

# Slow Fashion<sup>1</sup>

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1. Level	UG
2. Pre-requisite knowledge required by educators	A. No background knowledge required
3. Pre-requisite knowledge required by students	A. No background knowledge required
4. Number of students	Any number
5. Length of time required	20 minutes (reading only)
6. Type of activity	Article
7. Discipline	Business, Cross-curricular, Design
8. Topics covered	Care and repair, Consumers, Environment, Fair trade, Second hand clothes, Slow Fashion, Textiles, Working conditions

## FOLLOW UP / RELATED ACTIVITIES

'Designing Slow Fashion' by Kate Fletcher, in this Handbook.

## OBJECTIVES / LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To begin to understand the implications of fast economic speed on workers.
- To appreciate the existence of other types of speed on fashion production and consumption.



Fast fashion has become a defining characteristic of today's textile and clothing industry. It is a combination of high speed production and high speed, high volume consumption. It is made possible by the tracking of sales with electronic tills and just-in-time manufacturing where a sample or design sketch is turned into a finished product in as little as three weeks; and growing consumer demand – a recent report revealed that people are buying one-third more garments than four years ago<sup>ii</sup>, fuelled by the rise of cheap clothes and 'value' retailers like Primark and Matalan. Yet super cheap, 'value' or 'fast fashion' garments are no quicker to make or consume than any other garment. The fibre takes the same amount of time to grow regardless of a product's speed to market (in the case of cotton, around eight months to cultivate and two to ship). Likewise, the raw material takes the same amount of time to be spun, knitted or woven, cleaned, bleached, dyed, printed, cut and sewn; and the activity of going shopping and laundering the garment takes the same amount of time regardless of how speedily a design makes it from studio to high street retailer.

'Fast' in the case of today's fashion industry describes economic speed. Time is just one of the factors of production along with labour, capital and natural resources that get juggled and squeezed in the pursuit of maximising throughput of goods for increased profits. But increasing the speed of production and consumption comes at a cost. Rapidly changing style and novelty is workable only because clothing is so cheap (indeed, over the last fifteen years, the price of garments has been falling), made possible by the shifting of production to low cost countries, and by putting downward pressure on working conditions and environmental standards, the so-called 'race to the bottom'.

But there are other views of time and speed which acknowledge not just economic speed but also nature's speed and the pace of cultural change. These other views give us a key portal into the designing and making of more sustainable, user centred and worker-friendly fabrics and garments. These views provide us with a multi-layered focus on speed that is a marked shift in emphasis away from the status quo in today's industry where fashion is mass-produced and fashion and textiles are consumed en masse. They are part of a different world view, where a sensitivity to speed in both production and consumption is transformed into a force for quality (of environment, society, pay, working conditions and products, etc.) In this

world view we design ourselves a different system that makes money and also respects the rights of workers and the environment and at the same time produces beautiful and conscientious garments. This different system is described here as *slow fashion*.

Slow fashion is about designing, producing, consuming better. Slow fashion is not time-based but quality-based (which has some time components). Slow is not the opposite of fast – there is no dualism – it is simply a different approach in which designers, buyers, retailers and consumers are more aware of the impact of products on workers, communities and ecosystems. The concept of slow fashion borrows heavily from the Slow Food Movement. Founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy in 1986, Slow Food links pleasure and food with awareness and responsibility. It seeks to defend biodiversity in our food supply by opposing the standardisation of taste, defending the need for consumer information, and protecting cultural identities tied to food. It has spawned a wealth of other slow movements. Slow Cities, for example, design with slow values but within the context of a town or city and are committed to improving the quality of life for its citizens.

Thus, slow is about a shift from quantity to quality. In melding the slow movement's ideas with the global clothing industry, we build a new vision for fashion in the era of sustainability: where pleasure and fashion are linked with awareness and responsibility. Slow fashion is all about choice, information, cultural diversity and identity. Yet perhaps most critically, it is also about balance. It is about recognising that slow fashion is a combination of rapid imaginative change and symbolic (fashion) expression as well as material durability, quality making and long-term, engaging products. Slow fashion supports our psychological needs (to form identity, communicate with others, be creative through our clothes) as well as our material needs (to keep warm and be protected from extremes of climate).

Fast fashion, as it exists today, strikes no such balance. Indeed, it is largely disconnected from the reality of poverty wages, forced overtime and climate change. And fast fashion has little recognition of the fact that we are now less happy than our parents and our grandparents were, even though we own more material stuff. Slow fashion, in contrast, is produced and consumed differently to fast fashion. The heightened awareness of other stakeholders

and speeds in slow fashion, along with the emphasis on quality, gives rise to different relationships between designer and maker; maker and garment; garment and user. Recognising and designing with speeds other than just a fast commercial pace takes the pressure off time. Garments are still mass-produced, but they are done so in supplier factories that pay living wages and maintain high standards. Mutually beneficial relationships between retailers, brands and their suppliers are fostered over the longer term. This helps erase the unpredictability for suppliers of small volume orders and short lead times that frequently lead to the use of temporary workers and the forced overtime that have become the hallmark of today's economics driven fashion.

The balance implicit in slow fashion comes from combining newness and innovation with long-term stability. Only in finding some equilibrium between these speeds will quality be achieved. Quality normally comes at a price and at least some slow fashion pieces will cost substantially more than they do today, reflecting their materials, workmanship and values. This will result in us buying fewer high value, slow-to-consume products and bring key resource savings. It has been suggested, for example, that the sector could halve its materials use without economic loss if consumers paid a higher price for a product that lasted twice as long<sup>iii</sup>. Yet, other slow fashion pieces may cost the same or even less than today. These will be specifically designed to be resource-efficient, quick-to-consume products developed, say, as part of carefully planned closed materials cycles.

Slow fashion is a glimpse of a different – and more sustainable - future for the textile and clothing sector, and an opportunity for business to be done in a way that respects workers, environment and consumers in equal measure. Here are some tips to slow down your wardrobe:

- Repair your clothes with a smile (it's easier than going shopping).
- Ask stores about repair services (that may get them thinking).
- Ask your friends for new ideas about how to wear the garments you already have (it's always good to get new views on how to wear old things).

<sup>i</sup> This is a part excerpt from Kate Fletcher's book, *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys* (2008) London: Earthscan.

<sup>ii</sup> Allwood, J. M., Laursen, S. E., Malvido de Rodriguez, C. and Bocken, N. M. P. (2006) *Well Dressed?* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Institute of Manufacturing, p12.

<sup>iii</sup> Allwood, J. M., Laursen, S. E., Malvido de Rodriguez, C. and Bocken, N. M. P. (2006) *Well Dressed?* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Institute of Manufacturing, p4.

This is an excerpt from:

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