- Dressmaking



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DID YOU KNOW? Every second, a full truckload of clothes is burned or sent to landfill

Humans have been wearing clothes habitually for around 170,000 years. They are essential to protect the body from the elements, absorb sweat and retain heat. But in the modern world, clothes are not only admired for their functionality. Over the centuries, clothes have become increasingly focal in individuals' self-expression and identity. Studies show that wearing certain clothes or appearing well-dressed can impact a person psychologically, building their confidence and bettering their mood. For others, observing the latest fashion trends is a hobby that leaves them feeling a need to over-indulge and copy images of celebrities and models in the media.

Whether a person sources new clothes for practical or fashion purposes, each item is a result of many hours of material-sourcing, weaving, cutting and shaping. As of 2021, 65 per cent of the world's clothes were produced in China, with over 19 billion pieces of clothes being manufactured in the country. China and India are the world's leading producers of cotton, with both countries harvesting a mighty 6 million tonnes a year.

However, the mass production of clothing is taking its toll on the planet, being responsible for ten per cent of carbon emissions. If the way we produce and consume clothes continues, greenhouse gases entering the atmosphere will only increase. But by making more informed choices, we can reduce this damage to the environment. For example, it's estimated that if everyone extended the use of their clothing by nine months, the carbon, water and waste produced by the clothing industry would be 20 to 30 per cent less.

Did you know?
There are 92 million tonnes of textile waste annually

T-SHIRT TALLY

What is the production cost of one cotton t-shirt?

2,700 LITRES
It takes the same volume of water used for 50 washing machine cycles to produce one t-shirt

262%
Making a polyester t-shirt produces nearly three times the carbon of a cotton one

60°C
The temperature needed to dye a t-shirt

226 GRAMS
The cotton used for one t-shirt equals around four cotton plants

16%
Almost one-fifth of global insecticide use is for cotton farming

8,000
The number of synthetic chemicals used to turn raw materials into textiles

SEVEN KILOGRAMS
The carbon dioxide released to produce one t-shirt is equivalent to a small fire extinguisher

TWO SQUARE METRES
The land needed to grow the cotton for each t-shirt

35 TO 50
The number of wash cycles this garment lasts

<1%
A tiny fraction of the t-shirt's total emissions come from delivering the finished product

SYNTHETIC OR NATURAL

What are your clothes made of? All of your clothes contain either synthetic fibres, natural fibres or a combination of the two. Natural fibres are those that are directly derived from nature, while synthetic fibres are produced in a factory using a range of chemical compounds. Some examples of natural fibres include silk and wool from animals and linen and cotton from plants. These can be more environmentally friendly choices, as they do not contain chemicals that could harm the environment when returned to nature. Such materials are often naturally strong, such as the cellulose structure in plant fibres.

When materials are synthetically made, clothes can be mass-produced quickly and easily. The result is cheaper clothing, and specific qualities can be controlled in the production process. This includes thicker and longer fibres for multiple purposes. The downside to this type of fibre is that fossil fuels are required for their manufacturing. Oil can be refined, ultimately to turn certain petrochemicals into long chains called polymers. These are then melted and spun in a machine through small holes to make the fibres for clothes. Polyester, rayon, spandex and acrylic fibres are some examples of synthetic clothing materials.



Polyester is the most common synthetic fibre

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75 million factory workers work in the fast fashion industry, and less than two per cent receive a living wage

FAST FASHION

Instead of fashion trends changing on a yearly basis, some large retailers are now mass-producing inexpensive clothing within two weeks of styles being designed. This 'fast fashion' is damaging to both people and the environment. In order to deliver cheap clothes, many companies resort to hiring people in factories to work long hours while underpaying them. And by encouraging regular changes in fashion trends, clothes are being worn for shorter periods of time, increasing textile waste entering the environment. Usually, these clothes don't last as long, as the low production costs lower the garments' quality. Due to fast fashion, the world now uses 80 billion pieces of clothing in one year – four times as many compared to just 20 years ago.


In the US, 85 per cent of textiles are sent to landfills

HOW CLOTHES DECOMPOSE

Clothes can be produced relatively quickly, but it can take around 200 years for them to decompose. The time taken for clothing fibres to disappear back into nature depends on the type of material used. Some natural fibres, like cotton, only take a few months to decompose, and the process can take around five years for wool. But synthetic fibres can exist in landfills for centuries as they are much less biodegradable. Even when clothing has decomposed, the impact of its existence isn't entirely gone. During the process of degrading, toxic chemicals and greenhouse gases are released into the earth.

COTTON TO CONSUMER

Your carefully crafted clothes undergo a lengthy process from field to fabric



1 COTTON-PICKING
Cotton plants are grown from seeds in cotton farms. Cotton can be picked from the plants' stalks by hand or machine.

5 CUTTING AND STITCHING
In the garment factory, workers cut the cotton into the required shapes and sizes before the cotton patches are sewn together to produce clothes.

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DID YOU KNOW? 60 per cent of women's clothing and 75 per cent of men's contain cotton



2 SPINNING
The cotton is cleaned before being loaded into a spinning machine. This turns and twists the fibres into yarn.

3 WEAVING
A device called a loom is used to weave cotton together into sheets. The strands are interlaced, holding the cotton together.

4 BLEACHING AND DYEING
Heat is used to burn off surface fibres, making the cloth more uniform. Bleach is added to whiten the cotton, while other chemicals remove plant fragments. To add colour, cotton is submerged in dye, or patterns are printed on.

Did you know?
10 to 24 rows of cotton seeds can be planted at once

5 FACTS
STEPS TO A SUSTAINABLE WARDROBE

1 CONSIDER YOUR NEEDS
Ask yourself if you really need an item before buying it. Fashion trends are fleeting and encourage unnecessary purchases.

2 QUALITY OVER QUANTITY
Invest in well-made clothes, which are guaranteed to last for longer periods. The less you have to buy, the less you are contributing to fast fashion.

3 SHOP SECOND-HAND
Purchasing clothes from second-hand websites and charity shops is one way to extend the life of existing clothes and prevent them from entering landfill.

4 CHECK THE LABEL
Acknowledge the materials used in each garment before buying. Opt for those with natural and recycled materials to reduce harmful waste and the need for new resources.

5 CARE AND REPAIR
Take note of labels to see how each garment needs to be washed. This will help the fibres last longer. When clothes become damaged, see if they can be salvaged and try to repair them before replacing.

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