

SYNTHETICS ANONYMOUS PRESS RELEASE | UK

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Fashion industry addicted to greenwashing and fossil-fuel based synthetics

- *59% of claims by European and UK companies including **H&M**, **ASOS** and **M&S** unsubstantiated or misleading to consumers finds new report.*
- *An analysis of nearly 50 major fashion brands reveals they show no clear commitment to ending their addiction to fossil-fuel based fibres.*
- *UK-based **Burberry** among least transparent brands together with **Patagonia**, and **Lululemon**.*

The world's biggest fashion brands are fuelling the plastic pollution and climate crises through continued reliance on synthetic fibres made from fossil fuels, finds a new report by Changing Markets.

The report, entitled *Synthetics Anonymous: Fashion brands' addiction to fossil fuels*, analysed almost 50 major fashion brands; out of these it assessed 46 of the world's supposedly most transparent brands, from high street to luxury, including **Zara**, **Primark**, **H&M** and **Burberry** on the amount of fossil fuel-based materials in their collections and commitments to move away from them.

A further part of the investigation - scrutinising 12 brands and over 4,000 products - reveals that brands are routinely deceiving consumers with false green claims. The majority of brands made sustainability claims, with 39% of the products studied having some kind of green claim attached to them. 59% of green claims flouted the UK Competition and Markets Authority guidelines in some way.

The worst offenders were **H&M** with 96% false claims, **ASOS** with 89% and **M&S** with 88% false claims. H&M's Conscious Collection was also found to contain an even higher share of synthetics than the main one (72% compared to 61%).

Livia Firth, Eco-Age co-founder and creative director, said: *"For us at Eco-Age this report comes out precisely at the moment we need it most. There is so much greenwashing regarding circularity – a much needed business model we all need to adopt, but made nearly impossible in the fashion industry by the vast amount of synthetic fibres used. In this regards, we have also been working for few months at EU level to make sure that the proposed PEF label uses the correct methodology, and we*

hope the EU Commission will take this groundbreaking report into consideration to ensure the correct legislative way forward.

The report also exposed the extent of the fashion industry's addiction to fossil fuel-based fibres. While some brands are making commitments to move away from using virgin polyester, they make no such commitment regarding synthetics in general.

Most brands aim to address the fossil fashion problem by replacing virgin polyester with downcycled single-use plastic bottles, a false solution because it is a one-way street to landfill or incineration.

The brand assessment found that:

- 59% of sustainability claims by European brands were unsubstantiated or misleading¹, with H&M, ASOS and M&S being the worst offenders
- 85% of Boohoo products contained some type of synthetics, with 60% being 100% virgin synthetics.
- Zara's group, Inditex, reported one of the highest uses of synthetics by weight – comparable to that of sports giant Nike.
- No company made a clear commitment to phase out the use of synthetic fibres from their collections.

Urska Trunk, Campaign Manager at Changing Markets said: *“While brands are quick to capitalise on consumer concern by using sustainability as a marketing ploy, the vast majority of such claims are all style and no substance. While they greenwash their clothing collections, they are simultaneously dragging their feet on embracing truly circular solutions, for example by not making the necessary investments to ensure a future in which clothes can be recycled back into clothes.”*

Single-use plastics

Well over three quarters (85%) of companies plan to reach sustainability standards with the false solution of recycled plastic bottles.

High-street retailer **H&M** reported that 90% of its recycled polyester comes from single-use plastic bottles. Like H&M, **Primark** and **Zara's** group Inditex rely on the false solution of downcycling single-use plastic bottles. Unlike others however, Inditex reported that it has invested €3 million to fund tech innovation exploring textile recycling solutions, including the MIT-Spain Inditex Circularity Seed Fund. While this is a first

¹ These claims were assessed according to draft guidelines on sustainability claims published by the UK's Competition and Markets Authority.

step, it only represents 0.08% of the company's 2019 net profits,² and the report finds that significantly larger investments into true circular economy solutions by brands are needed.

The problem with synthetics

Synthetic fibres represent over two thirds (69%) of all materials used in textiles. This figure is expected to balloon to nearly three quarters by 2030, of which 85% will be polyester, a material produced from fossil fuels such as oil and fracked gas³. The production of synthetic fibres currently accounts for 1.35% of global oil consumption, which exceeds the annual oil consumption of Spain and amounts to 1.29 billion barrels of oil a year.⁴

Cheap synthetic fibres are not only harmful because they enable low-quality clothing that ends up in waste, but also perpetuate the fashion industry's dependence on fossil-fuel extraction during a climate emergency.

Microplastics also emerged as a critical blindspot 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 barrier – 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.

Greenwashing

European brands emerged as some of the worst for greenwashing, with an average of 59% of claims by European companies being unsubstantiated or potentially misleading to consumers.⁵ 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', or when brands were not specific about the amount of recycled content included in the product.

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² https://static.inditex.com/annual_report_2019/pdfs/en/memoria/2019-Inditex-Annual-Report.pdf

³ Tecnon OrbiChem (2021) *World Synthetic Fibres Database: Strategic market overview*.

⁴ <https://www.worldometers.info/oil/oil-consumption-by-country/>

⁵ These claims were assessed according to draft guidelines on sustainability claims published by the UK's Competition and Markets Authority.

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Of all the brands analysed, **Zara** and **Gucci** made the fewest claims deemed to be misleading; on the other end of the spectrum, claims by 96% of **H&M** (96%), **ASOS** (89%) and **M&S** (88%) flouted guidelines in some way.

H&M,’s Conscious Collection not only uses more synthetics than in its main collection but also one in five items analysed were found to be made from 100% fossil-fuel derived synthetic materials.

M&S has rebranded blended synthetics to seem high-tech, with a line of CASHMILLON™ virgin synthetic faux-cashmere clothing, and relies heavily on discredited certification schemes for cotton.

The worst offenders

The 15 worst performing brands assigned to the bottom category are those with minimum to no transparency about their use of synthetics, nor any numerical information about the use of synthetics on their websites, including **Primark**, **Patagonia**, **Boohoo**, **Burberry** and **Nike**.

Despite many well-known sustainability claims, **Patagonia** refused to respond to the assessment and discloses no information on its website about its use of synthetics, nor does it outline any specific commitment to reduce its reliance on them. While it encourages people to *‘buy less, demand more’* and to *‘join the fight against irresponsible, fast-fashion manufacturing’* it makes no commitment to move away from synthetics altogether.

Additionally, Patagonia advertises ocean plastics and fishing nets as a better alternative to virgin plastic, yet this is an approach that does little to stop the flow of plastics into the environment and only deals with the aftermath of the plastic pollution problem.

Similarly, **Adidas** boasts an ocean collection and relies on single-use plastic bottles for most of its products, yet reported that 90% of its apparel articles are made or blended with synthetics.

Recommendations

Not a single brand ranked as a frontrunner for their approach to synthetics; coupled with the greenwashing exposed in the report this suggests that the industry has a long way to go to contribute to tackling the climate and plastic crises in a meaningful way.

The report urges brands to tackle their addiction to fossil fuel-derived synthetics, to commit to ambitious climate targets and invest in truly circular solutions. Consumers are encouraged to think twice about their purchases and to question the integrity of the shops they are buying from before purchasing.

Finally, ahead of the upcoming EU textile strategy, the report asks legislators to take action to address low quality clothing mass produced by the fast fashion industry and ensure that brands become more transparent and responsible about their supply chains and the end-of-life of their products. In addition, measures are needed to end greenwashing, which the report found to be rampant in the industry.

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About Changing Markets

www.changingmarkets.org / @ChangingMarkets

The Changing Markets Foundation partnered with Stand.earth, Plastic Soup Foundation, No Plastic in My Sea, Retorna, The Clean Clothes Campaign and Fashion Revolution for this campaign. Our mission is to expose irresponsible corporate practices and drive change towards a more sustainable economy.

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 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.

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*.

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, kidswear 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.