

# An Introduction to Sustainable Fashion



Decoding Fast Fashion, Slow Fashion, and Greenwashing

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# who am i?

## and why am i such an expert?

I am Amanda Lee McCarty, host of Clotheshorse.

I have worked in the buying department of several iconic millennial fast fashion brands, including Urban Outfitters, Modcloth, and Nasty Gal.

Currently (in addition to making Clotheshorse) I am the Head of Product for a family-owned chain of gift shops looking to rebrand and become more sustainable and meaningful.

I love animals, crafting, thrifting, and traveling. I have a Hello Kitty tattoo. My superpower is speed reading.





# just the **facts...**

there are just too many clothes in this world!



- The fashion industry produces about **150 billion garments** every year. According to the Australian Circular Textile Association (ACTA), **30% of those 150 billion garments (45 billion) are never sold.**<sup>1</sup> They are destroyed, burned, sometimes donated.
- On average, **Americans buy about 70 new articles of clothing each year.** <sup>2</sup>
- 60% of new clothing ends up in the landfill or incinerator **within the same year it was made.**<sup>3</sup> That's 60 billion garments each year.
- We toss 85% of our unwanted clothing in the trash.<sup>4</sup> We donate the remaining 15% to charities, thrift stores, or "textile recycling" bins.
- If we use those 70 new garments as a way of visualizing what's happening to our clothing: 60 will end up in the landfill, 10 will be donated.
- Of those donated items, only 1 will be purchased locally and worn again.<sup>5</sup> The rest will head to the landfills or to countries in the Global South.



# why fashion matters...

what we wear has a bigger impact than you might think!

- The fashion industry is responsible for **10% of all greenhouse gas** emissions. Textile production alone releases 1.2 billion tonnes of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere every year. <sup>6</sup>
- It also produces about **20% of global waste water.** <sup>6</sup>
- The fashion industry uses more energy each year than both aviation and shipping combined.<sup>7</sup>
- The global apparel/accessory industry employs more than **75 million** workers worldwide. <sup>8</sup>



# who makes our clothing...

no, it's not robots!



- Once again: the global fashion industry employs more than 75 million people worldwide. **The majority work without contracts, set schedules, and the protection of labor laws.** Most do not make a living wage.
- **What's a living wage?** "A living wage is defined as the minimum income necessary for a worker to meet their basic needs. This is not the same as a subsistence wage, which refers to a biological minimum. Needs are defined to include food, housing, and other essential needs such as clothing." Source: Wikipedia
- **85% of garment workers are women.**<sup>8</sup> And the gender gap is wide here, with women making about 60-75% of men's wages.
- **Workers are expected to work 10-16 hours each day, 6 days a week.** Overtime is mandatory and wage theft is rampant (workers not being paid the wages they are due). Factory conditions are dangerous and unsanitary.
- **Sexual harassment/abuse and physical/mental abuse on the job are common.** Often female workers are unable to report this for fear of losing their jobs or sully their reputation/marriage prospects.
- Forced labor is very common in the fashion industry, from the Uyghur Muslims in China to so-called "dowry contracts" in India.

it's not  
“just fashion.”



before we go too deep...

# what is “sustainable?”

- **Sustainability** refers to the ability of something to maintain or "sustain" itself over time. This involves neither overusing resources nor damaging existing resources, biomes, etc.
- The sustainability community refers to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals when measuring the sustainability of an industry, movement, product, etc.
- There are 17 goals that the UN hopes to achieve by 2030. About half of them involve people (ending poverty and hunger, protecting human rights).

## THE GLOBAL GOALS For Sustainable Development



**it's not  
sustainable  
if it isn't good for BOTH  
the planet and its people!**



# what is sustainable fashion?

aka slow fashion!



- Slow fashion/sustainable fashion is a **thoughtful** approach to style and clothing that considers the processes and resources required to produce clothing.
- The slow fashion community values **the fair treatment of people, animals, and the planet**. We know that a better future requires change and work from all of us.
- Slow fashion focuses on several habits:
  - **Reducing our consumption.** This means buying less (especially brand new items). We buy items we plan to wear as long and as often as possible. We build long lasting relationships with our clothes.
  - **We are proud outfit repeaters!** We challenge the notion that every occasion requires a new outfit.
  - **Spending our money strategically.** We support brands and makers who are working as hard as possible to minimize impact on the planet while also paying a living wage to all workers involved in making, shipping, and selling clothing.
  - **Mindful “rehoming” of unwanted clothing.** We don’t jam it in a donation bin or toss it in the trash.

# what is **fast fashion**?

**spoiler alert: you're going to be surprised!**

Okay, let's start with what fast fashion is **NOT**:

- A specific price (not all fast fashion is inexpensive).
- A certain aesthetic (fast fashion comes in many forms).
- A particular customer base (fast fashion caters to people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds)

**You can't identify fast fashion by the locations of stores, the merchandising, or the influencers and celebrities promoting it.**





## What fast fashion **IS**:

- A business model that relies on selling as much stuff as possible, as often as possible.
- A way of doing business that must encourage the overconsumption of its customers to keep the business rolling (and profitable). This includes a lot of misleading, manipulative marketing (like greenwashing).
- An industry that will always prioritize profits over people, whether that's the people making the clothes, working in the offices/stores, dealing with the burden of our discarded clothing, or even the customer.



# the fast fashion-ification of an **entire** industry!

## it kinda snuck up on us.

- It all began with the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing recession. Everything was sold on sale. Soon customers became addicted to bargains (and retailers were addicted to the increasing revenue that accompanied constant DEALZ DEALZ DEALZ)
- The “original” fast fashion retailers like Forever 21 and H&M were experiencing exponential growth as customers had less money to spend but wanted more and more clothing.
- Traditional retailers saw this and found themselves in a quandary: reduce their prices to align with the fast fashion retailers (and risk “damaging” their brand) or stick with the same prices and lose customers. The solution: keep the same prices on the tags but sell everything at a discount. To remain profitable, clothing was designed to sell on sale. So while the price tag might say \$88, it was always planned to sell at \$40 or less (and the customer was receiving an item worth \$40 or less).
- Soon everyone was selling deals, and so that was no longer a way to win a customer’s loyalty and drive sales. So now every retailer had to be the first to offer every trend, no matter how fleeting. This meant operating faster: skipping fittings/sample reviews and shipping everything via air (versus boat).



**in 2022, most big  
retailers/brands  
operate using the  
fast fashion model!**

# **time out: let's talk about those deals.**

## **spoiler: they aren't that hot.**

Once again, retailers were selling everything "on sale," BUT those garments were always planned to sell on sale and still be highly profitable. This meant that clothes had to be produced more cheaply than ever!

- Less expensive fabrics were used (polyester/synthetics). About 60-70% of clothing made/sold today is made of polyester. Btw, polyester is plastic.
- Cheaper trims (zippers, buttons, hooks, snaps) were used.
- Details like pockets and lining were removed. Length was removed from skirts and dresses.
- Corners were cut in fit and technical design
- Factories (and therefore garment workers) were squeezed for lower and lower pricing.
- Furthermore, all of that air shipping was super expensive, so that meant that actually making the clothes had to become cheaper to offset it.

**Ultimately we were all left with a lot of poorly fitting, low quality, short-lived clothing.**



**clothes are less  
expensive now than  
they were in the 1990s.**

# how to **spot** fast fashion!

it's actually kinda easy



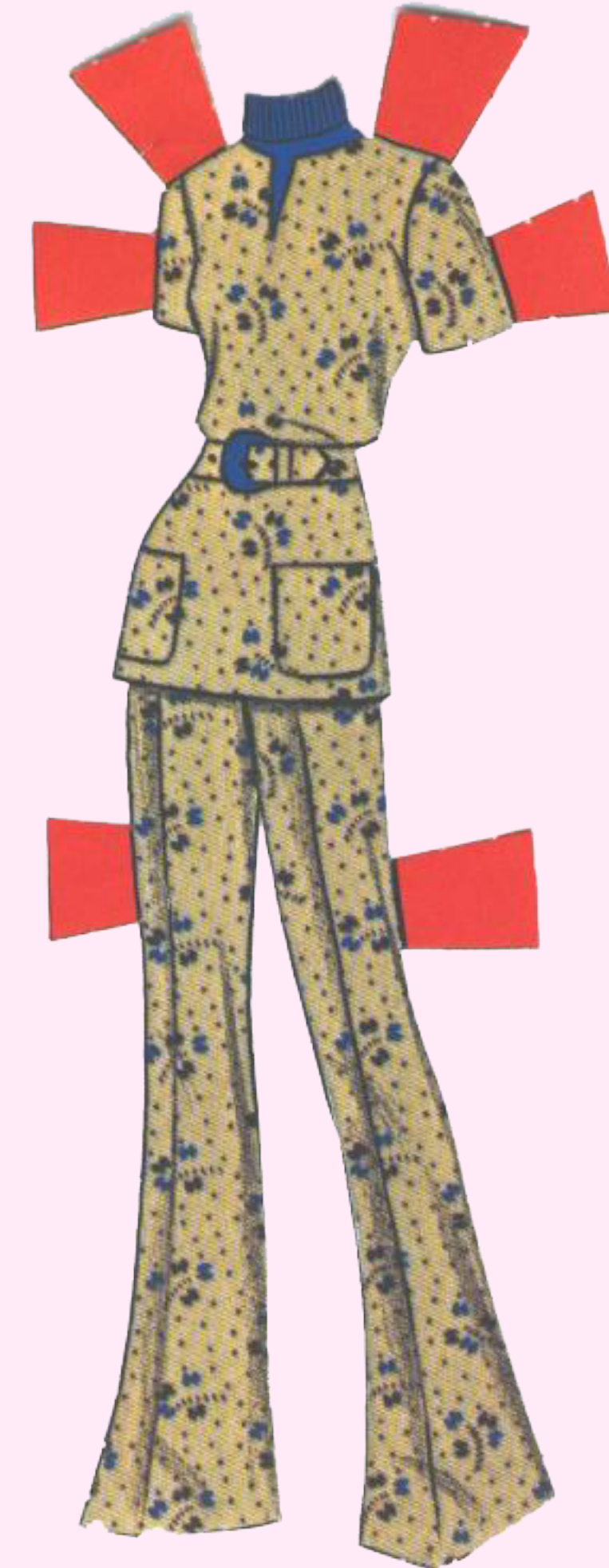
IS \_\_\_\_\_ FAST FASHION?

CHECK ALL THAT APPLY

- ☐ DOES THE STORE/WEBSITE HAVE 100s/1000s OF ITEMS FOR SALE?
- ☐ DOES THE BRAND LAUNCH NEW ITEMS EVERY WEEK/EVERY DAY?
- ☐ DO THINGS SEEM TO GO ON SALE **PRETTY FAST?**  
(WOULD YOU BE EMBARRASSED TO BUY SOMETHING FULL PRICE FROM THIS BRAND?)
- ☐ DOES THE BRAND HAVE A DAZZLING ARRAY OF DEALZ DEALZ DEALZ?
- ☐ DOES THE BRAND COPY/STEAL DESIGNS FROM DESIGNERS/ARTISTS?

IF YOU CHECKED MORE THAN ONE BOX...  
IT'S DEFINITELY FAST FASHION!

clothes  
horse





# **fast fashion will **never** be sustainable.**

## **yep, just disregard their instagram posts declaring otherwise!**

**Fast fashion cannot exist without overconsumption/overshopping.**

- The fast fashion model relies on selling you as much as possible, as often as possible. Why? Because the race to the bottom in terms of pricing means that retailers have to sell you more stuff/more often to keep raking in those billions.
- Furthermore, shareholders and investors expect major growth in sales/profit each year, no matter the state of economy or age of the business.

**The fast fashion model relies on SPEED (that's why "fast" is in the name).**

- After every retailer had reached the bottom in terms of pricing, they could no longer get your business simply by being the cheapest.
- Now they had to be the fastest, getting the trends to you before anyone else. This meant paying to ship everything via air (literally on an airplane) which is a lot more expensive.
- It also meant skipping fittings and sample approvals just to meet tighter deadlines...the result was shoddy, poor fitting product that no one really wore more than a few times.





## Fast fashion can't operate without worker exploitation.

- Getting those low, low prices while covering all of those international flights for our clothing meant that retailers had to make up that \$\$\$ somewhere else...and they did it by squeezing factories (and underpaying all of their employees).
- This meant that workers were paid less and less, working longer and longer hours to meet the faster turnarounds demanded by retailers.
- To be clear: retailers know that the pricing they are demanding from factories does not allow for a living wage for the workers, yet they still press for lower costs.



# introducing...greenwashing!

aka "fake it until you (never) make it"

**Let's break out the dictionary! What is greenwashing?**

Greenwashing is when a company/brand claims to be environmentally conscious for marketing purposes but actually isn't making any notable sustainability efforts.

**Why is greenwashing bigger than ever?**

- For the last decade, retailers/brands have been competing to sell the latest trends at the cheapest prices. Now that they have reached the bottom (and literally cannot make things faster/cheaper than they are now), they are desperate for new ways to get into your wallet!
- They know that we care about the planet and its people. They also know that we have a lot of eco-anxiety.
- They see our interest in sustainability as a trend that they should be marketing and selling to us. This is not a "good faith" effort to do something good. It's a way to sell more stuff!

# be a **greenwashing** detective!

it turns out that they all use the same tricks!





# #1 Look out for words that just don't mean very much because they aren't measurable.

Here are a few:

- **green:** only means something when we are referring to the color.
- **eco-friendly:** don't even get me started.
- **natural:** sounds appealing, but means nothing.
- **conscious:** don't ever talk to me or my son again, H+M!
- **recycled:** that's great, but is the item also recyclable, or is this the end of the line?
- **fair wage:** not the same as a living wage!



# **#2 Beware of "fluffy-washing," when brands exploit your love of animals to sell you dumb stuff!**

Here's some real talk: any brand that truly cares about animals will also be caring about preserving the planet where these animals live! Selling us a ton of new stuff as often as possible is not good for the planet (and its animals).

BIG EXAMPLE: "vegan leather," which is actually plastic.





# #3 Don't let them trick you with a ton of fancy sounding certifications and organizations.

These don't always amount to much. Some are better than others. Various programs may lack transparency, have limited ambitions, or use confusing metrics that give the appearance of greater progress than what has actually been achieved.

It's up to you to look into these programs. But it's easy! All you have to do is Google the name of the certification/organization, followed by the word "greenwashing." And like MAGIC! You will get your answer!



## #4 Beware of "Ad Bluster!"

This is what Greenpeace calls it when a brand bombards you with ads and press about this one good thing they did...and it's really just a microscopic part of its entire sales or production. They hope that you see the happy/nice story and then go buy something from them.

## #5 Don't get caught up in that one "green" aspect of a business!

Sure, a company might have recycled packaging (and talk about it constantly) but what's the story with the stuff that is shipped in that packaging? Or maybe the fabric is organic, but what about the workers who made the garment?



# CONGRATULATIONS!

## you are a **greenwashing** detective

- **Read labels/details on the brand website.** If I encounter a fabric that I don't know, I Google its name, followed by "greenwashing." MAGIC!
- **Background check brands.** Use the Fashion Revolution Transparency Index, check out Eco-Stylet, or just do some searching.
- Don't feel weird about asking brands for the details. **Asking a question ≠ trolling!**
- **It's progress, not perfection.** I appreciate brands that are making an honest effort to do the right thing, even if they can't get there 100%. Meanwhile, skip the brands that are using sustainability as a means of manipulating you.

# now that you're all **riled** up...

## things you can do!

**Be a proud outfit repeater!** Dismantle the expectation that you have to wear a new outfit for every event and instagram photo. And you definitely don't need a new wardrobe for your vacation.

**Have a favorite brand that just isn't thinking of the planet and its people?** Demand it from them via social media, email, and even good old fashioned snail mail. **You have so much power!**

**Vote with your wallet!** Support brands/businesses that care about the planet and its people. Use tools like [Eco Stylist](#) and [Good On You](#) to find them.

### **Thoughtfully rehome your unwanted clothing.**

- Rather than just dropping at the Goodwill, consider donating to a shelter or a local charity.
- Or pass it on to a neighbor in your local Buy Nothing group.
- Consider hosting a clothing swap with your friends!





**Extend the life of your clothing via mending and careful laundering.** Have your shoes, bags, and clothing repaired/tailored by professionals. Follow laundry instructions.

**Adopt a #SecondhandFirst approach.** Look for something secondhand before buying it brand new.

Places to shop:

- vintage shops, antique malls, and consignment stores
- Poshmark (great for brands)
- The Real Real (luxury)
- thredUP (great for kids and casual wear)
- Depop (a mix of vintage, handmade, and trendy secondhand)
- Mercari, Etsy, eBay, Vinted

**Or consider renting special occasion wear!**



## Shop Small and Shop Local!

- Small businesses have a major impact on their communities. According to the US Small Business Administration, when you spend \$100 at a small business, \$48 stays in the community. Spend \$100 at a big box store? Only \$14 stays in the community!
- Small businesses create jobs in a way that big businesses do not. Since 1995, more than half of jobs in the United States were created by small businesses.
- It's too late for the biggest companies out there to magically transform into sustainable, ethical brands because exploitation and waste are built into their business model. And they have been following this model for years and years. It is a way of doing business that will always prioritize profits over people. Getting them to change their ways would mean completely dismantling their current way of doing business, and that's just not feasible.
- Small businesses can constantly make changes to be more sustainable and ethical because they are small! Turning around a bike is easy <----that's a small business. Turning around a huge cruise ship is not so easy <----that's the big business.



# Most importantly: continue to learn more and share your knowledge with others.

**Lead by example!** Brag about your sustainable changes and decisions!

Additional resources:

- **Get involved:** Fashion Revolution, The OR Foundation, and Clean Clothes Campaign
- Read: **Consumed** by Aja Barber and **Fashionopolis** by Dana Thomas
- Watch: **The True Cost**
- Listen: Clotheshorse



# sources

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7. ["Can fashion ever be sustainable?"](#) Christine Ro, BBC.
8. ["GLOBAL GARMENT AND TEXTILE INDUSTRIES: Workers, Rights and Working Conditions,"](#) Solidarity Center.



# questions? want more info?

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