CUTTING TIES WITH FAST FASHION

A GUIDE ON SLOW FASHION PRACTICES

SLOW FASHION MOVEMENT

PREFACE

Fast fashion isn't just about cheap clothes: it's a system built on clever psychology that pushes us to buy more, faster, and without thinking. From social media trends to targeted ads, it plays on our emotions, desires and insecurities.

This e-book by the Slow Fashion Movement is an invitation to pause. To look beyond the rack. To question the illusion.

Here, we unravel the mind games of fast fashion; how it uses fear of missing out, dopamine-driven gratification and the power of social proof to keep us buying more than we need. We delve into the role of social media and targeted advertising in shaping our desires and distorting our sense of worth. And most importantly, we explore how to break free from this cycle.

It's time to take back control. To shop mindfully, live consciously and cut ties with fast fashion once and for all. Let's begin.

CHAPTER 1:
THE FAST FASHION ILLUSION
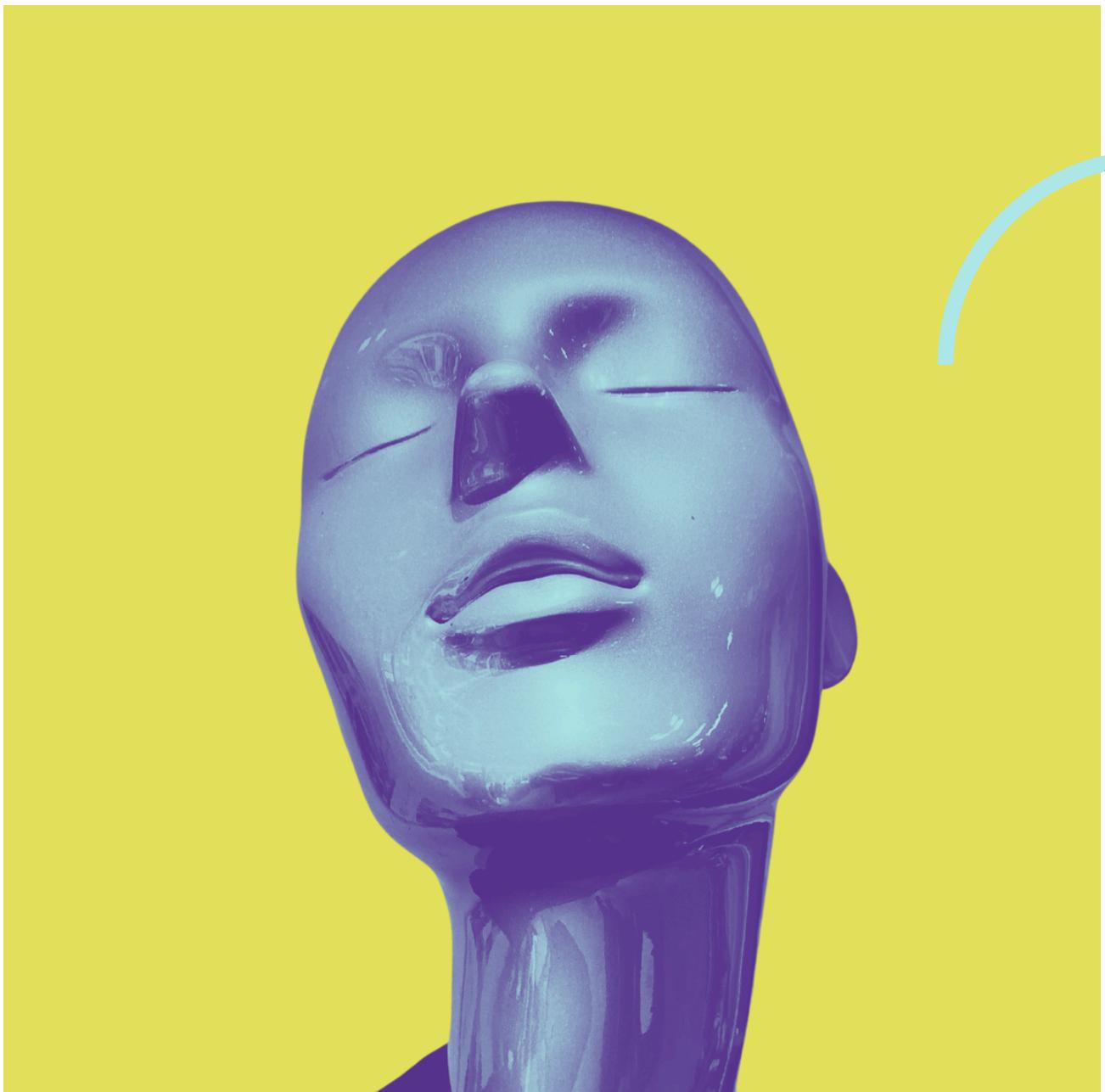
Do you ever feel like you can't keep up with the newest fashion trends? Or that your enjoyment of a new outfit is always temporary? The fast fashion industry relies on these feelings to keep consumers dissatisfied, not just with their outfits, but with themselves too. Before long, your closet is overspilling with clothing you hardly wear, while you're already seeking the next affordable piece. Behind this affordability lies an illusion that lures consumers to buy more than necessary without considering quality. Because, as French sociologist Jean Baudrillard once said, it is through overconsumption that the individual – and society – feel not merely that they exist, but that they are alive. Here, we explore some of the mind games fast fashion plays to maintain its grip on our culture.

CREATING A FALSE NEED AND AN INEXISTENT SCARCITY

The business model of fast fashion brands is entirely based on short-lived product cycles. For some brands, these cycles are as short as 15 days, which implies that the company has a new collection in store every two weeks. Besides the clear environmental problem connected to overproduction, this model also plays on the human instinct to seek novelty, and on our collective fear of missing out due to scarcity. Having new pieces in store constantly influences consumers to feel that they need to take part in it, while it still lasts. Meanwhile, pieces previously bought do not prevent consumers from engaging in overconsumption, because the sense of fulfillment with a new purchase becomes as short-lived as the collections in store.

PEAKS OF DOPAMINE AND EMOTIONAL SHOPPING

Engaging in the fast fashion cycle of consumption triggers a dopamine discharge, a major neurotransmitter that expresses pleasure and reward. This chemical can induce a sense of excitement through acquiring that new item, but the dopamine-induced hype soon fades and is replaced with a feeling of dissatisfaction once the novelty has settled. This microdosing of neurotransmitters may reinforce impulsive buying and strengthen the idea that shopping is a way to deal with stress, boredom or insecurity. Add to this the advancements of technology and analytics of algorithms, and we see fast fashion brands able to directly target people when they are feeling at their most vulnerable. The solution we're bombarded them with is quick and seemingly simple: buy more.
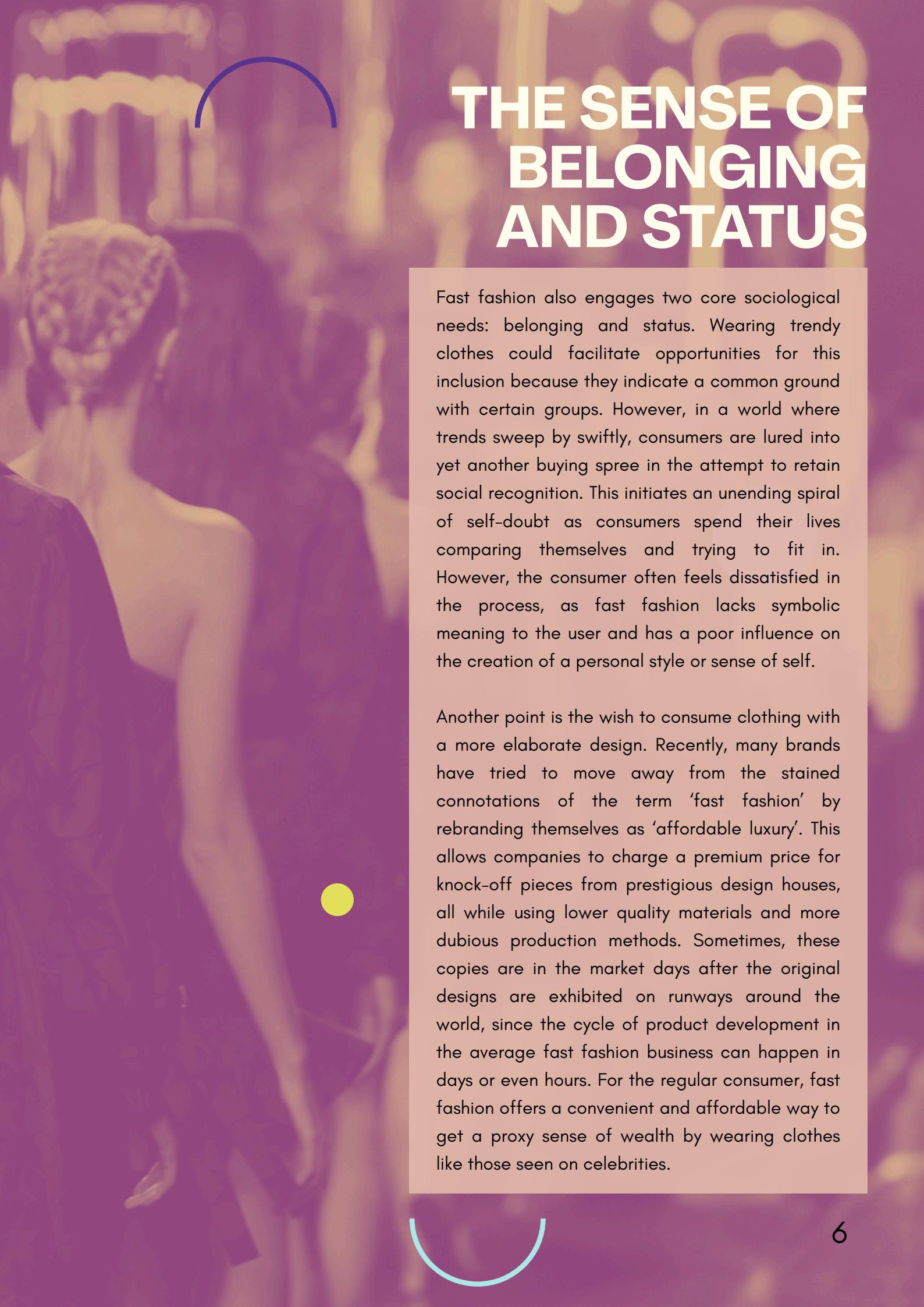
THE SENSE OF BELONGING AND STATUS

Fast fashion also engages two core sociological needs: belonging and status. Wearing trendy clothes could facilitate opportunities for this inclusion because they indicate a common ground with certain groups. However, in a world where trends sweep by swiftly, consumers are lured into yet another buying spree in the attempt to retain social recognition. This initiates an unending spiral of self-doubt as consumers spend their lives comparing themselves and trying to fit in. However, the consumer often feels dissatisfied in the process, as fast fashion lacks symbolic meaning to the user and has a poor influence on the creation of a personal style or sense of self.

Another point is the wish to consume clothing with a more elaborate design. Recently, many brands have tried to move away from the stained connotations of the term 'fast fashion' by rebranding themselves as 'affordable luxury'. This allows companies to charge a premium price for knock-off pieces from prestigious design houses, all while using lower quality materials and more dubious production methods. Sometimes, these copies are in the market days after the original designs are exhibited on runways around the world, since the cycle of product development in the average fast fashion business can happen in days or even hours. For the regular consumer, fast fashion offers a convenient and affordable way to get a proxy sense of wealth by wearing clothes like those seen on celebrities.

THE ERADICATION OF UNIQUENESS

Lastly, fast fashion — intentional or unintentional — diminishes the value of uniqueness. Rapid production cycles mean that collections increasingly lack diverse sizing, which makes it harder for people with different body shapes to find a comfortable fit. This can lead to dissatisfaction with one's appearance and self-worth, while also reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards (both of which are linked to impulsive shopping behaviours). Moreover, the mass availability of identical pieces fosters rigid style categories that lack individuality and limit personal expression. As a result, fashion shifts from being a form of self-expression to a symbol of conformity and standardisation.
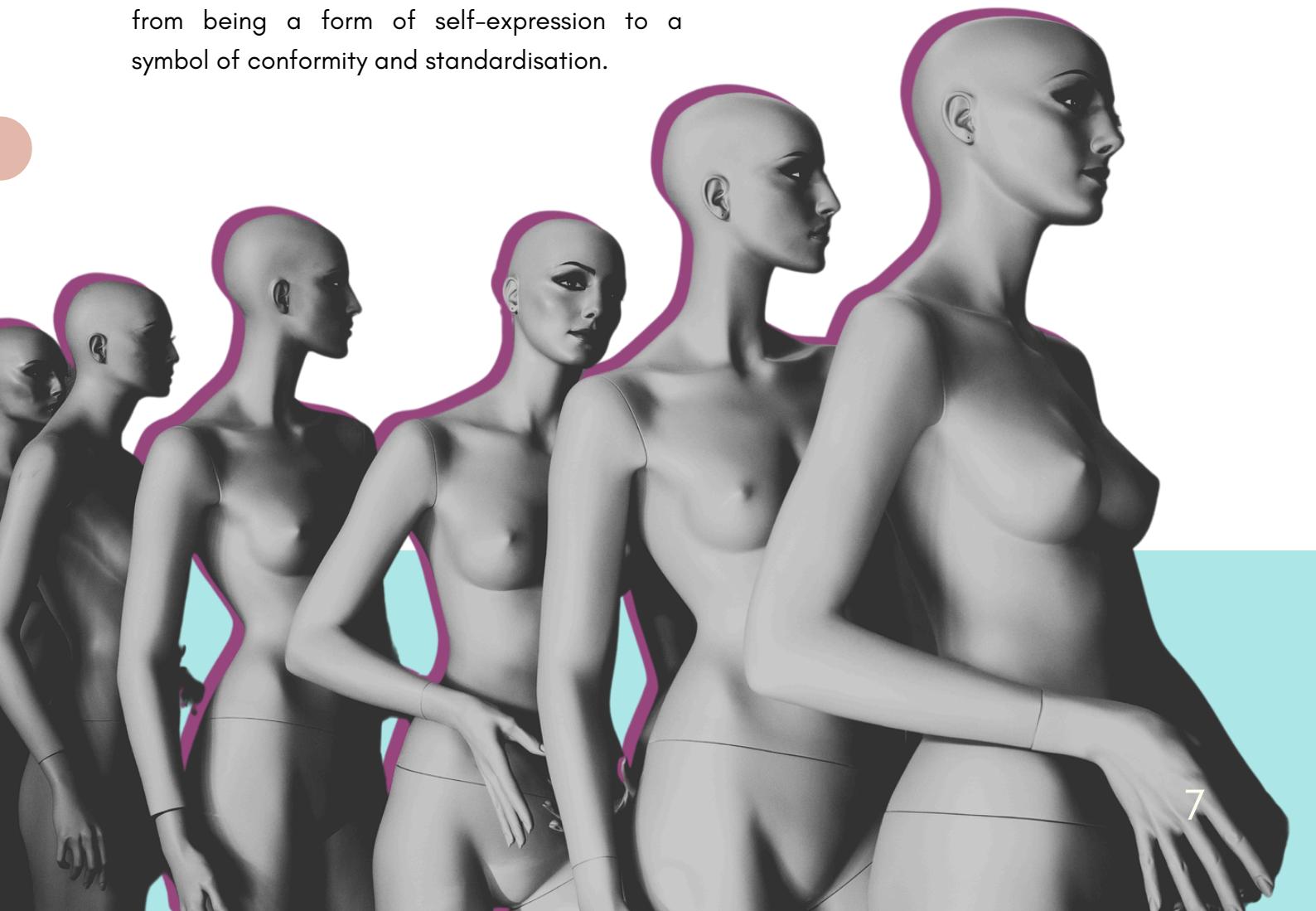
CHAPTER 2:
SOCIAL MEDIA & ADVERTISEMENT
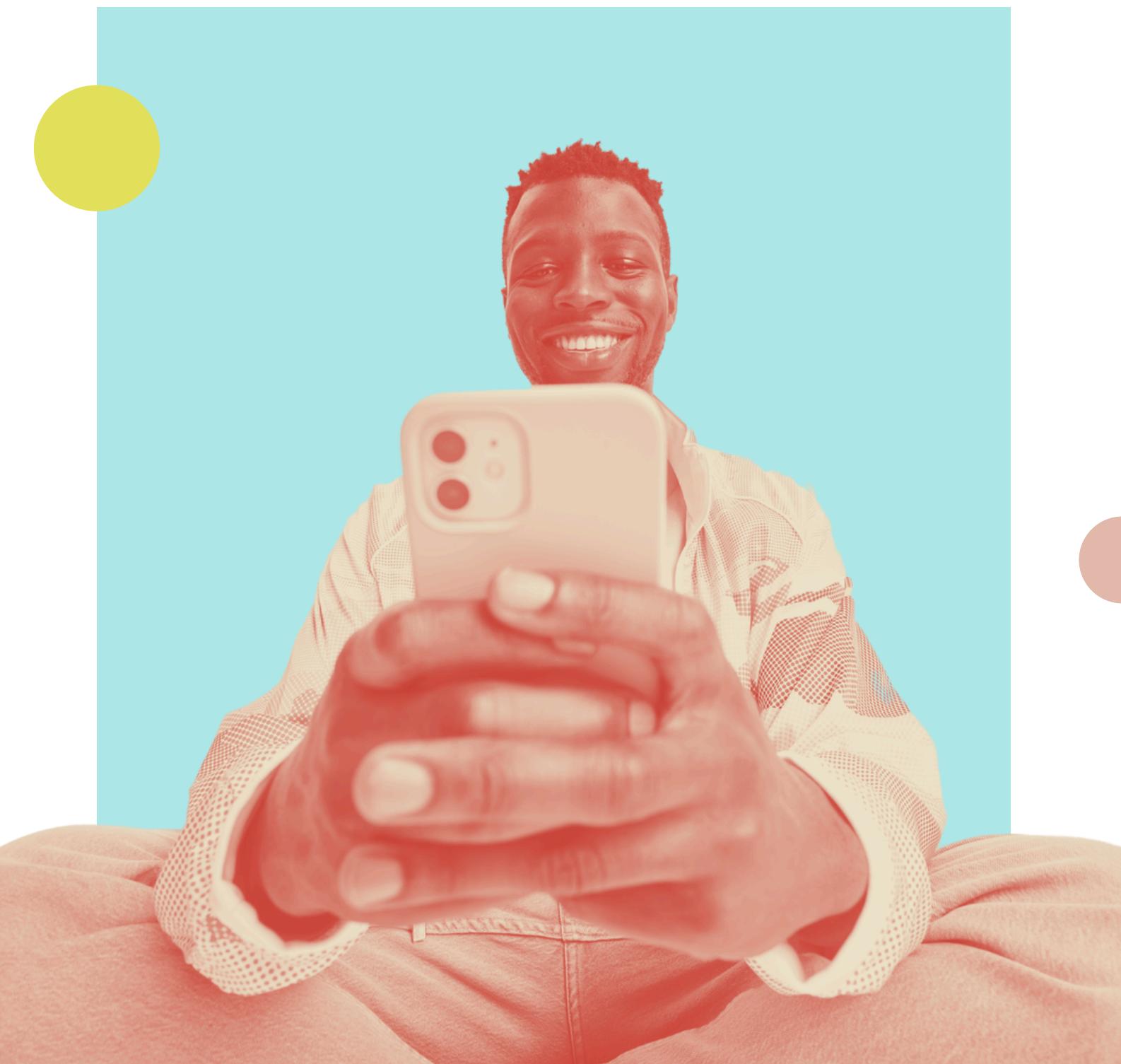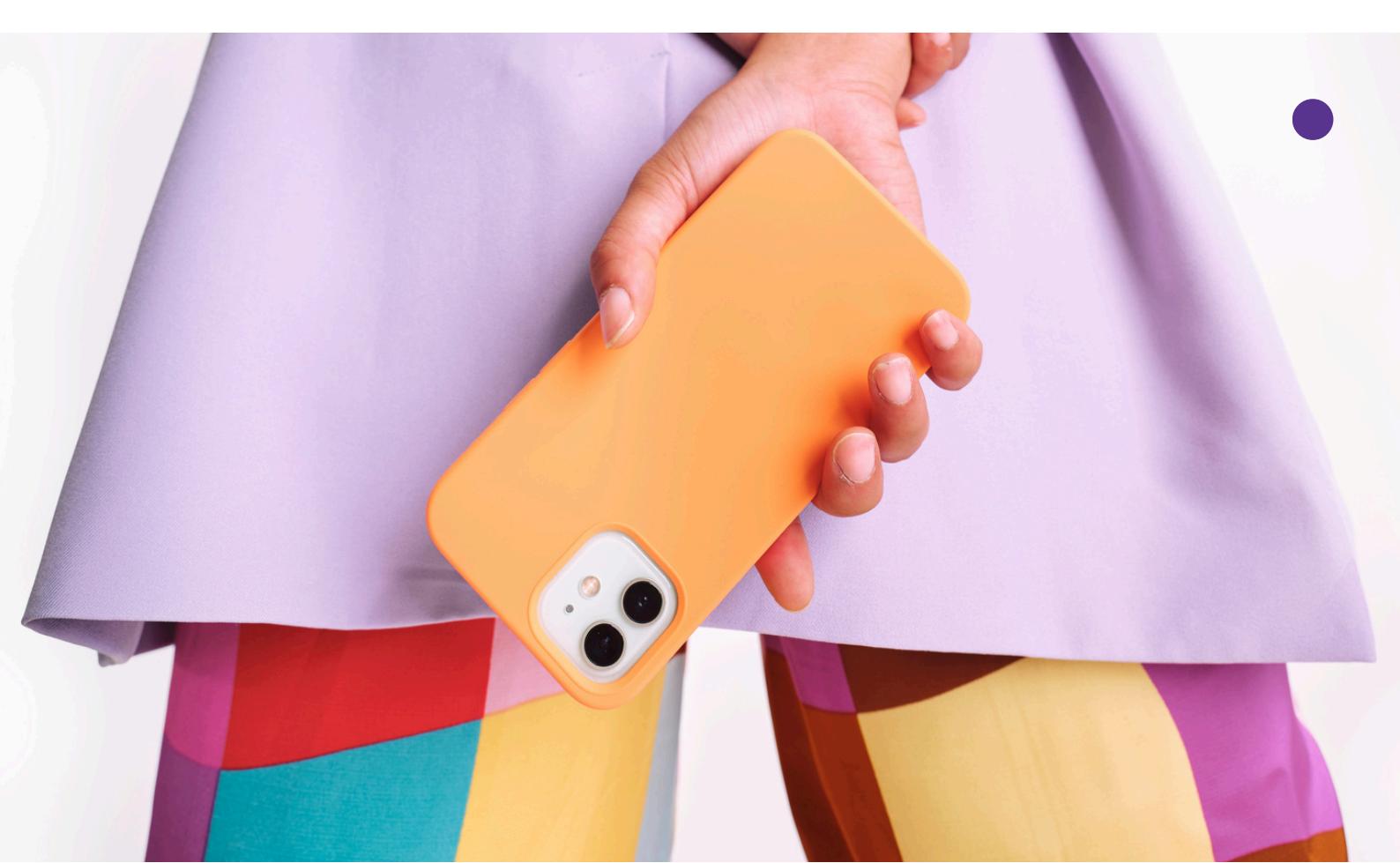
HOW ALGORITHMS SHAPE YOUR FASHION DESIRES

Algorithms are shaping fashion desires, influencing trends and encouraging the habit of shopping for specific pieces of clothing. The principal function of an algorithm is to create a personal shopping experience and increase user engagement by analysing every aspect of online shopping behaviour (things like purchase history and preferences). This personal data also includes likes, search history, social media interactions and the time spent looking at articles. This analysis is having an increasingly significant effect on shopping behaviour and overconsumption, as it begins to recognise certain behavioural trends that lead directly to increased revenue.

For example, Professor Xitong Li from HEC Paris estimates that the presence of personalised recommendations increases consumers' propensity to buy by 12.4%, and basket value by 1.7%.

It is important to point out that the overconsumption itself is shaped and maintained by the fashion brands, tech companies, retail giants and data engineers. We have to remember that the only thing algorithms do is analyse behaviour and develop a more satisfactory experience online. For companies, it boosts sales and generates revenue. All of this has changed the way we shop and interact online. It's important to be aware of this to determine where our own decisions start.

'Haul' has become a popular term in social media and influencers' content. What is a haul? This is a type of content where a person shows a large quantity of different purchased products, - in this case clothes – which shows the public what the latest trends are. As clothing hauls have become one of the most popular social media categories, brands have capitalised on this visibility and benefitted from the increased sales.

By incentivising these hauls, a phenomenon has occurred where consumers prioritise discounts (reduced prices) as a key factor in their purchasing decisions, and become less willing to pay an item's full price.

INFLUENCERS, HAULS, DISCOUNT CULTURE, AND THE FEAR OF MISSING OUT (FOMO)

When we talk about clothes, we are talking about how the 'Fear of Missing Out' (or FOMO) can create impulsive purchases. This is driven by an urge to keep up with trends or social pressures, and often leads to unsustainable consumption habits.

FOMO stands out for fast fashion brands as they create a need that never existed in the first place. This problem contributes not only to consumers' budgets, but the environmental impact of the fashion industry too.

According to MacAuley, fast fashion retailers know their audiences so well thanks to social media and profit from people's need to have instant gratification. We have to buy the clothes right away because we fear not being able to have them.

CHAPTER 3:
TOWARDS A SELF-SUFFICIENT WARDROBE

What is a self-sufficient wardrobe? It means you don't need a lot of clothes! Surprising, right? To be fashionable, you don't need a huge amount of clothes. What you need is a well-functioning collection. You can do so much even with the bare minimum. A self-sufficient wardrobe will never bore you or leave you feeling lost. You can use everything in it (the pieces all work together), and you always feel comfortable in your style. So, how do we get there?

HOW TO DEFINE YOUR PERSONAL STYLE TO AVOID IMPULSE BUYING

What exactly is personal style? It's how you put together different pieces and elements to express yourself. It's unique to you and should be fun! It's a mix of your taste, experiences, interests and values. You can keep developing it throughout your life. It also gets a lot easier when you stop following trends and start asking, "What do I actually like?"

Do you ever hear yourself say "I have nothing to wear"? It usually comes from thinking that your closet is missing that new item you saw online or the latest trend. But getting dressed shouldn't be a drag. Your relationship with your clothes should feel personal. So, when you get that 'nothing to wear' feeling, take a breath. Look at what you already have, what you'd like to wear, or what you could have fun trying out. And forget about what everyone else is doing! That feeling of having nothing to wear is just a feeling, not the truth. You do have clothes – things you bought because you loved them – and that shouldn't change.

If we just start playing around with what we already have, trying different outfits, and having fun with our closets, we'll soon discover our own personal style. And that style, where we make the rules, will always be in style.

PRACTICAL STEPS TO DETOX YOUR CLOSET AND MINDSET (TIPS TO CREATE YOUR DREAM WARDROBE)

So, how do we get a healthy closet relationship? Not one that's empty, but not one that's overstuffed either.

We begin by sorting through what we already have. What feels like 'you' and what would you keep forever? What are you unsure about but see potential in? And what's just too far from your style and needs to go? Just doing this kind of closet audit can help you find solutions that feel right.

Keep the things you really love - the ones you can see yourself wearing in five or ten years. Keep the pieces you bought thoughtfully and feel you just can't live without. For those items you're not sure about, try styling them in new ways. If you're crafty, you can customise them into something you'd wear more. Or, use apps like The Loop Map to design something new with your item and have a designer make it. If you're in the UK, Sojo is great for repairs. You can also find a local up-cycler or sewing shop to give your clothes a new lease of life. And for the things you're ready to part with, don't just toss them! Join a clothing swap, sell them on a second-hand site, or give them to friends or charities.

If you want to shop smarter, start by asking yourself, "Am I ready to start a relationship with this new piece?" Shopping is a privilege, so let's do it thoughtfully. Like we talked about before, we should only buy things that are true to us, our style and what we care about. We don't want to throw money away on something we'll ditch next year. Instead of just buying whatever is trendy, let's think of shopping as a treasure hunt. It takes time and research, but you end up with something unique and totally worth the search.

Every piece we own should feel special and be something we want to keep for years. Our wardrobe is a personal collection, so let's treat it with care, patience and love. Remember, 'loved clothes last.'

CHAPTER 4:

CLOTHING ATTACHMENT & THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LIFESPAN OF CLOTHES

STORIES OF LOVED CLOTHES THAT LAST
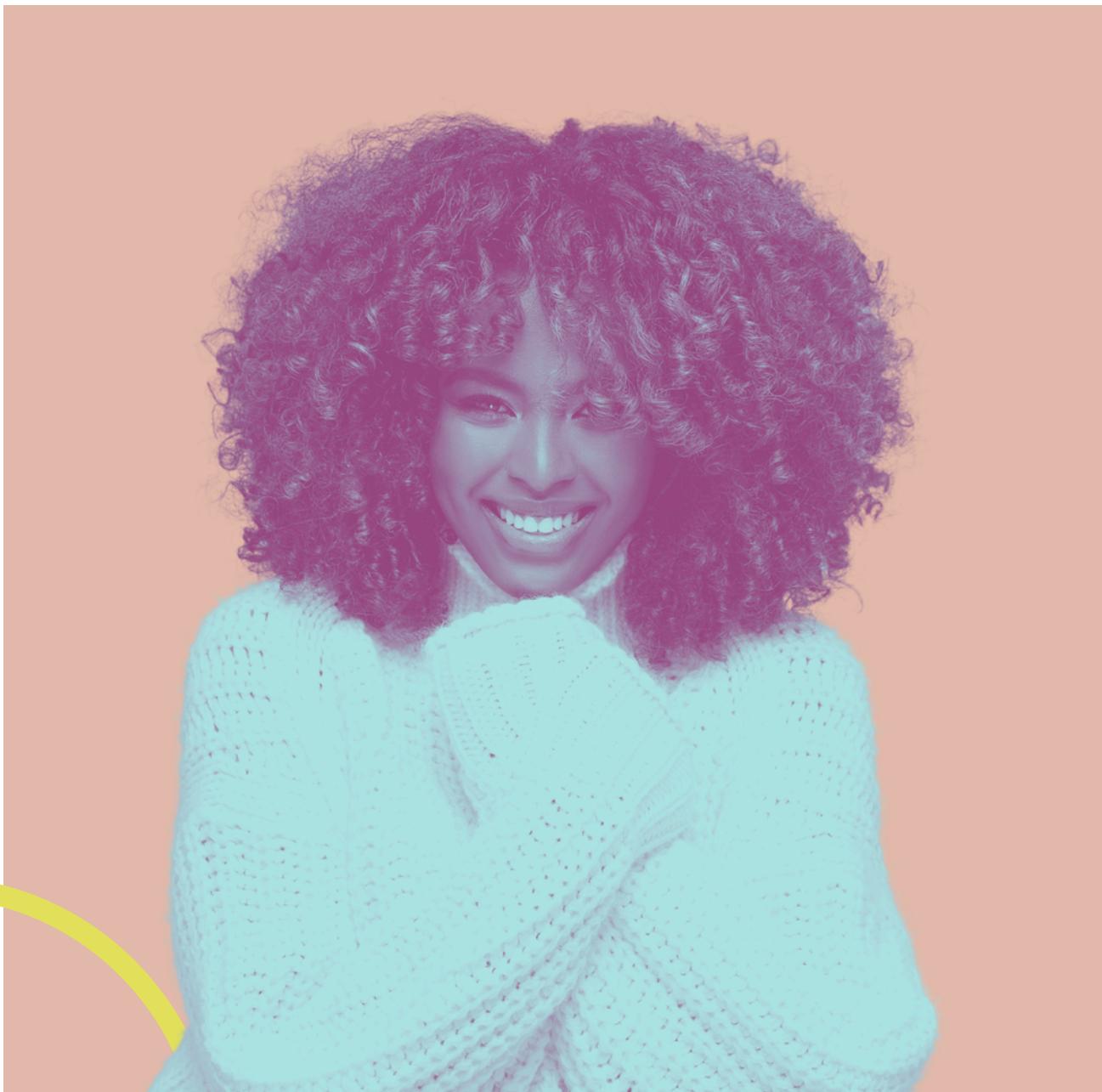
ME, MY CLOTHES, AND A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

A STORY BY KRISTINE

When I was 14, I picked up a pair of bright pink corduroy trousers from a local charity. I'd never had an item like that before. Moss green or dark brown corduroys - yes, but not bright and vibrant. I loved those trousers and wore them as often as I could for a year. Then one day, I reached for them and… They no longer fit me. My teenage body had developed curves, and that was it. I was gutted. Later in my life, after I had stopped growing, I developed a very different attitude and changed my clothes frequently. But even then, there were items that always survived my never-ending wardrobe updates. What is it about some items of clothing we just cannot part with?

For most of human history, clothes were time-consuming to make and therefore expensive to buy. Only rich people could afford a large wardrobe. Everyone else had few clothes, and they were cherished and worn to rags. Hand-me-downs and upcycling were the norm. The current state of affairs of an endless supply of cheap clothes and hauls is a recent phenomenon, fuelled by both fast fashion retailers and the rise of social media. As a result, a lot of people see clothing as disposable. But it isn't. Clothes don't just magically disappear after someone no longer wants them. Very often, they end up in landfills, and because a lot of modern clothing is made of synthetic materials, they'll be there for hundreds of years. The original wearer of that cute, trendy top will be long gone, yet the top itself will still be in a pile somewhere, looking pretty much the same as on the day it was bought.

How can we break out of this crazy cycle of overconsumption and instead connect with and value our clothes? We need to acknowledge a few things first. Constantly buying new clothes is not the norm, nor is it a right. The fashion industry has been completely distorted by the rise of fast fashion – especially by the meteoric rise of Shein, which makes brands such as Zara and Primark look small by comparison (which, of course, they're not). The rise of social media aesthetics is also to blame. Experimenting with different styles is part of life, but eventually we should develop our personal style preferences and buy accordingly. Jumping from trend to trend is not just bad for the planet and our finances; it also means we don't develop a personal style. If fisherman core is all the rage now, what will happen to all those garments and accessories once it's replaced by pilot core, for instance? Or steampunk core? Or astronaut core? Wouldn't it be better to have a smaller wardrobe filled with items that truly reflect our personality and style? Comprising of colours, cuts and shapes that actually suit us? No more jumping from trend to trend or replacing neons with neutrals just because the cycle has changed again.

Simplifying our wardrobe also simplifies our lives. When we have a well-chosen wardrobe that really works for us, it's much easier to decide what to wear, and that frees up time and space for other, more meaningful things. When we choose clothes that are right for us, we connect with them, and that creates a special energy. Some people call them their lucky clothes or winning items. Have you ever had an item that you would always wear on a particular occasion because it gave you confidence, strength or just made you feel great?
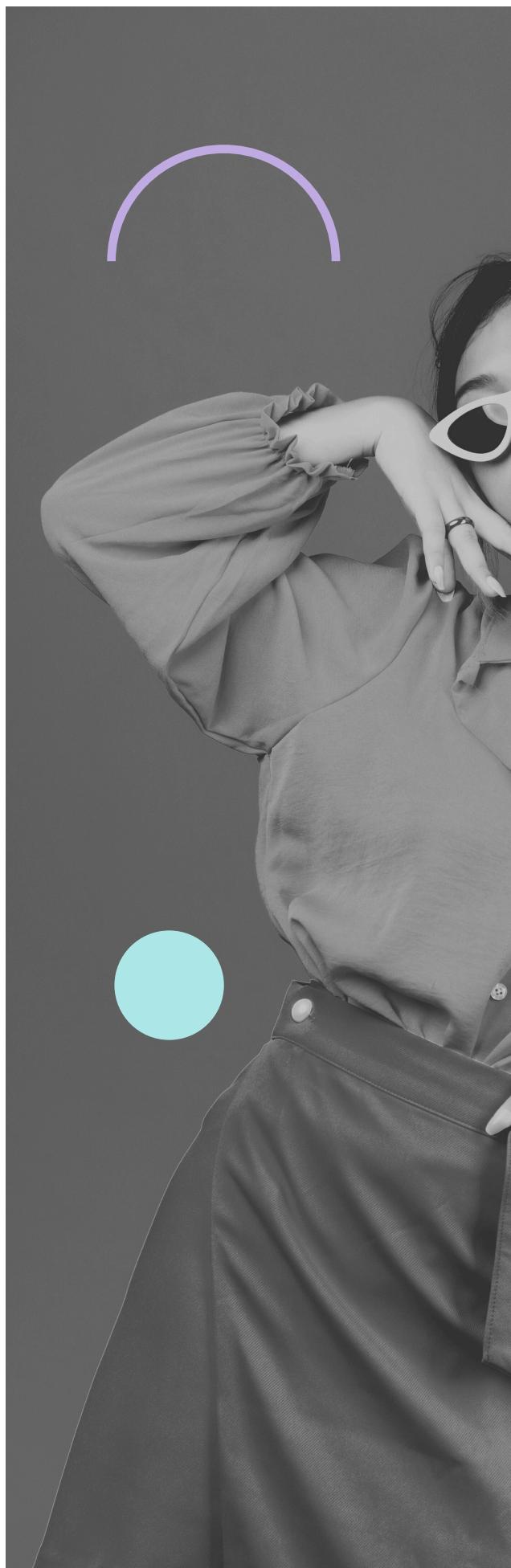
A good way to start re-evaluating our relationship with clothes is to take a look at the longest surviving items in your wardrobe, or the ones you reach for most often. Do you have duplicates of the same item? For instance, I love band T-shirts. The oldest one I have is from 2008. I bought it during my first trip to Finland before I went to see my favourite band. It's been worn a lot over the years, and the print has faded. It's more yellow than white, and it's also shrunk, but that doesn't matter. I still wear it because it's full of happy memories. Do you have something like that in your wardrobe? Clothes that tell stories?

During such a wardrobe reassessment, you might discover that some items no longer belong in your closet and that a wardrobe with fewer garments would help you to strengthen the emotional bond with your clothes. Here at the Slow Fashion Movement, we're all for responsible decluttering. Depending on where you live, you might have charity clothes banks or charity shops you can donate directly to. Or you could try to sell them online.

You might also discover that there are clothes in your wardrobe that don't feel quite right, but you're hesitant to give them away. It could be a jumper with a hole. Or trousers where the pockets are too shallow. Maybe it's a dress that's too long or a coat with a lining you don't like. If that's the case, then upcycling, repairing and altering are a great way to go. You'll be amazed at what a skilled seamstress or craftsperson can do! There are tutorials online showing such skilled repairs of woollen jumpers that it's impossible to tell where the hole was by the end of the video! Burnt a hole in your T-shirt whilst cooking? Or spilt oil on it? See how some carefully-placed embroidery can come to the rescue!

And it doesn't have to be flowers or butterflies if that doesn't reflect your style. Fed up with ladies' pockets that are not deep enough for your smartphone? A professional might be able to extend them for you. Want a quick update to your winter coat? Replacing the lining might be the answer. A denim jacket can be completely transformed with patches or fabric paint. Also, have you considered repurposing? An old pair of jeans can be turned into a skirt or a bag. A shirt can be turned into a sleeveless top. And rags can be crocheted to make carpets, doormats or bags. Once you start being creative about alterations and tweaks, ideas will keep coming at you faster than you can implement them. Who knows, you might pick up a new hobby and learn how to sew yourself? Connecting with your clothing is fun, it's a learning experience, and it makes you appreciate the work that goes into making them. We humans tend to attach meaning to pretty much anything, including our clothes.

Clothing should never be seen as disposable. Some people will love fashion, and some will treat clothing as purely a necessity. The clothes we wear and how we wear them reveal a lot about us. Luxury brands promote exclusivity, and therefore you won't see them donating their last season's items to charity. Bands such as Patagonia create ads to discourage people from buying their stuff and instead offer repair services. Fast fashion brands churn out thousands of items every week and then claim it's not that bad. Creating a bond with our clothing and voting with our wallets is a powerful tool. Just as we can support the brands we love, we can choose not to give our money to brands that don't align with our values.

THE LONG-TERM MINDSET

A STORY BY ANNELIE

If you've ever donated a bag of clothing to Goodwill or similar second-hand shops, take a moment to think of the specific items in that bag: When did you buy those clothes, and how much wear did you actually get out of them?

Ever since I was little, I've had the privilege of partaking in 'back-to-school' shopping. However, before I could buy new clothes, I was encouraged to clean out my closet. As a result of constantly being advertised the latest collection from brands I liked or wanting to keep up with trends at school, I always desired something new. This came at the cost of throwing out perfectly good clothing with plenty of life left, and continuously replacing my wardrobe for the sake of novelty.

Typically, the classic closet clean-out involves discarding worn-out pieces or clothing we no longer reach for. I realised sometimes I couldn't even remember the clothing I got rid of, and that bothered me. So, I decided to explore the concept of keeping clothes I don't wear and seeing if that charm eventually returned. From this, I've realised that my taste in clothing functions similarly to music. When I love a new song, I play it over and over again until I get sick of it. But after taking a break and listening to other music, I eventually came back to it and enjoyed it again. The same rings true for the clothing that loses its charm. What feels dull or overused today can feel fresh again after some time away. By holding onto clothes that have lost their charm, I've created a wardrobe that naturally cycles in and out of my seasonal wear, much like how my music taste shifts over time.

This cycle of seeking constant novelty connects deeply with our psychological well-being. Shopping indulges and enriches our hedonic happiness, which is about maximizing pleasure and minimizing displeasure, resulting in short-term gratification (Schaffer, 2023). Alternatively, hedonistic happiness is the type of happiness that gives us long-term fulfillment, which Aristotle associated with the concept of virtuous living. Fast Fashion capitalizes on our need for instant gratification by appealing to us emotionally, financially, and psychologically. It fulfills our desire for self-expression, social status, and quick dopamine.

That quick feeling of pleasure you get after purchasing something that fulfills a psychological need is much stronger than knowing the environmental and social costs of fast fashion (Sierra, 2025). Shopping fast fashion is a continually reinforced habit by our social environment, advertising, and social media. We are in an era of videos of mega-hauls from influencers sent by fast fashion brands gaining traction, verifying the urges to consume more and have all the latest, trendy clothing. The consumer is not at fault for indulging in fast fashion consumption. It's a psychological fulfillment we are now becoming aware of, and it's important to learn how it influences the decisions we make. The desire to feel socially accepted and match a reputation of luxury can be simulated through the fast fashion industry. Its convenience and affordability open the doors of trendy clothing to a much wider audience. All these factors contribute to a lesser attachment to the clothes we buy and how long we keep them.

This is where outfit repetition comes into play. Society has convinced us that the unspoken concept of outfit repeating is embarrassing, but that couldn't be further from the truth. If an outfit makes you feel comfortable and fits just right, there's no shame in wearing it multiple times. Clothes are made to be worn, and you bought them for yourself, not for the people who might see you in them. Outfit repetition makes you more grateful and appreciative of the clothes you do have. The more we buy, the more we look for that quick dopamine hit and convince ourselves we need more. We are lucky enough to be able to purchase new, good clothes that fit us right. If you feel the need for change, spending a couple of hours experimenting with new styling techniques can bring a refreshing update and help you form new connections with the clothes you already own, while also saving money.

The increased accessibility we have to fashion leads us to discard clothes before they've truly lived their full lifespan. One way to break this cycle is to embrace the aging of our clothes rather than seeing wear and tear as a flaw. Just as leather patinas, denim fades beautifully, and soft cotton shirts become more comfortable over time, clothes can develop character with age. Instead of viewing older garments as 'used', we can appreciate them for the stories they hold and the comfort they bring. It's important to challenge the idea that only newness is desirable.

By shifting our mindset from fast fashion's novelty-seeking cycle to a more sustainable, long-term appreciation, we can create a more mindful and fulfilling relationship with our clothes.

CHAPTER 5:
CONSCIOUS CONSUMPTION

Fast fashion thrives on constant newness, making us believe that we need more, even when our wardrobes are full. But conscious consumption isn't about giving up fashion, it's about making intentional choices that align with our values, last longer and contribute to a healthier planet.

Conscious consumption means being mindful of what you buy, wear and discard. It's about shifting the mindset from impulse-driven shopping to making thoughtful decisions that prioritise quality over quantity.

Shopping consciously doesn't mean you can't enjoy fashion. It means making better, more mindful choices.

Before buying, ask yourself:
- Instead of asking, "What's new in stores?" ask, "What do I actually need?"
- Do I truly need this, or is it an impulse buy?
- Can I style this in at least 5 different ways?
- Is it made ethically and sustainably?
- Does this align with my personal style?

FIVE TIPS FOR CONSCIOUS CONSUMPTION

Buy less, choose well
Investing in fewer, higher-quality pieces reduces waste and saves money in the long run.

Consider the impact
Every purchase has an environmental and social footprint. Choosing better means supporting fair wages, ethical production and sustainable materials.

Quality Over Quantity
The key to a sustainable wardrobe. Fast fashion prioritises speed and low cost, often at the expense of quality and ethics. Conscious consumers instead focus on longevity, durability and timeless appeal.

Mindset Shift
Fashion should empower, not enslave. Your choices can drive change in an industry that desperately needs it.

**Think beyond trends**
Style should reflect your personality, not just seasonal trends dictated by fast fashion brands.
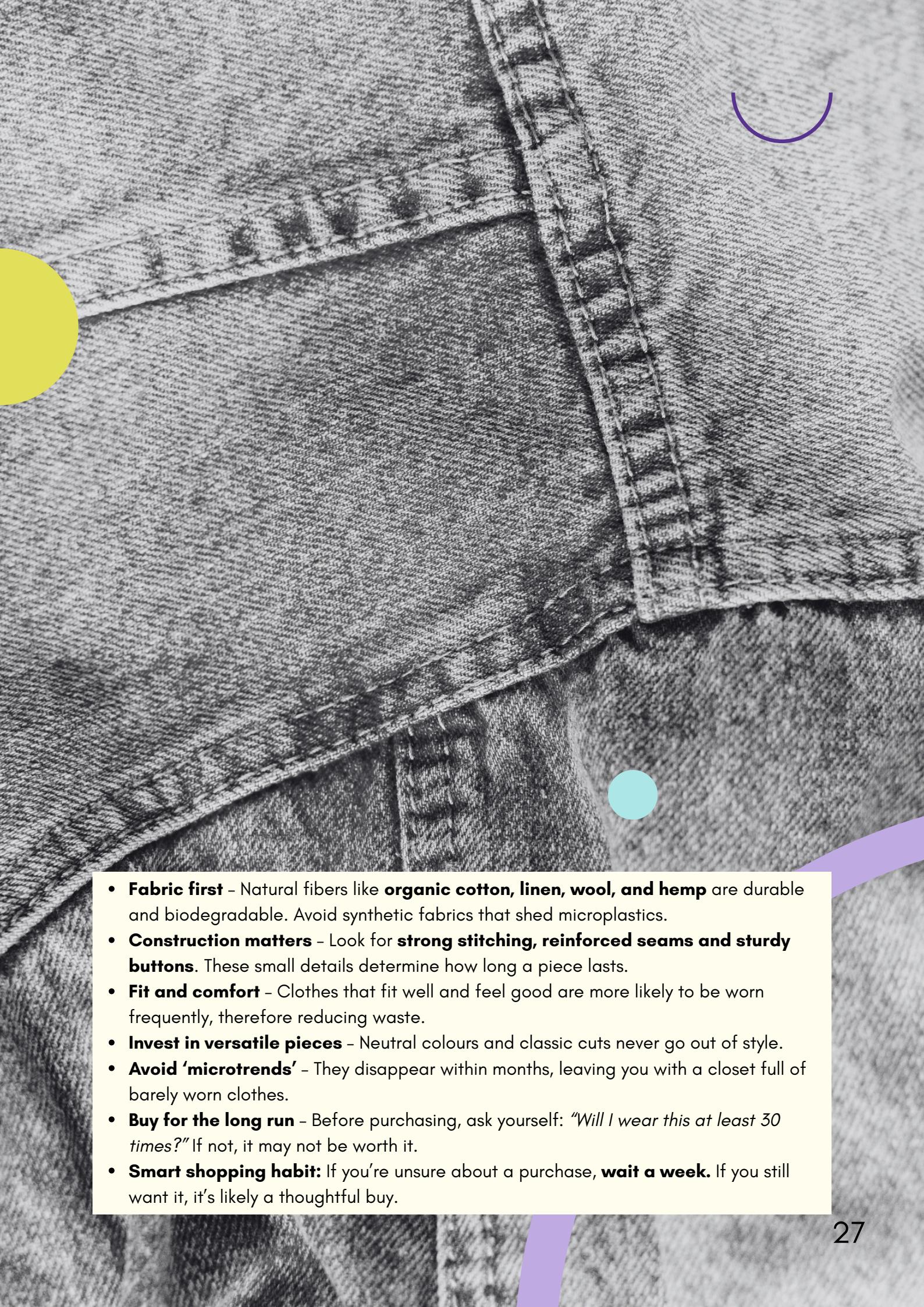
- **Fabric first** – Natural fibers like **organic cotton, linen, wool, and hemp** are durable and biodegradable. Avoid synthetic fabrics that shed microplastics.
- **Construction matters** – Look for **strong stitching, reinforced seams and sturdy buttons**. These small details determine how long a piece lasts.
- **Fit and comfort** – Clothes that fit well and feel good are more likely to be worn frequently, therefore reducing waste.
- **Invest in versatile pieces** – Neutral colours and classic cuts never go out of style.
- **Avoid 'microtrends'** – They disappear within months, leaving you with a closet full of barely worn clothes.
- **Buy for the long run** – Before purchasing, ask yourself: *"Will I wear this at least 30 times?"* If not, it may not be worth it.
- **Smart shopping habit:** If you're unsure about a purchase, **wait a week.** If you still want it, it's likely a thoughtful buy.

ALTERNATIVES TO BUYING NEW

- **Shop your own closet** – You likely already own great pieces you might have forgotten about!
- **Thrift, swap or rent** – Second-hand shopping gives clothes a new life and reduces textile waste. You can also swap with friends and family. Why not organise a join wardrobe sort and swap? If you're not sure about an item maybe borrow it first or rent it to see how you feel before buying it.
- **Support sustainable brands** – Brands that prioritise ethical labour and eco-friendly materials deserve your investment.
- **Repair, don't replace** – A missing button or a small tear shouldn't mean the end of a garment. Learn simple repair techniques or visit a tailor for those harder-to-fix problems.
- **Small changes, big impact**: The fewer higher-quality pieces you buy, the more sustainable, stylish and intentional your wardrobe becomes.
- **Take care of what you own**: Clothing that lasts longer means fewer purchases and less waste. Proper care can extend an item's life and reduce its environmental impact.
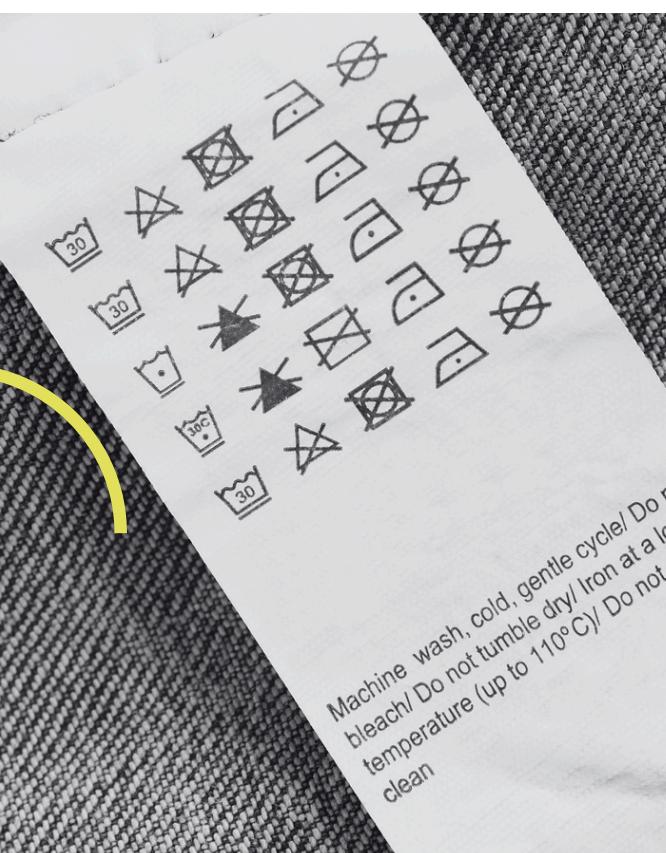
CLOTHING CARE

- **Wash less, air more** – Over-washing weakens fabric. Instead, air out clothes between wears.
- **Use gentle detergents** – Chemical-heavy detergents degrade fabric fibres and also pollute water.
- **Wash in cold water** – It saves energy and prevents shrinking or fading. For jeans, a handy tip is to wash them inside out for longer durability.
- **Follow the care label** – Following the recommended care instructions prolongs the lifespan of an item.
- **Line dry whenever possible** – Tumble drying weakens fibres and increases emissions, so line dry when you can
- **Store properly** – Fold delicate items, hang structured pieces and use moth repellents for woollens.
- **Bonus tip:** Learn simple DIY fixes like sewing on buttons, patching up holes or upcycling old clothes into new designs.

CHAPTER 6:
EXPERT'S INSIGHT:
DR. CAROLYN MAIR, AUTHOR OF THE BOOK *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FASHION*
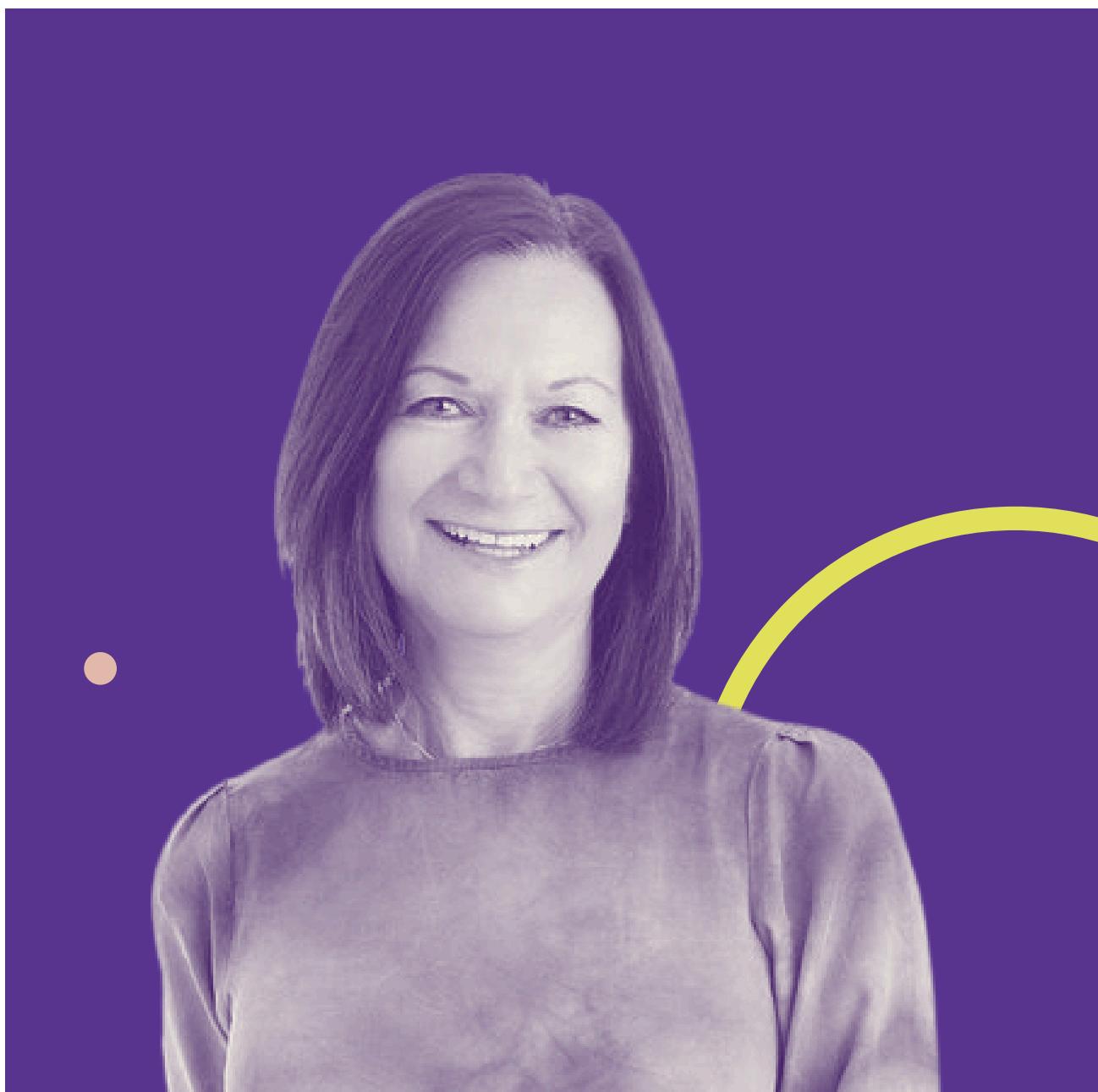
Dr Carolyn Mair is an award-winning academic, Chartered Psychologist and Fashion Business Consultant. The first edition of her book, The Psychology of Fashion, has sold 10,000+ copies across six languages, and was fully rewritten in the 2nd edition which was published in December 2024. Prior to establishing her consultancy in 2017, she was full Professor of Psychology for Fashion at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. Here she created the Psychology department and wrote the MSc Psychology in Fashion and BSc Psychology of Fashion degree programmes. Carolyn holds a PhD in Cognitive Neuroscience, MSc in Research Methods, and BSc (Hons) Applied Psychology and Computing.

Q1: HOW DOES FAST FASHION USE PSYCHOLOGICAL TACTICS TO ENCOURAGE OVERCONSUMPTION?

Dr. Mair: Fast fashion brands rely heavily on scarcity marketing, using limited-time offers, rapid product turnover and frequent new 'drops' to trigger the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). These strategies encourage impulsive buying, urging consumers to act quickly before an item disappears. In addition, the concept of instant gratification helps explain why we're drawn to immediate rewards. Anticipating and rapidly obtaining something, such as a new purchase or a social media like, activates the brain's dopaminergic system, particularly the nucleus accumbens (NA). The NA is a key structure in the limbic system (interconnected brain structures that help regulate your emotions and behaviour), involved in reward, motivation and pleasure. The resulting dopamine release produces a brief emotional high that reinforces the behaviour and makes us crave repetition. Importantly, the structures of the limbic system also work with other brain regions that are involved in memory, thoughts and motivations. It processes what our brain feels and thinks, then tells our body how to act. So, while it can help us regulate, it can also reinforce the behaviours we find pleasurable. Delaying gratification is mentally harder to do because the prefrontal cortex, which, among other things, handles self-control and planning, needs to override the limbic system. According to Tversky and Kahneman (1991), we tend to devalue rewards that are further in the future. For example, buying a £20 shirt now feels more appealing than saving that £20 toward a high-quality item in a few months. Fast fashion thrives on this tendency by offering immediate pleasure easily, at a low cost and with minimal effort or delay. This makes it incredibly tempting and drives overconsumption by activating the brain's reward system and reinforcing the behaviour, much like in addictive cycles.

Fast fashion taps directly into this reward cycle. Its affordability and accessibility lower the barrier to purchase, while the excitement and immediacy of buying deliver instant gratification and a quick dopamine hit. This process engages the same brain circuits that are activated by food, social approval and even addictive substances, making the habit of frequent shopping not only cultural but deeply neurological and difficult to break. Over time, consumers are conditioned to associate shopping with emotional relief or pleasure. Instant gratification feels good now, and our brains are wired to prioritise that feeling, even when we know the long-term consequences might not be so great.

Another important factor is affordability. Fast fashion items are typically priced to be within everyone's budget. While this inclusivity might seem positive, psychologically it can be a double-edged sword. When items are extremely inexpensive, we may unconsciously perceive them as of lower value. This is described in 'the price-quality heuristic' which describes the tendency to believe that cheaper goods are less worthy. As a result, we treat these purchases as disposable, leading to less emotional attachment, quicker discard cycles and ultimately more consumption. The accessibility of fast fashion, therefore, makes it easy to buy frequently and thoughtlessly, reinforcing a cycle of overconsumption with little long-term satisfaction or mindfulness.

Q2: WHAT MAKES IT DIFFICULT FOR MANY CONSUMERS TO QUIT FAST FASHION ALTOGETHER?

Dr. Mair: When consumers understand the ethical or environmental harm of fast fashion, but continue to buy it, they can experience an internal conflict between their values and behaviour. This is known as cognitive dissonance in Psychology (Festinger, 1957). To resolve this, they may justify their actions by claiming, "I only buy when it's on sale," or "everyone else does" and so on. This can minimise guilt without changing behaviour. In addition, we tend to resist change, preferring familiar, easy routines, as described in 'the status quo bias' (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Buying sustainable fashion often requires more research, motivation and sometimes higher costs. This can present a barrier for consumers which many might not be motivated to cross. Moreover, people tend to prioritise immediate rewards over long-term outcomes as described previously. Fast fashion offers quick gratification by means of affordable, trendy items that are readily available, whereas environmental and social consequences often feel distant or abstract. This is known as temporal discounting, a concept which describes how it is psychologically easier to ignore future problems. We are also heavily influenced by social norms. If our peer group continues to behave in a particular way, it reinforces the idea that that behaviour is acceptable or expected (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). As a result, changing habits that are social norms, can feel inconvenient and socially isolating.

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Q3: WHAT ROLE DOES SOCIAL MEDIA PLAY IN SHAPING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CLOTHING AND FASHION CONSUMPTION?

Dr. Mair: Social media amplifies social comparison and the need for social validation. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok constantly present idealised lifestyles and curated wardrobes, which trigger upward comparisons that often lead to feelings of inadequacy. Influencer culture fuels the idea that self-worth is tied to appearances and 'staying on trend'. According to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), when there's a gap between our authentic self and ideal self (as portrayed online), we try to reduce that gap, often by shopping. This can lead to compulsive buying behaviour driven by the need to project an acceptable or desirable self-image. This dynamic is further reinforced by likes, comments and shares, which can serve as positive reinforcement for fashion-related content and purchases. Each engagement acts as a reward, encouraging repeated behaviour such as showcasing new outfits or purchasing trending items. As described in B.F. Skinner's early work on 'operant conditioning', over time, this can condition consumers to associate shopping with social approval and personal validation. We use fashion as a tool to construct and express different facets of the self (Mair, 2018, 2024) so it makes sense that on social media, the curated wardrobe becomes a symbolic representation of identity. In many cases, this identity requires regular consumption to remain relevant. Fashion becomes as much, if not more, about managing the social presence and perceived value in digital spaces as about the clothing itself.
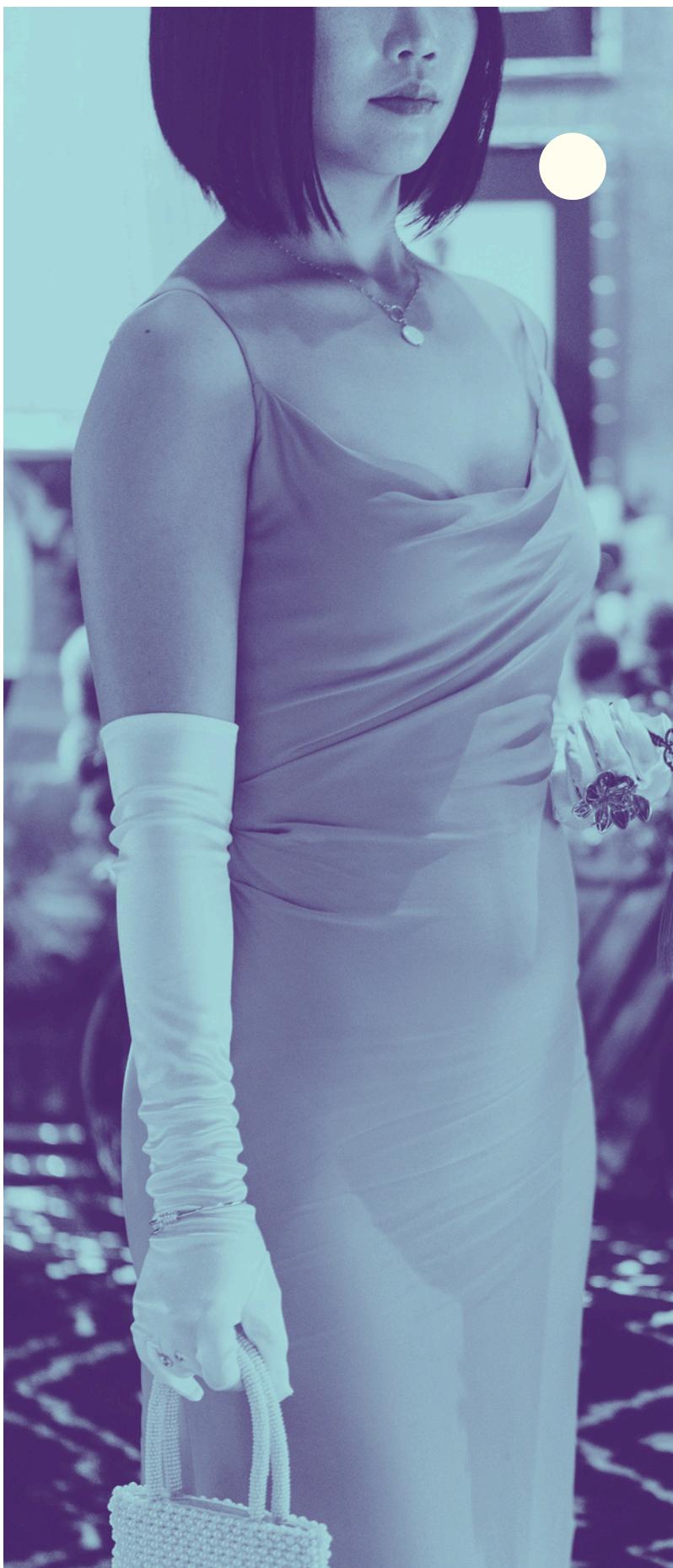
Q4: WHY DO PEOPLE OFTEN FEEL DISSATISFIED WITH THEIR PURCHASES, EVEN WHEN THEY REGULARLY BUY NEW CLOTHES?

Dr. Mair: The emotional high from a purchase quickly fades because we habituate. Hedonic adaptation suggests that we are likely to experience post-purchase regret when there are so many clothing options available, leading to dissatisfaction. There's also a disconnect between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. Fast fashion purchases are often driven by external pressures (trends, social approval), rather than personal meaning or utility. As a result, even frequent buying doesn't satisfy deeper psychological needs like identity expression or self-acceptance. In addition, the fast-paced nature of the fashion industry encourages impulsive buying, often without meaningful engagement with the product. Consumers may purchase clothes not because they genuinely want or need them, but because they feel a fleeting sense of urgency, often induced by limited-time offers or FOMO. This pattern reinforces a cycle of short-lived gratification followed by disappointment. Moreover, the overwhelming variety of options can lead to decision fatigue, causing individuals to second-guess their choices or feel they've missed out on something better. This is known as the 'paradox of choice' (Schwartz, 2004). Over time, this erodes satisfaction and fosters a habit of constant consumption without fulfilment (Dittmar, 2005).

Q5: WHAT SMALL MINDSET SHIFTS COULD HELP SOMEONE BEGIN TO REDUCE THEIR FAST FASHION CONSUMPTION?

Dr. Mair: A powerful way would be to move from a consumption identity to a conscious consumer mindset. Instead of viewing fashion as a means of validation or trend alignment, consumers could begin to see it as a form of self-expression rooted in values. Mindful consumption can reduce impulsive behaviours and encourage intentional shopping. We can help ourselves by asking questions such as "Do I need this?", "How many times will I wear this?", or "Have I got something very similar already?". In addition, developing intrinsic goals such as prioritising environmental impact, craftsmanship or long-term satisfaction helps rewire the emotional reward system, slowly replacing short-term pleasure with purpose-driven satisfaction.

Another helpful mindset shift involves cultivating gratitude and contentment with what you already have. By actively appreciating the value, versatility and memories attached to existing garments, consumers can foster a stronger emotional connection to their wardrobe, reducing the urge to constantly seek novelty. This practice, often aligned with minimalist or slow fashion principles, encourages a 'less but better' philosophy in which we choose quality and longevity over quantity. Furthermore, understanding how clothes are made, or experimenting with styling the same pieces in different ways, can reframe fashion as a creative and sustainable practice rather than a disposable habit. These small shifts, grounded in awareness and personal agency, can help disrupt the cycle of fast fashion consumption.

Q6: ONE KEY PIECE OF ADVICE FOR SOMEONE STARTING THEIR SUSTAINABLE FASHION JOURNEY?

Dr. Mair: The best advice is to know what matters most to you and why you want to change. Goal-setting theory states that specific, meaningful goals enhance motivation and behavioural follow-through. Begin by doing a wardrobe audit to identify patterns about what you wear and which items you love. Then set small, realistic goals such as not buying anything new for a month, buying second-hand (which is still new to you), swapping or renting. These behaviours can foster a sense of agency and progress, which are crucial for maintaining behaviour change. Asking why and educating yourself about the broader impacts of your fashion choices builds awareness and empathy that empowers us to align our actions with our values, reinforcing our personal 'why' and driving sustained change. One simple act we can all do in addition to educating ourselves is to engage with communities or influencers who promote sustainable behaviours. This provides social proof that these behaviours are beneficial and a sense of belonging that supports long-term change.

For more detailed information about the psychology underpinning fashion consumer behaviour, please see the recently published 2nd edition of The Psychology of Fashion (2024).

POSTFACE

You've just taken an important step of awareness, reflection and intention. Now, it's time to turn that awareness into action.

Fast fashion thrives on silence and compliance. But you have the power to say *no*. To stop supporting a system built on overproduction, exploitation and waste. And you're not alone.

We invite you to take the next step: sign our pledge to stop buying fast fashion. It's a commitment to yourself and to a more just, mindful and sustainable world.

Visit www.slowfashion.global to sign the pledge and explore more ways to take action. Follow us on Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn for content, tips, and inspiration to help you make conscious choices, one outfit at a time.

Together, we can rewrite the story of fashion.

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AUTHORS

Kristīne is a writer with a passion for fashion, books, films, history, and Finnish rock. With a vivid imagination shaped by childhood dreams of time travel and the supernatural, she turned to storytelling as a way to escape the ordinary. Her writing often explores the fantastical, especially through vampire fiction. This website reflects her personal journey as a writer beyond the bounds of time and genre.

Annelie is a third-year student at the University of California, Los Angeles, majoring in Environmental Science with a minor in Environmental Systems and Society. Originally from San Francisco, California, she enjoys hiking, running, thrifting, sewing, and upcycling clothing. She is passionate about the intersection of sustainability and business, particularly within the fashion industry. Her experience includes GIS, Excel, research, writing, data visualization, and video production.

Sara champions sustainable fashion through her advocacy and love for upcycling. As creative director of nomadxcollective, she guides a platform dedicated to ethically and consciously made goods. When she's not discovering new ways to upcycle, she enjoys a quiet moment with a cup of matcha.

Lilli is a digital marketing and communications specialist with a strong focus on sustainability and education in the fashion industry. She previously led the Fashion Education Network at FashionUnited, connecting educators and students with the fashion industry. Lilli also worked with AFRIEK, a socially-driven fashion brand, where she bridged communication, community-building, and real impact.

Thaís has a bachelor degree in international relations and one of her main area of interest is sustainability, she is part of the content creation team for the slow fashion movement as a tiktok content creator. She decided to mix her passion about fashion with consciousness.

Owen is a Digital Support Specialist working in eCommerce. With a passion for local communities, entertainment arts, and sustainable business, he brings a burning creativity and years of experience outside the fashion industry to Slow Fashion Movement.

Swetali blends a decade of experience in education and social impact with her passion for heritage preservation. As the founder of Earthyweaves, she champions sustainable handloom workwear rooted in India's artisanal legacy. A content writer, entrepreneur, and advocate for slow fashion, she draws from her family's Sambalpuri handloom heritage to reimagine traditional textiles for modern living. When not building her brand or writing about sustainability, she enjoys singing, and reading.

Rachel is a UK-based copywriter, editor, and content consultant who supports independent, sustainability-focused brands. After a decade in corporate retail, she shifted towards a more sustainable lifestyle following motherhood and the COVID pandemic. She now embraces second-hand shopping, avoids fast fashion, and runs a creative content business alongside selling preloved fashion. Rachel is also an active volunteer with SFM.

Pedro is a fashion revolutionary, acting at the intersection between technology, innovation, and sustainability. His expertise is in the environmental performance of fashion materials, predominantly focused on footwear. Currently, Pedro works full time as a Life Cycle Assessment specialist in Norway. In his free time, Pedro learns how to sew, so he can wear the revolution he promotes.

Puja is a campaign organizer, movement builder, ESG & SDG trainer, and sustainability expert dedicated to transforming the fashion industry through conscious consumerism and climate activism. She serves as an Executive Board Member at Slow Fashion Movement and is the Community Organizer for the South Asia Hub of Remake, where she works to amplify voices from the Global South in the fight for a just and sustainable fashion system.