

What are the environmental costs of current consumer trends, behaviours and purchasing decisions?

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With the global market value of fast fashion approximated to hit 133bn \$USD in 2026 (Statista, 2022), current consumer trends, behaviours and purchasing decisions have the power to impact the environment prodigiously. Companies such as H&M and Zara are just two names amongst the giant fast fashion retail brands that claim they are partaking in the rising trend of using recycled plastic in their clothes – but is this simply a façade of sustainability that is ultimately yet another exemplification of greenwashing?

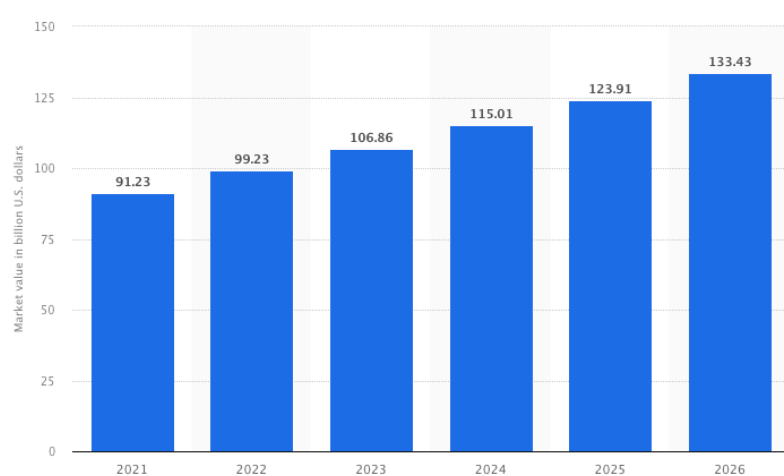


Fig.A - Sourced from Statista, showing the fast fashion market value

Sustainable trends have been on the rise as an increasing number of consumers globally have expressed their interest in taking steps to ensure they are actively taking on the role of being drivers of change. This has been exemplified by an independent study which claimed that '4 out of 5 people describe themselves as likely to choose a brand with a positive approach to environmental sustainability' (SmartestEnergy, 2021). This study also emphasised that this is increasingly true for the newer generations. Ultimately, brands are aware of this and therefore capitalising on this trend is beneficial to them from a business viewpoint. Utilising branding with slogans such as 'conscious choice' makes consumers feel as if they are becoming a part of this active change in the name of sustainability when making purchasing decisions.

Recycled polyethylene terephthalate (rPET) is the recycled plastic that is used to manufacture these clothing items. Brands such as Adidas has already switched over half of its polyester for rPET (Financial Times, 2022). Some online fast fashion brands that are known for offering clothes at relatively cheap prices (Boohoo, ASOS, PLT) are struggling to meet such figures as the immense cost of rPET disrupts their ability to offer such prices. So, their usage of recycled plastics is much lower - at below 5%. However, popular high street brands – such as H&M - fit into neither of these categories. Whilst their usage of rPET currently sits at just under 6%, they aim to drastically change this in the coming

decade and increase this to 100%. This displays the eagerness of some brands to jump on this trend - perhaps without considering if it actually tackles the specific problem. An increase in the use of recycled plastic is, in fact, not necessarily doing so with regards to the environmental issues that have arisen from the clothing industry and its extensive contribution to plastic pollution, contrary to what consumers may think.

Microfibres are the key problem in the case of recycled plastic. Synthetic microfibres are plastic fragments no bigger than 5mm in size that are shed from clothes, particularly when they are spun and rinsed when washed. They have direct negative impacts on the environment. For starters, they contain toxic chemicals meaning that they harm aquatic organisms which unknowingly ingest them – thereby negatively affecting the marine ecosystem. Shed microfibres can even lead to negative health effects in humans through cancer and reproductive problems, though this link has not been proven to a sufficient degree. Moreover, microfibres have a link to negatively impacting soil fauna and the functions of soil by a multitude of means. As well as weakening soil stability, in an investigation into how soil PH is affected, it was found that soil PH increased in the presence of microfibres and there was found to be less microbial activity (Zhao et al, 2021). These factors are both crucial in soil reactions so that their functions can be carried out effectively. The key reason as to why the magnitude of this environmental cost is so great is the very high persistence of these microfibres - they take up to thousands of years to decompose. Given that the clothing industry alone accounts for 34.8% of global microplastic pollution (Boucher and Friot, 2017), it is clear that these brands have the power to slash the pernicious impact that the shedding of microfibres is having on the environment and aquatic life. Logically, an approach that is genuinely sustainable would have to encompass negating the ways in which these after-effects (as opposed to the manufacturing process) have an impact on the environment. As it so happens, recycled plastic still contributes to the problem as it sheds microfibres. If this solution is not directed at the real issue, then surely concocting this image of recycled plastic being the 'green' and 'sustainable' option could potentially be doing more harm than good as it misleads the average consumer into believing that this is a long-term solution? In reality, this solution is neither long-term nor very effective. The notion that using recycled plastic to minimise these environmental costs is as harmful as it is fallacious.

Though, it is not to say that there are zero benefits. Issue 1 in volume 55 of the 'Resources, Conservation and Recycling' journal presented a life cycle assessment which suggested that rPET could save a significant amount of non-renewable energy. This implies that greenhouse gas emissions too could see a notable reduction of up to 75%. Despite this, due to this energy saving occurring at the very beginning of the manufacturing process and not targeting the after-effects (namely the shedding of microfibres) which - as discussed earlier - is the cause of a greater proportion of the issue, this benefit is not as effective in negating the environmental costs. I find there is no evidence to suggest any longevity within this factor.

Most sustainable trends do not tend to be 'green' in actuality, unlike how they appear. These trends have shown to impact consumer purchasing decisions strikingly and this is causing environmental costs such as the harm to marine life to be amplified. In future, I think that brands ought to take more care when selling the idea of sustainability to

consumers. As time goes on, given that brands are putting a greater emphasis on 'sustainable trends' due to the positive effect it has on consumer purchasing decisions, the harm to the environment may well increase exponentially.

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