

The ethics of fashion: When slow is good

Fast fashion is not just cheap clothing. It's human exploitation, involving sweat factories. Here people, usually women, work for below minimum wage. Worse, these factories include [abusive, unsafe and unsanitary conditions](#). Child labour is also [not uncommon](#). Furthermore, the [cost it places on the environment](#) is disastrous. In fact, each step involved in creating a garment has [implications](#) for the environment. These steps impact climate, affect biodiversity, and make actual mountains of textile waste.

Fast to slow

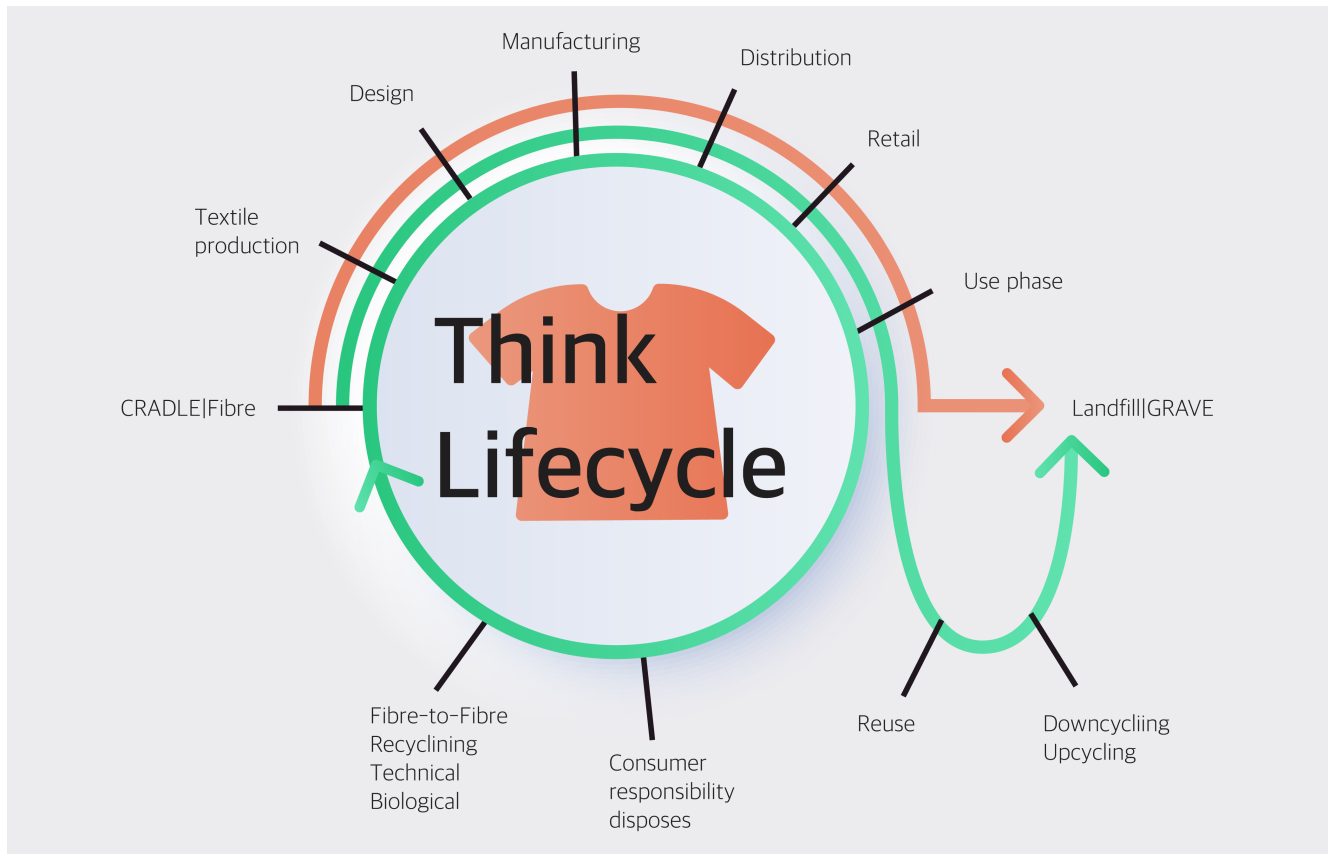
There have been two incredibly important events about sustainability in the fashion industry. They are the [2025 Sustainable Cotton Challenge](#) and the [Call to Action for a Circular Fashion System](#). Some of the brands that have accepted the Sustainable Cotton Challenge include:

- H&M
- Inditex
- Adidas
- Nike
- Levi's

The Sustainable Cotton Challenge seeks to ensure all cotton comes from sustainable sources. From 2025 onwards, the subscribed brands have committed to sourcing 100% of their cotton from sustainable sources. This call to action encourages the fashion industry to adopt a circular economy system to their business strategies. In other words, they are being encouraged to collect, reuse, and recycle. Due to this, many companies are creating innovative ways to achieve these goals. For example, some are developing techniques that allow them to reuse fibres. These fibres come from [used fabrics](#), [fishing nets](#), and even [wood pulp](#) from sustainable forests.

Another driver of responsible practices in the fashion industry is the competitive edge. Brands know that leadership in sustainability can be a competitive advantage. [The Patagonia brand](#), for example, has a broad and loyal customer base due to its [sustainable approach](#). This sustainable approach includes how they develop products. It also includes their promotional campaigns and participation in various environmental initiatives.

Young consumers are driving this trend towards sustainability awareness. According to [Nielsen's Global Corporate Sustainability Report](#), younger generations want sustainable brands. As a result, this is ushering in a new standard for ethical fashion.



Source: <https://www.elijahxia.com/uiuxdesign-ecoclo>

A change of ethics in fashion

Slow fashion represents commitment within the garment sector to [reduce its ecological footprint](#). The millennial generation has brought about a [turning point](#) in the fashion industry. This is because they are now the main target audience of the world's major brands. Further, they have become major buyers of sustainable-oriented goods and behaviour.

For this reason, slow fashion has been gaining popularity within the sector. Slow fashion has emerged as the antithesis of fast fashion. As such, it focuses on a philosophy of responsible consumption. This means that it focuses on buyers who care about the impact of the clothing industry on the environment and society. Recently, knowing the origin of the clothes they buy is a growing concern among consumers. They want to be aware of where clothes are made, what materials are used, and who produced it. Indeed, this knowledge immerses the consumer within the entire process of making a garment, from design to purchase.



Source: [Kathmandu Post](#)

The slow fashion philosophy has some established bases, among which are:

- Opposition to supra-industrial fashion production
- Preference for handmade, small business and locally manufactured products
- Recycling garments through second-hand or vintage clothing and donating unused items
- Garments made from recycled materials and good practices in their supply chain
- Customised manufacture of garments, as well as repair and modification of these to extend their useful life
- Reduced fashion consumption, avoiding compulsive buying and preferring garments of the highest quality

Towards a more ethical production

Unfortunately, it doesn't matter what "speed" fashion is, or even consumer

awareness. The biggest challenge is that fashion will always be a form of self-expression. Thus, garments that are not attractive, no matter how ethically made, will not sell.

Therefore, to transform fashion to be sustainable, we need innovative products. One example is to put in place a circular economy approach. Industry leaders need to know that consumers consider environmental and social costs when buying.

The basis of [the circular economy](#) is to transform a resource into a product and to obtain a waste that is transformed into a recycled resource. Through this, production would cease to be linear, and thus become circular. So, the key concept is the intention to generate less waste and to put the waste to new uses.

Forest for Fashion

Clothes and garments are resource intensive to make. In fact, an average kilogram of textiles has [a carbon footprint of 15kg and a water footprint of 10,000 litres](#)! The water footprint is mostly from cotton production, which also often takes place in the world's most water stressed areas. After all this waste, the lifetimes of our garments are relatively short. [Up to 85% of the textiles are disposed of](#) in landfills or incinerated, causing even more pollution. The fashion industry is valued at over [\\$2.5 trillion](#) and employs some [60 million people](#) worldwide. So, it makes sense to shift textile production away from fossil fuel-based synthetic fibres. And thus to replace them with renewable and biodegradable textiles.

There are even textile alternatives which are currently available. In fact, using fibres from sustainably managed forests could reduce carbon emissions. The [Forest For Fashion](#) initiative involves partnership between:

- The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
- The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation
- The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC)

Together, they show that forests can be the solution to stopping the mass pollution caused by the fashion industry.

The PEFC certifies products of forest origin such as wood, paper, cork,

mushrooms, resins, and essences. This guarantees for consumers that they are buying products from sustainably managed forests. By choosing [PEFC](#), buyers can help combat illegal logging and promote the key functions of forest resources. This includes the maintenance of many ecosystems and biological diversity. It also considers the economic livelihoods of rural populations. Additionally, PEFC can certify companies as recyclers. This allows the conversion of old fabrics into new fibres. The decisions we make as consumers, from something as basic as choosing how and what we wear, can make a difference.

Behind the brand

For a garment to be truly sustainable, companies must also respect the rights of workers. Unfortunately, the fashion industry is not known for its inclusive and non-judgmental attitude. Most of its discrimination problems are usually based on physical appearance. These often go unnoticed or forgiven by fans. Sometimes, however, brands or designers go too far even for the most loyal fashion enthusiasts.

Racism in the fashion industry permeates through advertising, product design, and company policy. This has created many scandals over the years. An example of this came when fashion brands joined the #blacklivesmatter movement last year. Many of them came under scrutiny for the disconnect between their brand identity and toxic internal practices. This callout included brands as big as Dolce & Gabbana and Gucci. These brands had [produced racially insensitive and culturally inappropriate clothing.](#)



A Gucci sweater (now pulled from stores) which resembles blackface. Source: [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#)

Stereotypes in fashion exist, only they are mutating from references. In the 1990s we had supermodels. Now, we have influencers, another type of social model. New stereotypes are necessarily created and recreated. This subsequently constructs new ways of expressing fashion.

How to break away from fast fashion



Source: [SANVT](#)

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the dark realities behind fast fashion. There are solutions and alternatives that can help us dress well while being fair to the planet.

Here are five tips to start implementing this year:

1. *Demand a better quality, not a higher quantity, of clothes.* The current demand for garments is exorbitant. Because of their low price, we can often buy many more clothes than we need, even if they will have a short lifespan.

2. *Extend the life of your clothes.* Learn the best care routine for your clothes. Also, use cleaning products that are friendly to the environment.
3. *Explore alternative clothing.* Thrift stores often have unique, high-quality treasures hidden on their hangers and shelves.
4. *Support ethical fashion and sustainable brands.* If you really need to buy new clothes, invest in a sustainable fashion brand. Repair or create with your clothes
5. *Fix broken garments.* When clothes break, buttons fall off, or a zipper breaks, fix them! Don't throw it away. There are many businesses that repair clothes for very affordable prices. This will allow you to enjoy your favourite clothes for years to come.

If meaningful changes in the fashion industry matter to you, as well as living sustainably overall, join the [**THRIVE**](#) project. Find out more about how to make your own positive contribution.

Written in collaboration with THRIVE Tribe member Martha Fernandez.