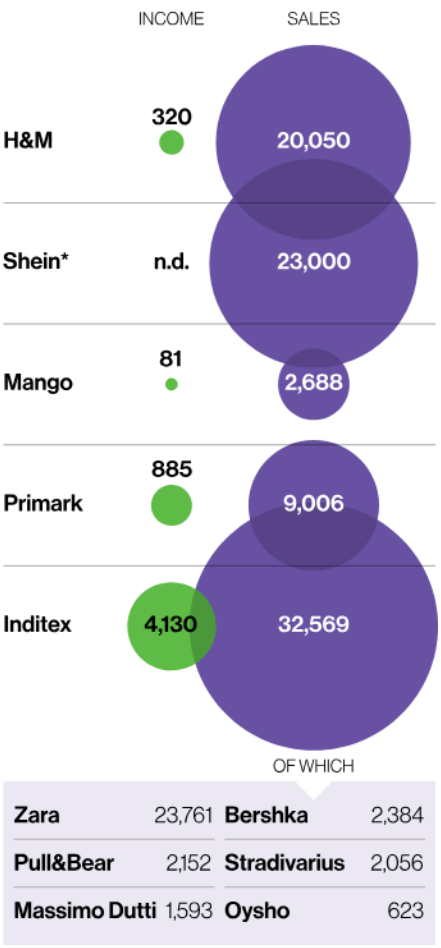
Primark’s AI usage

Primark is the only fast fashion giant without an online shop. Building an online shop would force them to massively change their current logistics automation. They do use AI to save money, time and employees. But during my research, I also found many more AI use cases, that explain the companies growing sales.

There are more than 460 stores in 17 countries, but since the company focuses on Europe, especially the UK, it is indeed not always listed as an own player in graphs and statistics about fast fashion giants.



But this graph shows its presence in the global market very distinctively, since it doesn’t list the sheer amount of Inditex’ subsidiaries like Zara, Bershka, Pull&Bear or Stradivarius, just to list a few.

The photo source is listed as: Ufficio Studi Il Sole 24 Ore

Primark has published an app for the Irish and Italian market (so far, they are planning to expand the area in the upcoming months). While the app still doesn’t allow online shopping, it allows the user to browse products, check the in-store availability, save their favourites, locate stores and receive personalized notifications.

This actually grants them many of the benefits an online store can usually offer to a company. They are now able to collect and analyse loads of data, while still not having to change their logistics.

They can now track user behaviour and preferences easier, saving products will most likely require an account. When checking for store location, you usually grant access to your own location, just so you don’t have to type it yourself.

Even without the users creating an account, so many people will accept all cookies, because that’s usually many clicks less than actually declining them, or only accepting necessary cookies. And when creating an account, the tiny percentage of users, who will read the general terms and conditions, will also be able to realize, that personalized notifications about products and upcoming product lines do require you to share data.

While I wasn’t able to find sufficient sources about Primark’s actual evaluation of their user’s data, I think it can be assumed, that they use complex AI algorithms to recognize and recognize trends, hype and disinterest.

The better part of articles about their AI use in logistics was actually from companies, advertising their work by the example of their collaboration with Primark and how they helped in the building and/or upgrading of its warehouses.

I also found an article on reelmind, which does cite sources and sounds very promising, but reelmind seems everything but trustworthy and I wasn't quite able to figure out, why they upload articles for public access anyway and who wrote them? While some paragraphs are nonsense, I do like their depths about AI in the supply chain management.

Fast fashion companies also optimize their inventory management with AI. It can help minimizing the risk of overstocking unpopular items and ensuring availability for the popular items, reducing waste and preventing lost sales to stockouts.

AI algorithms can identify problems in the processes of sourcing materials, manufacturing, distribution and delivery. Then optimize routing of delivery trucks, predict future disruptions and suggest work-arounds.
AI is also used more and more for quality control, inspecting products for defects. Using 3D mapping for their stores has helped upgrade their lighting, which apparently cut major costs and is also helpful in the future for store layout changes.

Primark is upgrading their warehouses constantly. They are using automated cranes instead of manual forklifts, autonomous guided vehicles, basically just vastly reducing human labour, which ended up improving speed and accuracy for them.
They seem to work together with many companies that offer the latest, most modern technology for transport and dock management, IT systems and cloud infrastructure.

The main point the company stands by, is that they would have to vastly change their current, super optimized logistics process, if they ever wanted to venture into ecommerce. Their products are so cheap, they probably won't even be able to figure out shipping, that wouldn't be more expensive than the actual product, at least not within labour protection rights. Fast fashion is also the industry with the highest rate of return rights, not just due to poor quality, cheap materials but also consumer behaviour. Many people tend to order multiple sizes, to make sure, that one of the items fit, and the current advertising and hype around fashion often leads to impulse purchases. Many customers treat the actual arrival of the package as a mystery unboxing, as they cannot even remember what they initially ordered. That also leads to returns, once they figure out, they don't want it.

They would have to upsize their online customer support significantly and also employ people for picking, packing and delivering the orders. While that are tasks, that can be supported by AI, analysing the needed improvement and then implementing it would take not only money but also a lot of time.

A comment on the initial video I watched mentioned, that Primark probably also benefits from the fact, that their register lines are always quite long. While that may scare off some single-item purchases, as the customer doesn't want to queue that long, it does make returns much more annoying. While online returns can be done with usually two clicks, returning items at Primark requires you to go to the store, bring the receipt, and then stand in line for quite a while, before getting the little money back you spent on the items.

For many people, that is just not worth the effort. Overall, Primark's success does definitely stem the most from their loyal customer base, that just doesn't give in to the persistent education about the problems with fast fashion.

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