



This article is written by Kate Fletcher and originally appeared in The Ecologist in June 2007

## Fast is not free

Fast speed in fashion is a defining characteristic of today's textile and clothing industry. It's about fast in production – tracking sales with electronic tills and just-in-time manufacturing which has now made it possible to turn a sample or design sketch into a finished product in as little as 12 days; and fast in consumption – a recent report revealed that people are buying one third more garments than four years ago fuelled by the rise and rise of 'value' retailers and supermarkets like Primark and Matalan. Yet super cheap, 'value' or fast fashion garments are no quicker to make or consume than any other garment. The fibre takes the same amount of time to grow regardless of a product's speed to market (in the case of cotton, around a year). Likewise the fibre takes the same amount of time to be spun, knitted or woven, cleaned, bleached, dyed, printed, cut and sewn; and the activity of going shopping and laundering the garment takes the same amount of time regardless of how speedily a design makes it from catwalk to high street retailer.

Fast fashion is not really about speed; it is about selling more goods and making more money. Time is just one of the factors of production along with labour, capital and natural resources that get juggled and squeezed in the pursuit of maximum profits. But fast is not free. Short lead times and cheap garments are only made possible by the exploitation of labour and natural resources. → [factsheet 6 on Working Conditions](#). Yet it doesn't have to be this way. We can design ourselves a different system that makes money and also respects the rights of workers and the environment and at the same time produces beautiful and conscientious garments.

## How slow can you go?

Slow fashion is about designing, producing, consuming and living better. Slow fashion is not time-based but quality-based (which has some time components). Slow is not the opposite of fast – there is no dualism – it is simply a different approach in which designers, buyers, retailers and consumers are more aware of the impacts of products on workers, communities and ecosystems. The concept of slow fashion borrows heavily from the Slow Food Movement. Founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy in 1986, Slow Food links pleasure and food with awareness and responsibility. It seeks to defend biodiversity in our food supply, by opposing the standardisation of taste, defending the need for consumer information and protecting cultural identities tied to food. It has spawned a wealth of other slow movements. Slow Cities, for example, design with slow values but within the context of a town or city and are committed to improving the quality of life of its citizens.

Thus slow is about a shift from quantity to quality. In melding the slow movement's ideas with the global clothing industry, we build a new vision for fashion in the era of sustainability: where pleasure and fashion is linked with awareness and responsibility. Slow fashion is all about choice, information, cultural diversity and identity. Yet perhaps most critically, it is also about balance. It is about recognising that slow fashion is a combination of rapid imaginative change and symbolic (fashion) expression as well as material durability, quality making and

long-term engaging products. Slow fashion supports our psychological needs (to form identity, communicate with others, be creative through our clothes) as well as our material needs (to keep warm and protect us from extremes of climate).

Fast fashion, as it exists today strikes no such balance. Indeed it is largely disconnected from reality – with little recognition of poverty wages, forced overtime and climate change. With no recognition of the fact that we are now less happy than our parents and our grandparents even though we own more stuff. Slow fashion in contrast, is produced and consumed differently to fast fashion. The shift from quantity to quality takes the pressure off time. It allows suppliers to plan orders, predict the numbers of workers needed and invest in the longer term. It gives companies time to build mutually beneficial relationships. No longer will suppliers have to employ temporary workers, subcontracted workers or force workers to do excessive overtime to meet unpredictable orders with impossible deadlines. Workers will have secure employment with predictable hours and opportunity for promotion.

Of course, quality is going to cost more. We will buy fewer high value, slow-to-consume products. A fairer distribution of this ticket price through the supply chain is an intrinsic part of this quality-driven agenda. Employment would be preserved as workers spend longer on each piece. Slow design is about a richer interaction between designer and maker; maker and garment; garment and user. A strong bond of relationships is formed which permeates far beyond the garment manufacturing chain and influences the way our clothes are designed and used.

Slow fashion is a glimpse of a different – and more sustainable - future for the textile and clothing sector and an opportunity for business to be done in a way that respects workers, environment and consumers in equal measure. Such a future is but a garment away.

By Kate Fletcher

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### Further Reading

<http://www.slowfood.com/>

[www.katefletcher.com](http://www.katefletcher.com)

A summary of a workshop done by Kate Fletcher at the Fashioning an Ethical Industry Conference 2007 <http://fashioninganethicalindustry.org/resources/reports/conferencereport/>



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