



SUSTAINABILITY OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY INQUIRY

By Alexandra Reece

Where Does It Come From?

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY:

Have UK clothing purchasing habits changed in recent years?

Revenue from the sales in ethical clothing rose from £29 million in 2015 to £36 million in 2016 in the UK, clearly showing there is a greater interest in protecting the planet and its people through our consumer choices. (Statista, 2018).

However, although it may be true that consumers are becoming increasingly aware of their environmental and social impact (globally) in their clothing choices and beyond, this is not altogether reflected in people's purchasing habits.

The constant availability of 'catwalk copies' and the latest trends at affordable prices has meant that people have not had to compromise on style when shopping on a budget. The journalist Lucy Siegle's recent book 'To Die For: Is Fashion Wearing Out the World?' (NB: a great reference point) states how consumer spending on clothing increased during the 2008-2009 economic downturn. During that time the likes of Primark flourished in the UK, offering consumers a 'fashion fix' that was cheap although socially and environmentally damaging. According to the consultancy EcoAge (2018), the average consumer is now purchasing 60% more items of clothing than 20 years ago.

Recent years have also seen the rise of affordable (/cheap) instore and online fast fashion brands, such as Boohoo, Nasty Gal, Missguided, InTheStyle.com, Forever 21, and so forth... which are changing the way people shop. The latest trends are available to purchase at the click of a button, without feeling the quality of the garment or reading the clothing swing-tags or labels. This makes it not only easy for people to purchase clothing quickly, but also with minimal thought about where or how their clothing is made.

What is the environmental impact of the fashion supply chain? How has this changed over time?

No longer do clothing stores have 4 season turnovers. The likes of Zara and H&M have worked to achieve a catwalk to sale product in less than 2-3 weeks, meaning there are closer to 16-24 'seasons' a year. This involves rapid store turnover that perpetuates a cycle of mass production, consumption and wastefulness.

Recent stories about fashion houses burning their leftover stock to avoid it entering surplus and sale collections, further shows how the consumers' desire to satiate their 'fashion' demands is occurring to the detriment of the environment.

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What incentives have led to the rise of “fast fashion” in the UK and what incentives could be put in place to make fashion more sustainable?

Social media has been instrumental in the rise of fast fashion. Cookies mean that websites can target individuals with fast fashion adverts as they browse the Internet. Online fashion companies have established relationships with online ‘influencers’ who work to advertise the latest fast fashion by modelling it on their Instagram profiles. Users now only have to tap on the photo to be told the price and get an online link to the clothes that the influencer is wearing. This has only increased with the rise of reality TV. For instance, the contestants on the 2018 series of Love Island were styled almost entirely by fast fashion brand Missguided, who then put details up on social media of how viewers too could look like the people onscreen. This is bound to have influenced many young and impressionable consumers.

The government needs to make it easier for people to recycle clothes and create greater awareness around this. Houses are now used to recycling their household waste with weekly bin collections, so why not with clothing? This is something that could be done twice a year. With a campaign such as this it needs time to catch on and not to be abandoned after a short trial period in a small area.

The Government could also create incentives for all businesses to make their clothing more sustainable by creating a set of requirements for all clothing to meet that is sold in and to the country. This could involve taxing companies, or the clothing, that do not meet these requirements. After all, the 5p charge on plastic bags in supermarkets has been successful, and the sugar tax has forced businesses to change. More needs to be thought about clothing as a vital part of our everyday lives, rather than just food.

Is “fast fashion” unsustainable?

Yes, in the sense that fast fashion involves rapid turnover at a cheap price, therefore requiring short-cuts in the manufacturing process. This involves using sweatshop labour, toxic dyes, waste off-cuts, poor quality stitching, to ensure clothes can quickly make their way into stores.

If environmental and social destruction from the manufacturing process is put to one side, then ‘fast fashion’ may be thought of as sustainable if people re-wear and re-use it for a long period of time. However, owing in part to the poorer quality of the garments and ‘seasonality’ of fashions this may not be that likely an option.

What industry initiatives exist to minimise the environmental impact of the fashion industry?

The Government should aim to work with and support initiatives as well as WRAP, such as Fashion Revolution, Centre for Sustainable Fashion, the Circle NGO, Common Objective, Forum for the Future, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, and The Sustainable Angle. WRAP is a great start but needs more publicity. People who actively search to reduce their environmental and detrimental social impact as fashion consumers may know about these initiatives, but the vast number of consumers do not.



Industry initiatives include: Ethical Trading Initiative, Better Cotton Initiative, RSN Cotton Pledge, Greenpeace Detox Campaign, The Accord, ACT, Sustainable Apparel Coalition, Better Work, and SCAP. The September/October 2017 issue of the Ethical Consumer, entitled 'Is Ethical Fashion Still a Mountain to Climb?', is a good guide for this.

The Fairtrade Foundation is primarily focussed on trade justice and working conditions but also has a strong environmental focus embedded.

The Government needs to work to ensure that such initiatives become requirements of sale especially of big businesses, rather than voluntary sign-ups. Government-backing could help to strengthen such initiatives by working to ensure businesses adhere to their regulations.

How could the carbon emissions and water demand from the fashion industry be reduced?

Changing the materials that we use, such as reducing the use of non-organic cotton. Exploring eco-friendly fibres such as rain fed cotton, khadi and wool, that are used unmixed with polyester will greatly help with footprint during production and also at end of life as they are biodegradable.

Increasing the use of recycled materials in mainstream clothing brands as well as already sustainable/ethical brands. Look into the use of alternative materials, such as Econyl that is made from recycled nylon from items including fishing nets.

The dyeing process also uses a lot of water and creates toxins. To reduce the environmental impact of chemical dyeing, natural dyes should be researched, funded and used. Recent breakthroughs with dyes produced from bacteria allow a more consistent batch of colour than traditional natural dyes. Dr James Ajioka from the University of Cambridge has had much recent success with bacteria based dyes. Enzymes in the bacteria produce colour that doesn't fade, is non-toxic, which can be created from the by-products molasses and biodiesel. Government and industry investment in such exciting new developments is a necessity.

Furthermore, it is important for consumers in general to reduce the amount of clothing they buy as over-consumption is damaging the planet.

WASTE FROM FASHION:

What typically happens to unwanted and unwearable clothing in the UK? How can this clothing be managed in a more environmentally friendly way?

The Guardian (2017) states that in April 2017 consumers were expected to get rid of 680 million items of clothing as part of an annual Spring cleaning of their wardrobes. 235 million of these garments end up in landfill. Presumably the remainder of this figure is recycled through clothing banks, charity shops, Cash-for-Clothes places, or sold privately second-hand.



However, according to the Guardian (2017) men are more likely to bin unwanted items, with 82% of people surveyed saying they would bin their clothing items last Spring, compared to 69% of women. Campaigning initiatives clearly need to appeal to all genders.

Clearly more needs to be done to increase the percentage of unwanted items that are recycled, and reduce the amount of unwanted clothing in the first place.

WRAP has statistics on how to extend the life of garments through encouraging people to wear clothes longer, wash them less and pass them on to new homes instead of throwing them away at end of life.

How much unwanted clothing is landfilled or incinerated in the UK each year?

According to the Guardian (2017) a predicted 235 million items of Britons' unwanted clothing were expected to end up in landfill in Spring 2017. This works out at an average of 7 items of clothing going straight into the bin per person.

A 2,000 people strong survey by Sainsbury's found that 75% of consumers bin clothing instead of recycling or donating it. This was due to not knowing that worn-out or dirty clothes can be recycled or accepted by charities.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation put the annual cost to the UK economy of landfilling clothing and household textiles at approximately £82 million.

Does labelling inform consumers about how to donate or recycle clothing to minimise environmental impact, including what to do with damaged clothing?

Besides a few small-scale ethical retailers, the majority of clothing labels have minimal information on them. Labels usually include, company name, price, size, fabric type, manufacturing origin, and washing instructions. Certain luxury or ethical fashion retailers may offer repair services to their customers, such as Patagonia and Barbour.

In order for consumers to pay attention to labelling that would tell them how to donate, recycle and minimise environmental impacts, large swing tags need to be on the front of clothes. It is important that labelling is clear and straight-forward for consumers to follow. Signs could also be implemented on displays on the shop floor.

The traffic light system that is used on the majority of food packaging in UK supermarkets has proven successful in being easy to understand for all consumers. A similar labelling device would be instrumental to the success of informing clothing customers.

What actions have been taken by the fashion industry, the Government and local authorities to increase reuse and recycling of clothing?

The Government's waste advisory body WRAP has a 'Love Your Clothes' website that offers advice on choosing clothing designed to last longer, buying second-hand, using energy-efficient cleaning methods, donations, and swapping or selling unwanted clothes items. However, more needs to be



done to promote the use of this resource as few members of the public have heard of it, let alone used it.

Clothing banks exist in many local authorities, although they may be provided privately by charities or for-profit 'Cash-for-Clothes' businesses. Local authorities provide clothing banks at tips although they could do with better signage and accessibility for people without cars.

In partnership with Oxfam, Sainsbury's is encouraging consumers to donate their clothing in their shops, rather than binning it. TKMaxx and Cancer Research UK have urged consumers to 'give up clothes for good' in a bid to raise money to fight children's cancer. The fashion giant H&M offer a £5 voucher for use in their stores for every bag of clothes brought into their store to be recycled. However, it is unclear whether these clothes are recycled or merely sent away to developing countries, thus harming the domestic trade in the destination country.

How could consumers be encouraged to buy fewer clothes, reuse clothes and think about how best to dispose of clothes when they are no longer wanted?

If the Government were to set a minimum standard for clothing quality and sustainability and tax all items that do not meet these requirements, then the cost of clothing could be increased, thus encouraging people to invest in clothing that is made to last. The Government needs to prevent businesses from multi-buy sales and offers, to discourage mass consumption by consumers.

There need to be more awareness campaigns about the impact of the clothing industry on the environment and on workers. This could involve TV advertising and should include education about clothing supply chains in curriculums from primary to secondary schools. People need to be aware of the impacts that are occurring within their lifetime. This is not a problem for future generations, but for now. This makes the problem harder for us all to dismiss.

Businesses in the clothing industry could offer services to repair clothing. For instance, Barbour and Patagonia offer services to re-wax and repair jackets and coats to ensure the longevity of their clothing.

SUSTAINABLE GARMENT MANUFACTURING IN THE UK:

How has the domestic clothing manufacturing industry changed over time? How is it set to develop in the future?

Due to search for greater profit margins and cheaper labour, and to make small businesses profitable, much of the manufacturing for UK-based clothing companies relocated abroad over the last two to three decades.

The EEF forecast predicted in 2014 that Britain's manufacturing sector would grow by 3.6% that year, an increase from previous prediction of 2.7%. This would have made the growth in



manufacturing above that of the overall economy in 2014 at 3% growth. Clearly this is an encouraging sign for the expansion of manufacturing in the UK.

UK manufacturing would enable brands to take back control of their designs and manufacturing, establish a transparent supply chain and lower carbon emissions. Volume may be something that UK manufacturing would struggle to compete with, as it is not widespread enough to meet high-street demand (Guardian, 2014). It is still often the case that low-value, high-volume manufacture is best served in low-cost countries. Continuity of supply needs to be established if moving manufacturing back to the UK, meaning the decision to re-shore manufacturing back in the UK cannot be taken lightly. UK manufacturing poses great benefits for the economy, offering jobs, reducing transport costs and emissions, and easing factory inspections.

Factories do exist in the UK, such as Fashion-Enter's Factory in north London that produces 7,500 units a week for companies such as Asos, M&S and John Lewis. However, they suffer from a small workforce pool. Due to lack of specialist training and skills in the UK in clothing manufacturing the whole workforce is from countries such as Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and China (Gould, The Guardian, 2014). This is something that needs to be addressed in order for manufacturing to continue in the UK at a high standard. Incentives need to be made to encourage people to train and work, perhaps as apprentices, in fashion manufacturing across the UK, not just in London.

Ethical brands often are working with suppliers that are abroad but with a responsible social outlook. Supply chains are transparent and workers are part of co-operatives that ensure they work in healthy conditions and are paid a fair price. Where Does It Come From?

(wheredoesitcomefrom.co.uk) is a clothing brand that shares the garment story with the customer to educate and to inspire more conscious shopping in future.

How are Government and trade envoys ensuring they meet their commitments under SDG 8 to “protect workers’ rights” and “ensure safe working environments” within the garment manufacturing industry? What more could they do?

No input.

Are there any industry standards or certifications in place to guarantee sustainable manufacturing of clothing to consumers?

The organisation Fashion Revolution has been campaigning strongly since the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 for businesses to become more transparent about their supply chains and environmental impacts. The annual Fashion Revolution campaign encourages consumers to ask the clothing industry ‘#whomademyclothes?’ in a bid to make the industry think more about its social and environmental impact.

The Fairtrade foundation and the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation offer an accreditation scheme to businesses who manufacture abroad.

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SCAP. The September/October 2017 issue of the Ethical Consumer, entitled 'Is Ethical Fashion Still a Mountain to Climb?', is a good guide for this.

However, none of these certifications necessarily guarantee sustainable manufacturing, but are good guides and initiatives to help make the industry start to make a difference.

Only if there is a legal clause put in place could industry standards or certification guarantee sustainable manufacturing of clothing to consumers. This is something that the Government needs to address.