

THE BIG DEBATE: ARE CLOTHES TOO CHEAP?



THE DILEMMA

A lot of clothes are very cheap. International clothing chain H&M, which has more than 4,000 stores worldwide, sells dresses starting at £8.99 and T-shirts for as little as £3.99 in the UK. This is great if you don't have much money, or if you like to have a big wardrobe, but it raises some important questions: what is the quality of the clothing like? How long will it last before you need to buy a replacement? Are we wasting perfectly good clothes needlessly? And are people being paid very low wages so that these clothes can be sold so cheaply?

Clothes also leave a large **carbon footprint**. A staggering 26 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions are caused by clothes, from their manufacture to disposal. This means clothing has the fourth biggest impact on the environment, after housing, transport and food.

What's more, a quarter of all clothes in the UK are binned instead of recycled, meaning they end up in landfill sites. Some 300,000 tonnes of clothing was sent to landfill in 2016 – that's as heavy as 23,700 double decker buses!

CARBON FOOTPRINT

The amount of carbon dioxide (a greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming) released into the atmosphere as a result of the activities of a particular individual, business or organisation.



THE OPINIONS

“Our purpose is to provide... clothing that is great value for money. In doing [this] well we know we contribute to making millions of people's lives better.” – **George Weston, CEO of Associated British Foods (Parent company of Primark)**

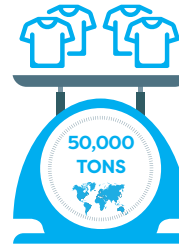
“Low-cost clothing is produced, sold and finally discarded in mass quantities, which has serious consequences for the environment, the workers paid poorly to make them, and even the mental well-being of the people buying them.” – **Marc Bain, fashion reporter**

FACTS & FIGURES

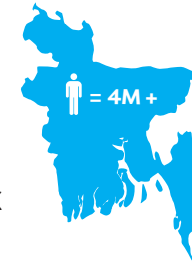
The UK clothing industry is worth more than **£40 billion**



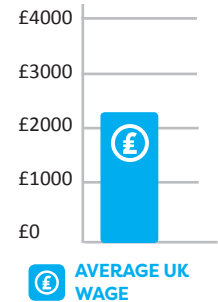
H&M stores worldwide have collected more than **50,000** tonnes of clothing for reuse and recycling since 2013



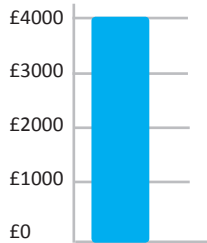
More than **4 million** people work in Bangladesh's garment industry, making clothes sold in western countries such as the UK and USA



The average UK wage is **£2,300** a month



The average UK house contains **£4,000** worth of clothes!



Clothes retailer Marks & Spencer recorded sales of **£10.6 billion** last year



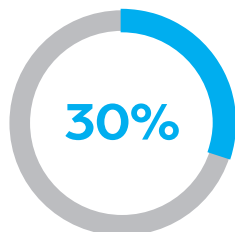
In countries including Bangladesh, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Cambodia, workers earn less than **\$100 (£75)** a month



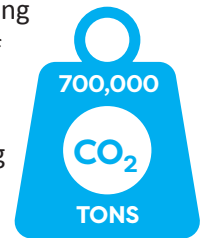
The clothing industry employs **555,000** people in the UK



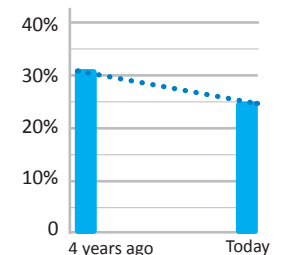
30% of an average UK wardrobe has not been worn in a year



UK householders are saving **700,000 tonnes** of carbon dioxide a year by washing clothes at lower temperatures and ironing and tumble-drying them less



25% of clothes in Britain end up in the bin. **4** years ago the figure was **31%**





RATIONING
of Clothing, Cloth, Footwear and Knitting Wool has begun.

Since last Sunday, June 1st, cloth, clothes, boots, shoes and knitting-wool are rationed. A list of rationed goods, with the number of coupons they require has been published in the newspapers.

The new arrangements will take a few days to settle down. Meantime you will lose nothing by postponing your purchases. Shops will have their usual supplies, and NO ONE will be able to buy more than YOU are entitled to.

A pamphlet about rationing issued in 1941

DID YOU KNOW?

For most of the Second World War (1939-1945), clothes were rationed (limited) in the UK. The rationing scheme worked by allocating each type of clothing item a number of points, which varied according to how much material and work went into its manufacture. When you saved up your points, you could buy some clothing. For example, 11 coupons were needed for a dress, two for a pair of stockings and eight for a man's shirt or a pair of trousers.

HIGH STREET DEALS

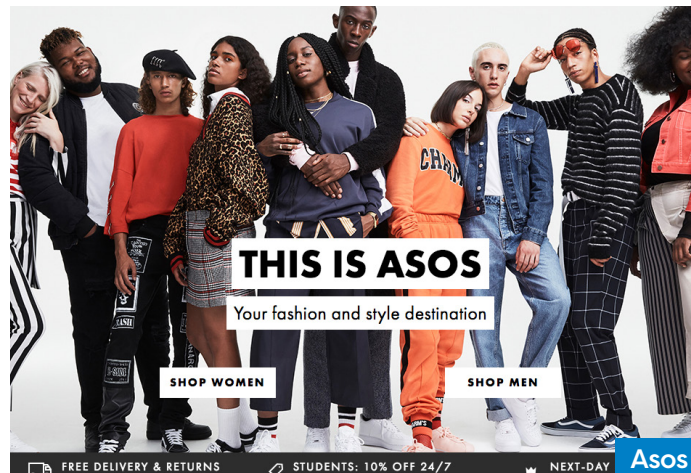
Before the 1990s, many shops in the UK used British factories to manufacture the clothes and shoes they sold. But companies began producing their items in Asia as the decade went on, because it was much cheaper to pay an Asian worker than a British one. Today, almost all the clothing we buy from high street chains such as Top Shop, Next and Primark, or online stores such as Asos, are manufactured in Asia. Some of the most popular low-price fashion retailers in the UK are:



H&M



Primark



Asos



Topshop

CLOTHING SUPPLY CHAIN

So you save up some money to buy a new pair of jeans. Then, on a Saturday morning you jump on the bus, head to the high street and begin browsing the stores. You find a pair you love, so you try them on. They fit like a glove, you buy them, take them home and feel good. But where did those jeans come from? They are part of something called a supply chain. Here's how it works:



1

The materials to make clothes are sourced. For example, cotton plants are grown and then harvested ready to be weaved into fibres.



2

Low-paid workers turn the materials into garments in factories. Most UK retailers use factories in Asia, Turkey and Eastern Europe.



3

Clothes are delivered to stores via worldwide distribution networks. This involves the clothes being moved from factories to shops by modes of transport such as ships, lorries and aeroplanes.



4

The clothes are sold to customers online and on shop shelves.

LOW WAGES; CHEAP CLOTHING



Workers at a clothing factory in India

Cheap clothes also means cheap workers, as the people who are paid to make the garments are often paid low wages – even by their country's standards. Last year, a campaign group called Labour Behind the Label said that workers making clothes for Marks & Spencer in Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh were still earning less than half what they need for a decent living. This was six years after the store promised to pay a living wage (enough money for people to

get by). Labour Behind the Label said that workers from three factories in Sri Lanka, three in India and two in Bangladesh were all being paid below the amount required for a dignified standard of living. Many of the workers in Sri Lanka were living in poor, crowded accommodation with no running water. The workers' pay averaged £64 per month, but campaigners say they need £158 to meet their most basic needs, such as food and clothing.

DANGEROUS CONDITIONS

One of the major criticisms leveled at stores that sell cheap clothes made in overseas factories is that the working conditions for the people who manufacture the garments are not safe enough.

In 2013, more than 1,100 people died and 2,500 were injured when an eight-storey clothes factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh collapsed. The building contained five garment factories that supplied global brands including Primark, Benetton and US store Walmart.

Although health and safety conditions have improved in Bangladeshi clothes factories, workers still feel exploited. Nazma Akter, the founder of an organisation that campaigns for workers' rights in Bangladesh, said: " [The workers] have higher production targets. If they cannot fulfil them they have to work extra hours but with no overtime. It is very tough; they cannot go for toilet breaks or to drink water. They become sick. They are getting the minimum wage as per legal requirements but they are not getting a living wage."



The site of the collapsed clothes factory in Bangladesh



CLOTHES WASTE

Ever since clothes became cheaper and more easily accessible, they also became more disposable. This means people are more likely to throw away clothes after one season of wear so they can follow trends and buy something new. According to Wrap (the Waste and Resources Action Programme), the average piece of clothing in the UK lasts for just 3.3 years before being thrown out. Wrap says that people in the UK bought 1.13 million tonnes of new clothing last year. Cheap clothes encourage people to buy more items more often, adding to the waste problem. Is it time we spent more and bought less?

BUT PEOPLE NEED CHEAP CLOTHES

Over a million people in the UK earn the minimum wage, which is the lowest amount a person can be paid by law. For people over 25, it will be £7.83 per hour from April 2018, while for people aged 18-20, it will just be £5.90 per hour from April 2018. For people on low wages, cheap clothes aren't about being 'on trend'. Without the cheap high street and online retailers, they simply wouldn't be able to afford the clothes they need. In the 19th century, the Salvation Army ran second-hand clothes shops to provide poor people with cheap clothing;

nowadays, a pair of trousers costs just £6 in some high street shops. Isn't that a good thing?

Although it's all well and good saying clothes are too cheap, perhaps we need to focus more on education and campaigning than on ramping up the price. Teaching people to recycle clothes rather than chuck them, and to campaign for factories to improve working conditions for their staff, would be better ways of improving the clothing supply chain without punishing the consumer.

THE FREE MARKET

A free market is an environment where businesses and people can trade freely with as few rules and regulations as possible. The prices for goods and wages are decided by how easy and cheap they are to manufacture and how popular they are with consumers. The reason clothes are so cheap, therefore, is that consumers – us – want cheap clothes. The reason they can afford to be so cheap is that factories in Asia will produce them far cheaper than factories in Europe. People who support a free market would say that clothes are the right price and it would be wrong to impose taxes or force retailers to increase the charges, because it is wrong to interfere in a free market.



RESTRICTING THE MARKET

Airline flights are taxed, partly to encourage us to fly less and therefore reduce the UK's greenhouse gas emissions. Cigarettes are heavily taxed to discourage people from smoking. Plastic bags from big stores – including clothes shops – now cost 5p to discourage plastic pollution and waste. All these measures do restrict the freedom of the market, but taxes and extra charges can and do change the way we shop for the better. After the plastic bag charge was introduced there was an 85% drop in usage in England. If the UK Government really wanted to reduce clothes waste and encourage clothes stores to make better quality clothing at a higher price, they could.



The 5p bag charge has made a radical change

CHARITY DONATIONS

Not all unwanted clothing ends up in the bin. There are more than 11,000 charity shops in the UK, many of which accept clothing donations. They sell the garments on and a portion of the money goes to fund the charity's work. According to the Charity Retail Association, a group that represents the UK's charity shops, stores "raise over £270 million for a range of causes in the UK" and they "function as a way of raising awareness of the charity". Clothing makes up the majority of what they sell. If we make new clothes more expensive, it's likely less will be bought. The knock-on effect of this would be that fewer second-hand items are donated to charity shops.



YES, CLOTHES ARE TOO CHEAP



1. We are buying too much – We are buying tonnes of clothes every year and much of this ends up being chucked. Fashion trends mean people do not keep clothes for very long, which is wasteful. We should spend more on less and keep it for longer.

2. Workers are being exploited – The reason our clothes can be so cheap is because workers somewhere in the world are being exploited. They are paid very little and forced to work in sometimes dangerous conditions. By buying the cheap clothes they produce, we encourage the unfair system to continue.

3. The environment is suffering – With so many tonnes of clothes ending up in landfill sites, we are literally throwing away materials and fabrics. The world is suffering a pollution and resources crisis, yet the cheap clothes industry continues to encourage terrible waste.

NO, CLOTHES ARE NOT TOO CHEAP



1. Clothes are now accessible to everyone – There was a time when people who earned low wages had to make do with old, damaged clothing because they couldn't afford new things. While some people still cannot afford to buy new clothes, cheap garments mean that a lot of people, including people on low wages, can buy clothing.

2. The clothes industry creates jobs – The UK clothes industry alone is responsible for more than half a million jobs. Although workers in factories are not paid as much as they might be, it's better that they have a low-paid job than no job at all.

3. Let the market decide the price – We shouldn't interfere with successful private businesses by introducing punishing charges. The clothing industry gives thousands of people a job and provides millions of people with affordable clothing. It is not up to a government or anybody else to interfere and impose charges like this.



Discuss

Do you enjoy clothes shopping?



Where do you buy clothes?



Discuss

Would you buy second-hand clothes from a charity shop?



Discuss

What matters more to you: good quality or low price?



Would you pay more for better quality clothing?



Discuss

Do you think we should keep our clothes for longer or do you like to be on trend and update your wardrobe regularly?



Discuss

Should people who manufacture our clothing be paid more?



Do you and your family recycle old clothing or chuck it in the bin?



Discuss

Is it up to the Government to step in and force the clothing industry to be more responsible?



Does making something more expensive mean people are less likely to buy it?