

What (not) should fashion be?



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Elegant and casual, classic and modern... the fashion terms are innumerable. Recently, however, the fashion discussion has almost been taken over by the opposite pair: fast and slow, or fast and slow, sometimes called sustainable, although these terms are not always used interchangeably.

Initiatives are also emerging to join the conversation and promote pro-environmental consumer attitudes. In the following text you will read about one of them - the Polish-Macedonian “Stop fast fashion” project.

Industry's impact on the environment

The fashion industry has been under criticism for several years over its adverse environmental impact.

It is estimated to be responsible for:

- 8 to 10% of global carbon dioxide emissions (which is 4 - 5 billion tons per year)
- the consumption of 79 trillion liters of water per year (that's roughly the amount of water that flows through the Vistula River in two and a half years)^[1]
- About 20% of industrial water pollution from textile processing and dyeing
- 35% of primary microplastics in the oceans
- 92 million tons per year of textile waste^[2]



[1] Own calculations based on data on the average annual flow of the Vistula River in Tczew:

<https://www.imgw.pl/sites/default/files/2022-01/imgw-pib-monografia-2022.01-metody-obliczania-przeplywu-sredniego-niskiego-sqn-calosc-min.pdf>

[2] Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H., Perry, P., Rissanen, T., & Gwilt, A. (2020). The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nature Reviews : Earth and Environment*, 1, 189-200. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9>

What (not) should fashion be?



What is fast fashion?

In terms of negative impact on the environment, fast fashion - the phenomenon of quickly launching fashionable yet cheap clothes - is the worst. Brands using this model of operation, release many collections in a year, relying on cheap labor and low-quality materials.^[3] It has become customary to talk this way about companies that launched several hundred new items each week.

One Chinese company in the industry has set the infamous bar so high that in its case the term “ultrafast fashion” is more appropriate. Shein, as it is referred to, produces up to 10,000 new designs every day.

According to McKinsey, fast fashion companies are transforming their business models by introducing:

- **Flexible and scalable supply chains:** they work with large networks of suppliers, who often produce exclusively for them.
- **Data-driven design:** they use trend and demand analysis to design and select products based on popularity and customer feedback.
- **Loyal customer base:** they develop this through marketing programs with influencers and community building on social media, which lowers customer acquisition costs.



[3] <https://goodonyou.eco/what-is-fast-fashion/>

What (not) should fashion be?



- **Engagements in mobile apps:** gamify the user experience by offering loyalty points for activities such as feedback or watching live broadcasts^[4]

The need for free fashion

As a counter to fast fashion, a slow fashion movement is developing, focused on:

- **High-quality and long-lasting clothing:** garments are usually made from natural (such as wool, cotton, linen) or recycled fabrics, and the materials and production techniques used are chosen to extend the life cycle of the products as much as possible.
- **Ethics:** the slow fashion movement promotes decent working conditions, as well as local production that supports reducing the carbon footprint resulting from transportation.
- **Minimizing waste:** clothes produced in this trend are often timeless, so they do not succumb to temporary trends.^[5]
- **Transparency:** companies associated with slow fashion often employ transparent production practices, allowing consumers to make informed choices about their purchases.^[6]



[4] <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-fast-fashion>

[5] <https://italianartisan.com/what-is-slow-fashion/>

[6] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christophermarquis/2021/05/14/what-does-slow-fashion-actually-mean/>

What (not) should fashion be?



Consumer attitudes in the spirit of slow fashion

Consumer attitudes associated with the idea of slow fashion reflect a conscious approach to shopping and a concern for quality, ethics and the environment.

We can mention here:

- making thoughtful decisions and avoiding compulsive purchases
- focusing on quality rather than quantity
- supporting ethical brands
- buying second-hand clothes
- taking conscious care of your closet
- repairing instead of throwing away.

Closet / capsule closet

The realization of building a closet in the spirit of slow fashion can be a capsule closet, a concept that promotes a minimalist approach to fashion, which involves having a limited number of clothes that can be combined with each other to create a variety of styles.



What (not) should fashion be?



“Stop fast fashion” initiative

Capsule closet is the leitmotif of the winning blogs (and vlogs) submitted in the competition organized as part of the “Stop fast fashion” project. The project is implemented by the Polish Foundation for Development Education and Innovation and the Macedonian association “MATA”.

The winners of the competition - Elena Olehovna Hrom, Matea Makarovska and Magda Cichomska - were announced on October 16, 2024, during the “Stop fast fashion” webinar organized as part of Erasmus Days. The virtual meeting was not only an opportunity to settle the competition and announce the winners, but also an opportunity to engage in a discussion concerning the fashion industry.

Here are the projects of the contest winners:

1. Matea Makarovska from Macedonia:
<https://youtube.com/shorts/Ysr79tD4rQk?feature=share>
2. Elena Hrom from Ukraine:
<https://youtube.com/shorts/rRhONl3dOBg?feature=shared>
https://youtube.com/shorts/df6_rFrUkrs?feature=shared ;
<https://youtube.com/shorts/HeCsjnduQGw?feature=shared>
3. Magdalena Cichomska from Poland:
<https://tycikraft.blogspot.com/2024/09/szafa-kapsukowa-i-juz-masz-w-co-sie.html>



What (not) should fashion be?



Among the current and beneficial (in the context of promoting slow fashion) transformations of the clothing sector, the experts mentioned:

- upcycling, i.e. giving new life to unused and unwanted items
- popularization of vintage fashion
- changing shopping habits
- sustainable consumer attitudes.

Participants of the meeting could also meet representatives of the Macedonian organization SIEC, which focuses on social integration. It develops various projects related to slow fashion and upcycling, among other things. Real-life examples of items created by improving damaged/unwanted products, became a contribution to the conversation about the prices of clothes and accessories that have undergone upcycling.

About the project “Stop fast fashion”

The main objective of the Polish-Macedonian initiative is to prepare young people, students and teachers to actively participate in the fashion industry in a more sustainable and conscious manner, and to raise their awareness of the impact of fast fashion on the environment and the local community.

The results of the project include: e-learning courses on the sustainable fashion sector for vocational education teachers, scenarios for teachers for workshops with young people along with educational and multimedia materials on sustainable fashion, international conference with sustainable fashion show. We invite you to participate in the project!



What (not) should fashion be?



The effects of the project can be followed on the FERI Foundation Platform:

<https://feriplatform.org.pl/stop-fast-fashion/>

<https://feriplatform.org.pl/stop-fast-fashion-eng/>

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