

Sustainable fashion

Inquiry question: Sustainable fashion: what is it, why it matters and why you should support it

Sustainable fashion is the concept of manufacturing and marketing items of clothing and accessories in the most sustainable method possible. This means brands and companies can only be sustainable when they take into account both the environmental and socio-economic aspects of sustainability. This suggests that the entire life of the item from the design and materials until the final sale and recycling is as environmentally sustainable as possible. Unfortunately, there is no way for fashion to be completely sustainable although there are many ways that we can create a more sustainable future. One means of this is to stop shopping from brands that support fast fashion. We can put our trust and support in brands that offer sustainable fashion. We can thrift or buy from op-shops to allow you to explore a new variety of vintage or different clothes. All of these second-hand clothes in thrift stores are being reused by customers instead of being thrown away into landfill or being incinerated causing large CO₂ emissions. Sadly, many large brands are not embracing sustainable fashion as sweatshops are still being used in developing countries. There are a variety of different ways to support our environment whilst still looking fashionable.

Fast fashion is the act of companies releasing cheap, trendy clothes very quickly after being seen on the catwalk. According to *The Webster's dictionary*, a sweatshop is a 'small manufacturing establishment employing workers under unfair and unsanitary working conditions'. Eighty per cent of these employees are young women from developing countries as it is easy to get them to work there. Many children and immigrants from poor families work for long hours with little rest and minimal pay. Sweatshops were first created in the late 1880s as the industrial revolution created sewing machines making it faster and easier to make clothing. This allowed dress shops for the middle-class citizens to appear. In the 1960-1970s fashion became a large part of self-expression. This prompted other brands to create trendy clothes that were displayed by high-end designers on the catwalk only a few weeks before. These products were not very high quality and only lasted a few washes. In the late 90s to the early 2000s, low-cost fashion was at its peak with the brand Zara dominating the industry. Zara is a Spanish clothing brand that is described as the epitome of fast fashion. It is speculated that it takes only one week for Zara to design and produce a product before it is available in store. Most brands take an average of six months for this process to occur. Clothes produced in sweatshops are cheap and mass-produced meaning that what people buy is not very good quality. This means that these items wear out quickly and end up in our landfill after only a few washes. The fashion industry produces 92 million tonnes of textile waste and 1.2 billion tonnes of carbon emissions annually. Sixty per cent of fabric fibres are made from fossil fuels that do not decompose when thrown away, some even ending up in our oceans. When toxic microfibers wash into our oceans, the fish digest these making it not only harmful to them but also the humans eating them. The clothes left in landfills produce methane gas that is toxic to the environment. Only 0.4% of the items we buy containing cotton is organically produced, 99.6% is inorganic cotton. Many people assume that cotton is the most sustainable fibre as it is a natural fibre, though there is much more to this than they think. Environmentally, cotton is unsustainable due to its heavy strain on water sources. Many pesticides are required to produce it harming both the environment and the farmers who produce it.

Organic cotton is on the rise but many people are unaware of the difference between organic and un-organic cotton. Organic cotton is when the farmers they take into account the health of the soil, they use no GMOs or toxic chemicals, they physically remove the cotton, it conserves water and it uses rainwater more efficiently. Organic cotton reduces the

environmental footprint, promotes safe workers and paves the way for other cotton farmers to make a difference. Organic cotton is 80% rain-fed putting less of a strain on external water sources. Another natural fabric is organic hemp. Hemp can be grown all around the world as it needs little water, no pesticides and it naturally fertilises the soil it grows in. Unfortunately, hemp is difficult to spin meaning it is usually spun with cotton, destroying the move away from cotton. Another naturally occurring fabric is organic linen. Linen is derived from the flax plant requiring minimal water and pesticides; it even grows in areas with poor-quality soil. When linen is created, we use the entirety of the flax so nothing is wasted. When linen is not dyed, it is fully bio-degradable. Ecofriendly man-made fabrics have been on the rise in the past few years. One such fabric is Tencel. Tencel is a light cellulose fabric created by dissolving wood pulp. It requires less water and energy to produce and is 50% more absorbent than cotton. The solvent used is recycled, reducing dangerous waste. A fabric called Econyl uses synthetic waste and recycles it into a new nylon yarn that is the same quality as normal nylon. Econyl uses less water and creates much less waste than traditional nylon products. Econyl is far more sustainable than nylon as synthetic waste is rejuvenated and made into a fabric similar to its less sustainable sibling, nylon. Luxury brand Tommy Hilfiger uses Econyl in their sunglasses as step towards better sustainability. The only issue with Econyl is that when products created by it, plastic micro-particles are released and they can end up in the ocean. The final sustainable fabric is Qmonos. Qmonos is synthetic spider silk made by fusing spider silk and microbes. This fibre is supposedly five times stronger than steel and it is incredibly lightweight, more flexible than nylon and 100% biodegradable. It is an ethical and eco-friendly option as no spiders are harmed in this process making it vegan friendly. Many people assume that all man-made fibres are bad for the environment as they are not naturally occurring. For some fibres that may be the case but these fibres are derived from natural substances and were created as a more environmentally friendly alternative. Sustainable fashion is important as the fashion industry is incredibly wasteful and uses unsustainable fabrics.

The act of thrifting or buying from vintage stores is a positive step towards being more fashion sustainable. Thrifting is ethical and environmentally friendly as second hand clothes are donated and recycled. When we buy second-hand clothes we are doing the 'recycling' aspect of reduce reuse and recycle. This interrupts the current cycle of buy, use and throw out by recycling instead of discarding. The Salvation Army received and sold 20,000 tonnes worth of products in 2015-2016 that would otherwise go into landfill. Some people are hesitant when donating their clothes as they are worried that it will just end up in landfill anyway. The most important thing when donating clothes is that they are clean and in appropriate condition. This means if you wouldn't buy it, don't donate it. Thankfully, the salvation army sells all items that are donated so there are no doubts when donating your second-hand goods. The Salvation Army is a charity that donates 100% of profits to those who need to most assistance in our community. When you thrift it is guaranteed that the item you buy will be much cheaper than if you were to buy the same product from the original manufacturer. A t-shirt bought for \$30 can most likely be found for \$15 or less at an op-shop. This enables people to experiment with different clothes allowing them to find their style and express themselves through a wider variety of items. Thrift stores, or op-shops, have a wider variety of clothes that aren't just for the current season or fashion. This means if you are interested in trying out a different style of clothes, the op-shop will mostly have something that suits your needs. It is also a good place to find cheap Halloween costumes. If you are looking for an easy DIY costume, thrift stores sometimes have a Halloween section or there are regular clothes that can be transformed into a costume. Additionally, when you buy from thrift stores it is more likely that the product will be of a much higher quality. When clothes have already been used, it is high quality as it hasn't torn or broken as of purchase. A \$5 shirt from Kmart will tear much faster than one from a thrift

store or a high quality, sustainable brand. This also reduces the amount of resources wasted. One pair of jeans takes approximately 6700 litres of water to produce. It produces greenhouse gases equivalent to 130 kilometres.

Sadly, our clothes are worn only seven times on average before they are discarded. In Australia we throw 501 million kg of clothes to landfill annually. This figure does not include the 94 million kg that is exported overseas. These figures are approximates as the government does not track or manage the growing textile waste issue. As no one is tracking this, many providers do not take into account the environmental damage it poses. This should be of a higher priority as most active wear is made from the same material as single-use plastic bottles. Two-thirds of the world's Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) is from clothing with the remainder producing plastic bottles and plastic packaging. PET is part of the polyester family making it incredibly versatile and one of the most useful ingredients in manufactured fibres. The issue with PET is with every wash, a trace metal called antimony leaks out. Antimony can cause respiratory irritation and possibly cancer. Australia is the world's second highest consumer of textiles per capita with three in 10 people discarding more than 10 items of clothing in one year alone. Three in 10 will discard an item after only one use. This is appalling with the current overproduction rates of the fashion industry. Over 100 billion garments are produced by this industry annually. 87% of all textiles are sent to landfill, 12% are mechanically recycled and less than 1% are recycled back into reusable materials. 87 billion garments are sent to landfill or incinerated annually, why is there no difference? The landfill issue presented in all countries around the world is amplified by mass production and overproduction. In Australia, our plastics and paper is recycled, why not textiles? People created awareness into the wasting of valuable materials that can be recycled into different products, thus plastic and paper recycling initiatives began. Currently, there is only one little known initiative to recycle textiles and people are not driven to donate their pre-loved clothes. This method is ragging but it is not sustainable as it only allows clothes one extra life cycle before it ends up in landfills. Australians need to start donating their pre-loved clothes to limit the textile percentage in landfills. When we donate our clothes, they can go to people in need looking for high-quality clothing at a cheaper price. Thrifting needs to become more common than it currently is to promote sustainable fashion. Most people at thrift stores are either a few teenagers looking for vintage clothes, or middle-aged women looking for a new sweater. People need to become more aware of the benefits of thrifting as most people are unaware of the environmental benefits. The Australian government needs to take further action on these issues before it is too late. Initiatives need to be put in place to encourage people to recycle or donate their old clothes.

In the modern age of fashion it can be difficult to decipher between fast fashion and sustainable fashion. There are a few easy ways to determine which brands are fast fashion and which are sustainable brands. Fast fashion brands commonly offer thousands of styles that have just been seen on catwalks. The clothes are always on trend though they are cheaply made as the turnaround time from design to production is very short. Generally these items are around for a short period of time before they are replaced by another low-quality product. One of the biggest fast fashion offenders is Zara. Zara not only produces around 840 million garments per year, they pay their workers at less than minimum wage. When you buy something from Zara for \$20 the worker making this item was most likely paid around 20 cents. The materials are of low quality and the products are cheaply made allowing Zara to make maximum profit. Other major offenders include Uniqlo, Topshop, GUESS, Fashion Nova and H&M. At H&M, most of the materials used to create their items are non-eco-friendly and unsustainable. According to *good on you*, only between 1%-25% of H&M facilities pay an appropriate living

wage to people. You may be wondering, what exactly is a living wage? A living wage differs from minimum wage in the fact that instead of being paid the *bare minimum*, they are being paid at a *socially acceptable* minimum. This essentially means that these workers are kept out of poverty giving them enough money to afford necessities such as food and rent. An acceptable living wage differs from person to person as it all depends on the living status of a person. If they work full-time with no partner and no children, they should be paid around \$500 per week, a person with a partner and kids receives approximately \$1000. A living wage will help to eliminate poverty in workers as it allows them to live in a house and buy the necessities to survive. H&M is a prominent part of the fast-fashion industry as it promotes 'disposable' fashion by constantly rotating new trends and different products. The cheap price tags on the items sold are a good indication that these products are of poor quality and created under unfair conditions. Luckily, there are many brands dedicated to creating the most sustainable items possible at a reasonable price. One brand is called Pact located in Colorado, USA. This brand ensures that the entire process of harvesting cotton from seed to product are as sustainable and responsible as possible. The cotton they use is entirely GMO free making it 100% organic. Other good brands include Vetta, Petite Studio, Reformation and ABLE. There are a few ways to determine whether a brand is sustainable or not. Checking the materials in a product is the first step to sustainability. It is best to look for products that use organic cotton, linen, hemp, Tencel or silk as these items are from renewable sources. It is also good to look for dyes that are natural as most dyes are toxic and harmful to the environment. It is best to avoid brand that use leather as cows put a large toll on the environment, by requiring a lot of work to maintain. Most leather that we use does not come from the same cows that we eat meaning many cows are slaughtered purely for their skin. It is important when shopping to examine where these products were made. When products are made in places such as China, Bangladesh or Cambodia it is most likely that these workers were treated unfairly and worked for less than minimum wage. In these countries, they do not take any environmental responsibility when creating these products as they make sure to keep the production price as low as possible. Sustainable fashion is important for the welfare of workers and to keep our environment healthy. We can be more sustainable by supporting brands that are both ethically and environmentally friendly.

Fast fashion is a rapidly increasing global issue causing harm ethically and environmentally. It is clear to see that fast fashion is the act of buying clothes that have been made from ethically sourced materials, the workers were adequately paid and they worked under fair conditions. There are some clear signs of spotting fast fashion companies and ways to avoid buying their products. Sustainable fashion is important it is a simple way of doing your part in keeping our Earth clean. This allows us to reduce the amount of CO₂ emissions produced by the fashion industry and reduce the amount of textiles in landfills. This means recycling or donating old clothes, thrifting or buying from sustainable stores. When we do this, we are creating a more environmentally sustainable future for both current and future generations. Many brands are becoming more and more sustainable as they aim to achieve a future full of sustainability.

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