

# Rethinking ownership and consumerism



In front of me sits a huge pile of clothing from my wardrobe. A heap of exuberance on my wooden floor. It is evidence of too much consumption over the years, and of bad wardrobe management. For me, 2019 started with not only rethinking ownership and consumerism but with a pledge to at least personally make a change. Finally.

The fashion industry is a vast and controversial sector as it offers so many different fields but it is ripe for innovation. As an MIT post-graduate student of Design Thinking, I have been fortunate to be part of a team assignment that looks for innovation opportunities in the fashion industry. When we think of pollution, we envision coal power plants, strip-mined mountaintops and raw sewage piped into our waterways. We don't often think of the shirts on our backs, but the overall impact the apparel industry has on our planet is quite grim.

In the first world, shopping has become a way of life, a weekly pastime and, for many, an addiction. Shopping malls, glossy fashion magazines, catalogues and internet ads bombard us with

enticing opportunities to spend money. Feeding this rampant consumerism is the 'fast fashion' trend in which clothing is designed to be moved as quickly as possible from the catwalk to store. Only about ten years old, fast fashion is leading the way in disposable clothing. This trend is particularly worrisome because it creates demand and constantly churns out massive quantities of cheap clothing, ultimately accelerating carbon emissions and global warming. Most of the unsold clothes end up as waste, as do all those clothes that are ordered online and do not fit. They are returned to the retailer and too often end up in landfills before they are even worn once.

Not to mention the too often unethical working conditions in developing countries. Altogether, more than half a trillion gallons of fresh water are used in the dyeing of textiles each year. Made from petrochemicals, polyester and nylon are not biodegradable, so they are unsustainable by their very nature. While the manufacturing of both uses great amounts of energy,

nylon also emits a large amount of nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas, during manufacturing. The workers are exposed to these toxins on a daily basis.

There can only be one solution: we need to consume less. Work with what we have, rework our wardrobe, upcycle items, thrift, create swap shops with our friends and spring clean regularly.

Globally, there has been a collective mind-shift from ownership towards renting (or sharing). While previous

In 2017, buying second-hand clothing for environmental reasons increased by 22.5% annually. The benefits do not stop with the environment: Buying second-hand has several major advantages over buying new as it extends the 'lifecycle' of clothes and materials with relatively few new inputs. As second-hand tends to be cheaper, it opens up a market of previously unavailable brands, materials, styles and handcrafted quality to a new audience. Second-hand clothes can increasingly create a camaraderie that does not happen at a mall, if you think about clothes swaps or sharing with like-minded people. It can create new markets and entrepreneurial opportunities and can go towards a good cause while reducing waste.

And most importantly for the fashionista, it offers fashion freedom and wardrobe flexibility without the associated inconveniences.

Besides my pledge to buy only second-hand this year, I decided to establish a swap system with friends so that we can share our wardrobes and items freely. I could rent an evening dress that spends most of the year hanging in a friend's cupboard and give it more opportunities to shine. A friend's handbag might work fantastically well with my yellow skirt. This marks a new beginning and I wonder how this could be turned into something more structured, maybe into a rental system for clothing.

Imagine that each month a certain number of outfits are delivered to your door by a rental service. Clothes and accessories are clean, the right fit for your body shape and styled to suit your lifestyle. At the end of each month, the outfits are collected and the next month's outfits delivered. Your mornings are stress-free. Time is saved, no shopping frenzy, no useless returns to shops or online retailers.

Initiatives like this already exist in some countries and they offer the desired fashion freedom and wardrobe but with a much smaller environmental footprint. Would you also fancy such an initiative? To connect our own behaviour with ethical and environmental initiatives enables us to make a more sustainable choice, as Mahatma Gandhi said, 'there is no beauty in the finest cloth if it makes hunger and unhappiness'. **CF**

generations have placed value on sole ownership, the increasing interest in a sharing economy has led to versatile new initiatives, which are a much-needed response to consumerism and never doubted capitalist paradigms.

The dilemma of how we use fashion more ethically has offered many new ways of living and while I am busy reorganising my pile of clothing, I decide to try some of them out.

First of all, one of the best ways to acquire new clothes sustainably is to shop second-hand (also called 'pre-loved' and 'gently worn'), vintage or thrift. These new words encourage us to believe in these items and their value beyond a first life, and beyond becoming waste.

I have never been a fan of New Year's resolutions, but what I now know of the disastrous impact of the fashion industry has made me pledge to not buy any new fashion item in 2019 and if I buy any, it will be pre-owned.



Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by **INDRA WUSSOW**, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.