

**OVERCONSUMPTION**

# SLOWING DOWN FAST FASHION



**Re<sup>→</sup>set**  
**lessons from**  
**lockdown**

# SLOWING DOWN FAST FASHION



**How the pandemic sowed  
the seed for a more  
sustainable fashion future**

During the pandemic, so many people had extra time because they stopped commuting to work or attending social functions that it caused a huge shift in behaviour toward clothing and fashion. Some of the changes offer evidence-based hope for a much slower and less wasteful future for the fast fashion industry. Young fashion designers like Jeremy Salazar (@happyxloco)<sup>1</sup> in New Mexico, took to upcycling second-hand clothing, textiles and objects sourced from local community thrift shops. Purchasing second hand or 'pre-owned' clothing became more broadly socially acceptable as people also cleared out cupboards of unworn clothes and passed them on and home-making skills such as **sewing**,<sup>2</sup> knitting and crocheting became widespread again. In India, the **Mother India's Crochet Queens (MICQ)**<sup>3</sup> flourished, with 6,000 members across the globe collaborating on crochet projects. **Re-purposing**<sup>4</sup> and **re-styling**<sup>5</sup> wardrobes took off, while exchanging clothing with friends was popular and simply making do with fewer, maybe more expensive but longer lasting items was a concept gathering popular support.



**QUALITY  
NOT  
QUANTITY**

Fashion is still one of the **largest industries**<sup>6</sup> in the world with annual revenues of around **\$1.4 trillion in 2018**,<sup>7</sup> carbon emissions of **2.1 billion tonnes**<sup>8</sup> – more than aviation – and over 60 million people working along the global supply chain. On average, each person in Europe buys **5kg of clothes per year**<sup>9</sup> and for the USA, the figure is over three times higher at 16kg. According to the Swedish researchers, **Mistra Future Fashion**,<sup>10</sup> 80% of the climate impact of clothing stems from the production phase, before the garments even hit the racks. They found that doubling the active lifetime of a garment, decreased its climate impact by 49%. For example, on average a t-shirt is used 30 times and washed 15 times. If this t-shirt is instead used 60 times, the climate impact can be cut in half. Producing these same garments using solar-powered energy could mean a total reduction of 67%. If the consumer bikes or walks to the store instead of taking the car the total impact decreases by 78%. This is why extending the life of any given item by encouraging more uses per garment, minimalist approaches and the use of secondhand markets and charity shops is so important.

An April 2020 report<sup>11</sup> by The Business of Fashion suggested that there was already an increasing awareness of the wasteful nature of fast fashion and a growing interest in “purpose-driven, sustainable action”. It predicted that what it called the lockdowns’ effective “quarantine of consumption” could accelerate some of these shifts and that if stores remain closed for two months, 80% of publicly listed fashion companies in Europe and North America would be in financial distress. A follow up report in 2021<sup>12</sup> showed the fashion industry experienced a 20 percent decline in revenues in 2019–20, with 7% of the industry participants leaving the market entirely. This was a seismic shakeup with the potential to cut emissions significantly. New trends highlighted include consumer demand for circular sourcing – where no waste is generated – and virtual shopping, which will involve producing a design in the metaverse only. Research is still to be done on the carbon impact of virtual shopping.

There is some concern that the boom in online shopping entrenched by lockdowns could simply replace local shops and high streets with faceless firms and their invisible sourcing practices. The Chinese retailer Shein – worth \$10 billion – rose to the top of the fast fashion industry from nowhere in the last two years and Boohoo, another fast fashion giant, recorded a 41 percent jump in revenue<sup>13</sup> in 2020. But the 2020 Resale Report<sup>14</sup> showed that the global online market for luxury second hand clothes grew 25 times faster than the wider retail market in the previous year. A ThredUP report<sup>15</sup> also estimated 33 million consumers bought second hand apparel for the first time in 2020 and these habits were in place for long enough to stick. It estimates that the second hand clothing market will double in the next 5 years to \$77 billion. Around 60% of retailers<sup>16</sup> in the report indicated they would be interested in selling secondhand clothes in the future.

Gains to be made by slowing down fast fashion are not just environmental, but also contribute to better well being. According to international research<sup>17</sup> on consumerism and well being, people who shop excessively experience emptiness and boredom in between shopping periods, with enjoyment lasting a maximum of 3 days for 90% of people and as little as a few moments for 8% of shoppers. Young, high income women are the most vulnerable. The spread of online shopping and social media makes people even more susceptible to overconsumption, driven also by constant comparison to others which is known further to undermine human well being.



Even before the pandemic, some influencers were helping to reduce consumption and set new behavioural norms among groups who might not otherwise be considering a more sustainable lifestyle. For example, Courtney Carver, a woman from Utah in the US, started Project 333<sup>18</sup> as a “minimalist fashion challenge that invites you to dress with 33 items or less for 3 months”. In 2014, Caroline Joy, a Texan blogger, started Unfancy – Mindful Style<sup>19</sup> to record a journey as she engaged in a year-long challenge to try to live with a small and structured closet of 37 pieces. Since then, so-called ‘haul’ videos shared on social media that glorify shopping and consumption have also experienced a backlash, with a rise in ‘anti-haul’ vlogging about the joys of not shopping. And the 10x10 challenge<sup>20</sup> encouraged participants to be more creative with their existing wardrobe by focusing on 10 items over a 10 day period.

**BUY LESS.**  
**CHOOSE WELL.**  
**MAKE IT LAST.**

Fashion Revolution, a London-based NGO with chapters around the world, has been campaigning since 2014 to draw consumers’ attention to unsustainable fashion industry practices with their “Who Made My Clothes?”<sup>21</sup> campaign. The Greenpeace environmental group has led the “Detox my Fashion”<sup>22</sup> campaign since 2011, aimed at eliminating toxic chemicals from the production processes in the fashion supply chain. The British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood put it succinctly: “Buy less. Choose well. Make it last. Quality, not quantity. Everybody’s buying far too many clothes.”<sup>23</sup> And British designer Stella McCartney spoke out<sup>24</sup> against her industry following a report on clothing’s environmental impact<sup>25</sup> by the sustainable economy think tank the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

What was new during the pandemic was the way people had time to consider where their clothes came from, who was making them and even whether they really needed them in the first place. Fast fashion had grown into almost the definition of wasteful, unsatisfying, over-consumption. But the pause enabled by the pandemic’s upheaval, and opportunity for reflection, rethinking, and trying different ways to approach clothing - one of our most basic essentials - may well have set our behaviour, and the industry in a new, healthier and greener direction.

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# Re<sup>l</sup>set

## lessons from lockdown

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