

How can the impact of fast fashion brands in Manchester be averted?

Manchester was once dubbed the 19th-century ‘Cottonopolis’ of the United Kingdom due to its central importance to the UK cotton industry.¹ With changes to the industry, Manchester still remains integral to fashion, now with what is dubbed ‘fast fashion’. The abundance of brands that home themselves in Manchester is central to this assertion with Boohoo being the exemplar of this throughout. Resultingly, we will be discussing how fast fashion impacts the city through moral, ecological, and political viewpoints. Ideas surrounding awareness about the fast fashion industry alongside waste, and personal and public responsibility will be explored closely.

Waste in the fashion industry is a huge and imposing problem on the Earth’s resources and its ecological system. It has been estimated that the industry alone uses around 79 billion cubic metres of fresh water, not including the washing of garments for personal use.² As a result of this an estimated 700,000 synthetic fibres are shed in a single domestic wash-cycle with dubious and insidious chemicals seeping into our oceans, plant and marine-life, and our eco-system.³ In a bid to combat the disposability of the fast fashion industry, and the harm it does to our planet, those with no basis in fashion (other than their own sense of moral duty) have sought a different way to involve fashion in sustainability and reduce our impact upon the earth. Manchester-grown company Stitched Up, based in Chorlton, is an example of the way in which fashion can, and should, be responsible in its practices offering reusing, recycling, and reducing excess fashion waste.⁴ Stitched Up is a prime example of fashion-based environmental damage and the responsibility to avert and do damage-control placed solely in the hands of the public, rather than corporations. Therefore, rather than allowing the responsibility of protecting and conserving the environment falling into the hands of the public, who are under no obligations to do so, the vast majority of action should be taken by those who are actively harming the environment – the corporations themselves, with supporting action from the Government. This, however, may not create the most radical change that is necessarily needed due to individuality in business.

¹ J. Lowe, ‘A Manchester Warehouse’, *Household Word* 9 (1854), pp. 268 – 72 (p. 269).

² The Environmental Audit Committee, ‘The Fashion Industry Must Pay to Clean up its Waste’, 2019 <https://houseofcommons.shorthandstories.com/sustainabilityinthefashionindustry/index.html> [accessed on 17/04/2019]

³ The Environmental Audit Committee, ‘The Fashion Industry’.

⁴ Stitched Up, ‘What is Stitched Up?’, Unknown, <http://stitchedup.coop/about/> [accessed on 19/04/2019]

The waste produced by the Fast Fashion industry is an unfortunate by-product, yet it almost appears waste is its whole proponent. With fast fashion's ethos defined as, according to Boohoo, making fashion 'accessible' with '100 new products dropping on the daily', making fast fashion sustainable requires a whole overhaul of their central belief.⁵ The accessibility of the industry is certainly commendable, yet constantly putting out new garments while offering free next-day delivery creates more problems than accessibility fixes. The aforementioned support from the Government in tackling the industry has come in the form of a Parliamentary inquiry into the waste generated (and perpetuated) by the fast fashion industry. Offering pamphlets on how the details of fast fashion and enquiring into its core are, again, a real shift towards understanding and undoing the industry's harmful components. However, in order to execute a move away from wear-once culture, proposing alternative sources for your clothing rather than throwing stats or irrelevant information at a public mostly uninformed would do well to reinforce that protecting the environment need not come at the (supposed) cost of not buying new clothes as readily. However, the lack of follow-up to the inquiry's suggestions is not particularly surprising given the leadership of Environment Secretary Michael Gove whom once proposed removing climate change from the Geography national curriculum.⁶ Resultingly, it then seems entirely appropriate for personal responsibility for the environment to seem the way in which the surge for eco-consciousness will play out.

Capitalising on youthful insecurity and a limited budget is Manchester-based brand Boohoo who offers unlimited and unparalleled amounts of discount or promotion codes to students. Caveats they offer are high percentage discounts if students promote the company to friends and family or discounts landing on days when student loans are released. Every year Capital Manchester (with around 500,000 listeners in a single week) in collaboration with Manchester Business Improvement District, the Arndale Centre, or the Trafford Centre offers a 'Student Lock-In' whereby discounts for over 150 designer, high street or independent stores, are offered.⁷ Enticements such as this are highly appealing to students who operate on

⁵ Boohoo, 'Who are Boohoo?', Unknown, <https://www.boohoo.com/page/about-us.html> [accessed on 19/04/2019]

⁶ Patrick Wintour, 'Michael Gove abandons plans to drop climate change from curriculum', 05 July 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/jul/05/michael-gove-climate-change-geography-curriculum> [accessed on 22/04/2019]

⁷ Global, 'The Audience', Unknown, <https://www.global.com/radio/capital-fm/audience/> [accessed on 17/04/2019]

a limited budget. In order to combat the disposable arena of the fashion industry, increasing awareness amongst the student population is a crucial next step.

The University of Manchester is already making steps towards this in the form of their online website with an article written by senior lecturer Dr Pasty Perry who describes the inhospitable conditions of fast fashion and the impact on our eco-system.⁸ The article itself was originally found on *The Conversation*, an independent website for academics with links to a whole host of Russell Group universities. Resultingly, there are two major audiences for this message. The University of Manchester totals around 40,140 students and republishing onto the University's website increases the audience base by a large amount while also encouraging awareness amongst the intended audience of fast fashion.⁹ However, the website (amongst my peers) is not widely used – only used in emergencies for researching a certain date throughout the semester. Consequently, while there is an obvious effort made by the University, it, like many other efforts made in combating the disposable nature of the fast fashion industry, has not gone far enough. Rather than recycling articles, the University could rather dedicate a universal lecture or seminar-like talk where the facts of fast fashion are made abundantly clear. They could make this subject a core part of their Sustainability Challenge for first-year undergraduates culminating in active participation rather than passive.

The idea of waste from the fast fashion industry – industrial, by-products of their garments in the form of unrecyclable plastics (or personal landfill) and the entire nature of their clothes being throwaway garments ready for the next cycle of fashion, would mean that the fashion industry, in order to fulfil their new-found dream of sustainability in the wake of the inquiry into the industry, demands an overhaul of ethos. With brands now detailing ways in which they are taking responsibility for the environmental impact of their clothes, to effectively implement said ideas of sustainability, they would need to formulate a new eco-conscious central idea for their brand, instead of relying on the (rather lazy) comfort of a brand offering more clothes than can be worn in three lifetimes, for the sake of inhibiting any further

⁸ Pasty Perry, 'Read this before you go sales shopping: the environmental costs of fast fashion', 27 December 2017, <https://theconversation.com/read-this-before-you-go-sales-shopping-the-environmental-costs-of-fast-fashion-88373> [accessed on 19/04/2019]

⁹ Division of Communication and Marketing, 'Facts and Figures 2019', 2019, <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/facts-figures/> [accessed on 17/04/2019]

irreversible damage, rather than monetary gain.¹⁰ These brands need to become more transparent if they want to ever achieve sustainability, and not merely superficially. However, this is one of the most difficult of plans to implement. In a society where a company based entirely around expendable items can double their profits in 2018, in spite of the surge in popularity and interest around sustainability and eco-consciousness, why would this company choose to invest in clothing that cost more money to make and therefore increase their prices?¹¹ Moral ideals provide no incentive when a company can boast a revenue of £580m in a culture that is in its beginnings of a more eco-aware lifestyle.¹²

In conclusion, the concentration of fast fashion brands within the city of Manchester has not been addressed adequately. Although inquiries, articles in and on newspapers, websites, and the television has increased the spread of awareness to the dangers of fast fashion, it is all a form of passive participation in what we should see as a moral duty. Corporations are the worst culprits in passive activism, letting the responsibility fall at the feet of the proletariat (who have readily picked it up) rather than engage in change that will create active results. In order to combat the dangerous by-products of a system inherent in disposability, the whole ideology would need to change. While this is perhaps a revolutionary (or idealistic) proposition, it is imperative. Making it so you cannot ignore the industry is a crucial step: Government-led initiatives would be crucial to this, yet it is expressly clear that personal responses would be the most significant in creating change that can be multiplied.

¹⁰ Boohoo, 'Environmental and social responsibility', Unknown, <http://www.boohooplc.com/boohoo-social-responsibility/supply-chain-operations> [accessed on 20/04/2019]

¹¹ Jonathon Eley and Naomi Rovnick, 'Fast-fashion chain Boohoo almost doubles sales in 2018', 25 April 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/f6b72d9c-4850-11e8-8ee8-cae73aab7ccb> [accessed on 22/04/2019]

¹² Eley, Rovnick, 'Fast-fashion chain'.