

The Facts and the Fictions of the Fast Fashion Industry



Fast fashion is a relatively new factor in the climate crisis. Before the 20th Century, most British people had a few outfits that were tailor-made for the rich, or hand-sewn for the poor. The material was expensive and was often reused to make many different garments across one person's lifetime. As people became richer after the Second World War, clothing shops and catalogs appeared where you could buy items that were already made to wear and available in different sizes, and the style of the clothes available changed along with the seasons. Not only was it convenient, it was also remarkably inexpensive. Over the last seventy years, mass production has allowed clothes shopping to become more and more convenient, as items have continued to decrease in value and increase in abundance. Clothes have also become more disposable, and are no longer made to last. You can now walk into a high street clothing chain and buy ten or fifteen items for less than the price of one dress in the 1950s. In the 1990s, high streets filled up with bright, colourful fast fashion shops like Forever 21 and Topshop. They played loud pop music and offered cheap, on-trend polyester clothing that an average teenage girl could afford to buy for herself. The Carbon footprint of a simple T-shirt purchased from one of these shops (Topshop, Zara, H&M, etc), was enormous in contrast to the price tag, and the

clothes were replaced so quickly that people were pressured to shop continuously to be able to keep up with the current fashions. Traditionally, there were four fashion seasons a year. Since the opening of Zara, there have been twenty, owing to their [design to retail time frame of about five weeks](#).

It has become [culturally unacceptable to wear the same outfit on more than one occasion](#). Cheap tops and dresses bought from the high street sale are [often only worn once or twice](#) before they are recycled or shipped to landfill sites. A [2019 Barnardos survey](#) established that British people will spend up to 2.7 Billion pounds in an average summer on clothes that are only worn once. As a nation, we buy more clothes than every other country in Europe, simply because prices are so low, and we [value the price](#) of an item more than any other factor, including durability, quality, and sustainability.

The available information about fashion sustainability is deliberately confused by brands. Online statistics claim that [the industry sells between 80 and 150 billion items](#) yearly, and that [nearly three-fifths](#) of what is produced end up in incinerators or landfills within 5 years. Despite the publication of these facts on the United Nations website, there is no actual scientific research to back up these numbers. The fashion industry is so enormous it is pretty much impossible to assess how much damage it is doing to the planet. Dr. Linda Greer (a senior global fellow of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs) asks [“Where are the technical papers? Where are the peer-reviewed journals? Where is the serious work?”](#) She points out that the lack of solid information makes it confusing for consumers to understand the dangers of fast fashion, and makes it impossible to hold clothing brands to account. The agreed facts, are that the industry is the [second biggest global pollutant](#), releasing more CO2 than aviation and shipping combined, and that [4% of global waste comes from fashion](#). The rate at which we are buying and throwing away clothes is completely unsustainable, and that brands claiming to be taking steps to protect the Earth are causing mass harm to people and planet behind the scenes.

Environmental Issues

So how is mass clothing production so damaging in terms of the climate crisis? How can it release more emissions than the aviation industry, which releases emissions directly into the atmosphere twenty-four hours per day, every day of the year? Making the materials requires a constant supply of the Earth's natural resources, and synthetics like polyester (which is typically

used to make the very cheapest clothing) require chemical processes as part of their formation. The [production of polyester alone could release up to 706 million tonnes of greenhouse gases a year](#). Natural materials are not much better because of their excessive need for water during agriculture. This harm is, for those working in the industry, a carefully balanced loss, which allows those at the top to make huge profits (it's thought that the fashion industry generates about [\\$620 billion every year](#)), by producing the clothes for mere pennies while offsetting the true cost onto the planet, and flogging the clothes for cheap, still making a decent profit for every item sold.

The production and sale of clothes touches plant and animal agriculture; fossil fuels, shipping, and aviation to transport goods; as well as forestry, mining, construction and manufacture. Every aspect of the production and sale of clothing is dangerous and harmful for the planet, and the rate of production is steadily increasing each year. Growing cotton (the plant agriculture aspect of production) requires gallons of water for each item of clothing. [One T-shirt could rely upon 7,000 litres of water to grow the material it's made from](#). The 25 million cotton farmers across 80 countries often use petrol-powered heavy machinery to produce cotton, and deploy [6% of the world's toxic pesticides to protect their crops](#), poisoning animals, destroying the fertile soil and polluting rivers. The process of dyeing the fabric is just as toxic, and often the [dye leaks into freshwater sources like lakes and rivers](#), releasing tiny fibres or other chemicals that poison wildlife. It requires a [huge amount of heat](#) to dye cotton, and the fabric has to be washed and dried before it can be shipped off to production. The material is then moved by ship, from factory to retail, packaged in single-use plastic, sold, and worn a few times before being shipped again to landfill or second-hand clothing markets. The majority of polluting processes happen in factories in the developing world, out of view of British shoppers who are encouraged by brands not to think much about where their clothing comes from.

Around [60% of the clothing we buy is synthetic](#) (polyester, nylon or acrylic) or some other kind of synthetic fibre that requires petroleum as part of its production process. These materials are cheap and versatile, so can be used to make anything from athletic gear to winter coats. The worst culprit by far is polyester - around [50 million tonnes of it were produced in 201](#). The real damage to our natural environment takes place long after the factory stage however, every time a piece of synthetic fabric is washed, tiny fibres break away from the garment and are washed into rivers, eventually reaching open water.

These fibres contribute to ocean plastic pollution in a subtle but pervasive way. The fabrics they make — along with synthetic-natural blends — leach into the environment just by being washed. Estimates vary, but it's possible that a single load of laundry could release hundreds of thousands of fibers from our clothes into the water supply. If these tiny fibres are smaller than 5 millimeters in length, they evade capture by water treatment plants and end up [contributing to ocean pollution](#) as microplastic debris. It is thought that thirty-five percent of the microplastic waste in the ocean can be linked to the fashion industry, we are dumping [190,000 tons per year](#) in tiny fibres as a result of the laundry process. These materials take thousands of years to break down, and will never be retrieved from the ocean. Worse, they are poisonous for wildlife, and [soak up other toxins](#) before they are swallowed by marine creatures. A [study published in 2018 established that around 73% of fish in the North Atlantic open ocean have microplastic in their stomachs](#). Fibres have even been found in crustaceans at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, the deepest point in any ocean. Humans have touched every inch of the seafloor with the remnants of our obsession with fashion, and now we are re-ingesting the carcinogenic fibres through tainted seafood. The WWF suggests we eat a [credit card's worth of microplastics](#) every year, and these “forever chemicals” will remain inside our bodies until we die. Even after we are buried, they will remain in the ground for thousands of years inside our coffins.

The “consumer use” of clothing contributes [to 39% of its carbon footprint](#), this includes washing and drying the clothes, as well as disposing of them when they become unwanted or fall apart. Enough textiles go into landfill [to fill the Sydney Harbor Bridge annually](#), yet the ugly consequences of this mass dumping are largely invisible to us in Britain. Part of this wastage is the [clothes that are never sold in the first place \(about 20% of what is produced\)](#), with what is leftover being buried, shredded, or sold. H&M has made many sustainability commitments in the last decade, but was [accused of burning tons of unsold clothes in 2017](#). This practice occurs in all branches of the fashion industry; expensive brands like [Louis Vuitton](#) would prefer to incinerate excess stock than degrade their brand by discounting the clothes heavily, regardless of the toxic chemicals that are released into the Earth's atmosphere as part of the practice.

Dangerous Factories and Unethical Labour Practices

The fast fashion industry can easily evade responsibility for unethical labour practices through the use of offshoring and third-party contracts. By relying on middleman factories in the developing world to provide extremely cheap labour, they can sell their clothes in Britain at

absurdly low prices They can also distance themselves from the practices employed by their factories, thus allowing them to identify as an ethical brand even if their clothes are sewn by people who are being paid less than living wages. This is the case for 98% of garment workers across the planet. In 2013, H&M announced that it would pay its 850,000 employees a “Fair living wage” by 2018. Seen as a serious marker of progress for the fashion industry, the pledge was well received by activists, who were later disappointed when the company failed to live up to its promises in any meaningful way, blaming their third-party labour suppliers: “We have always been clear on what our goal is; to set the foundation and mechanisms needed for fair living wages to be paid by suppliers,” and yet [50% of their employees have seen no pay increase over the last 8 years.](#)

According to [Oxfam](#), “It takes just over four days for a CEO from the top five companies in the garment sector to earn what an ordinary Bangladeshi woman garment worker earns in her whole lifetime.” If a clothing brand wanted to pay their employees a living wage, they easily could without having to raise the price of the clothing, simply by reducing the pay of their top earners. In the year 2016, [H&M made £2 Billion. It would only have taken 1.9% of this profit to pay their Cambodian workers fairly for their hours of labour \(an extra \\$78 a month\).](#)

Aside from being poorly paid, working in the fast fashion industry can often be dangerous. Sometimes, sewing machine operators work [over 100 hours a week](#), in sweltering hot and dirty conditions. [85% of factory employees are women](#), preferred by clothing companies because they are seen as less likely to unionize in demand of better pay and conditions. The Human rights of these women are unprotected, and they describe being sexually harassed or exploited at work. Some are fired for becoming pregnant. There are also accusations of child labour across the fast fashion industry. Developing countries are more tolerant of “sweatshop” factories as paid work is much harder to come by, and yet there have been many serious incidents. The most famous: the [collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in 2013, in which over 1,129 labourers were killed](#), made headlines around the world. Whilst making clothes for Primark shops in the UK, employees complained to their managers about cracks in the factories' infrastructure to no avail. This demonstrated the human cost of fast fashion to consumers around the world, but resulted in little meaningful change. The pandemic revealed that even in Britain, where [garment workers make clothes for £3.50 an hour for online fast-fashion sites](#), safety is not a priority. In March 2020, labourers were forced to work in conditions that helped spread the coronavirus through factories. The rise of the internet over the last twenty years has

dramatically worsened the situation. Slowly replacing what are known as “brick and mortar” shops, online retail has taken over, and combined with the outreach of Instagram culture, it is spiraling dangerously out of control.

The Rise of Ultrafast Fashion

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to what many are referring to as the “demise of the high street” in the UK, with many shops having to close for prolonged periods in 2020 and 2021. The lack of demand for established brands has led to a reduction in sales and profits, as well as some closures. Arcadia, the British retail empire owned by Sir Phillip Green, which only ten years ago was untouchable, [closed its shops recently](#). Topshop, one of the Arcadia brands, has always been one of the pinnacle fast-fashion brands in the UK, but it could never compete with the cheap Instagram-led sites that are constantly spawning. Online retailers are thriving; [ASOS increased its revenue by 19.39% in 2020](#), and took over the Topshop brand, which has simply moved into its hugely popular website.

ASOS’s biggest rival, BooHoo, has acquired the rest of Arcadia’s brands, now owning Burton, Dorothy Perkins, Wallis, Oasis, Debenhams, Warehouse, Coast, and online giants MissPap and PrettyLittleThing. Their profits also shot up in 2020, and their success is considered to be the main contributor to the demise of Forever21. Suffering at the hands of online shopping, the high street staple of the 2000s became outdated, neglecting to invest in e-commerce and failing to embrace the body positivity movement, falling behind the times on issues like race inclusivity and “special size” clothing. Online retailers like PrettyLittleThing make a conscious effort to feature models on their websites with different body types, remaining in step with ethical values, while still exploiting workers and showing utter contempt for the planet behind the scenes.

So-called “ultra-fast fashion,” is capable of record boardroom to wardrobe time. A [recent report by Coresight Research](#) found that Missguided releases about 1000 new products every month. The US brand Fashion Nova tops even that, with [600-900 new styles](#) every single week, more clothes than could ever fit into a physical store. Much of this is enabled by social media; influencers are paid to promote new clothes constantly, generating new fashions every few days, and pushing their young fans to stay on-trend. The constant demand for online content works symbiotically with the endless production of new clothing fads. Previously, an outfit could

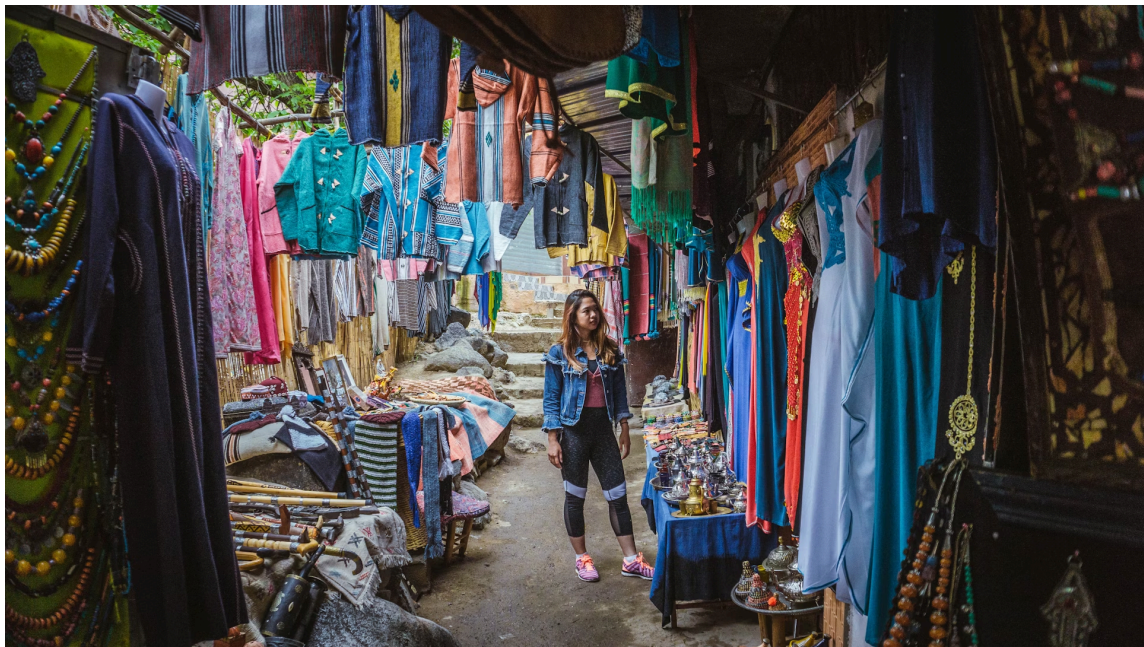
be worn a few times on separate occasions, but the constant documentation of our lives leaves nowhere to hide repeat outfits, and the pressure to look perfect at all times is never eased.

One online retailer that has mastered the influencer/brand sales relationship is the US company Fashion Nova, which uses a large network of online and mainstream celebrities as partners. They are paid to post themselves wearing mass-produced affordable dupes for designer items, and the brand is seen as an affordable way to dress like you have money. The founder, Mr Saghian, brags that [Fashion Nova's clothes can be made in two weeks](#), the crucial difference to other brands being that 80% are sewn in the Los Angeles Garment district by American workers. However, the US labour department and an [investigation by the New York Times](#), have discovered that the brand employs many of the same techniques as other fast fashion brands, bringing illegal low pay and dangerous conditions to the US market. To compete with brands that manufacture abroad, they pay as little as \$2.77 an hour, mostly to undocumented immigrants that have no power to unionise or demand fair pay. These revelations made little impact on the brand's sales when they were published in the national press, and most celebrities chose not to waive their endorsement.

In the UK, the equivalents to Fashion Nova are PrettyLittleThing and Missguided, the latter being famous for the [£1 bikini that sold out in 2019](#). Also heavily affiliated with influencer culture and marketed to young girls, PLT offers a £8.99 monthly subscription fee, entitling you to unlimited free next-day delivery and returns. It's custom is growing rapidly every year, having [increased sales from £23 million to £510 million between 2016 and 2019](#). Part of the appeal is how easy it is to bulk-buy clothing, and return it if it turns out to be poorly designed or ill-fitting. Often shoppers will order a mass of clothes and only keep one or two items, a wasteful act, which contributes to unnecessary emissions as clothes are pointlessly delivered and returned to warehouses. More than half of the clothes bought from PLT are returned, it is likely that one garment is delivered to several different addresses across the country before it is worn once or twice, and then discarded. Despite the constant barrage of discount codes and online sales, the BooHoo group (which owns PLT) recently announced a [£150 million bonus for its executives](#), whilst paying it's UK factory workers as little as [£3.50 an hour](#).

Consumer changes and sustainability in fashion

Considering projected population rises, it is likely that we will be buying 63% more clothing (an increase of 40 million tonnes a year) by 203. So how can we make the clothing industry more sustainable? what can both consumers, and brands do to reduce the impact of the industry on climate change? How can we make sure the brand's sustainability pledges are genuine and enforced to prevent "greenwashing?" As an example of Greenwashing: Inditex, the company that owns Zara, promised in 2019 that all of its clothing would be made from sustainable or recycled materials by 2025. This pledge has been challenged by activists, who question why, if Zara wanted to reduce its Carbon Footprint, it would not simply cut down production and make fewer clothes. To reduce the emissions related to the production, companies need to employ upstream operations, which include switching to renewable energy sources and sustainable materials, as well as decarbonising packaging, transport, and retail operations. It's estimated this could generate 61% of the necessary reductions. Circular solutions are needed to reduce waste. For example, some progress has been made with the increase in popularity of second-hand clothing sites like Depop and Vinted, which promote Vintage/retro finds.



Recycling clothes gives the illusion of sustainability, however sending clothes to second-hand markets is no valuable solution either. It simply transfers the problem of surplus to the developing world, where the clothes pile up in market streets, clogging drains and creating a

health and disease hazard, with the dye running into lakes and rivers, poisoning the water. The clothes create tangled lines that are dragged into the sea, putting fishermen in danger. Less than half of recycled clothing is resold, and mostly remains in markets for several weeks before being transferred to landfill sites anyway. By recycling our clothes, we feel like we are making an ethical choice, but what we are really doing is sending them on one more international shipping journey to clog up and pollute waste disposal sites in the global south. If we saw 30-foot-high piles of unwanted clothes scattered across cities, towns, and beaches in the UK, this might encourage us to shop less, but for us, it remains out of sight and out of mind. It's much better to resell unwanted clothing in the UK, swap old clothes with friends, mend, or reuse the material. Before buying, check the label of clothing to find out what materials it is made from, looking for something biodegradable. Organic or recycled cotton, hemp, linen, or bamboo are great options alongside sustainable synthetics like lyocell, modal, pinatex, or ecoVero. The truth is, it's hard to undercut the fast-fashion industry without spending a little more time and money on your fashion choices. However, these sacrifices are more than worth it when you consider the damage that has already been done by the industry, and how little time we have left to save our precious planet from the climate crisis.