

# Will Fashion Ever Be Ethical?

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July 9, 2021

By Naume Guveya

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The fashion industry is responsible for 10% of annual global carbon emissions. This is more than all the emissions from maritime shipping and international flights. What's more, the fashion industry's emissions are expected to increase by over 50% by 2030.

Ethical fashion is a more attractive choice. Unfortunately, it's got a bit of a reputation for being expensive.

## Why Is Ethical Fashion Expensive

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In an ideal world, ethical fashion would be available to everyone. However, the costs that go into creating this type of fashion are inherently high due to several reasons. The most common of these reasons are:

Fast fashion isn't free. Someone, somewhere is paying.

*Lucy Siegle*

### 1. The cost of materials

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Fast fashion is made with some of the cheapest materials, e.g. nylon, acrylic, and polyester. These cheap materials are derived from petroleum by-products and coal (both non-renewable resources) and they are some of the most unsustainable fabrics in the world. In some cases, fast fashion is made from renewable materials like cotton, but even then, the cotton is not grown sustainably, using up too much water and relying on the heavy use of pesticides.

On the other hand, ethical fashion is made from materials that are produced sustainably. For instance:

- Farmers who produce the raw materials and workers who produce the fabrics must be compensated well.
- The water used in the production of raw materials must be disposed of properly.
- Any chemicals used in the farming and fabric production processes must be non-toxic.
- When raw materials like cotton are used, they are not grown using conventional methods. Instead, farmers opt for sustainable farming methods.

The sustainable production of materials tends to cost more compared to the traditional way of doing things. Additionally, a lot of the sustainable raw materials, e.g. hemp, linen, and eco-friendly bamboo, take a lot of time to process into fabrics.

When you combine all these factors, it's easy to see why the cost of the materials used in ethical clothing can become quite high.

## 2. The cost of labour

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A lot of non-ethical fashion brands prey on and exploit desperate communities to pay the lowest wages possible and maximise their profits. Workers are treated unfairly and they hardly make enough to survive. Conversely, ethical brands run factories where employees rights are upheld, safe working conditions are provided, and fair living wages are paid. These differences contribute to the price of the end product.

## 3. The cost of a niche market

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Ethical fashion is still a niche market in its nascent stage. As such, demand is still relatively low. Fast fashion, on the other hand, has high demand. When demand is high, costs are lower because brands enjoy economies of scale. With economies of scale, the cost per unit is spread over a larger number of items, thus reducing the cost of producing one item.

Most ethical fashion brands don't have the benefit of economies of scale and their products are still largely made in small numbers. This drives up production costs before we even consider any retail markups.

## The Quality vs Cost Debacle

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A lot of consumers demand high quality at a low cost. They expect fashion brands to provide top-quality clothing, uphold workers' rights, ensure safe working conditions, and pay decent wages, all while still providing inexpensive clothing. The pressure is on brands to meet consumer demands in addition to dealing with increasingly complex supply chains and high industry competition.

In the end, many brands take the easy way out, constantly feeding our huge appetite for cheap clothing at the expense of the workers and the environment.

But the consequences are dire.

Factory workers are being exploited to keep up with the demand. Natural resources are depleting, putting an even bigger strain on the planet that's already struggling to support us. Simply put, the whole system is unsustainable and it's in no way ethical.

## Who is to blame?

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This vicious cycle of fast fashion consumption highlights who is at the core of all the activity – we, the consumers. Fast fashion companies present us with new trinkets and shiny objects constantly and we keep on buying. The modern consumer is buying 60% more clothing compared to 2000. But the clothing is only being kept half as long since the clothing companies keep on feeding us more.

As consumers, we are at the centre of the problem, but we may also hold the answer to achieving truly ethical fashion.

Fast fashion is like fast food. After the sugar rush it just leaves a bad taste in your mouth.

*Livia Firth*

What if we stopped buying new outfits every other week? What if we started respecting the people and processes involved in fast fashion production and reduce our consumption?

For example, can we respect that it takes a minimum of 50 million years for crude oil to form? The same crude oil that eventually becomes polyester. What about the average six months it takes to grow cotton from seed to crop? By respecting all the intricate processes, people, and resources involved, we can start trying to achieve a balance and work towards ethical fashion.

How about we start glamourising ethical fashion and fuel its growth into a non-niche market?

Forget the whole narrative that ethical fashion is expensive. Various fashion brands are showing that it's possible to produce affordable ethical fashion. If they can do it, then other brands can do it too. The system is in no way perfect but we do have a choice. We can choose to ditch fast fashion and reshape fashion the ethical way.

Fashion can be ethical.