

Ethics

Throwaway culture

RecyCOOL Lessons

Disclaimer

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Throwaway culture

Description of the lesson

In this lesson we will explore throwaway culture, starting with overconsumption and its impacts on how we value our clothing. We will look into what we can do with unwanted clothing and investigate how communities around us manage the clothing they no longer need.

Objective

Objective of this lesson is to explore the throwaway fashion, attitude and culture in our society and its effects on our lives.

After this lesson you will be able to

- define throwaway attitude and its reasons
- research and identify solutions to throwaway culture from your point of view as a consumer

Tools and materials

pen, paper, garments from your wardrobe

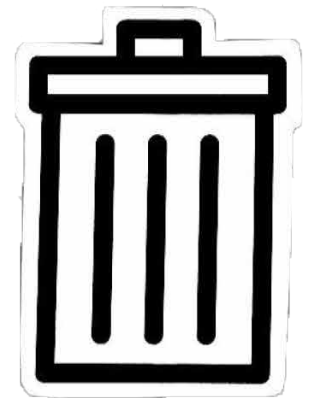
THROWAWAY CULTURE:

Throwaway culture within the fashion industry is a term used to describe overconsumption, single-use production and designing products which are not made to last. It relates to the *planned obsolescence strategy*
The term throwaway fashion is often used as a synonym to fast fashion.

Related terms:

throwaway attitude, throwaway design, throwaway society, planned obsolescence

Throw away (dispose of, get rid of, throw out, discard, clear out)



We are all in the habit of passing along items that we no longer need or want. We outgrow our clothes, they get damaged, or eventually – we simply get bored of them.

Our clothing takes different paths and journeys after it leaves our homes for good. Can you list some of them?

Textile collection point

Communal waste

My friends wardrobe

Cleaning cloth in my dad's garage

...

You probably already came across the term **THROWAWAY fashion**. It describes an item which was used briefly and then discarded.

When we throw something away, it's important to realise that there is no such thing as 'away', especially considering that the majority of clothing produced today is made of synthetic materials, about 60%.

In fact, clothing production is projected to double again in the next decade, with 73% made from synthetics by 2030.

Clothing made from synthetic clothes does not biodegrade. In fact, discarded clothing does not biodegrade in landfill. Rather, it will gradually fragment over hundreds of years, releasing microfibres, releasing toxic chemicals into the soil and water, as well as into the atmosphere.

This is why it is important to consider where your unwanted clothing may end up – as it will have an impact on the environment and communities near the waste.

While we talk of ending throwaway culture and the need to buy less and make less, we have been slow to recognise the contribution of people and communities who deal with our global textile waste. In the absence of large scale closed loop solutions, everything ends up in landfill or incinerated somewhere.

– Roxy Houshmand-Howell, Fashion Revolution

Watch this [video](#) where an environmentalist and activist Vandana Shiva describes the throwaway system globally and its effects on third world countries.

- Whilst Vandana Shiva's sentiments are very much relevant today, ten years on, there are other organisations to look to today that are managing fashion's waste. Consider [The OR Foundation](#), founded by Liz Ricketts.

The OR Foundation, whose overarching goal is to catalyse a Justice-Led Circular Economy. The OR Foundation operates out of Accra, Ghana where the Kantomanto Market, the largest second-hand clothing market in West Africa and which imports clothing waste from high-income countries across Europe and beyond.

Please consider watching [this video](#) which discusses Extended Producer Responsibility from the perspective of people who are managing fashion's waste on the ground. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is an environmental policy and a form of product stewardship that extends a producer's responsibility for a product to the post-consumer stage of a product's life-cycle.

In essence, it calls for the fashion brand to be held accountable for the impact of the clothes they sell throughout its life-cycle, including disposal. You can read more about stopping the export of clothing waste to lower-income countries in The OR Foundation's [position paper](#) [#StopWasteColonialism](#).

Throwaway attitude applies to our clothing too – and we can see throwaway garments everywhere around us. Clothing makes us feel better, we communicate who we are through our clothing. So why do we throw away our own clothes, and why do we make this decision so easily?

The reason behind society's attitude to discard our own belongings so easily depends on a variety of factors. There is one main reason why we easily discard what we have – we simply have too much.

Yes, you heard me. **We buy and own so much that we don't value what we have and discarding clothing has very little impact on us.**

One of the reasons we have too much is that we shop too much. And why do we shop so much, even when we don't need the specific product?

Prices are low, products are accessible, available and not designed to last – we are faced permanently with marketing tactics and advertisements, we shop without considering the purpose behind our purchases. Here is a statement by Orsola de Castro on one of the most commercial events of the year:

“Black Friday is a scam. It's one more way to get citizens to think they are finding a bargain, when in fact they are hunting an illusion. Black Friday is about the rush, the speed, the compulsion. At Fashion Revolution we are asking you to stay conscientious and to buy with purpose.”

– Orsola de Castro, Fashion Revolution co-founder and creative director

But do we really need so much stuff, or are we simply addicted to buying something new?

One of the reasons for our willingness to shop is also our emotional state.

People often shop when feeling sad, but whether and why shopping reduces residual (lingering) sadness remains an open question.

Sadness is strongly associated with a sense that situational forces control the outcomes in one's life, and thus we theorised that the choices inherent in shopping may restore personal control over one's environment and reduce residual sadness.

– Scott I. Rick Beatriz Pereira Katherine A. Burson in The benefits of retail therapy: Making purchase decisions reduces residual sadness

Shopping relates to the culture of the specific country or nation.

It varies from country to country and the shopping intensity is different even within European countries. Here is the data on clothing purchased annually, in some EU countries:

Country & Items of clothing per capita (KGs)

- UK – 26.7
- Germany – 16.7
- Denmark – 16.0
- Italy – 14.5
- Netherlands – 14.0
- Sweden – 12.6
- France – 9.0

Throwaway attitude relates to the ways we acquire our belongings. So if we are getting to buy things easily and for a low cost, we are more likely to get rid of them easily.

Let's put it this way. Imagine you buy yourself a cheap top which costs you the same amount as your morning coffee from a cafe on your way to school or work, and then imagine you buy yourself a good quality top from a local designer, which costs you 10 times more.

Which top you will be likely to look after more and keep in your wardrobe for longer? If you should get rid of one of them, which one will be more likely?

Since 1996, the amount of clothes bought in the EU per person has increased by 40% following a sharp fall in prices, which has reduced the life span of clothing. Europeans use nearly 26 kilos of textiles and discard about 11 kilos of them every year. Used clothes can be exported outside the EU, but are mostly (87%) incinerated or landfilled.

Globally less than 1% of clothes are recycled as clothing, partly due to inadequate technology.

Watch [this video](#) on throwaway fashion by Economist, where you have a view on throwaway issues in the UK.
(Video is with subtitles so that it is easier to understand)

So with this much information on "throwaway culture" attitudes, is there any way we can change it from our point of view?



Reflection

Go back to your notes from the beginning and try to investigate your community deeper. Talk to your parents, friends, neighbours. You can make notes, or simply make a video or reels.

Try to follow areas covered in these questions:

What is the most common reason for disposing of their clothes?
What are some of the most common things we do with used clothing? Do we gift it? Do we donate it? How do we dispose of unwanted goods?

How are people in your community treating other personal belongings, including clothing, after they no longer want them or need them (plastic, electronics)?

You can watch the video about the journey of throw away clothes into innovative design – [making clothes out of unwanted materials](#) (upcycling production)

Play your final video/ reels to people around you, and use them to help generate discussion about the ways our clothing could be saved from the landfill.

Now, considering the information we have acquired in this lesson, what are the best ways we can deal with the garments we no longer want? How do you keep them in the loop, or alternatively – how do you dispose of them ethically?

Here are some suggestions, but feel free to make your own.

- Unwanted good quality garments can be kept in the loop by:
- Exchanging them with your friends
- Reselling them as a second hand item, either online or in person
- Bringing them to swap
- Remaking
- Repurposing by customising

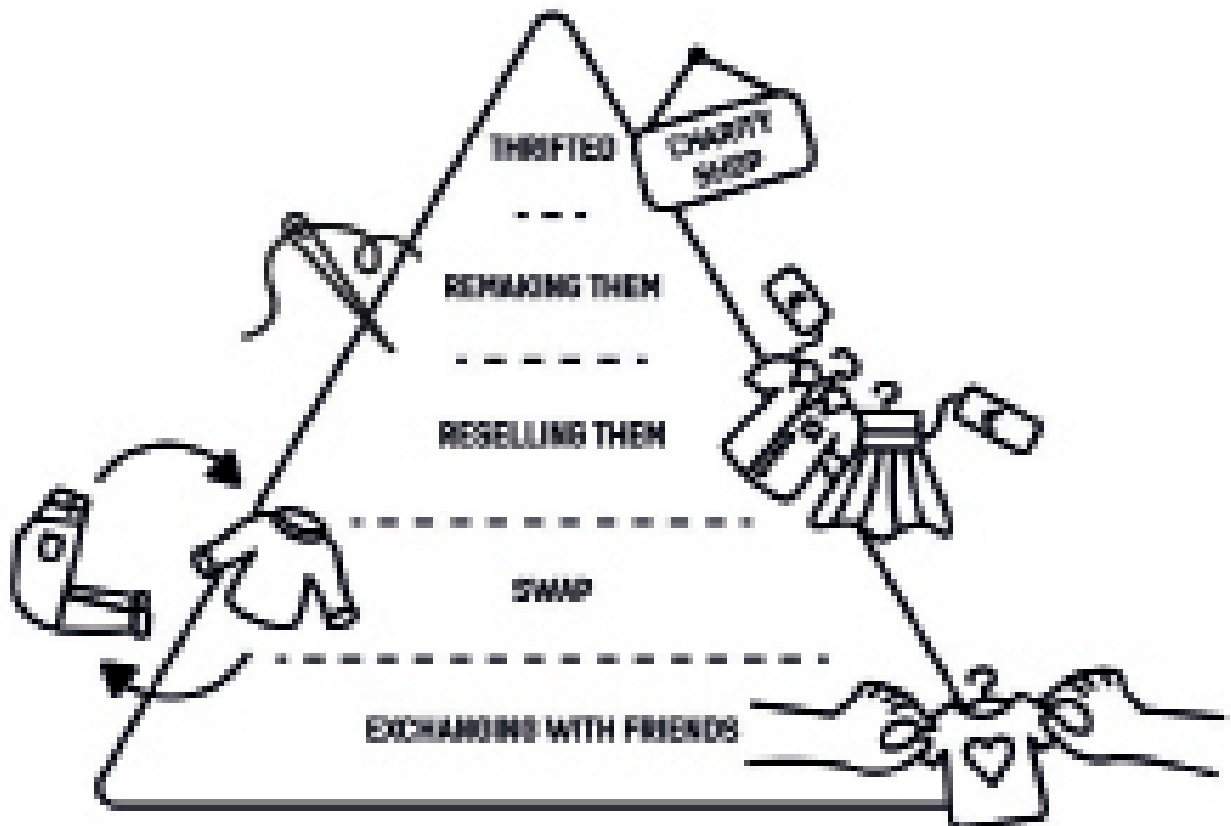


Photo credit: [Lucie Holkova](#)

[Fashion & Sustainability](#)

Unwanted damaged or heavily worn garments can be disposed of by:

- Separating them into a correct recycle bin (textile waste collection box, if not, in many places this is unfortunately a communal waste – do the research how to correctly dispose clothing in your area)
- Using them till the last moment – as a cloth, cutting it into pieces
- Mending or remaking them into a new, customised garment, or a home product like a pillow case, or an accessory

For further reading and learning, we suggest:

[Stop Waste Colonialism](#) , an initiative by [The OR Foundation](#)

[Textile Mountain: The Hidden Burden of our Fashion Waste](#) by European Environmental Bureau

[How to Make Fashion Circular](#) by The Ellen MacArthur Foundation

[Loved Clothes Last](#): How the Joy of Rewearing and Repairing Your Clothes Can Be a Revolutionary Act by Orsola De Castro



Resources

BBC News. Fast fashion: The dumping ground for unwanted clothes. 2021. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-58836618>

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The Or Foundation (2023). Stop Waste Colonialism: Leveraging Extended Producer Responsibility to Catalyze a Justice-led Circular Textiles Economy. Available at: <https://stopwastecolonialism.org/stopwastecolonialism.pdf>

Attachments:

VIDEO - [From throw away clothes into innovative design](#) - making clothes out of unwanted materials - upcycling production

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