“How Your Addiction to Fast Fashion Kills” by Amy Odell (May 2, 2013 *Buzzfeed*)

Is shopping “the new terrorism”?

The collapsed Rana Plaza in Bangladesh.

Via: Bangladesh / Reuters

If you're an average consumer, there's a good chance you shop at affordable places like H&M, Forever 21, Zara, or JCPenney. These stores fuel and fulfill our demand for fast fashion — trendy, cheap things we can easily discard as soon as the clothes fall apart or the next covetable fad comes along. But they also fuel an unsustainable demand for dirt cheap labor available in the extremely poor nations like Bangladesh, where the death toll from the collapsed Rana Plaza factory has passed 400 and is expected to climb by hundreds more.

"Virtually every major brand that we shop at is producing in Bangladesh," said Elizabeth Cline, author of Overdressed: The Shockingly High Price of Cheap Fashion. "I would say the problems at Rana Plaza are not specific to that building, and they're not just specific to the brands operating in that building" — they're pervasive in the whole country, where labor goes for 14 cents an hour.

Clothing manufacturing conditions in Bangladesh are typically terrible across the board. The infrastructure is awful (an engineer saw cracks in Rana Plaza's facade the day before the collapse, but nothing was done about it), the workers sometimes don't even receive their wages, and local authorities don't enforce building codes. Yet with the demand for fast fashion an all-time high, more and more clothes are being made in the kinds of conditions that morally offend a lot of people in the Western world — and without these kinds of well-publicized tragedies, shoppers don't even think about it.

"The reason we have fast fashion is the cheap exploited labor around the world," said Cline. She estimates that "less than 10% of what we're wearing... was made in factories where people were paid a living wage and working in safe and legal conditions."

Sustainable fashion writer and consultant Amy DuFault has come to think of shopping as a form of terrorism. "It's just something to think about," she said, "This idea of shopping as the new sort of terrorism. And it sounds dramatic, but if you think about it it's actually really true — we have control over what's happening in the environment, the people and planet."

A host of complicated factors have contributed to this disturbing, massive exploitation of the world's cheapest labor. First, labor costs in China, where infrastructure and technology are not necessarily great but still better than what you find in countries like Bangladesh or Pakistan, have increased. So stores wanting to deliver fast fashion to consumers at competitive prices are moving on to cheaper labor in Bangladesh. Also, in 2005 the U.S. government lifted quotas on imports, allowing U.S. companies to import as many clothes from impoverished nations as they wish, which experts believe really helped fuel the explosion of fast fashion.

Another big problem with the manufacturing process is the use of subcontractors, which are extremely hard to supervise. Large companies that make things in different places all over the world hire subcontractors to find them factories to manufacture things. Those factories might subcontract to other factories, which makes it really hard for even companies that have reputable monitoring agencies to keep track of everything going on in the supply chain.

Ultimately, it's the companies' jobs to ensure their goods are ethically produced, however, "The companies are not filled with bad guys rubbing their hands together saying, who cares if we lose a couple hundred workers?" noted Susan Scafidi, a professor of fashion law at Fordham.

"Focusing more on infrastructure is something these companies need to do, but even the most well-meaning companies are going to have a tough time. They really have to rely on third-person monitoring if they're a small company," continued Scafidi. "It is truly a headache for the industry right now."

So, how can you tell if you're getting something that's ethically made? An easy but imperfect way is to look at the label. Scafidi called Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Honduras "the worst of the worst." Garments from China are likely to be made by workers in better conditions than you find in a place like Bangladesh. "There is no safe Bangladeshi label right now," Scafidi warned.

Concerned shoppers should also look for clothes bearing a Made in the U.S.A. label. American Apparel (which has its own problems, but exploiting cheap labor in Bangladesh is not one of them) makes everything here.

Other labels focused on ethically manufactured clothes but that don't produce everything in the U.S. include Everlane and Eileen Fisher, the latter of which Cline admires for its transparency about their manufacturing process — something most stores lack in spades. Eileen Fisher admits that not all of their manufacturing is perfect (some things are made in

China, where factory conditions have improved drastically in the last decade) but they carry a lot of explicitly labeled fair trade and organic items. You can find a sizable list of other ethically minded brands on Cline's website.

But ultimately, the industry won't be more transparent about its manufacturing processes as a whole unless consumers demand it. "Every interview I've done in the past few days, people are asking where can we shop instead. I think this is a real turning point," Cline said. Besides, there's nowhere else for companies to go for cheaper labor right now — Bangladesh was the last stop for rock bottom prices.

Scafidi and Cline believe consumers would pay a little bit more to shop somewhere with ethical manufacturing standards. After all, what would mean more to you as a consumer? Having one more super-cheap shirt, or waiting a little longer to buy a shirt but having the peace of mind knowing that shirt was made by workers treated not just humanely, but fairly?

Of course realistically, it's hard for consumers to remember these tragedies every time they shop. Shopping is an emotional and often impulsive experience for most of us — we're looking for a cheap pick-me-up after a bad day, or a dress to impress a date. "There will never be any visual cue in the store to say, hey think about [how clothes are made]. It's an atmosphere designed to make you not think about where the things came from, but to think about how much fun the clothes will be," Scafidi said.

Apparel companies have a lot of power, though. They've certainly proved they can change the way we think about shopping. "They've fed us fast fashion, they've fed us cheap and chic, and constantly changing [merchandise], and they've benefitted a lot from that. So they have to be partners with the American consumer in changing our shopping habits," Scafidi said. "You have to bring your conscience with you into a store. It's worth dragging along because in the longer term it's better for everybody."

A family member of a victim of the Rana Plaza collapse tries to identify her sister-in-law's remains.
Via: Ismail Ferdous / AP