# Online shopping drives surge in plastic bag usage in the UK



Online shopping has significantly contributed to the rise in plastic bag usage in the UK, producing a staggering 2.6 million plastic bags every day, according to an analysis by Development Economics commissioned by sustainable packaging company DS Smith, an International Paper company. This surge in ecommerce packaging has widened the gap between the increasingly sustainable practices of high-street retailers and those of online fashion retailers.

Since the implementation of a high-street levy in 2015, the use of plastic bags in physical retail has plummeted by 98%. However, while foot traffic to stores has diminished, the demand for online shopping has surged, resulting in a dramatic increase in plastic packaging. In the past year alone, UK online fashion retailers delivered a total of 941 million plastic bags, making the UK the largest individual market for ecommerce plastic delivery bags among major European economies. Notably, the UK surpassed Germany by an estimated 150 million bags in this regard.

The report suggests that this trend is expected to escalate, with plastic bag usage projected to increase by 40% between now and 2030, aligned with anticipated growth in online fashion sales. Projections indicate that by 2030, approximately 1.3 billion plastic delivery bags will be arriving at UK homes annually, aggregating to about 6.9 billion bags over the next five years.

Currently, the statistics reveal a concerning trend regarding recycling practices. Only 9% of the plastic bags utilised in fashion ecommerce are being reused or recycled, leaving the overwhelming majority, about 91%, to end up in landfill or incineration. This equates to an estimated 857 million plastic bags last year alone. According to the continuing growth of ecommerce and the sluggish progress on recycling rates, it is anticipated that over 1 billion plastic bags will be dispatched to landfills or incinerated each year by 2030.

Stefano Rossi, Divisional CEO Packaging at DS Smith, remarked on the situation, stating, “With some of the biggest brands in the world, we estimate that we’ve already replaced more than 1 billion pieces of plastic over the last four years – but we must do more.” He noted that while online shopping has grown significantly, ecommerce retailers are trailing behind high-street stores in moving away from plastic bags. He highlighted that brands like Zalando have shown that change is feasible but pointed out a significant challenge: “There simply aren’t enough paper alternatives available and our industry needs to step up to provide them.”

Zalando, a prominent name in the fashion ecommerce space, has taken steps to address this issue by switching to paper shipping bags composed of recycled content and FSC-certified virgin fibres since 2020. David Fischer, Director Logistics Sustainability and Packaging at Zalando, indicated the positive response they have received from customers, stating, “Switching from plastic to paper shipping bags has been a game-changer.” He noted a 16 percentage point increase in customer satisfaction following the introduction of paper bags.

However, challenges remain in fully eliminating single-use plastics in the ecommerce sector. Fischer remarked, “Finding the perfect solution is a complex task, especially in a landscape where more sustainable alternatives are not yet fully scalable or may not meet the minimum requirements both in terms of sustainability and operational feasibility.”

Public sentiment appears to support a shift towards more sustainable materials for packaging, with two-thirds (67%) of people in the UK favouring the phasing out of plastic bags where alternatives exist. Additionally, three in five (60%) shoppers express a preference for their purchases to be wrapped in cardboard or paper.

A significant number of shoppers (46%) reported they would be more inclined to choose a fashion retailer that employs easily recyclable packaging. The growing consumer demand for sustainable packaging solutions presents an opportunity for brands to adapt. In collaboration with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, DS Smith has trained its 800 designers in circular design principles to improve the recyclability and recycled content of packaging, reflecting a potential pathway for addressing consumer expectations in the evolving ecommerce landscape.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)