122 ULTRA-FAST FASHION IS TAKING OVER – AND USING EVERY TRICK IN THE BOOK TO GET US ADDICTED

The Chinese fashion retail website Shein was recently valued at $100bn and has added almost 315,000 styles to its website this year alone. At the time of writing, Shein UK has a lot of items in the under £5 section, with several crop tops and miniskirts priced at an alarming £1.99.

Fashion, especially the cheap kind, is addictive. That’s why ultra-fast fashion brands such as Shein keep increasing the array of styles on offer, while social media ads and customer-generated content such as “haul videos” ensure that fashion addicts never forget about their drug. Some of these videos are sponsored by the brands, but the personable, chatty style helps viewers forget that they are in fact watching ads. Wealthy YouTubers disguised as average shoppers normalise the idea of ordering bags full of clothes every single week.

Georgia Willard, a 23-year-old student and former fast fashion addict, tells me that her social bubble as a teenager in Australia fed her addiction. “You felt like you needed to have a different outfit every time you went out to prove to people that you could dress properly and look the part. I ended up buying outfits almost every weekend.”

Willard was prompted to kick her fast fashion habit when she learned about the environmental and human impacts of the fashion industry in a textiles class at school. In addition to learning about the ugly reality of the fashion industry from the documentary the True Cost, which she watched at school, she also realised she couldn’t keep up her habit and afford a big trip she’d planned to the UK. Since then, the growth of cheaper, ultra-fast fashion brands has made the cycle of buy, wear, throw away and repeat all the more difficult to escape.

Willard now feeds her fashion addiction with secondhand apps such as Depop and Vinted instead. For so many, it seems impulsion and consumerism are more powerful than a desire for a world in which female garment workers can work in a safe environment, let alone live happy, full lives – some workers at factories supplying Shein reported working more than 75 hours a week. In one of them, workers got one day off a month.

Ultra-fast fashion is not good news for the planet, either. At this rate, by 2050 the fashion industry may use almost a quarter of the world’s carbon budget. Around 60% of Gen Z say they have altered their personal spending habits and behaviours to reduce their environmental impact, but they also seem to be pushing the growth of ultra-fast fashion – the attitude-behaviour gap is huge.

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