

This Could Help Fight Fast-Fashion Pollution

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Several strategies may help reduce textile pollution, including renting your clothes, buying fashion that is responsibly manufactured and taking care to donate used clothing where it does the most good
- › The overabundance of cheap clothing driven by consumer demand has also affected the secondhand clothing industry in Kenya and Ghana, as reported by CBC and ABC News Australia; quality of the donated items is so bad that an estimated 40% of what arrives in Ghana goes straight to the landfill
- › Although the capital of Ghana can process 2,000 metric tons of waste each day, the city produces nearly twice that; textile waste is estimated at nearly 6 million garments each week
- › Researchers are evaluating consumer interest in renting clothing in an effort to cut back on textile waste; manufacturers must also make changes to raise the quality of the clothing so it can hold up to being worn by multiple people

You might have heard of shopping referred to as “retail therapy.”¹ Some have suggested that buying stuff, especially new clothes, can make you feel better. In the past 18 months, many have turned to shopping online and, during lockdowns, it may have seemed like the only thing to do.

However, retail therapy can create several challenges. Many of the positive emotions you get from buying new clothes will quickly vanish, while the excess burden on your

credit card and in your clothes closet doesn't. If you are like many people, you may not have considered where your clothes go after you have donated them.

Unfortunately, many donated clothes do not end up being worn by people in need or even by people in your own regional area. Rather, donated clothing from richer countries like the U.S. and the U.K. are bundled and shipped by the ton to developing countries like Ghana.

This has become the true cost of “fast fashion” and cheap clothing. In a recent investigative report by ABC News² in Australia, journalist Linton Besser traveled to Ghana, where he learned more about the dirty secret behind the world's fashion addiction, something they call “dead white man's clothes.”

And when it comes to “fast” fashion, the overabundance of cheap clothing produced by manufacturers whose sole goal is to create demand for their products and boost their income has not only added to the global waste problem but may be a major contributor overall.³ In 2014, Americans were buying 500%⁴ more clothing than in the 1980s and Canadians were buying 400% more clothes.⁵

In 2018 experts estimated that 85% of donated clothing⁶ wasn't being worn by someone else but, rather, ended up in landfills. Since many of these textiles are made from synthetic fibers and do not degrade easily, clothing has quickly become the largest global waste problem.

However, while the problem is significant, there are potentially effective options that could help reduce pollution and some that will continue to feed the emotional high you get with new clothes. But, before discussing these innovative ideas, let's learn why it's crucial we all make a change in the way we buy, wear and dispose of clothing.

Textile Waste Is a Growing Problem

If you're keeping track of statistics, it appears that the average American woman owns 30 outfits, which is a boost from the nine that women owned in the 1930s.⁷ In 2015, the U.S. apparel industry was a \$12 billion dollar business, built on American families who

spent \$1,700 on clothes annually. By 2019, experts estimated the value of the apparel market had jumped to \$359.9 billion (€300).⁸

The dollar amount spent every year is not financially significant, but because fast fashion is cheap, it represents a growing volume of textiles, which also means there's a growing volume of waste. But where does all that waste go? In the Marketplace video above, Charlsie Agro from CBC News, takes a deep dive into the fast-fashion industry in Canada.

Recently, ABC News Australia⁹ followed donated clothing from the U.K., the U.S. and Australia to the streets of Ghana, where nearly 15 million used garments arrive every week, flooding the city's clothing market. Likely because a lot of the clothing being donated today has been created cheaply and sold cheaply, an estimated 40% of what arrives goes straight to the landfill.¹⁰

The news article tells the story of one young woman, Aisha Iddrisu, who became a “head porter” at the tender age of 12. These are women who carry 121-pound (55 kilogram) bales of clothing on their heads through the bazaar and narrow passageways where mechanical vehicles cannot travel. Unable to find work in her remote village, she comes to Accra with her 18-month-old baby to earn money for her family.

As you can imagine, balancing 121 pounds on your head is hazardous, and many are injured. The secondhand clothing trade has grown in Accra, as it has in Kenya where Agro follows the journey of other used clothing in the video above. However, as one merchant from Ghana describes the industry:¹¹

“Seventeen years back [when I started] it was good, but now what they are bringing to Africa, to Ghana ... they are continuing to reduce the quality that was given to us. Now it's very bad.”

What Happens to Your Donated Clothes?

Besser describes the market in Accra, saying, “every spare inch of pavement seems occupied by a hawker, a new batch of old clothing folded and hung among their wares.

They call them “obroni wawu” – dead white man’s clothes.”¹²

Importers can pay as much as \$95,000 for a shipping container of clothing, sight unseen. Nearly 60 containers of clothing are delivered to Accra every week. Many times the clothes in those containers are torn, stained or not wearable, and enough of them are that way, the importer may have lost his money.

The growing number of low-quality clothing and sheer volume of manufactured clothing are major contributors to the waste crisis in Ghana and other areas of the world where recycled clothing is big business. In addition to fueling people’s desire to buy more, the clothing industry continues to feed new fashion lines into the stores on nearly a weekly basis.

What used to be spring/summer and fall/winter clothing lines, has become a veritable production line of low-quality, inexpensive clothing manufacturers use to respond to changing trends. Besser interviewed Liz Ricketts, a fashion waste campaigner from America who has also documented the textile disaster in Ghana for nearly a decade.

Although waste has been a part of fashion, and “a lot of brands overproduce by up to 40%,” she says, she also believes that consumers are “somewhat complicit” explaining:¹³

“We have decided that convenience is a human right and we think that when we go shopping we should always be able to find exactly what we want. We should find it in our size and the colour that we want. That also contributes to this overproduction.”

Besser points out that Australia does not have the same clothing retail sales as the U.S. or the U.K., but on a per-person basis they are second only to the U.S. From the 60 containers of clothes that arrive every week in Accra, about 6 million garments leave as waste. Although the capital city of Ghana, Accra, can process 2,000 metric tons of waste every day, the city produces nearly twice as much.

Besser reports that during monsoon season, excess water washes “an untold volume of clothing into the city’s medieval network of open sewers. The fabrics choke the city’s drainage system and promote flooding. Mosquitos breed, diseases prosper.”¹⁴

Once the textiles make it out to sea, the heavier material sinks to the bottom, where it becomes entangled and then rises, forming long arms of fabric that Ricketts calls “tentacles.” She says they can be between 8 feet and 30 feet long and sometimes as much as 3 feet wide.

Is Renting Your Clothing the Answer?

Although the idea of renting a wardrobe is a new idea, renting tuxedos and wedding dresses has been practiced for decades. The incentive is to pay a fee to wear clothing you may wear only once or twice in a lifetime. However, one research team is examining whether people may be ready to give up owning their wardrobe and rent it instead.¹⁵

Consumer willingness to use clothing rentals, also known as “collaborative apparel consumption,” is being tested using surveys among Gen Z consumers. It is a business model the researchers describe as “providing consumers with the ability to focus on using their products instead of ownership.”¹⁶

The team surveyed 362 adults born between 1997 and 2002.¹⁷ The authors discovered that the Gen Z generation wants to be fashionable but may not care if they own the products they're using. After evaluating other recent surveys, the authors found that sustainability is a driving force in current buying patterns and customer loyalty, especially among the Gen Z consumers.¹⁸

The survey sought to identify factors that may influence a consumer's use of an apparel rental service. After analyzing the results, the data showed the attitude of the Gen Z consumer helped mediate the intention to use a rental service.¹⁹

Corresponding author Ting Chi, chair of Washington State University's Department of Apparel, Merchandising, Design and Textiles, commented in a press release from the university:²⁰

“The idea is growing more popular, especially among Gen Z consumers. They are very interested in sustainable consumerism, care about the environment,

and are willing to make changes to help the planet. We're wasting too many textiles.

Americans are buying an average of 67 clothing items every year, but how many do we really need? They're inexpensive but cause real environmental damage. We need to make an individual effort to help the environment and one way to help is bringing in a sharing economy."

However, it's important to remember that fundamental to the idea that clothing can be rented and used multiple times, is that the clothing is well-made and durable. This means, to move from an economy where people own their clothing to one where rentals become commonplace, manufacturers will also have to move from fast fashion to quality.

The Care What You Wear Campaign

But heavy-duty material cannot be the only criteria when developing fashion that does not negatively impact the planet. Very simply put, it's important to start caring about what goes into the clothing we buy and wear. The real sustainability movement in fashion is that the clothing we wear does good in and for the world. Marci Zaroff, founder of the first organically certified textile mill in the U.S, explains it this way:²¹

"It's not just about looking good in clothing. It's about feeling good and doing good in the world so when you think about caring about what you're wearing, it's about going deeper and saying where did this fiber come from, how is it being grown, where is it being made, who's making it.

It's not that different from the Farm to Table Movement, where people are saying, 'Where is my food coming from? How is it being grown and produced?'... We're waking up to our source inside. We're awakening to that desire to know what we're putting in and on our bodies as an extension of ourselves.

It's not just what you eat. It's also what you wear that is a part of you. We need to be thinking about fiber no differently than we are about food."

The upshot of this is that responsibly made clothing, made with nontoxic dyes (or no dyes) and organic materials, also feel great. There's a real difference in quality, and when a piece of clothing is of superb quality, the urge to toss it after a few wears is greatly diminished. In fact, high-quality items often get better with use, opposed to turning into a misshapen, discolored, ill-fitting, worn-out mess after a few washes.

How Can You Be Part of the Solution?

The solution to disposable clothes begins with consumers who seek out high-quality, sustainably made clothing that is cared for and worn much longer than fast fashion can be. Unfortunately, while many major fashion brands have promised to recycle clothing, the technology to separate fibers in large quantities and weave them together again into a new product is not yet available.

According to Elizabeth Cline, author, journalist and fast fashion and sustainability expert, "The reality is that currently only about 1% of clothing is actually recycled in the very literal sense of the word."²²

Claudia Marsales, head of Markham, Ontario's. waste programs,²³ calls the claims of recycled clothing "a form of greenwashing." She goes on to say, "In order for fast fashion outlets to recycle what they make it would take 12 years to recycle what they sell in 48 hours."²⁴

In short, the industry model is the root of the issue and recycling is a simple way to make the industry appear responsible without altering the way they do business. The primary solution should be obvious. It's incumbent on consumers to make a change in the marketplace by buying less and only buying what is needed.

This allows you to spend more on high-quality items that are well-made and are easily used for years. When something in good condition no longer fits your body or your lifestyle, consider looking for people in your circle of friends and family who may need it. Local women's shelters and crisis centers may also accept donations.

Reputable charities that serve the needs of your local community, such as your local church, may help distribute clothing to the needy within your community. At the end of the day, the answer to reducing global waste lies in every individual doing their part to reduce their total consumption.

Sources and References

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