



BEHIND THE LABEL – A LOOK AT SUSTAINABILITY IN FASHION

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Fast fashion is cheap, low quality and generally unsustainable in the long run, in terms of environmental impacts, labour practices and ethical concerns for consumption.

Sustainable fashion is a system that prioritises the triple bottom line in the production and consumption of fashion.

There are many opportunities to improve the textile industry's value chain, to increase the fashion industry's ability to produce good quality items at reasonable prices without destroying the environment in the process.



The fashion industry, which is a subsection of the larger textile industry, has evolved over the last 20 years, as globalisation and consumerism have led to the development and proliferation of fast fashion. Fast fashion is defined as “low-cost clothing collections that mimic current luxury fashion trends”. It marries runway designs with affordability and easy access, from department stores such as

H&M, to the developing online marketplace spearheaded by brands such as Shein. Fast fashion, however, is a system of fashion characterised by unfettered product creation, distribution and disposal of products.

The nature of fast fashion — which is endlessly changing and trend-chasing — is cheap, low quality and generally unsustainable in the long run, in terms of environmental impacts, labour practices and ethical concerns for consumption.

THE UNSUSTAINABLE SIDE OF FASHION

Environmental impact

On the environmental front, the impacts of fast fashion — and the broader textile industry — are mainly related to its high resource cost as well as its high level of waste.

More specifically, these impacts include the following:

Carbon Emissions

The textile industry produces between 2-8% of all global CO₂ transmissions annually.

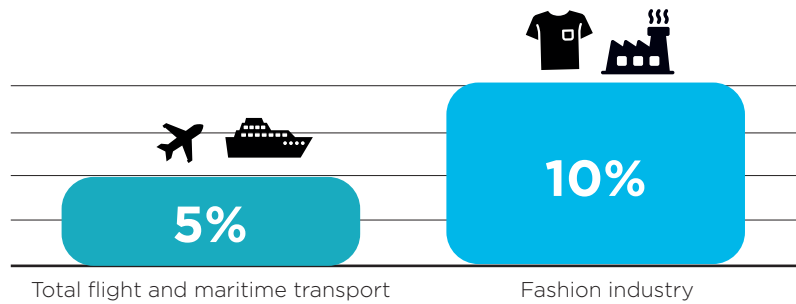
In 2016, the industry released 4 billion tonnes of CO₂ or 8.1% of all global CO₂ emissions.¹ These figures only account for production, and do not include transportation from retail outlets and laundering.

The high carbon footprint of the fast fashion industry is related to its high energy use, as well as the source of the energy used. China, for example, utilises coal-based energy, and as such, would have a higher footprint than a country that makes use of alternative sources of energy for its textiles.

Water Use

The textile industry is the second largest consumer of water in terms of industry, consuming roughly 1.5 trillion litres of water per year. The estimated rate of conversion is about 200 tonnes of water consumed for every tonne of textile produced. Most of this water consumption is associated with cotton cultivation, dyeing, printing and finishing.

CO₂ CONSUMPTION IN COMPARISON



Textile manufacturing uses roughly 44 trillion litres of water annually for the purpose of irrigation.

Synthetic materials

The demand for materials brought on by fast fashion has led to the manufacturing of synthetic materials, such as polyester, which is produced from petrochemicals. According to one research study, "... the production of these synthetic fibres accounts for 1.35% of global oil consumption, a figure which exceeds the oil consumption of Spain".²

Of the 60% of global fibre produced in 2017 for the textile industry, polyester accounted for 51% or roughly 54 million tonnes of all textile production, driven by the fast fashion industry.

There is evidence that materials such as polyester contribute to oceanic microplastic pollution.

Waste

The fashion industry produces 92 million tonnes of waste per year, with the majority ending up in landfills or being burnt. It is worthwhile to note that the fashion industry's waste is split into two categories: pre-consumer and post-consumer textile waste.

- Roughly 15% of material used in garment production is wasted during the production phase.
- H&M was reported to hold \$4.3 billion worth of unsold inventory in warehouses.³

Human Cost

Fast fashion has high turnover rates for styles and supply to meet its prodigious demand. However, this is facilitated by unsavoury conditions in the supply chain. The exploitation related to fast fashion is documented, with well-known distributors all employing low-cost labour, primarily located in developing countries such as Bangladesh, Istanbul and China. These conditions run counter to several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

(Earth.Org, 2022)

92 MILLION

tonnes of clothes-related waste we discard **every year**

=



a garbage truck full of clothes either incinerated or sent to the landfill **every second**

=



enough to fill one and a half Empire State Buildings **every day**

¹https://quantis-intl.com/measuring-fashion-report (2018)

²https://changingmarkets.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Synthetics-Anonymous-2-online-reports-layout.pdf

³https://hmggroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2145888_en.pdf



Greenwashing

Fast fashion brands have adopted strategies to replace the use of virgin polyester with recycled polyester, which is produced using post-consumer plastic waste. This strategy, while more eco-friendly than using virgin polyester, is inconsequential if some fast fashion brands’ business practices remain the same.

High supply and distribution of recycled polyesters still leave waste levels at their current levels, with similar microplastic output into

the environment. This can be seen as a form of greenwashing, which is a practice that exaggerates the environmental safety of a product by omitting information and using misleading branding. Another form of greenwashing is through return programmes, where consumers can return unused clothing for a coupon. This already produced clothing is then dumped into landfills and the coupon is used to purchase more clothing, exacerbating the consumption issues for which the industry is known.⁴

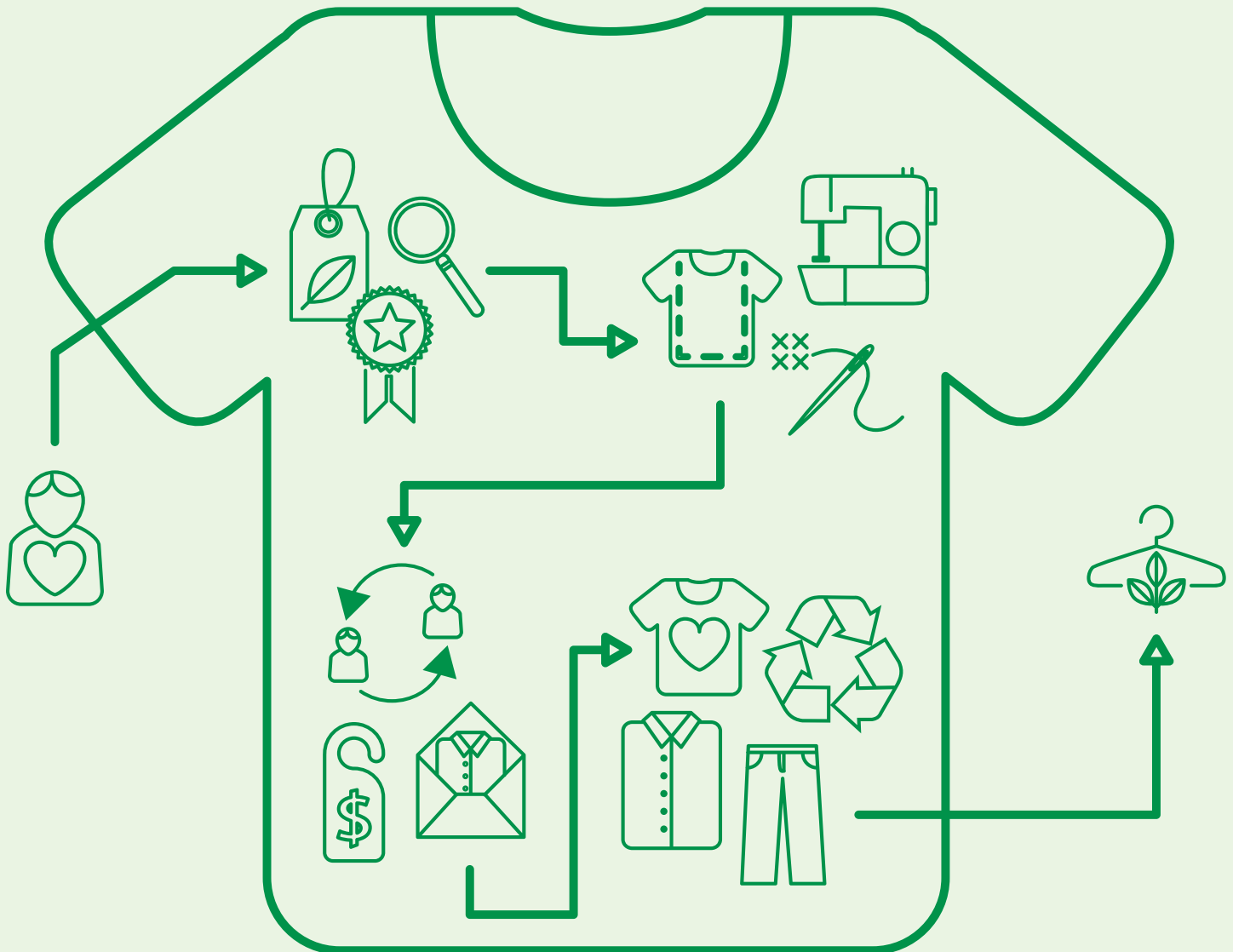
HOW CAN FASHION BE MORE SUSTAINABLE?

Sustainable fashion is a system that prioritises the triple bottom line in the production and consumption of fashion. It is in some ways an extension of the slow fashion movement, which focuses on balance over excess, seasonless designs and a slower production model that prioritises quality over quantity.

FAST FASHION PURCHASING HABITS AROUND THE WORLD



⁴<https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/54429/ultrafast-fashion-giant-shein-takes-greenwashing-to-new-low-charitywash/>



On a producer level, fashion brands must adjust their supply chains to reduce use of unsustainable materials such as polyester, and utilise renewable materials that may also be biodegradable. At the other end of the chain, consumers can drive sustainability through their purchasing habits:

1. **SHOPPING SECOND-HAND FIRST**
2. **BUYING FEWER CLOTHES AT HIGHER QUALITY LEVELS**
3. **SHOPPING LOCALLY**
4. **CHOOSING SUSTAINABLE BRANDS**
5. **UPCYCLING CLOTHING**

Another way to integrate sustainability into fashion is through circularity. Circularity is an application of the circular economy concept in the context of the textile industry. According to UNEP, “Circularity’s driving objective is preserving the value of materials as they are moved and retained within the textile food chain, reducing the use of natural resources and environmental impacts from the activities of the textile industry.”⁵

⁵[https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/UNEP_Sustainability and Circularity in the Textile Value Chain - A Global Roadmap_0.pdf](https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/UNEP_Sustainability%20and%20Circularity%20in%20the%20Textile%20Value%20Chain%20-%20A%20Global%20Roadmap_0.pdf)

ON THE GREEN AGENDA

Locally, we can see efforts made to implement concepts of circularity in the example of recycling carnival costumes. 'Carnicycle' is a Trinidad-based group whose goal is to collect, clean and recycle the materials used in carnival costumes so they can be reused for future events or repurposed for craft projects. The driving goal behind this initiative is to extend the lifecycle of the costume materials and to reduce the need for virgin costume production, thereby reducing waste.

Waste reduction is also the driving force behind the company FabBrick, which recycles textile waste in Europe into bricks made from the materials. The used textiles are shredded, mixed with an eco-friendly glue, compressed by machine and then moulded into bricks, which are used for varying purposes, mainly based around decorative building. The company's founder Clarisse Merlet developed the moulding process and the machine used for it to minimise energy use and to keep the process as minimally pollutant as possible. The founder also hopes to expand the scope of the company to develop bricks that can be used in the construction process, an innovation that can transform the waste of the textile industry into a supplement to other industries.⁶

TAILORING A BETTER INDUSTRY

There are many opportunities to improve the textile industry's value chain, to increase the fashion industry's ability to produce good quality items at reasonable prices without destroying the environment in the process. While there is much work to be done, changing standards, evolving policies and regulations, and growing consumer awareness are positive signals for the future sustainability of the industry. ■



⁶<https://www.fab-brick.com/fabbrick-english>