

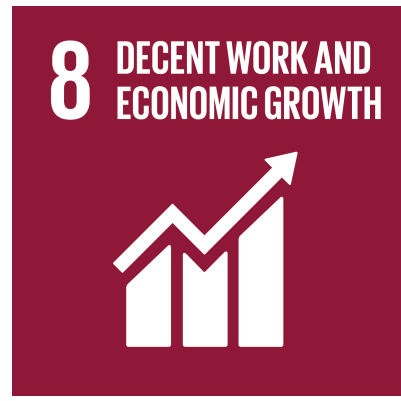


Cleaner Clothes

Improving Sustainability and Tackling Human Rights Concerns in the Fast Fashion Industry

Dr Laura Steele, Queen's Management School

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Fast fashion is big business, but with staggering environmental and social costs attached that are rarely reflected on the price tag. How can the industry balance predicted growth against deepening concerns regarding sustainability and human rights?

According to the British Fashion Council, the fashion industry directly contributed over £32 billion to UK GDP in 2017, up 5.4% from the previous year. Indeed, the sector outperformed the rest of the economy by some 1.6% over the same period. It is a significant employer, supporting around 890,000 jobs ranging from design and manufacturing to retail sales. From a consumer perspective, there has never been greater choice. The democratising effects of so-called "fast fashion" – rapidly produced, inexpensive, mass market garments – means that following design trends is no longer the preserve of a wealthy few. As a result, research by McKinsey & Company found that the average consumer bought 60% more clothing in 2014 than in 2000, but kept each garment half as long. Perhaps unsurprisingly, concerns have been mounting over the environmental and social impact of such changes.

The UN Environment Programme reported that the fashion industry produces 20 percent of global waste water and 10 percent of carbon emissions, more than international aviation and maritime transport combined. In terms of the raw materials used to produce apparel, cotton is particularly problematic because of the large quantities of land, water, fertilisers and pesticides required to produce it. Non-biodegradable alternatives, such as polyester, require less water and can be recycled. However, there is evidence that just one load of laundry containing polyester, nylon or acrylic clothing can discharge over 700,000 microplastic fibres into the water supply. These fibres are not only detrimental to sea life, they can also end up in the human food chain with as yet undetermined consequences.

The dyeing of fabric is another area of concern, with more than 1,900 chemicals used in the production of garments, of which 165 are classified by the EU as hazardous to health or the environment. Indeed, the UK Health and Safety Executive cautions that exposure to certain textile dyes can cause respiratory problems, skin complaints and, in the case of benzidine based products, cancer. In textile producing countries where health and safety standards are lax, garment workers are frequently exposed to such toxins. Runoff from the dyeing process can pollute waterways and disrupt ecosystems affecting the wider community. It is also a thirsty activity, frequently requiring a 1-to-30 dye-to-water ratio. This has led to reports of factories exhausting local water supplies.



The problems do not end once the product has been produced, as it must then be transported to the point of sale. In an increasingly globalized world, this may necessitate a journey of thousands of miles. The environmental impact of this stage has been significantly reduced though the work of key industry players improving their flow of goods. However, according to the European Parliament, significant waste is still generated in the form of items such as packaging, tags, hangers, and bags. But what about when the item finally reaches the consumer's wardrobe? Eco-Age suggests that the average fast fashion garment is worn less than five times and disposed of after just 35 days. The clothes are often low quality, with poor resale values, and there is simply too much to currently all be recycled. Such is the extent of the problem, there have been reports of charities turning away donations of fast fashion garments. As a result, many end up part of the estimated £140 million worth of clothing sent to landfill in the UK each year.

Shockingly, some products are simply destroyed before they ever make it to the consumer. For example, in July 2018 luxury fashion label Burberry revealed in its annual report that it had burned over £28m worth of its fashion and cosmetic products in order to prevent counterfeiting and protect intellectual property. A practice that is widespread across the fashion industry, according to The Guardian. Criticism of Burberry was compounded by the fact the company had recently become a core supporter of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's Make Fashion Circular initiative, designed to tackle waste within the industry. Following a public outcry, in September 2018 Burberry announced that it would stop the practice with immediate effect.

In addition to the environmental issues outlined above, there are also serious social and human rights concerns within the industry. For example, many fashion retailers outsource production to developing countries, where labour standards are frequently poor (though, as the Financial Times reported in May 2018, the UK is by no means immune to such problems). According to the UN Environment Programme, "textile workers are often paid derisory wages and forced to work long hours in appalling conditions". Recently workers in Bangladesh, the world's second largest garment exporter, took to the streets to protest against low wages. Tear gas and rubber bullets were deployed by police, with one person killed and a further 50 injured. The Associated Press reported that thousands of workers were subsequently fired for participating in the protests. In addition, it has been widely reported that forced labour is used to pick cotton in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where conditions are often dangerous. During the annual harvest, citizens are issued with a daily quota and failure to achieve this can result in harassment from employers or even the government.

In light of these growing concerns, in June 2018 the UK House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee launched an inquiry into the sustainability of the fashion industry. Their final report, published on 19th February 2019 and entitled "Fixing Fashion: Clothing Consumption and Sustainability", painted a damning picture. In addition to the environmental concerns (many of which are outlined above), the Committee noted that:

"Our biggest retailers have 'chased the cheap needle around the planet', commissioning production in countries with low pay, little trade union representation and weak environmental protection. In many countries, poverty pay and conditions are standard for garment workers, most of whom are women. We are also concerned about the use of child labour, prison labour, forced labour and bonded labour in factories and the garment supply chain".

The Committee made a range of recommendations for both government and business, including legislative changes to strengthen protection and reporting requirements in relation to modern slavery; collaboration between the government, fashion retailers, water companies, and washing machine manufacturers to tackle microfibre pollution; a ban on incinerating or landfilling unsold stock that can be reused or recycled; and the introduction of an Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme to ensure fashion retailers take responsibility for the waste they create. In addition, a levy of one penny per garment on manufacturers was proposed in order to create a fund of approximately £35m to support improved clothing collection and recycling. Only time will tell how businesses, government, and consumers respond to the social and environmental challenges presented by the fashion industry, but one thing is for certain: it will all come out in the wash.

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