

Rancid Piles of Donated Clothes Litter Developing Countries

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Donated clothing enters a stream of garments, many of which are shipped to poor countries where they are sorted and sold or dumped in landfills creating small mountains of waste along beaches
- › Fast fashion, or cheap copies of high fashion garments sold at affordable prices, is a large contributor to the fashion industry's dirty secret that only 1% of all clothing is recycled and most textiles ultimately end up in landfills
- › The fashion industry's goal is to make people unhappy with their clothing and feed an addiction to purchasing new clothes as often as possible. Although several companies are exploring the idea of renting clothing, this fundamentally means the clothing must be well-made and durable
- › You can lower the impact of fast fashion by taking several steps, including purchasing high-quality, sustainably made clothing, repairing and reusing your clothes, swapping and exchanging clothes with friends and family and donating to local charities that keep the clothing in your community

Studies conducted during the on-again, off-again lockdowns of COVID-19 revealed how damaging social isolation was to most people. A reporter from [The Conversation](#)¹ did an informal review of 33 published studies that included nearly 132,000 people from around the world and found that social restrictions increase your risk of depression over 4.5 times and the odds you would experience loneliness nearly doubled.

During this time, many people turned to what has been called “retail therapy,” or shopping for clothing, much of which occurred online during the lockdowns. While some suggest that buying new clothes could make you feel better, most people agree those positive feelings seldom last long.

What does last is the impact fast fashion has on your pocketbook and the environment. Underneath all the glamor in the store windows and beautiful photos online are dirty secrets the fashion industry doesn't want you to know or understand. If you're like many people, you haven't considered what happens to your clothes after you donate them.²

You might feel like you're doing your part by donating unwanted clothes to charity or dropping them off at a take-back bin. But the sad reality is that a large portion of these discarded clothes simply ends up in a landfill somewhere.³ The overabundance of donated clothing is the result of the push for cheap clothing by manufacturers whose sole goal is to create demand and boost their income. These actions have made them a major contributor to environmental pollution.⁴

In 2014, Americans bought 500% more clothing than in the 1980s⁵ and Canadians bought 400% more clothing.⁶ Although the problem is significant, there are potentially effective options from which to choose. Before discussing these ideas, let's discover why it's crucial we make changes to the way we buy, use, and discard clothing.

What Happens to Donated Clothing?

Stacy Dooley is a BBC investigative reporter whose 2018 documentary, “Fashion's Dirty Secrets,”⁷ shone a light on the damage retail therapy is doing in developing countries. You might be surprised to learn that fashion is second only to oil as the top five most polluting industries in the world.

As shops can quickly produce copies of high fashion items at affordable prices, people are tempted to update their look. This feeds their insatiable appetite, increasing the potential that retail therapy becomes even more addictive. Unfortunately, of the massive

amount of fast fashion that reaches take-back bins and charity shops, less than 1% will eventually get recycled into new garments.

Much of the cast-offs ends up along the coast of Ghana, which Bloomberg reports is one of the largest importers of used clothing.⁸ As clothing gets cheaper and more disposable, the fashion industry produces more than 100 billion items each year. Bloomberg reports this is approximately 14 pieces of clothing for every person walking the Earth. Shockingly, this is more than twice the number produced just a little over 20 years ago in 2000.

Once the clothing arrives, it undergoes sorting by brokers and processors whose business is to export the clothing to developing countries where it will be purchased and worn. Once clothing has entered the deluge of garments transported to Ghana and India, there is no way to track what happens to it.

Mark Burrows Smith, chief executive officer of Textile Recycling International, spoke with a reporter from Bloomberg, noting that in his experience with a company that processes 400 million garments annually in the U.K. and Ireland,⁹ "I think it needs to be understood that all textiles, whether new or recycled, will ultimately end up in landfill. The key is to keep the garment in use as long as possible."

The cast-offs that arrive by the bale from industrialized nations are known in Ghana as obroni wawu, or dead white people's clothes. It's almost incomprehensible to the people of Ghana that so much clothing could be thrown away.

Accra is the capital of Ghana and just south is Chorkor Beach along the Gulf of Guinea. There you'll find a wall of clothing more than 6 feet high. The rags have been packed down through exposure to the weather and are degrading in a putrid pile. It is here that people have built a small town on a foundation of rags.

Solomon Noi is the city's head of Waste Management and he believes that 40% of all the used clothing that moves through the port of Accra is not worn or repurposed. Although the country doesn't have the infrastructure to take care of the waste, banning the imports would shut down a trade that supports many people's livelihoods.

Recycled Clothing Is a Myth Perpetuated by Retailers

Old clothing rarely gets recycled into new garments because the technology does not exist to handle the waste produced at scale. Additionally, different fibers require different chemicals to break down the product for recycling. Many garments are made with two or three types of fiber, making recycling nearly impossible.¹⁰

Instead, clothing enters a supply chain supported by workers in third-world countries to prolong the life of the material before it eventually ends up in a landfill or piled high along the beach. The recycling myth was created and perpetuated by companies that want people to continue to purchase clothing without feeling guilty about what happened to the clothes they discard.

Bloomberg reports¹¹ that in 2013, H&M began a used clothing collection program across 40 countries to tap into growing environmental awareness. The H&M's blog once claimed: "H&M will recycle them and create new textile fiber, and in return you get vouchers to use at H&M."¹²

Today, H&M acknowledges that only 1% of garments collected are recycled each year and most end up in landfills,¹³ but the damage has already been done. Other fashion chains began their own recycling campaigns and none acknowledged that the capability of recycling at that scale did not exist. In 1950, New York department store tycoon, Earl Puckett said:¹⁴

"It's our job to make women unhappy with what they have in the way of apparel. Basic utility cannot be the foundation of a prosperous apparel industry. We must accelerate obsolescence."

In 1974, Norman Wechsler, president of Saks Fifth Avenue, said obsolescence in women's fashion was "the name of the game."¹⁵ By the 1980s, the Spanish clothing company Zara had pioneered a model that allowed them to roll out thousands of designs each year.

Rancid Piles Fed by Fast Fashion Pleasure-Inducing Compulsion

The new production model changed the shopping habits of Zara consumers as they began visiting the store four times the usual number each year. A 2007 study¹⁶ found that the company had inadvertently tapped into strategies that support addictive behavior.

The researchers found that the decision to purchase a product was related to how much the individual anticipated they would gain and lose. A consumer purchase could be predicted by looking at specific patterns of brain activation that showed they weighed a combination of preference for the item and price considerations. In other words, your brain likes to find a bargain.

Bloomberg reports¹⁷ that in the past 20 years, the average number of times a person wears their clothes before getting rid of them has dropped by 36%. In America, that equates to wearing clothing less than 50 times on average. In China, the average number of times an individual wore their clothes dropped from over 200 to just 62 times.

With a greater eye on the environmental impact, several companies have explored the idea of renting your wardrobe. The business model is described by researchers as “providing consumers with the ability to focus on using their products instead of ownership.”¹⁸ One research team surveyed 362 adults¹⁹ born between 1997 and 2002 and found the attitude of the Gen Z consumer helped mediate the intention to use a rental service.

However, while this may help feed the consumer's desire for new clothing and keep a particular garment in circulation longer, the fundamental idea of rental clothing means the garment must be well-made and durable.

The fashion industry used to have four seasons but today collections are updated on a nearly weekly basis. In a 2018 CBC Marketplace report,²⁰ journalist Charlise Agro investigated the claims made by retail take-back programs and took a Canadian family behind the scenes to show them the journey clothes donated at their local charity take on the way to Africa or India.

Claudia Marsales, senior manager of waste and environmental management for Markham, Ontario, believes the take-back programs are a losing proposition and nothing more than a form of greenwashing. It does nothing to address "the broken business model of fast fashion,"²¹ and is really just circumventing rather than addressing the real problems.

In short, the industry business model is the root issue, and recycling programs are a simple way to make the industry appear more responsible without actually altering the way they do business.

Help Lower the Impact of Fast Fashion

In addition to being chemically dependent and conventionally produced, cotton also needs water – lots of water. Chemicals and toxic dyes are released from these textiles, adding to our global water pollution problem. At the end of the day, the answer to lowering global waste lies with every individual doing their part to reduce total consumption.

The solution requires consumers to purchase high-quality, sustainably made clothing that is cared for and worn much longer than fast fashion. When you purchase clothes, seek fabrics that are made with organic cotton, hemp, silk, wool and bamboo. Consider exchanging clothing with your family and friends, especially when you have clothes hanging in your closet that have not been worn for more than 6 months.

Find ways to repair and reuse your clothing and consider selling or swapping online. Keep in mind that most donated clothing ends up in landfills, so consider seeking out reputable charities that serve the needs of your local community, such as your local church.

In the past I didn't give much thought to my clothing, but I've since dedicated myself to wearing [sustainably produced organic clothing](#) and supporting the "Care What You Wear" movement through Regeneration International.²² I added a line of organic clothing

grown and sewn in the USA to my webstore, and we support the SITO brand – a GOTS-certified organic clothing brand by the biodynamic certification agency Demeter.

The Mercola-RESET Biodynamic Organic Project is also helping 55 certified organic farmers in India convert to biodynamic production of cotton on 110 acres of land. Biodynamic farming is organic by nature, but it goes even further, operating on the premise that the farm is regenerative and entirely self-sustaining.

Biodynamic farming brings animals and plants together to form a living web of life, a self-sustaining ecosystem that benefits the surrounding community. RESET (Regenerate, Environment, Society, Economy, Textiles) will pay all organic biodynamic farmers in our project a 25% premium over conventional cotton prices, which will be paid directly to the farmers.

So, going forward, give some serious thought to cleaning up and "greening" your wardrobe. Your choices as a consumer will help guide the fashion industry toward more humane and environmentally sane manufacturing processes, and not just stopping short at a façade of sustainability through take-back recycling programs that do very little to curtail our global textile waste and environmental pollution problems.

Sources and References

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- ^{2, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17} [Bloomberg, November 2, 2022](#)
- ³ [CBC, January 19, 2018](#)
- ⁴ [UN Environment Program, November 12, 2018](#)
- ⁵ [The Atlantic, July 18, 2014](#)
- ⁶ [YouTube, January 19, 2018 Min 3:54](#)
- ⁷ [BBC, October 9, 2018](#)
- ¹³ [H&M, Let's Close the Loop](#)
- ¹⁶ [Neuron, 2007; 53\(1\)](#)
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- ¹⁹ [Study Finds, August 12, 2021](#)
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- ²² [Regeneration International](#)