

# Breaking the Fashion Habit: Educational Intervention for Sustainable Fashion Consumption

WHITE PAPER – 2026



## **FOREWORD**

**Fashion overconsumption can no longer be understood solely through production systems or market dynamics; it is fundamentally rooted in the psychological, emotional, and habitual drivers shaping consumer behaviour. As this report evidences, purchasing practices are increasingly embedded in reward loops linked to identity, social validation, and emotional regulation. Addressing this challenge therefore requires a decisive shift toward a consumer-centric perspective that uncovers the underlying mechanisms of behaviour. Equally, the findings highlight that motivations differ across educational backgrounds and cultural contexts, reinforcing the need for interdisciplinary collaboration that bridges behavioural science, design, marketing, and policy. Only by integrating diverse disciplinary lenses and cultural viewpoints can we develop interventions that are both effective and scalable, capable of transforming consumption patterns and supporting a more sustainable fashion system.**

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## CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

The UK faces a critical fashion overconsumption crisis. The average UK person owns 100-150 items of clothing and disposes of 3.1kg of textiles annually (12kg in the EU). Among 18–24 year olds, 81% purchase clothing monthly, with consumers buying 60% more clothing than 15 years ago whilst wearing each item for half as long.

Overconsumption is not merely a supply-side problem. Online fast- and supersonic-fashion business models have created habitual buying loops characterised by high repetition, automaticity, and emotional reward systems. Fashion shopping has evolved into entertainment, social validation, mood enhancement, and addictive behaviour - where the purchase process itself, rather than the physical product, provides gratification.

Current policy responses emphasising circular economy principles and sustainable manufacturing fail to address these psychological and behavioural dimensions of overconsumption.

## OVERVIEW

This study prototyped the Habit Awareness and Behavioural Intervention Training (HABIT) framework with 56 young adults across the UK and EU, combining:

- Habit Loop workshops identifying triggers, routines, and rewards
- Systematic journaling to record purchasing behaviour
- Future-self letter writing to promote goal alignment

The intervention was empirically tested through purchase metrics, validated psychometric assessments, and Large Language Model analysis.





## Critical Insights

### The Hedonic Treadmill

Overconsumption is not just a production or self-restraint problem.

Fashion business models have created habitual buying loops - high repetition, automaticity, and emotional reward systems. Physical products are not always the primary motivation. The buying cycle provides emotional rewards, social validation, and mood regulation.

### Educational background matters

Significant discipline-specific differences emerged. Design students responded to emotional and social motivators: Management students to utilitarian factors. This demonstrates the salience of educational and career associations to intervention outcomes.

Importantly, this also highlights the need to tailor messaging and educational strategies to the distinct motivations of different learner groups. It also opens up a broader discussion around the need to align industry training and messaging to the specific roles individuals occupy within the fashion and textile sector, to ensure maximum connection and impact.

### Single Interventions Show Promise

Even a short-term, single-phase intervention produced measurable behaviour change, suggesting substantial potential for longitudinal programmes.

# CHANGE IN MONEY SPENT ON ONLINE FASHION

Money spent decreased on average by £17.49 (28.3%).

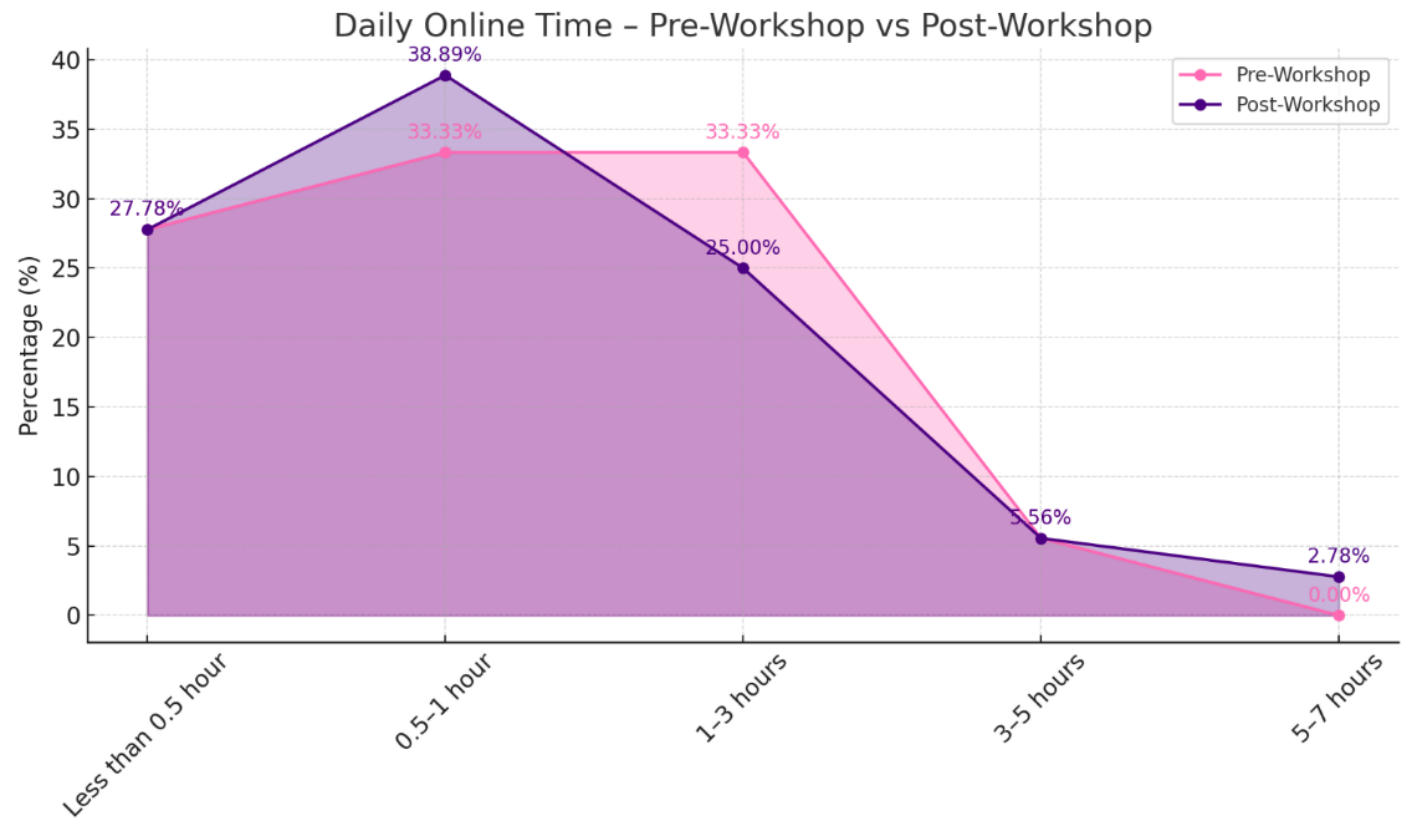
Variability in spending also decreased indicating a pattern for participant to spend less.



## CHANGE IN TIME SPENT ON ONLINE FASHION BUYING (DAILY)

The time spent online moves from 2 hours to 0.75 hours

Post workshop shows significantly stronger skew towards lower usage, implying that although participants spent slightly more time online per day it was for shorter durations.

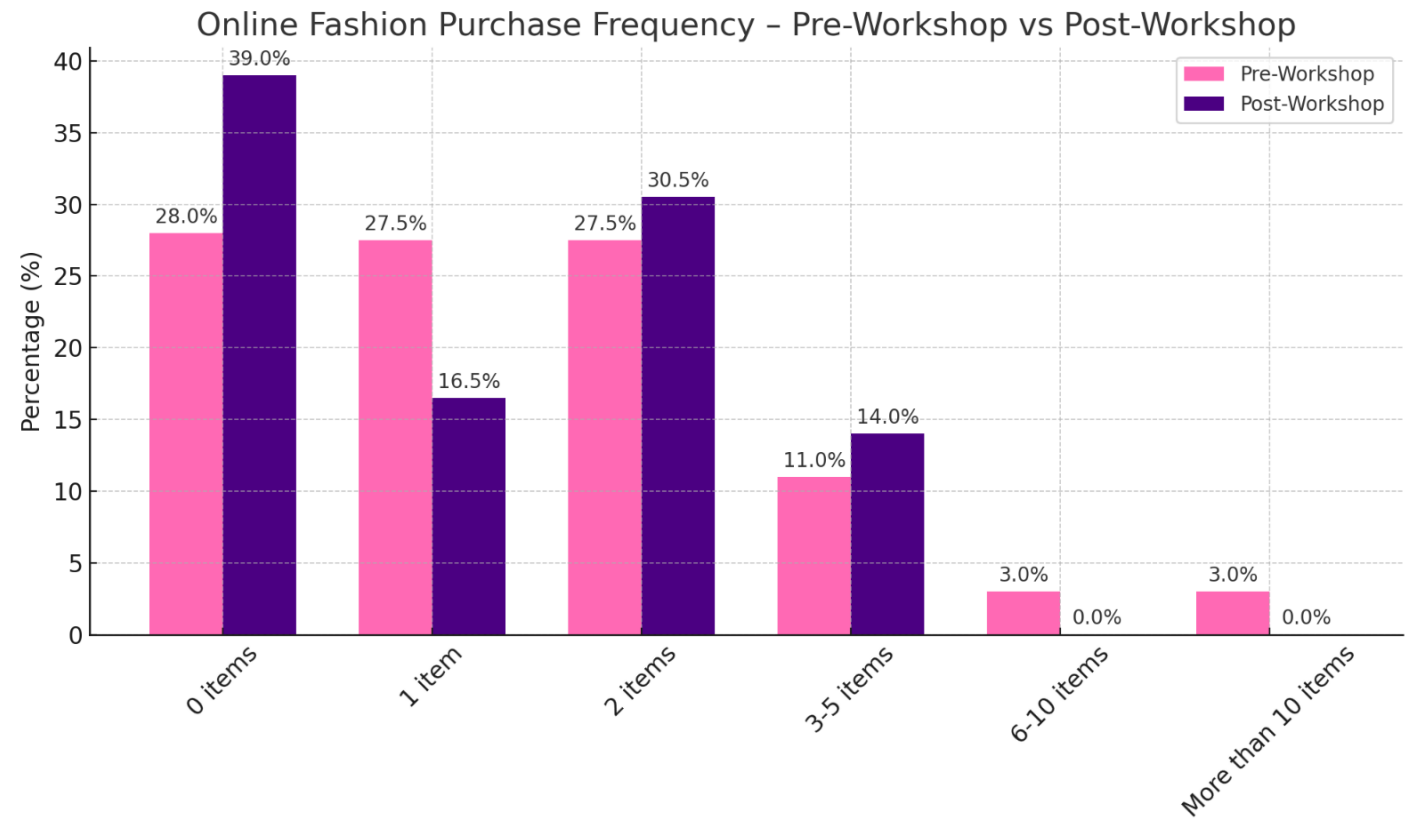


## CHANGE IN FREQUENCY OF PURCHASES (TWO WEEKS)

Participants, on average, purchased fewer items after the workshop.

There was greater variation in purchase behaviour before the workshop.

Afterward, participants became more consistent, clustering around lower item counts.

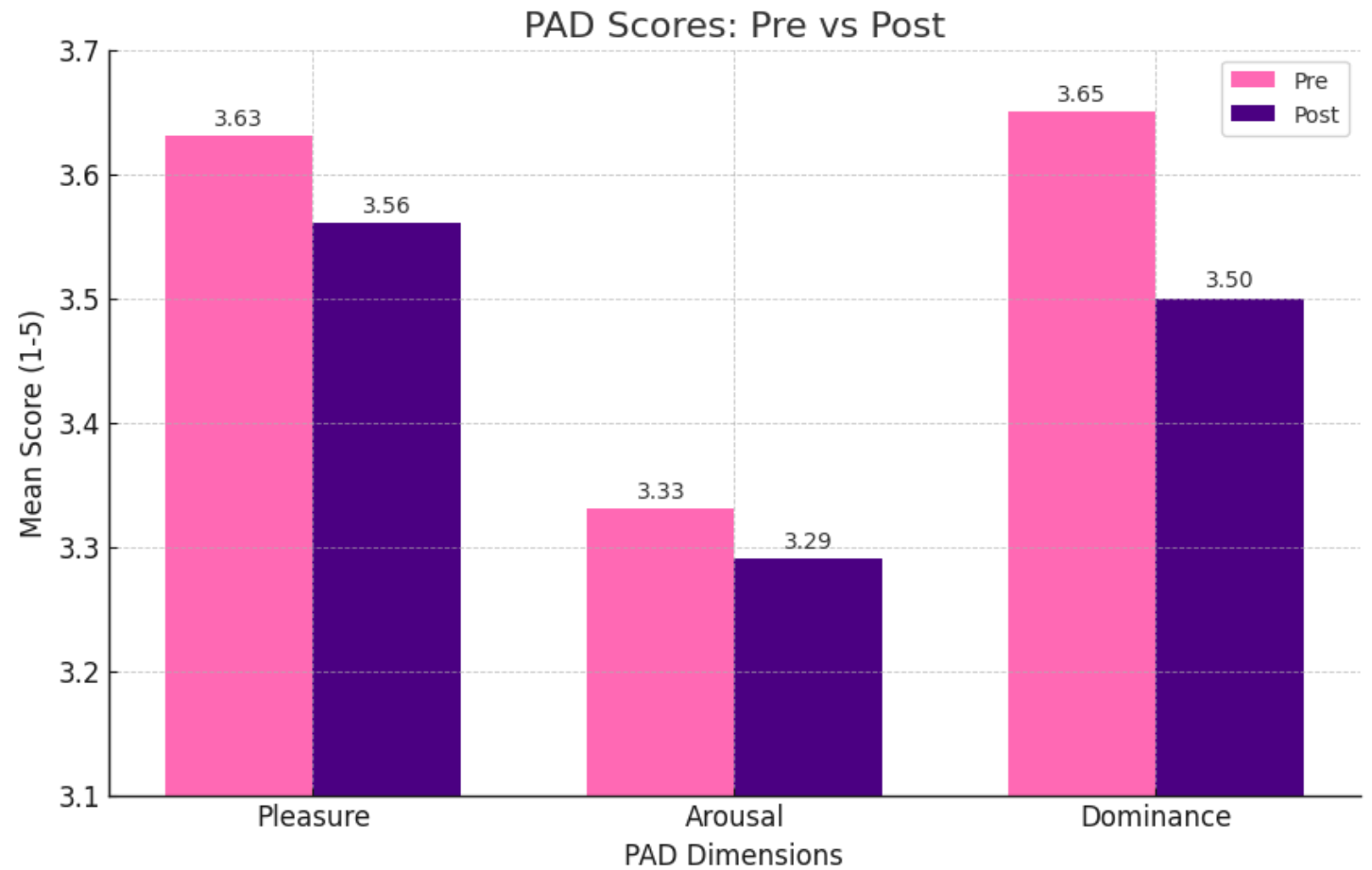


## PSYCHOMETRICS: EMOTIONAL TRAITS – PAD SCALE

Small decreases in Pleasure, Arousal, and Dominance.

The downward trend in Pleasure and Arousal may indicate reduced emotional intensity.

The decrease in Dominance may reflect participants' greater self-awareness.



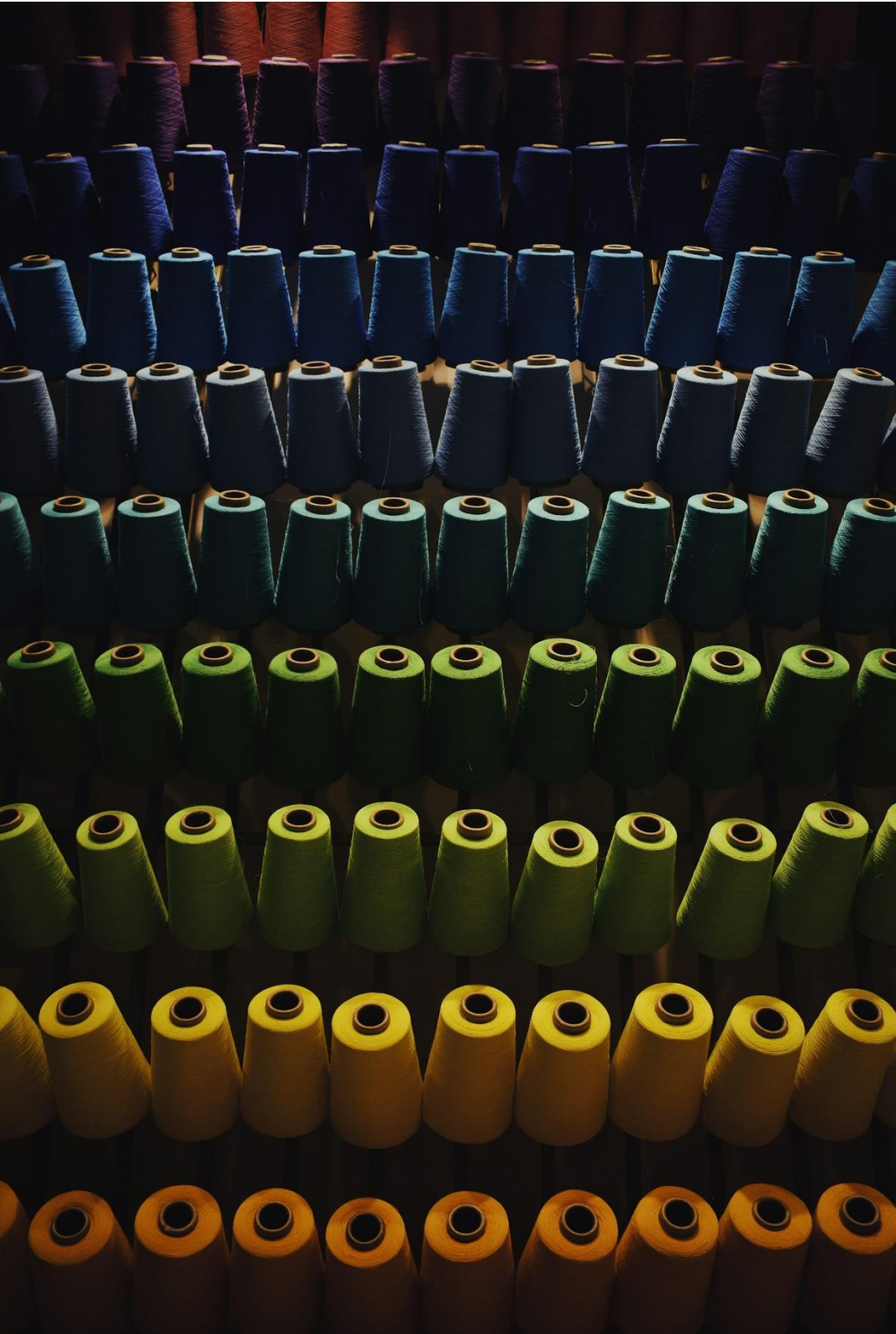
## PSYCHOMETRICS: HABIT INTENSITY – SHRI SCALE

Frequency change was statically significant ( $p = 0.0067$ ). Automaticity and self-identity have shown directional change (decrease) between pre- and post-workshop. Automaticity and self-identity require longer period to change comparing to the habit frequency.

Psychometric analysis revealed the importance of hedonic and social value. Contrary to expectations, nationality was less influential than discipline-specific associations: Design students prioritised emotional and social rewards, while Management students emphasised utilitarian motivations. These differences were also reflected in the habit loop sequencing (Colour Coded).

	TRIGGER						ROUTINE					REWARD			
	Boredom/ Emotions	Social Media	Friends/ Social	Events/ Context	Sales/ Discounts	Practical Needs	Browsing/ Scrolling	Research/ Compare	Social Check	Save/ Wishlist	Purchase /Buy	Positive Emotions	Social Rewards	Negative Emotions/Guilt	Functional/ Problem-Solving
<b>Design</b>	54	32	19	26	18	10	46	37	19	22	15	69	17	30	13
<b>Mgt</b>	30	29	16	19	23	15	20	38	12	13	6	62	5	25	12

Design Habit Loops			Management Habit Loops		
Trigger	Routine	Reward	Trigger	Routine	Reward
Social Media	Social Check	Negative Emotions/Guilt	Sales/Discounts	Social Check	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Research/Compare	Social Rewards	Events/Context	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions
Social Media	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions	Boredom/Emotions	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Sales/Discounts	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions	Practical Needs	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Research/Compare	Social Rewards	Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions
Social Media	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions	Friends/Social	Research/Compare	Functional/Problem-Solving
Social Media	Browsing/Scrolling	Negative Emotions/Guilt	Boredom/Emotions	Research/Compare	Negative Emotions/Guilt
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Negative Emotions/Guilt	Friends/Social	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions	Boredom/Emotions	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions	Practical Needs	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Negative Emotions/Guilt	Social Media	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions	Events/Context	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions	Social Media	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Purchase/Buy	Positive Emotions	Boredom/Emotions	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Friends/Social	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions	Social Media	Research/Compare	Negative Emotions/Guilt
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions	Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions	Friends/Social	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions	Sales/Discounts	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Social Media	Save/Wishlist	Positive Emotions	Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions	Boredom/Emotions	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions	Social Media	Research/Compare	Positive Emotions
Boredom/Emotions	Browsing/Scrolling	Positive Emotions			



## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

### **Addressing Habitual Overconsumption**

National recognition of fashion overconsumption as a habitual behaviour, warranting similar scrutiny to gambling or unhealthy food consumption.

### **Strengthening Authentic Sustainable Manufacturing**

Positioning and supporting UK manufacturers as global leaders in ethical production and conscious consumption through evidence-based consumer education.

### **Enhancing Consumer Education and Public Awareness**

Curriculum integration at school and university levels with targeted messaging about the emotional and habitual roots of overconsumption.

### **Cross-Sector and Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration**

Funding collaborative research programmes uniting behavioural science, sustainability, manufacturing, digital regulation and design.

### **Regulation of Digital Retail Environments**

Regulating online retail and social platforms to limit algorithmic targeting that encourages overuse, compulsive browsing, or unsustainable consumption patterns. Restricting dark patterns in advertising and digital retail, particularly those that amplify emotional triggers, negative self-comparison, or addiction-like engagement.



## **Industry Opportunities**

### **Reducing Supersonic Fashion Demand Through Behavioural Insight**

Integrate behavioural insight into product development, customer communication, and service models to support more intentional purchasing.

### **Strengthening Authentic Sustainable Manufacturing**

Elevate sustainable manufacturing as a competitive advantage, supported by evidence-based consumer engagement and transparent value propositions.

### **Improving Consumer Education and Sector Communication**

Collaborate on national consumer education initiatives to promote informed, value-driven buying behaviour aligned with sustainability goals.

### **Regulation of Digital Retail Environments**

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## Future Direction

Habit framework investigates the habitual and addictive nature of online fashion buying as an ignored contributor to fashion overconsumption and underuse.

**Limitation:** This project highlights the efficacy of habit loop awareness through educational training in disrupting problematic purchasing behaviours. However, the scope is limited to a single intervention and a short data collection period.

**Research Priorities:** To develop HABIT from a disruptor of unhealthy buying patterns to a sustained habit-change tool requires further testing through longitudinal, multi-phase training to support lasting behaviour change.

Further exploration of policy implications and business opportunities through engagement with textile professionals and government agencies is required to best support conscious online fashion consumption and responsible sector transformation.

***The challenge is not simply encouraging 'better' purchasing but rather dismantling ingrained behavioural patterns.***

For future collaboration, please visit:

**<https://thehabitlab.co.uk/>**





## Conclusion

Fashion overconsumption is not solely a production problem - it is also a behavioural challenge with oversupply as a major contributing factor. The HABIT framework demonstrates that educational interventions addressing the psychological drivers of habitual purchasing can produce significant, measurable behaviour change.

Policymakers must recognise that sustainable manufacturing and circular business models cannot alone solve the overconsumption crisis. Effective solutions require understanding and disrupting the emotional, social, and habitual dimensions of fashion purchasing. The HABIT framework provides a validated, replicable approach that can be scaled and adapted across contexts.

Insights from the project should also create awareness of

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