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TURNING THE TIDE

Public attitudes on plastics and fast fashion

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60-SECOND SUMMARY

- 1 The growing use of plastics in fashion is a problem – an increasing amount of harmful petrochemicals are being used to make clothing, which is rarely recycled, and ultimately ends up in our environments.
- 2 The public wants action on the use of plastics, and most say that they are trying to reduce the amount of plastics in their everyday lives. There is a broad desire for more action on the use of petrochemicals by the fashion industry.
- 3 But the public is reluctant to say that they actually buy synthetic fibres – only a third of us say that we regularly buy clothing containing synthetic materials, despite plastics accounting for the majority of textile production.
- 4 We have changed our shopping habits over lockdown – we are buying less clothes, and have felt less pressure to do so.
- 5 This could change once the pandemic ends, with many planning on increasing their spending on clothes after lockdown – particularly young people and those who buy fast fashion.
- 6 In response to the growing issue of plastics in fashion, the RSA is calling for new measures to turn the tide, including a tax on virgin plastics used in clothing; a ban on marketing petrochemical-derived clothing; and a commission to prepare for the future of fashion.

BACKGROUND

Plastics are a problem. Over the last decade, awareness campaigns, legislation and industry promises have arisen to try and turn back the tide. High-visibility measures such as charging for plastic bags and bans of single-use plastic items have been widely praised for changing consumer behaviour and reducing the amount of plastic that ends up in landfill. But the focus has been on packaging and consumer goods: there has been far less attention paid to the plastics we wear.

Synthetic fibres, such as polyester, nylon, elastane and acrylic, are made using fossil fuels, and the use of these fibres in fashion has dramatically increased in recent years, doubling between 2000 and 2020. These cheap fabrics have fuelled the explosion of fast, throwaway fashion.



The oil industry is placing big bets on the continued growth of plastics in clothing. While governments invest heavily in renewable energy, and electric cars become more mainstream, oil producers are looking at other avenues for petrochemicals. The contribution of the fashion industry has been consistently overlooked in the discussion of our climate crisis: responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions, projected to rise to 25% at its current trajectory. In 2015, polyester production was responsible for 700 million tonnes of CO₂, the equivalent of the annual carbon emissions of Germany.

Once plastics are created, they're difficult to get rid of – only a tiny proportion of synthetic fibres are recycled, with most being landfilled or incinerated. With every wash, hundreds of thousands of microfibrils are released into the environment – an 6kg wash could produce up to 700,000 fibres. Recent studies have found these have reached even the most remote parts of the arctic, and are increasingly turning up in the food we eat.

There are some great examples of fashion brands innovating to eliminate plastics from their supply chains, but much more needs to be done to change the practices of the mainstream fashion industry.

To shed some light on this issue, we commissioned a poll of the UK public on how they buy and use clothing, and what they would like to see change. The results are remarkable – we are highly aware of the damage caused by plastics and petrochemicals, but are reluctant to admit that we regularly buy clothing that contains synthetic materials. The public want greater action and transparency on the use of petrochemicals in the fashion supply chain. To this end, we've recommended some next steps that we think could help in the fight against plastics – including a tax on plastics in clothing, a ban on marketing, and a new textile commission for the UK.

At the RSA we've been working on the impacts of fast fashion, and plastics, for some time. As part of our [Regenerative Futures](#) programme, we aim to show how the fashion system can be a source of health for people and ecosystems and are working on experimental projects which exemplify how this different future could look, act and feel. This has included supporting young design talent to design for a circular economy and working with pioneering small and medium-sized businesses, across manufacturing, marketing and design, to increase their collective influence within fashion. This spring, we'll also be publishing the results of a project in Leeds on creating local sustainable fashion systems.



KEY FINDINGS

Our survey has revealed that the UK public want to see action on the use of petrochemicals in fashion, but that that few of us realise how much plastic goes into our clothing.

The public wants action on plastics.

Three quarters of us (76%) want to see fewer plastics and petrochemicals used in the production of clothing. We also want our clothes to be designed to last longer, and be repairable (77%), alongside a desire to feel less pressure from social media (63%) and advertising (61%) to shop. The public see both the government and consumers playing a role in tackling environmental impacts of clothing – regulation and consumer behaviour change score equally on 59%.

However, there is an 'awareness gap' when it comes to the use of plastics in our clothing.

67% say that they try to reduce the amount of plastic they use in their day to day lives, such as in packaging. But a third of us say that we regularly buy clothing containing synthetic material. This doesn't tally with the amount of synthetic fibres actually bought and produced – synthetic fibres already account for 69% of all textile production worldwide, a number which is set to rise to 73% over the next decade.

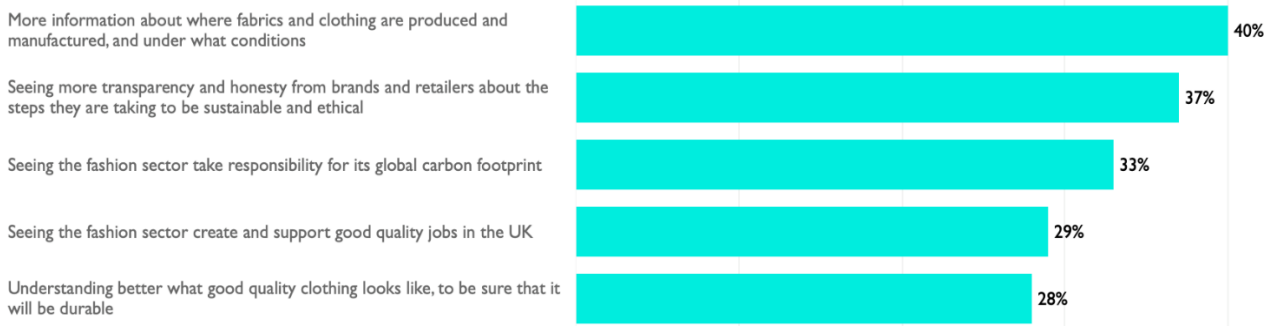
49% of those who regularly buy fast fashion admit to buying clothing that contain synthetic materials, a number which is likely far below what is actually purchased - fast fashion relies heavily on cheap fabrics with a high percentage of synthetic fibres for keeping prices low. It is worth noting, however, that synthetic fibres are found across all price points within clothing retail. Our survey also suggests that young people are less likely to feel like plastics are a problem in fashion (66%, vs 76% for the population as a whole).

We need better information on how our clothes are made.

We asked the public what steps would encourage them to make more sustainable choices when shopping for clothing. Most popular was greater information about fabrics and where they come from, and we would also like to see the fashion sector take responsibility for its carbon footprint. Despite recent scandals in UK clothing factories, bringing back clothes production to the UK also scored highly – a measure which would allow us to tackle some of the exploitative working practices and environmental damage which plagues the textile supply chain.



Which, if any, of the following would encourage you to make more sustainable choices when shopping for clothes?



We have changed our buying habits over the course of the pandemic.

62% of us say that we've bought less clothing since the start of the first lockdown, which may be a result of 49% of us saying that we've felt less pressure to do so. A small number of us have also seen the pandemic as an opportunity to change how we treat our clothes – 17% say they have mended more clothing than usual, and 19% of us intend to repair our clothes more after the lockdown ends.

It remains to be seen whether this behaviour change will last - 29% are looking forward to buying new clothes when shops open up again, including 41% of 18-24 year olds, the largest consumers of fast fashion according to our survey. In spite of this, some have used fashion as a pick-me-up while stuck inside - 29% of the public also say that they've bought new clothing as a treat during lockdown, including nearly half (47%) of 18-24s.

Those who regularly shop at online fast fashion websites are twice as likely as the rest of the sample to be excited about shopping again, at 49% - bringing worries that we may be ready to pick up our pre-pandemic fast fashion habit again when restrictions lift. Many of us will have become accustomed to a life less oriented toward shopping - we need to be careful to avoid a post-pandemic splurge on cheap disposable clothes.

Overall, these findings show that while there is a desire for change in the fashion industry, this isn't necessarily reflected public's buying habits. It is likely that a relatively small proportion of the population are responsible for a large proportion of the clothes that are bought. The next stage of this work will be to unpick who is buying fast fashion, who is repairing, reusing and recycling, and who his buying sustainably; and what can be done to stem the tide of clothes ending up in landfill and in our environment – watch this space.



NEXT STEPS

These findings suggest that there's more to be done in terms of both raising awareness of the plastics problem in our clothes, and in shifting industry practices towards sustainability. There is no simple way of unpicking a global supply and disposal chain, but there are measures we can take today.

Tackling the scale of the plastics problem in fashion will take action from government, producers and consumers – we cannot expect the industry to self-regulate, and suggesting the public 'vote with their wallets' unnecessarily takes responsibility away from those producing these plastics in the first place. The need for action is urgent given the worrying levels of microfibres present in our environments, air and even our food-chain, and ever-increasing global emissions. A solution will take cooperation from those involved at every stage of the product life cycle. As a start, we suggest:

1. The government should explore a marketing ban on clothing made from fossil-fuel derived materials, beginning with those made from virgin fibres, in a similar vein to successful bans on fast-food, cigarettes and alcohol.
2. The government should also consider a tax on clothing imported into or produced in the UK using virgin plastics, in order to disincentivise the extraction of fossil-fuels destined to become clothing. Income should be used to invest in new innovations in biomaterials and circular economy infrastructure.
3. More broadly, we need an independent commission for the future of fashion. In addition to reviewing the UK's policies on addressing the immediate social and environmental challenges of the sector, this should focus on harnessing opportunities for the UK to play a leading role in developing a circular and regenerative fashion system, including innovation in biomaterials, regional supply chains and the creation of high-quality jobs.
4. Fashion brands should commit to eliminating fossil-fuel derived plastics from their clothing and supply chains. This should involve creating policies, metrics and incentives within the business to drive change, including providing transparent information to consumers.
5. Citizens can help encourage change from fashion brands by asking for transparency on supply chains and by demanding synthetic-free clothing.

The eye-watering levels of plastics in our environment can at times seem insurmountable – it will be a generational challenge to undo the damage caused by fossil fuels and the careless disposal of synthetic textiles. By learning from positive steps in packaging and consumer goods, a coalition of government regulation, consumer action and a commitment from the industry to change their practices could start to stem the tide of cheap, disposable plastic in the fashion supply chain.

For more information, including the full data tables, contact Josie Warden on josie.warden@rsa.org.uk.

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