

From Necessity to Conscious Choice: Second-Hand Clothing and the Environmental Impact of the Fashion Industry

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Abstract - This paper takes a closer look at how our clothing choices impact the planet—and how a growing number of people are rethinking those choices. Once seen primarily as a last resort for those with limited means, second-hand clothing is now gaining recognition as a smart, sustainable, and even stylish option. As one of the most resource-hungry industries, fashion is responsible for around 10% of global carbon emissions and 20% of wastewater—figures that call for urgent change. By analyzing existing research and data, this study explores how the reuse of clothing fits into the circular economy and contributes to a lower-impact fashion system. It finds that while much of Europe's used clothing is exported to Africa and Asia—where it is reused, downcycled, or discarded—attitudes at home are shifting. Younger generations, in particular, are embracing second-hand not just out of necessity, but as a conscious choice that aligns affordability with environmental responsibility.

Keywords: Second-hand clothing, Circular economy, Sustainable fashion, Consumer behavior

1. Introduction

What we wear and the clothes we buy may seem like purely personal or stylistic choices. When purchasing clothing, we usually focus on quality, price, and fashion trends. We rarely pause to consider the cost that nature bears for the choices we make when buying clothes. However, beneath every outfit lies a complex supply chain of production, consumption, and waste—one that significantly impacts the environment. One of the industries with the highest resource use and environmental harm is the global fashion business. It is one of the main causes of pollution and climate change, accounting for 20% of worldwide wastewater and 10% of global carbon emissions (EEA, 2023). In addition to land needed to cultivate cotton and other fibers, textile production requires a lot of water. According to calculations, 2,700 liters of fresh water are needed to produce one cotton t-shirt (Van Woensel and Lipp, 2020). As a response to that, design students Tessa Callaghan and Aleks Gosiewski, who were both listed on Forbes' 2022 30 Under 30 list, created Keel Labs, a sustainable materials firm based in Morrisville, North Carolina, in 2017 (Ingle 2024). They set out to solve the underlying cause of the fashion industry's escalating

textile waste problem—unsustainable materials by creating Kelsun™, to demonstrate how ocean-derived biomaterials may transform fashion by lowering pollution, resource consumption, and carbon impact (Ingle 2024). This idea began to be liked and embraced in the clothing industry. Thus, later Keel Labs collaborated with Stella McCartney to introduce its seaweed-based Kelsun™ fabric at Paris Fashion Week in 2023 (Ingle 2024). Another environmentally friendly alternative is the reuse of clothing. Clothing reuse was initially practiced by non-profit and humanitarian organizations that donated garments to people in need. However, this approach has evolved, and used clothing is now commonly sold in second-hand stores. The paper investigates the ecological footprint from clothing industry. In addition to that it explores the growing trend of consumers choosing to buy used clothing as a sustainable, conscious lifestyle choice rather than out of financial necessity, and how this tendency aligns with the objectives of the circular economy.

2. Methodology

To achieve the aim of this paper, a desk research approach was undertaken. Initially, existing literature and data-based reports were reviewed to examine the environmental impact of the textile and clothing industry. Subsequently, the research focused on push and pull motivations of consumers for using second-hand clothing, as well as on the key documents and policies related to clothing reuse and the circular economy in this sector.

3. Ecological Footprint of the Clothing Industry

With rapid fashion, the quantity of clothes manufactured and thrown away has increased (European Parliament 2024). There is more supply than demand for clothing in the market resulting to cheaper clothing prices. In just a few decades, the amount of clothing purchased per person in the EU has increased by 40% due to price reductions and the faster delivery of fashion to consumers (Nikolina 2019). In 2020, the third-largest contributor of land use and water degradation was the textile industry (European Parliament 2024). According to Nikolina (2019), between 2% and 10% of the

environmental impact of EU consumption is attributable to clothing. As can be seen in Figure 1, the textile consumption per person in 2020, in the EU required 400m² of land, 9000 liters of water and 391 kg of raw material (EEA 2024). Since the majority of production occurs outside, this effect is frequently seen in third-world countries (Nikolina 2019).

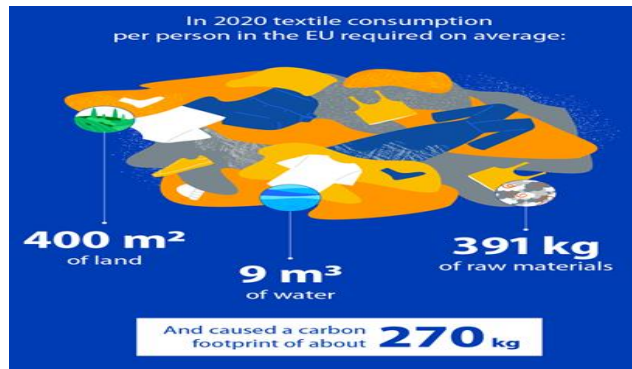


Figure 1. The environmental impact of textiles
Source: European Environmental Agency, 2023

Since clothing purchases have increased significantly, the following question arises: What happens to clothing that is no longer used? Due to Europe's low capacity for recycling and reuse, 46% of old textiles were sent to Africa in 2019 (EEA 2024). According to EEA (2024), the majority of these textiles are reused there, while the remainder frequently wind up in landfills or unofficial waste streams. Less than half of used clothing is gathered for reuse or recycling when it is no longer needed, and only 1% is recycled into new clothing (Nikolina 2019). In 2019, 41% of used textiles were sent to Asia, where they were mainly downcycled, re-exported, or landfilled after sorting in dedicated economic zones (EEA 2024). Between 2000 and 2019, the export of used textiles from the EU increased from a little over 550,000 tonnes in 2000, to almost 1.7 million tonnes in 2019-3.8 kilograms per person in 2019 (EEA 2024).

4. Motivation Shift: From Need to Choice

The market for secondhand apparel reduces demand for new clothing, increases clothing longevity, and gets rid of textile waste, making it a more sustainable approach to fashion (Huang, 2022). Those with lesser incomes have historically been more likely to purchase used clothing in wealthy countries (Osterley and Williams 2019). However, second hand clothing is not adopted sufficiently mainly because of the social humiliation and stigma (Kapoor & Khare, 2019). According to (Koay, Cheah, & Lom, 2022) The apparent cleanliness of the worn clothing and its owner worries a lot of purchasers, which makes the purchasing process very difficult. There is a growing trend in the use of second-hand clothing by younger generations. Being reasonably priced, environmentally friendly, creating jobs, and even offering epistemic advantages like the uniqueness of the products, used clothes draw in mainly young customers (Liu, Bernardoni, & Wang, 2023). Thus, nowadays,

second hand clothing users' motives are shifting from necessity-driven adapters to buying second-hand clothing as a desirable and conscious choice.

5. Conclusions

The fashion industry's take-make-dispose model has left a heavy mark on the planet, with high carbon emissions, water usage, and waste. Second-hand clothing offers a simple yet powerful alternative—extending the life of garments and embracing circular economy values. Once tied to financial need, it's now embraced by many, especially younger generations, as a sustainable and stylish choice. Still, challenges remain: low recycling rates, reliance on exports, and lingering stigma. Unlocking the full potential of reuse will require better infrastructure, policy support, and public awareness—key steps toward a more responsible and climate-friendly fashion future.

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