

EXPOSED: Major high-street brands accused of greenwashing as polyester clothes made from recycled plastic bottles are shown to be environmentally disastrous

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- New video exposes 5 reasons why polyester clothes made from recycled plastic bottles are adding to fashion's waste crisis and flooding the natural environment with plastics
- Major high-street brands such as H&M, Primark and Zara accused of greenwashing
- The majority of companies (85%) examined, indicated they aim to achieve their 'recycled' polyester targets by using polyester from damaging downcycled PET bottles

[A new video released today](#) from the Changing Markets Foundation with plastic pollution campaigning organisation City to Sea myth busts the use of recycled bottles for clothing, exposing it as an environmentally destructive practice which also allows brands to greenwash their collections.

High-street retailer H&M reported that 90% of its recycled polyester comes from single-use plastic bottles while most companies (85%) examined indicated they aim to achieve their 'recycled' polyester targets by using polyester from downcycled PET bottles. Retailers like Nike, H&M, Primark and Zara's parent group, Inditex, all rely on the false solution of downcycling single-use plastic bottles to meet its demand for synthetic polyester.

The video reveals 5 reasons why the practice of turning PET plastic bottles into clothing is greenwashing:

- 1) Once turned into clothing the plastic CANNOT be recycled further and will instead be thrown away. This means clothes are on a one-way route to landfill, incineration, or being dumped in nature. One garbage truck PER SECOND ends up in landfill or is dumped in nature.
- 2) Turning plastic bottles into clothes removes them from circular recycling loops where they can be made into new bottles again. Plastic bottles can be collected to be recycled multiple times, reducing the amount of virgin plastic needed, or to be refilled which helps to cut reliance on single-use plastic.
- 3) Recycled plastic going into synthetics does NOTHING to help stop the wider problem of microplastics. Billions of tiny plastic particles that shed from clothing during manufacturing, wearing and washing still end up polluting the ocean and our bodies through the air we breathe and the food and drink we consume. Instead of greenwashing recycled synthetics and ignoring microplastics, they should be instead reducing reliance on synthetic fibres at source.
- 4) Brands token use of recycled synthetics is just a drop in a very polluted ocean compared to the industry's reliance on virgin plastics. Production of these fibres, derived from oil and gas, has exponentially increased fibres over the last 20 years, and shows no signs of slowing. Use of recycled synthetics distracts consumers from the deeper problem of fashion brands' entrenched reliance on fossil fuels – production of which uses as much oil per year as the whole of Spain and produces as much emissions as 180 coal-fired power stations.
- 5) Making fashion from plastic bottles is just another greenwashing tactic by brands to encourage people to buy more of what they don't need and the planet can't afford.

The video comes off the back of the ground-breaking report by the Changing Markets Foundation '[Synthetics Anonymous Fashion brands' addiction to fossil fuels](#)'. The report, which investigated nearly 50 major fashion brands, shows how cheap synthetic fibres are not only harmful because they enable low-quality clothing that ends up in waste, but they also perpetuate the fashion industry's

dependence on fossil-fuel extraction during a climate emergency. Microplastics also emerged as a critical blind spot for most brands.

Despite the known damage they cause to human and environmental health – including recent research which has found microplastics in placentas, stools and even able to cross the blood-brain barrier¹ – the report showed the vast majority of brands were found to be asleep at the wheel when it comes to microplastics, delaying meaningful action by citing uncertainty and calling for even more research. By pushing recycling of bottles into fibre, brands may even be worsening microfibre release by fragmenting larger plastics into synthetic fibre which can leak more easily into the environment.²

The report also highlighted that 59% of claims by companies investigated being unsubstantiated or potentially misleading to consumers. Examples of brands misleading consumers include claims that synthetic products are recyclable when no such recycling technology exists, where claims are made with no supporting evidence given for products being labelled as ‘sustainable’ or ‘responsible’.

George Harding-Rolls, Campaigns Adviser at the Changing Markets Foundation commented saying:

“Sustainability isn’t something big business can slip on and off like the latest fashions. It must be woven into every level of their operations. With their carefully marketed green credentials unravelling fast, brands are clinging to recycled bottles for clothes to distract consumers from their inherently unsustainable reliance on fossil fuels for fibre. If fashion brands are serious about reducing their environmental impact, they should stop the charade of downcycling plastic bottles into clothes and instead focus on cutting their addiction to fossil fuels and curbing overproduction”.

Jo Morley, Head of Marketing and Campaigns at City to Sea added, “This new video exposes two problems here and one solution that no one is yet talking about. The environmental impact of fast fashion is huge, as is our obsession with single-use plastics like water bottles. The solution for consumers though is simple; buy less, and when you do buy, support the reuse economy. For water bottles this means carrying reusable bottles and refilling them, and for clothes this means buying, when you need to, second-hand pre-loved clothing.”

END

For further information or to arrange interviews please contact george.harding-rolls@changingmarkets.org or City to Sea’s Media Manager, Steve Hynd, on steve@citytosea.org.uk or ring 07903569531

Notes to editor:

1. **About Changing Markets** www.changingmarkets.org / @ChangingMarkets The Changing Markets Foundation’s mission is to expose irresponsible corporate practices and drive change towards a more sustainable economy.
2. **About City to Sea:** City to Sea is a not-for-profit that campaigns to stop plastic pollution at source. To find out more about City to Sea, please visit <https://www.citytosea.org.uk/>
3. **About the study** Changing Markets analysed in total 49 fashion companies - 46 of these were assessed based on their responses to our questionnaire and publicly available

¹ <https://www.embopress.org/doi/full/10.15252/embr.201846701>;
<https://particleandfibretoxicology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12989-020-00358-y>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969721031314>

information and 12 through analysis of their online shops. There was some crossover between the two studies, with 9 of the fashion companies featuring in both studies.

4. **About the assessment of 46 companies** The 46 brands who received the questionnaire were selected based on their high scores in the Fashion Transparency Index 2020, and were combined with some of the most well-known brands to use synthetics, as well as with companies that have signed up to the Changing Markets' Foundation Roadmap towards Responsible Viscose and Modal Fibre Manufacturing. They were evaluated based on their individual responses to a Changing Markets questionnaire and publicly available data on their websites. According to this, brands and retailers were classified into four categories - frontrunners, could do better, trailing behind and red zone.
5. **About the analysis of 12 online shops** Changing Markets analysed over 4,000 products from 12 brands' online Spring/Summer 2021 collections to assess the prevalence of synthetic fibres in today's fashion. We wanted to better understand the composition of products and claims that companies make directly to their customers – and how this compares with policies and commitments they publish online or disclose to civil society. The brands we investigated were: ASOS, Boohoo, Forever21, Gucci, George at Asda, H&M, Louis Vuitton, M&S, Uniqlo, Walmart, Zalando and Zara. These were chosen to represent a range of brands: from luxury to low-cost, department stores and online-only, those who put sustainability at the forefront of their communications and ultra-fast-fashion brands for whom this is not a consideration. For the analysis, a selection of products was randomly chosen across the following male and female categories: shirts/tops, non-jeans-based trousers, jackets/coats, dresses, kids wear and hoodies/sweatshirts, with data collected on material composition, sustainability claims (if any) and certifications to support such claims. We have also used a recently published draft guidance by the UK Competition and Markets Authority to establish whether the claims were substantiated or not.