess, although she endures arduous 17-hour stints at the Lifeng factory for a mere 6 cents per hour. Jasmine's narrative epitomises the struggles of over 130 million Chinese peasants, predominantly young women, pursuing employment in the globalised economy. The documentary illuminates the abysmal working conditions, depicting Jasmine's daily existence: extracting loose threads and lint from jeans, without a fixed wage, and enduring frequent overtime, all while residing in squalid dormitories.

The film '*China Blue*' highlights the substantial demands placed on the workforce and posits that structural issues, driven by multinational corporations, are central to the problems faced. It narrates the story of Jasmine, an aspiring factory worker, illustrating the human cost of consumerism. Jasmine's struggles include being unable to return home for holidays like the Chinese New Year due to financial constraints, compounded by the harsh working conditions factory laborers endure to produce goods for export. The film also prompts critical examination of the global free-trade system and encourages consumers and retailers to consider the ethical implications of the industries they support. Jasmine's inquiry, 'Who are the overweight, tall individuals purchasing these pants we produce?' conveyed a compelling message that underscores the persistent presence of oppressive institutions driven by global capital. *China Blue* is an eye-opening film for the Western world, shedding light on the hidden realities behind the production of expensive clothing. In a pivotal moment towards the film's conclusion, Jasmine places a letter in the pants pocket destined for an upscale boutique, connecting the garments' owners with their manufacturers.

The *China Blue* challenges viewers to look beyond product labels and consider the workers and conditions in other nations, advocating for consumer accountability and greater respect for the global labor force. It highlights the personal experiences of workers like Jasmine to demonstrate how Western demand for low prices fuels exploitative labor practices worldwide, urging audiences to recognize the actual cost of their clothing and inspiring a call for change.

### Perspectives on Labor, Environment, and Consumer Capitalism

Global trade is often viewed as a catalyst for economic progress; nevertheless, it has also resulted in considerable labour exploitation, environmental damage, and economic disparities. *The True Cost* and *China Blue* documentaries offer unique visual accounts and testimony that reveal the truths of global trade beyond just statistics and economic models. These documentaries provide perspectives on labour, consumer capitalism, and environmental exploitation. Therefore, the garment and textile industries have shifted production to nations with the lowest labor costs, leading to extensive worker exploitation. Sweatshops<sup>iv</sup>, prolonged working hours, and perilous working conditions are prevalent in countries such as China, Bangladesh, and Cambodia.

The documentary ‘*China Blue*’ details the denial of fundamental labor rights for factory employees, highlighting unpaid overtime, wages below promised amounts, and inhumane working conditions. It also addresses the environmental impacts of textile production, particularly in China and India, including health risks to farmers from pesticide use in cotton cultivation, river and soil pollution, the carbon footprint of global shipping, and the landfill crisis caused by non-biodegradable textile waste, all of which stem from consumer capitalism-driven fast fashion.

The documentary ‘*The True Cost*’ examines the adverse effects of the fast fashion industry, particularly on workers in South Asia. It highlights how the demand for cheap fashion in Western countries perpetuates labor exploitation and encourages low-cost, mass production, leading to unsafe and inequitable working conditions. The film also details the severe environmental damage caused by textile production, including river and soil pollution in countries like India and China. Cotton cultivation's reliance on pesticides poses health risks to farmers, and the substantial volume of non-biodegradable discarded clothing contributes to a worsening global landfill crisis.

### Labor Exploitation and Environmental Degradation in *China Blue*, and *The True Cost*

The *China Blue* and *True Cost* deal with labor precarity, environmental pollution, and the devaluation of workers' rights by the fast fashion industry in developing countries of Southeast Asia. *The True Cost* reveals the dark and profound aspects of the global fast fashion supply chain. The narrative explores themes of avarice and trepidation, authority, and destitution while scrutinizing the interrelations among fashion, consumerism, mass media, globalization, and capitalism (Siegle, 2015). Outsourcing apparel production to low-wage economies like Bangladesh, India, and Cambodia has reduced item prices, transforming contemporary purchasing and selling practices in the apparel industry. However, this shift has also resulted in increased human and environmental costs (Zeynep, 2017). Garment workers globally are among the lowest paid, with daily earnings sometimes as low as a few dollars. Most workers lack representation and struggle to assert their rights within the supply chain. The documentary criticizes large corporations for exploiting inexpensive labor, violating workers' rights and safety, and infringing upon these rights to maximize profits, citing economic advantages as the primary justification for these costs (Ozdamar-Ertekin & Atik, 2015).

Only 10% of donated clothing is recycled, repurposed, or distributed to thrift shops; the rest goes to landfills. Much of this waste is non-biodegradable, persisting for over 200 years and emitting toxic gases. Charities often ship unsold donated clothing to developing countries, where it overwhelms local markets, undermines garment businesses, and pollutes the environment (Zeynep, 2017).

The garment industry is significantly dependent on women, children, and informal labourers, with 60–70% of individuals in developing nations involved in precarious, contract-based employment. Women endure compounded exploitation stemming from their gender and precarious employment, while inadequate regulation in the informal sector permits manufacturers to circumvent labour rights and minimum wage legislation (Chan, 2013; Tager, 2016).

Further, *The True Cost* contends that the contemporary fashion industry is a globally destructive entity in which indifferent companies and unthinking consumers degrade the environment and exploit Third-World laborers in pursuing inexpensive apparel and high fashion...



If that sounds excessive, it may help to understand that Morgan assumes that prior to watching *The True Cost*, his viewers have already bought into the narrative that the entire world is going to hell. Various interviewees offhandedly refer to the planet as “dying,” “declining,” or having “overstepped [its] limits.” No one ever actually identifies what these calamitous global breakdowns consist of (global warming isn’t even mentioned, though “greenhouse gases” get one reference), but they are all quite certain they exist (Faherty, 2015, p. 240).

The offshore outsourcing tactics employed by the fashion industry in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) enable fashion brands to disregard associated ecological impacts (Bick et al., 2018). Each pair of manufactured denim jeans emits 33.4 kg of CO<sub>2</sub>, uses 3781 liters of water, and requires 12 square meters of land for production. Consumer consumption patterns and behaviors influence environmental performance and impact (Asmi et al., 2022).

In addition to labour exploitation, marginalised communities face considerable environmental injustices within the fashion supply chain, with water shortage emerging as a critical issue. Climate change has reduced the availability of potable water, while other factors have increased the demand for these already limited supplies. This issue is particularly acute in developing nations, where marginalised populations encounter restricted access to clean, safe water and inadequate infrastructure to adapt to variable water conditions (Padder & Bashir, 2023). The fashion sector intensifies this issue, as the cultivation of raw materials such as cotton significantly strains water supplies. Therefore, cotton is among the most extensively utilized fabrics in the fashion sector. It is among the most water-intensive crops to cultivate. The quantity of water needed fluctuates according to various factors, including soil type, climate, and geographic location. Cotton cultivation in arid regions exerts significant pressure on freshwater resources, as irrigation is essential for crop maintenance (Jans et al., 2021).

As a result, agriculturists depend on insecticides to protect cotton crops from pests and insects that could significantly reduce yields. The substantial pesticide-related expenses impose financial pressure on farmers, who frequently invest more in these chemicals than they gain from cotton yields (Haq et al., 2008). In numerous underdeveloped nations, farmers frequently use pesticides over the allowed levels to safeguard their crops, diminishing profitability (Haq et al., 2008; Bhusnar et al., 2021). Thus, the health ramifications of pesticide exposure are a significant concern. Acute exposure may lead to dermal irritations, respiratory issues, and toxicity. Furthermore, extended exposure has been linked to more severe problems, such as chronic respiratory illnesses and possible carcinogenic effects (Bhusnar et al., 2021).

The documentaries *China Blue* (2005) and *The True Cost* (2015) offer a devastating critique of the global fashion business. They reveal the systemic injustices, worker exploitation, and environmental damage that underlie contemporary international trade. These films illustrate how the global economic system perpetuates a cycle of wealth accumulation in the Global North at the expense of workers and ecosystems in the Global South. In the end, *China Blue* and *The True Cost* critically critique international trade under late-stage capitalism, showing how global economic systems and neoliberal policies continue to support environmental degradation and oppressive labor practices. These movies emphasize how urgently structural change is required through ethical consumption, corporate responsibility, sustainable fashion, and improved labor rights. In the absence of such measures, the fast fashion sector will persist as a vehicle for economic and environmental injustice, exacerbating worldwide disparities rather than promoting just growth.

## Conclusion

Global trade, chiefly via the integration of world markets, presents extensive potential while engendering complex challenges. Global Trade has consequences that affect vulnerable populations and negatively influence individuals, society, and the environment. This reduces production expenses, lowers commodity prices, and fosters international collaboration and cultural exchange. Nevertheless, trade can exacerbate economic disparities, especially for developing countries with constrained negotiating leverage and dependence on a restricted array of exports, rendering them susceptible to economic downturns and cycles of poverty. With their increased demand

and production, international trade and fast fashion exploit the population of developing nations. *The True Cost* and *China Blue* are documentaries that uncover the detrimental aspects of global trade, particularly in the fast fashion industry. Numerous products, such as furniture and clothing, are manufactured in developing countries to minimise production expenses, leading to perilous working conditions and inadequate compensation. Further, there are pertinent ethical questions on the responsibilities of individuals, society, states, businesses, and nations to oversee and regulate other entities within supply chains and fast fashion industries across the globe.

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<sup>i</sup> *China Blue*, directed by Micha X. Peled (Teddy Bear Films, 2005)

<sup>ii</sup> *The True Cost*, directed by Andrew Morgan (Untold Creative LLC, 2015).

<sup>iii</sup> The theory of comparative advantage posits that individuals, organizations, or nations should specialize in producing commodities or services with a lower opportunity cost, facilitating mutually advantageous trade. Trade remains advantageous even when one party possesses absolute efficiency in all domains, provided each entity concentrates on its relative strengths (Ricardo, 1817).

<sup>iv</sup> A sweatshop is a workplace commonly seen in sectors such as garment manufacturing, where employees endure substandard working conditions, extended hours, inadequate wages, and frequently hazardous situations. These factories routinely infringe upon labor rights and exploit employees, especially in developing nations.