



tearfund

DIGGING DEEPER

# *Conscious Consumption*

A study designed to help you think about how and why we consume clothing, what this means for people on the other side of the world, and the ways we can become more conscious consumers.

## Introduction

**We've designed this study to be used by a group. If you have a group of classmates or friends who want to dive deeper into the idea of conscious consumption, this study is perfect for you to use.**

**This is a big topic, so we've broken it down for you.**

**The first part of the study is called Learn and it's designed to be read ahead of time before you meet as a group. Alternatively, you can carve out some time at the start of your time together to read aloud or silently.**

**The second part of the study is called Reflect and this is the part that we've written especially with your group in mind. In this section, we dive into the nitty gritty of the topic and provide questions to discuss with your group.**

**It might take more than one session to get through all the material. Don't worry! Just take it at your own pace.**

**The study finishes off with a challenge and some suggestions for how you can get started on a journey of conscious consumption.**





## LEARN

### Consumers in a modern, globalised world

Consumption is part of our everyday existence. We have to buy things to survive and there is nothing inherently wrong with this. However, in high-income nations, we consume at a level that is well beyond what we need to sustain ourselves. According to a 2019 report on inequality by Oxfam, the 26 richest people own as many assets as the 3.8 billion people who make up the poorest half of the planet's population.

In the fashion industry, **the rate of consumption has increased 400%** in the past two decades, with **80 billion pieces of clothing** consumed globally every year. You might think garment workers would benefit from this increase in demand, but it's estimated that 98% of garment workers in the fashion industry don't earn enough to meet their basic needs. *Why is this?*

Although demand has increased and the profits earned by global fashion corporations have risen to three trillion dollars a year, the price of clothing has steadily decreased. To make higher profits and be the first to pump out on-trend clothing, fashion corporations compete fiercely. This competition has placed pressure on supply chain manufacturers to deliver the same quality clothing for continuously decreasing costs and time frames. If cotton producers and garment factories can't meet the low-price expectations of fashion companies, they lose the business because the fashion company will just move to a cheaper supplier. This is called fast fashion, *and who does this model negatively affect the most?*

The people who make our clothes. This includes the farmers who grow the cotton, the fabric spinners who create the yarn, and the garment workers who sew the final product.

This downward pressure on price and production time drastically affects workers, as factory managers have little choice but to pay them less, require them to work longer hours, and cut corners on health and safety. This also has negative consequences on the environment because factories and farmers must produce high quantities of material as cheaply as possible. This often

means using pesticides and toxic, harmful chemicals. This price-squeezing leaves factories little money to invest in environmental management (such as water use reduction or wastewater treatment).

One of the most well-known and tragic outcomes of this race to the bottom was the collapse of the eight-storey Rana Plaza garment factory in 2013 that killed over 1,100 workers and injured over 2,500. Despite the discovery of cracks in the building, garment workers were ordered to return to work because our consumer pressure for cheaper clothes made factory owners hesitant to take even one day off production.

For fashion companies and us, the fast-fashion production model appears to work; but it's at the cost of people and the planet.

## Disconnection and exploitation

### PEOPLE

**The fashion industry employs 60 million people around the world in its production — 40 million of these workers are in the Asia-Pacific region. A key cost in the production of many goods is labour. By vastly reducing this cost through outsourcing to countries with more relaxed employment laws and lower minimum wages, it becomes profitable for a company to sell products at lower prices.**

Unfortunately, the disconnection between us and workers across the world fosters unawareness and indifference about where the products we buy come from. We desire and evaluate things without any thought of the chain of production that gave us the product. In the past, there was a close and often face-to-face connection between producers and consumers. However, we now live in a globalised society and the supply chains that produce the products we buy are long, complex and often involve multiple countries. One t-shirt may be made from raw materials produced in India, processed into material in China, cut and sewn in Bangladesh, and then sold on multiple continents!



When you combine this distance with our ever-increasing demand for cheap clothing, the scene is set for human rights abuses like modern slavery to occur. **Modern slavery** includes practices such as forced labour, debt bondage and human trafficking. Essentially, it refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot leave because of threats, violence, coercion, and deception.

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**Of the 40 million people trapped in modern slavery globally, 24.9 million are trapped in forced labour.**

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Fashion is among the top five most exposed industries to modern slavery risk. Clothing is recognised as one of New Zealand's highest-risk imports, and it's estimated that NZ\$184 billion worth of garments produced using modern slavery is imported annually by the 20 biggest economies. *How is this possible?*

In addition to the factors mentioned above, garment factories employ a lot of migrant workers. Migrants are at high risk of exploitation as they can easily become trapped in forced labour through the confiscation of their passports and visas, or by deceptive tactics, such as the false promise of a "better life". Often, people who end up working in forced labour conditions have restrictions on their freedoms. It's not uncommon to have dormitories on the same site as a factory and both are surrounded by high walls. This means workers may never be allowed to leave the complex.

An example of this is the enslavement of the Uyghur people and other Muslim minorities on cotton farms in the Xinjiang region in China. This region produces 20% of the world's cotton, and while some companies have committed to stop using Xinjiang cotton, many still haven't traced their supply chains, so they cannot be certain that cotton is not being sourced from Xinjiang. This example of forced labour is extreme and large-scale; but it is only one example of millions occurring in the broken fashion industry every day.

## PLANET

**Everything we consume is sourced somewhere and everything we throw out goes somewhere.**

So, ask yourself: *when you throw something away, where is “away”?*

“Away” is a landfill that has overflowed into a village, it is a sick child, a polluted river, a dying ecosystem. Around the world, rubbish dumps are concentrated in areas where the poorest live—out of sight, smell and mind of the rich.

Our planet does not have bottomless resources or endless space for our waste. The fashion industry alone uses over 342 million barrels of oil *a year* to produce synthetic materials, such as polyester and nylon. This fabric can take up to 200 years to decompose in a landfill, releasing greenhouse gases throughout the process. The fashion industry is considered the second largest polluter on Earth, contributing 10% of carbon emissions (more than the aviation and shipping industries combined) and 20% of global wastewater. In China and India, it is said that farmers can predict the “in” colour of the next season by looking at the colour of the rivers.

The production of goods is necessary and has many positive effects for people, including providing jobs, meeting material needs and generating income. But our *over*-consumption is perpetuating poverty, misuse of power, habitat destruction, climate change, violence and modern slavery in the world’s most vulnerable communities. In the end, the people who contribute to the demand for fast-fashion the least, are feeling its effects the most.

## REFLECT

Our world is here for us to flourish in and to use the wonderful resources on offer. Our challenge is to do so responsibly and sustainably. This study, its questions and challenges are not meant to incite guilt, but to inspire reflection, transformation and action. We encourage you to reflect on the ways you consume, rather than just conforming to the various trends and habits of society.

### Take a minute to discuss what you've learned above:

1. Did any of it surprise you?
2. Do you ever think about the people who make your clothes?
3. Have you ever thought about the process your clothes go through before they get to you and how this affects the planet?

### LEARNING TO STOP, THINK, AND CONSIDER

Consuming ethically is a conscious commitment to act for the well-being and benefit of others, and to respect and prioritise the dignity of human life.

This quote by fashion designer and activist Orsola de Castro captures this perfectly: *“It isn't enough just looking for quality in the products we buy, we must ensure that there is quality in the lives of the people who make them.”*

It's easy to think that exploitation in the fashion industry is a distant issue that is disconnected from us here in New Zealand and therefore is not our problem to address. We are extremely good at not caring about issues that do not directly affect us. This is such a common issue that sociologists call it *psychological distance*.

The other challenge is that the exploitation of garment workers makes our lives convenient. We actually benefit from it through cheap and trendy products. Because we benefit, it can be easy to feel that any of the solutions will negatively affect us. This is called *solution aversion*. Solution aversion is when we believe that all the solutions to a problem are unpleasant or will make our lives inconvenient.

Once we understand our role as consumers in the fashion industry supply chain, we are compelled to think about how our purchases affect other peoples' lives. First, we must dig deep and ask the hard questions about where our stuff comes from. Was the process to make it harmful to people and the planet?



\*MAKECHANGEFORMAKERS

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**CARRY SOMERS**  
Co-founder of Fashion Revolution

## Questions for discussion:

1. Do you relate to the concepts of psychological distance and/or solution aversion? How do you see either of these play out in your life?
2. In the moment, it can be really easy to let our desire for aesthetic clothing trump the desire to ensure the wellbeing of the person who made it. How can we bring these into equal importance when faced with purchasing decisions?

## A MIND SHIFT: PURSUING CONTENTMENT WITHOUT CONSUMPTION

At the heart of over-consumption is dissatisfaction with what we have. Every day, we are fed narratives that the next thing—the one that is just out of reach—is the key to our happiness. Have you ever turned to shopping after a stressful day? Or maybe it was after a bad breakup, a missed promotion, or an unexpectedly low mark on an assignment. We often turn to consumption to fill a void of some sort because we've been trained to believe new things will make us happy, more desirable and more beautiful. This habit has quite literally been engineered in our society since the 1950s.

Let's briefly go back to when the way we consume massively shifted...

After WWII, people were encouraged to consume more to rebuild war-damaged economies. In a 1955 article about retailing, Victor Lebow captures it perfectly:

*Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. **The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he***

**wears, drives, eats, his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies.**

*These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special urgency...**We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-increasing pace.** We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore, constantly more expensive consumption.*

70 years later, and our society is completely saturated with this mentality. We have been trained to become quickly dissatisfied, and therefore, we must now *unlearn* many of these deeply ingrained tendencies. We know that our planet and some of the most vulnerable communities are paying the price of this shift. Instant material gratification is like a sugar rush and when it wanes, we're left wanting more. Rather than give in to the desire, we can remind ourselves that feeling good about how we look should not come at the cost of another person, and then learn to re-fall in love with the things we already have.

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What does it look like to be content in a modern world?
2. The irony Victor Lebow spells out is startling: the more social pressure we feel, the more we express our individuality through what we wear, how we design our homes, etc. We want to be perceived as unique but still socially acceptable, and often this causes us to continually consume to fit each iteration of our ever-evolving desired image. What is your reaction to this realisation?

### **USING YOUR PURCHASING POWER TO MAKE CHANGE**

Production models, government policies, and industries are not forces of nature. We invent these systems and act as if we are powerless to change them, when in truth we are not. It is easy to succumb to apathy when we think we can't change something. But change is possible. If enough of us use our purchasing power to demonstrate our values, then we can boost the ethical consumer movement further. Big corporations are incredibly powerful, but they depend on customers buying their products.

As Carry Somers, co-founder of Fashion Revolution, says:  
*“Consumer demand can revolutionise the way fashion works as an industry. If everyone started to question the way we consume, we would see a radically different fashion paradigm.”*

You may be sitting there, feeling overwhelmed and like it’s impossible to be a conscious consumer. I promise you; it *is* possible. But the reality is, consuming ethically will most often come at a higher cost and effort to you.

Not to worry though, here are five tips to get you started:

1. **Stop and think** about all of the hands a garment went through before it got to you. If the price seems too good to be true, it most likely is. Someone’s exploited labour has probably paid for it.
2. **Avoid impulse purchases** and shift away from the ‘see-now-buy-now’ habit. Too often we buy things we don’t really love or need, and then these items end up donated or binned after little use.
3. **Carefully consider *each* purchase.** Leave a decent amount of time between the initial urge to buy an item and actually buying the item. Ask yourself, “*Do I need this?*” “*Do I really love this?*” “*Will I wear it for years to come or am I just following a trend?*”
4. **Instead of buying new, buy second-hand goods.** There’s something really beautiful about giving an item a second life and keeping it out of a landfill. But remember op-shopping is not a free-for-all. After all, it is still consuming.
5. **Do your research.** When you buy new, make sure to familiarise yourself with the [Ethical Fashion Guide](#) and research what your favourite brands are doing to uphold worker rights in their supply chain.

Which one of these will you commit to first?



## **Join the Challenge**

**Try to go six months, or a year, without buying a new fashion-related item. It will challenge you and redefine your sense of contentment when it comes to appearance. There will be times where you will look at your wardrobe, decide you hate everything and maybe even scroll your favourite store online. But it is those times that you can stop, think and consider why you're doing this challenge.**

**Remember that contentment can be found without consumption, have another look at your wardrobe, and re-imagine what you already own.**

