

CIRCULAR FASHION



In Promoting Sustainability



My Take

Sustainability can feel overwhelming, especially when conversations about climate change, pollution, or environmental responsibility seem too large to grasp. It may seem like we have no chance of contributing to saving our world when we're constantly confronted with massive statistics and global issues. However, I've come to understand that change begins with realistic, everyday actions that people can maintain over time. That is why my main argument is simple: small, consistent changes, such as thrifting and reusing clothing, are some of the most practical and impactful ways to make sustainability part of daily life. These habits don't require dramatic lifestyle shifts, but require awareness and small choices repeated over months and years. This is also where the idea of circular fashion comes in, as it offers a way to make clothing and shopping more sustainable and reduce textile waste.

Understanding Sustainability

Before exploring circular fashion or thrifting, it's important to understand sustainability itself. Sustainability refers to meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. At its core, it's about balance. It's about consuming resources at a rate the planet can replenish, and making choices that support environmental health in the long term.



The urgency behind sustainability can be explained by alarming environmental trends. Climate change continues to increase due to rising carbon dioxide levels from burning fossil fuels. According to NASA, atmospheric CO₂ levels are now higher than at any point in at least the last 800,000 years (NASA, 2023). This increase contributes to extreme weather events, rising sea levels, wildfires, droughts, and ecosystem disruption. Additionally, the US alone has one of the highest average carbon footprints in the world, with the average of 16 tons of CO₂ emissions per year per individual (The Nature Conservancy, 2022). This number is significantly higher than the global average of around 4 tons.



Environmental issues include more than carbon emissions, as plastic pollution is another major crisis. Each year, an estimated 14 million tons of plastic enter the ocean, harming ecosystems and wildlife (IUCN, 2022). Microplastics, which are tiny particles that shed from synthetic materials, are now found in drinking water, soil, and marine animals (UNEP, 2021). While these challenges are large and complex, individual responsibility still plays a meaningful role. Everyday choices can reduce waste and shift cultural norms toward sustainability.

Fashion's Environmental Toll

One of the most overlooked contributors to environmental damage is the clothing industry. This is one of the reasons why I am writing this piece, as someone who cares about the Earth and is interested in fashion. Unfortunately, around 85% of all textiles end up in landfills or are burned annually (UNECE, 2018). In the U.S. alone, people throw away about 11.3 million tons of textile waste each year, most of which is not recycled (EPA, 2023). Much of that waste could have had a longer life, with being resold, repaired, repurposed, or donated.

In addition, fast fashion, which is defined as the rapid production of inexpensive, trend-based clothing, has made clothing more disposable (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). If people only bought a few high-quality garments each year, it would significantly reduce the impact of the clothing industry. However, consumers today purchase 60% more clothing and keep items only half as long (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). Therefore, the fast fashion model continues to increase waste, contribute to overproduction, and normalize a culture of constant consumption that our Earth cannot keep up with.

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What is Circular Fashion?



Circular fashion, in short, is the opposite of the “purchase, wear one, toss repeat” cycle we have all gotten used to. Instead of treating clothing as disposable, the concept of circular fashion focuses on keeping items in use for as long as possible by repairing, reusing, recycling, or repurposing them. The broader circular fashion economy aims to design products in ways that avoid waste in the first place.

More specifically, at its core, circular fashion encourages one to keep clothing in use for as long as possible, intentionally choose items that last and can be recycled, turn old textiles into new fibers instead of sending them to landfills, and encourages everyday behaviors like repairing, reselling, and sharing (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

The impact of circular fashion is significant. A study by WRAP found that extending the life of clothing by just nine months can reduce its carbon, waste, and water footprints by 20–30% (WRAP, 2020). Even choosing to buy secondhand instead of new lowers the demand for new production, which directly reduces emissions and resource use.

Thrifting

Within the concept of circular fashion, thrifting is one of the easiest and most accessible ways for everyday people to make a difference. Over the last decade, thrifting has grown in popularity with younger generations who value affordability, sustainability, and individuality in the clothes they wear.



From an environmental standpoint, thrifting is one of the most effective ways to reduce fashion-related waste. Purchasing used clothing instead of new saves significant amounts of water, energy, and materials. For example, buying one secondhand T-shirt saves up to 700 gallons of water, which would otherwise be used in cotton production. On a larger scale, the global secondhand market is projected to save billions of pounds of CO2 emissions annually as more consumers shift toward reuse (ThredUp Resale Report, 2022).

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Beyond its environmental benefits, I personally believe thrifting is simply better. It allows people to curate a wardrobe with unique pieces, not trendy items that everyone has. In addition, buying secondhand is typically more affordable, making sustainable choices more accessible. To me, the thrill of finding a high-quality or name-brand piece for a fraction of its original price is unmatched. One time, I thrifted a Burberry skirt (originally valued at more than \$1,000) and purchased it for a single dollar at the Goodwill bins. You can't get better than that.

Thrifting also encourages creativity. Instead of buying something new every time a trend changes, thrifting pushes people to style what already exists by reimagining old pieces. Trends circulate over time anyway, so it just makes sense.

Closing Thoughts

Overall, sustainability does not have to be overwhelming if everyone does their part. It is not about perfection but the small choices that add up over time. Thrifting, re-wearing what we already own, and supporting circular fashion are simple habits that genuinely reduce waste and make fashion feel more intentional.

For me, choosing secondhand isn't just environmentally friendly, but it's fun! It allows me to express my style, save money, and reduce my impact all at once. The best part, however, is that anyone can start. Whether it's shopping in your own closet or visiting a thrift store, circular fashion begins with small steps. Even one small shift can make sustainability feel more doable and more impactful than you might think.

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