

CONFESSIONS OF A FORMER FAST-FASHION ADDICT

An article by Chloe Grant

Picture the scene: it's 2016. I'm sixteen, a high school student and aspiring vlogger – be honest, in those days, who wasn't? I'd seen the magic formula play out for so many other girls across YouTube: buy a bunch of stuff, style it up, flog it, and BAM - you're famous. I thought, why not give it a try? And so, my fast fashion addiction began. I'd buy huge hauls of items, flaunt them across social media, constantly on the hunt for that hit of newness and the thrill of wearing the latest trends.

Maybe your coming-of-age came five years later, where TikTok was dictating the trends, or maybe twenty years prior when it was the glossy pages of Vogue that was telling you what to wear. Either way, if you've ever dabbled in the addictive world of fast-fashion, then you know what it's like to first enter that world of fast-paced trends and style. From the get-go it's a race, one that you're doomed to never quite win, because there's always something shiny and new waiting in the wings.

Fast forward almost a decade and my relationship with fashion is entirely different, so much so that for readers who know me personally they're probably quite taken aback to know that I've ever perused SheIn, let alone ordered from them. So, what changed? How did I transform myself from fast-fashion addict to sustainable fashion activist? Well, it was certainly a journey, but one I am incredibly glad that I embarked upon, and one that I encourage you all to try out for yourselves.

Being a part of the sustainable fashion movement can be as inspiring as it is daunting; you are surrounded by people who broadcast this image that they have been shopping secondhand and wearing solely handwoven hemp clothing pretty much since the day they were born, and it can project this fear on to you, that you've had your epiphany too late, or that, maybe, it's not even worth having at all; it makes you scared that the damage is already done.

When I first dipped a toe in to sustainability I felt as if the people around me could read my fast-fashion-polluted mind and were silently judging me for the Zara jeans I'd paired with a Primark top. Even though I'd committed myself to quitting fast fashion I still felt the dark cloud of it looming over me; this new-found guilt I'd acquired that seemed sewn into every item of clothing I'd ever owned. Now, almost a decade on, I can see that this was complete silliness: no one can tell if you're wearing a Primark blouse at first glance. And, even if you are, who is to say you didn't thrift it?

You don't have to be wearing a 'sustainable outfit' to be deemed worthy enough to take part in the sustainable fashion movement – in fact, we'd urge you *not* to do that! Going out and buying a whole new outfit, even if it's sourced entirely from ethical retailers, still has a larger carbon footprint than simply loving and wearing the items you already own. The most 'sustainable outfit' is the one that is sitting right there at home in your wardrobe.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves, first of all we have to tackle the initial breakaway from fast fashion. Maybe you've seen news articles, or posts on Instagram, portraying the devastating effects of fashion pollution, maybe it was Netflix's Buy Now documentary that did it – maybe it's made you reevaluate what you wear, or at the very least, made you look at the fashion industry in a slightly new light. Whatever it is that's sparked this sense of upset and anger at the inequality of it all, cling to that. That anger and guilt that you're feeling after finding out the truth about fast fashion will be the thing to light a fire within you, one that will spur you on to making better consumer decisions, and it will only burn brighter as more time passes.

Think of fast fashion like smoking: in times gone by smoking was seen as attractive, a signal of being cool and distinguished, but one day that all flipped on its head and the truth came out. In the same way one day, hopefully soon, fast fashion won't be viewed as cool. One day the world will wake up and realise that it's not cool, it was never cool, and, worse than that, it's toxic – a killer. If you smoke cigarettes for ten years there will be undeniable effects on your body, but they'd be nothing compared to the effects of smoking for fifty. Fast fashion is the same. Even though your addiction may be short it will have impact – in the form of polyester clothing polluting the planet rather than tar rotting your lungs – but it's never too late to stop that impact metastasising into something bigger.

To continue with the smoking analogy: we are chain smoking garments. A constant cycle of newness from the moment we wake up to the second we fall asleep. The moment we have found and worn a trend it is discarded in favour of something new, and so the cycle perpetuates continually. We are addicted. Fast-fashion surrounds us at every turn; it's on our phones as we mindlessly doom-scroll, it's on the train station walls as we commute to work, on the advert breaks as we watch television, in the magazines we read on our days off – it has infiltrated every single part of our existence. But that doesn't mean it's impossible to leave behind.

When breaking away from your fast fashion addiction you have to treat it as such. In an ideal world it would be fabulous to completely leave it behind, go cold turkey, and never step foot in Zara again, but for most people that's not possible. In fact, holding yourself to such high standards, which you'll almost inevitably break, usually pushes you back into old patterns more quickly, versus slowly weaning yourself off fast fashion.

When making a change in my own life I made a few small, but very effective, changes: I deleted all fast fashion apps off my phone, I unsubscribed from all fashion marketing emails, unfollowed them on social media, and tried to cut out unnecessary trips to the mall. Think of it this way, if I was trying to give up smoking I wouldn't go and stand in a smoking area; in the same way, removing yourself from areas of temptation, such as shopping centres and fast-fashion websites, takes away the chance of being drawn in. Next, I downloaded Whering, a wardrobe organising app, that

allowed me to catalogue all of the clothes I own and style up lesser-worn pieces in the best way possible. Knowing, and loving, the pieces I already owned made me less likely to crave a whole new haul of items. Then, finally, I vowed to always search Vinted, Depop, and eBay for any items I wanted before I would even search the web. Putting this buffer between myself and fast fashion websites worked a charm – and I found so many treasures on these secondhand websites as a result!

So, with all that in mind, would I describe my old self as a bad person? Well, looking through my current sustainable lens, objectively I would have to say yes. However, can I truly be judged for the actions of my young teenage self who lacked the education? Back when I was shopping at stores such as Primark, H&M – and even SheIn – I lacked the understanding of the true cost that is paid when we have access to ultra-cheap, ultra-fast clothing. Now that the effects of this approach to fashion are more widely known it is all of our duty to be the most ethical consumers we possibly can. You want to be able to look back in twenty years and be proud of yourself for making that change, switching your shopping habits, and supporting a more sustainable industry.

Now it's been nearly a decade since I shopped that way and I can't remember the last time I bought a fast-fashion item. I know that can sound like a colossal challenge, one that maybe you feel you'll never reach, but I'm here to tell you that if I go can go from scrolling through SheIn and ordering monthly hauls off ASOS, to loving our planet and respecting the people who make our clothes – then **so can you**. You just have to be brave and take the plunge - your wallet, your wardrobe, and our planet, will thank you for it!