

Sustainable Fashion



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Fixing our throwaway fashion culture will take far more than a tax

February 19, 2019 by Tim Cooper

1. Clothing in Britain is increasingly characterised by a high volume/low value approach to business. Based on past trends, consumers will throw away around 680 million items of clothing this year. Replacements are cheap: dresses can be bought online for as little as £5.
2. Cheap prices provide wider access to consumers and fashion retailers argue that they are a sign of efficiency. But there is a dark side.
3. A new report shows that consumers are benefiting from cheap clothes at considerable cost to the environment and through exploiting poor garment workers.
4. The environmental impact of fashion is well known. Cotton production uses large amounts of pesticides and water, while synthetic fabrics such as polyester come from limited oil supplies. Bamboo, increasingly used as a cotton replacement, sounds pleasingly natural, but it is a semi-synthetic fabric. The production process involves the use of chemicals such as caustic soda. Consumers who care about the environment may feel less guilty as they take their unwanted garments to a charity store, but many of these clothes end up in landfill sites because they cannot attract buyers.
5. The social impact of fashion also raises concern. Evidence suggests that fashion companies do not carefully monitor how their clothes are produced, so consumers can't be sure that their

clothes were not made by exploiting workers. In Britain, many garment workers are apparently being paid less than the minimum wage. Abroad, slave labour, child labour and poor working conditions still exist, more than five years after the collapse of the Rana Plaza complex in Bangladesh killed around 1,100 garment workers.

6. In recent years, the Waste and Resources Action Programme (known as WRAP), which works closely with the fashion industry, has done an excellent job in promoting longer-lasting clothing.

7. But designing long-lasting garments is useless if they are thrown away early. Every garment that is produced has an impact on the environment. In a sustainable fashion culture, fewer garments would be produced and, when no longer wearable, the materials would either be recycled or reused – for example, through ‘upcycling’, where unwanted clothes are redesigned into new items.

8. It is a vision that still seems very far away. However, a report by the UK’s Environmental Audit Committee offers hope. It proposes a “producer responsibility” scheme in which producers would pay a 1p tax per garment to improve clothing collection and recycling in order to deal with clothing waste. This strategy attracted the most attention in the media.

9. But the report proposes a few other solutions that could be even more significant. For example, it noted that Sweden has reduced VAT (value added tax) on clothing repair services. School lessons on designing, creating and repairing clothes is another proposition.

10. Economic and educational solutions are needed because recycling does not fix the basic problem of unsustainable levels of production and consumption in the clothing sector. In short, companies produce too much and consumers buy too much.

11. A target to halve consumption of clothes by 2030 would be an appropriate goal to focus people’s minds.

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Match the word and its French equivalent

Lointain La soude caustique Efficace Un projet
L'effondrement Jeter Fournir Un vêtement
Surveiller Diminuer de moitié Qui dure longtemps Une quantité

The collapse		Caustic soda	
To monitor		To halve	
To throw away		To provide	
An amount		Far away	
Efficient		A scheme	
A garment		Long-lasting	