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Cardboard Dystopia

I threw away twenty-seven bags of garbage this month.

The days blend together as I am confined to a thousand-square foot South Oakland apartment. The drudgery of daily existence is only broken up by the ringing of the doorbell as our student life comes to resemble nine-to-fivers.

Danielle, Henry, Juliet, and I all recline on a grey-mechanical couch facing the sixty-five-inch TV that fills our tiny living room. The four of us are starting to look like characters from Disney's *Wall-E*. The forty-seventh episode of the fourth season of *Love Island* plays as just background music. The real entertainment is on the laptop that my screened-out eyes scan. Instinctively, my fingers scroll down the virtual aisles of an online mall. When the pages refresh, the black screen reflects a two-day-old bun, undereye circles, a unibrow, and Bob's Burger's pajamas with the word "butt" repeated 40 times.

"Do you think this will still be in style after COVID ends?" I ask the group, showing a picture of a blonde woman modeling an oversized turtleneck for the brand Shein.

"Hard to say. How much is it?" Juliet replies.

"Literally only twelve dollars."

"Dude you have to get it. That's like almost too cheap."

Should I charge my tired PayPal account for another article of useless clothing I won't be able to wear for months? *Hey, only twelve dollars. You deserve this.*

On Wednesday, I hear the two-toned electric sound of our doorbell. Like a well-conditioned Pavlov dog, I stand up quickly and a collection of Ritz cracker dust falls off my shirt onto the dingy-brown carpet. I would worry, but it has joined thousands of other crumbs, a problem for another time.

I notice the postman standing outside our door. His face looks tired, but he offers us a forced half-smile that reveals the gap between his teeth. I read "Eric" on the name tag of his bright-blue romper. A satchel, filled to the brim, drapes across his burly shoulders, which he drains by our retired brown door. He continues back up the hill with a pep in his step, six packages lighter. *Until tomorrow, Eric.*

The September sun is strong. It still feels vaguely like summer, as if it's hanging on by one last thread. I cradle a package addressed to me, a present to myself. The cardboard is warmed against the palm of my hand.

"What did you get, Corinne?"

I ponder the question. What did I get? Could it be the turtleneck I ordered from Shein? The bathing suit that finally came from Zaful? Or could I be holding Juliet's T-shirt dress? Or Henry's sex toy? Or even Danielle's matcha kit?

We march inside as our bare feet mop up the dirt from our front porch.

"Let's do a fashion show?" Henry suggests.

We all respond with eyes wide, collectively embarrassed to admit this will be the most exciting part of our day.

I look to Juliet, who is already in her t-shirt dress, to Henry, who is running upstairs to try out his Adam and Eve package, and to Danielle, who is racing to make matcha tea. Now standing alone, I observe the collection of Russian-doll trash that has accumulated in our once clean kitchen. Disturbed by the aesthetic of Package Day, I round up as many parcels as my hands can carry and make my way to the basement, which has become home to our recyclables because of our cheapness to splurge on a proper bin.

The ground feels slightly damp. It rained last night. I inhale with quick sudden breaths, taking in the dusty stench of our 100-year-old cellar. The air is a mixture of moldy petrichor and wet dog. Without even turning on the light, I whip the packages into the center of our basement. I expect the sound of cardboard hitting cement but instead the ring of collapsing boxes echoes.

My blackened feet lead me to the tug of a metal light string which dully illuminates our cellar. The small concentration of light spotlights our pile of rubble. It looks like a Fed-Ex-Factory down here.

Soon, I am standing up to my neck in recycling. Bubble wrap, plastic bags, and cardboard inserts act as a barrier to what is probably a hundred orders. The boxes seem to be collapsing on top of me and I might fall victim to the crushing weight of global warming. Low ceilings and overwhelming amounts of recycling trigger my fight-or-flight response.

My racing eyes find a Shein box falling from its box brothers. As it connects with the dingy floor, I hear the sound of plastic that reminds me of old toys falling off shelves. A pair of sunglasses tumbles out of the Shein box—a pair of sunglasses I ordered at the end of last semester.

The next morning, I tell my roommates, “Guys, I think I’m done with Shein.”

“What, why dude? I just bought the cutest sweater from there,” Juliet responds.

“I don’t know I feel like I’m buying things just to buy things.”

“Listen, it’s a good thing. I just saw something about Shein on Tik Tok and they are like the biggest Fast Fashion offenders out there,” Danielle snaps.

“I really doubt that. Come on, it’s like the only place I can find clothes for so cheap,” Juliet says to her.

“Juliet, how do you think they manage to sell things for so cheap? By being environmentally conscious? By paying their workers? I get it’s inexpensive, but we should be thrifting or something,” Danielle tells us.

“Have any of you been in the basement recently?” I interrupt.

Together, we duck down to the lair. I watch as my friends truly notice the boxes for the first time with dropped jaws. The breeze of our door swinging shut triggers an avalanche of plastic wrappings down the mountain of waste. Tumbleweeds of plastic bags dance between our legs. The basement feels like a cardboard dystopia.

We all stare at the trash as it stares back at us.

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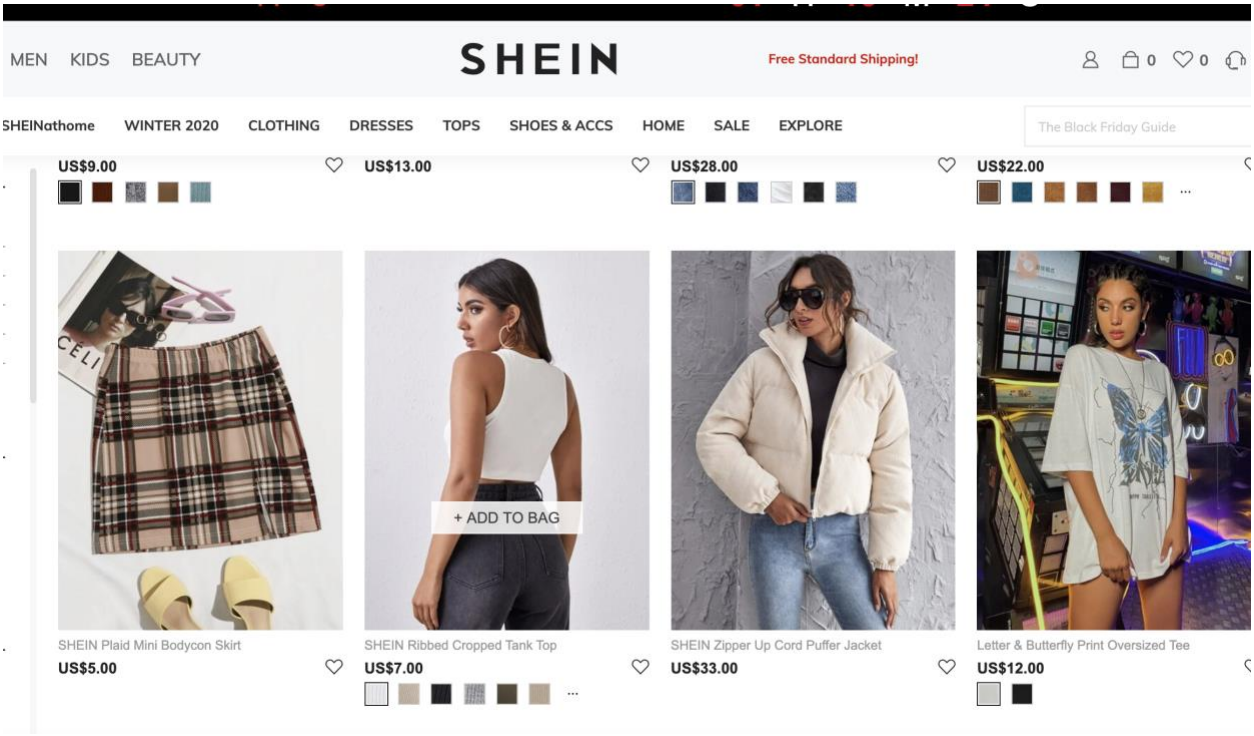
Shein was developed in Nanjing China in 2008, marketing itself right off the bat as a Fast Fashion company. By definition, Fast Fashion is inexpensive clothing produced rapidly by mass-market retailers in response to the latest trends.

“Shein prides itself on offering on-trend styles catering to both young women and teens, that won’t break the bank. Shein adheres to the concept that ‘everyone can enjoy the beauty of fashion.’ Shein is able to stay on top of the latest fashion trends from around the globe while rapidly bringing these styles to market… Shein is the ultimate one-stop-shop for the modern yet economical fashionista. It aims to promptly offer stylish quality products at appealing prices to

every user in the world.”



But how exactly do they manage to sell skirts for only 5$? Shein reminds pretty quiet on that front. The exclusively- online company makes contact nearly impossible as there are no phone numbers or emails directly associated with the company.

Calls asking Shein to clarify the ethics of their business go unanswered. Some buyers even speculate that the clothing is made by children, due to messy sewing and inexpensive production costs. Shein claims to strictly follow the labor laws of each country, however, many of the child labor laws in operational countries permit children to work as young as 14. Even so, nearly 18 percent of children work in factories in Bangladesh.

Other critics of the company wonder about its environmental impact. Production of any Fast Fashion company greatly contributes to hazardous emissions. Shein also uses toxic materials and fabrics, which make their carbon footprint even larger. They are able to produce

around 500 new items daily, only possible by utilizing cheap textiles made of plastics like nylon. These materials aren't durable and take hundreds of years to decay in landfills.

In an exposé of Fast Fashion, the magazine *Fashion Revolution* calls out the deplorable effects of companies like Shein: "Cheap prices make us believe they bring about savings for consumers. This may appear true in the short term, with a narrow focus and looking just at the money in our wallets, but all of us, as global citizens, will ultimately end up paying the external cost, the true cost for the unsustainable consumption and production of cheap clothing."

They continue, "This is why, when garments are priced as cheaply as single-use items, it implies that our clothing is disposable. And if we buy that message, we are buying into a very ugly side of fashion."

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Shopping in the 1950s looked different for Americans. Candy could've been bought for a nickel, a dozen eggs for a quarter, or a blouse for a dollar. Our grandparent's grocery list has increased with inflation, yet somehow clothing prices remained relatively stagnant. Highly competitive fashion companies pushed to keep prices down for consumers, even as it became more expensive to produce clothing. To offset production costs, big fashion brands slowly began to rely on outsourced-cheap labor, successfully cutting costs for over 70 years. Now, the industry generates up to three trillion dollars a year, making it one of the largest industries worldwide, but at what cost?

In the 50's, 90 percent of American clothing was produced in America. Companies eventually realized that they could outsource fabrication to developing countries to curb costs for labor. The capitalistic-domino-effect soon left only three percent of clothing manufacturing

centers in the US. The burden of textile production fell to low-cost economies, where laborers are paid an average of two dollars per day.

Fast Fashion began to dominate in the 1990s, with the arrival of brands such as Zara, Topshop, and Primark. Companies like Shein and Zaful take Fast Fashion even further.

Internationally, one in six people works in some part of the fashion chain, making it the most labor-dependent industry in the world. Yet, only 2 percent of factory workers earn a livable wage. Conditions dramatically worsened since the arrival of Fast Fashion.

Workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh are the lowest paid in the industry, bringing home barely ten dollars a month. The workers sit inside 100-degree factories for 12 hours a day, rushing to sew textiles to hit daily quotas. They work nearly 365 days a year, often going months without seeing family members; there are no vacation days in Fast Fashion. Every day, these employees show up with the risk of exhaustion, physical punishment, and injury by machine. At least 480 garment workers die each year.

Bangladesh is responsible for 20 billion dollars in garment exports, among the highest in outsourced production. Many clothing brands revered in American culture rely heavily on Bangladeshi exports: the most popular being H&M, J.C Penney, Walmart, Gap, and Zara.

As conditions of the factories have been exposed, consumers looked to companies to condemn safety shortcomings. Walmart refused to compensate workers in a deadly warehouse fire in Bangladesh that left over 100 dead. Gap refused to sign a worker's safety contract. Some companies have written statements claiming to denounce poor working conditions, but little has actually been done to protect outsourced employees.

Companies can ignore the production process of their clothes-- the horrible conditions, unsafe environments, and extreme heat-- because outsourcing means "out of sight, out of mind."

Judging from their skyscraping headquarters, many fashion companies believe they are saviors to people of low-income communities.

Multi-million-dollar businesses own the resources to appropriately allocate funds to legitimately improve the livelihood of employees, but instead, they opt to pay workers as little as possible to artificially stimulate the economy, keeping communities just poor enough for the incentive to work next-to-slave jobs while they bring in billions.

Garment workers employed under billion-dollar companies describe cracks in the walls, broken machinery, and weekly accidents that cripple people for life.

The 2013 Bangladesh Rana Plaza Garment Factory Collapse left over a thousand employees dead. Workers continuously complained of poor building structure as noticeable cracks surrounded them all day. These complaints went ignored. When the building began collapsing, alarms sounded. The owners of the factory refused to evacuate. The workers spent their last moments trapped in corporate prison. Bodies were pulled out of layers of debris for days following the disaster. Even after many weeks, people in the town claimed to have heard screams from underneath the rubble.

An anonymous Indian garment worker told reporters, “I don’t want anyone wearing anything that is produced by our blood.”

In 1911, a similar disaster occurred in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York. A failure to account for a fire plan, zero safety guidelines, and messy architectural layout led to the death of 146 women. The tragic fire inspired decades of labor reform in America. Yet, no major changes were made to outsourced factories following the Rana Plaza catastrophe. The year following the disaster was the largest grossing year of the fashion industry to date.

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“It’s not just about clothing, it’s about a disposable society,” writes consumer expert Michael Solomon.

Typical Fast Fashion brands produce between 300 to 900 pieces of new clothing items a week. At the same time, America is responsible for throwing away 80 billion pounds of clothing a year. The 82 pounds that individual Americans throw away annually will sit in landfills for 200 years, becoming the “Dirty shadow of the Fast Fashion industry.”

Globally, the fashion industry has secured its place in pollution, only second behind the leading oil industry, contributing to 8% of the world’s greenhouse gases. Each step of the production chain releases toxic fumes into the air and contributes to billions of tons of landfill waste around the world.

While Americans can see landfills filling, most of the environmental repercussions of the fashion industry (such as water contamination and air pollution) occur in developing countries. Climate change disproportionally affects non- white areas of the globe. Uber-rich fashion moguls cause many of the symptoms of climate change, and poor communities of color suffer the consequences.

Punjab, India is considered to be the largest cotton-growing location in the east. It also expends the largest amount of pesticides. For the west, this means producing large amounts of usable cotton for extremely low costs. For the east, this means hundreds of children born with debilitating birth defects and thousands of lives lost to cancer.

Dr. Singh, of Punjab India, studies the effects of pesticide exposure in his community. He has found that toxic pesticides sprayed over acres of cotton farms contaminated the people of Punjab.

“We can say that Punjab is dying now. There is no doubt. Punjab is the food basket of India. Now it is the disease basket.” Singh continues, “They are drinking very polluted water. We can say it is a toxic cocktail in our food chain.”

The use of pesticides has decreased since 2004, but the health effects will sit with the community for hundreds of years.

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As light has shone on the dark truth of the Fast Fashion industry, many are starting to speak out against it. Hundreds of new companies surfaced with a new goal in mind—sustainability.

Sustainable fashion is defined by *The Green Strategy* as clothing that is manufactured in the most sustainable way possible, taking environmental concerns and ethics into account by minimizing emissions and creating positive working conditions.

The most popular sustainable brands include Patagonia, Boden, Pact, and Eileen Fisher. 74 percent of people aged 18-29 said they prefer to buy from brands that are sustainable. Generally, ethical clothing brand’s mission statements center around manufacturing environmentally conscious, durable clothing. Brands are attempting to create a stronger relationship with the consumer, to incorporate intentionality back into shopping. Fixing the issues created by the Fast Fashion industry means reframing the way that consumers think about clothing.

Sustainable clothing lines are often criticized for being expensive. Usually, ethically sourced clothing ranges between thirty and one-hundred-and-fifty dollars. When efforts are actively being made to reduce greenhouse gases, use organic materials, and pay workers fairly, the price of clothing naturally increase.

Sustainable brands often encourage buyers to rethink their predisposed ideas about clothing prices. The Fast Fashion industry has trained us to expect to buy dresses for 8.99$ or shoes for 20$. Unlearning these falsely conceived prices is vital.

Expensive products are encouraged to be used for many years, while cheaply made inexpensive clothing is encouraged to be mass consumed and mass disposed of.

Emma Ferguson, student at The University of Pittsburgh, has recently turned to exclusively buying clothing produced sustainably.

“The final straw for me was receiving a shirt from Shein and noticing that the stitching was done poorly. After some research, I found that a sloppy seam means that the item has been produced by a child or an overworked employee. The Fast Fashion industry doesn’t align with my feminist or ethical views, so I just couldn’t see it as worth it to continue to support it.”

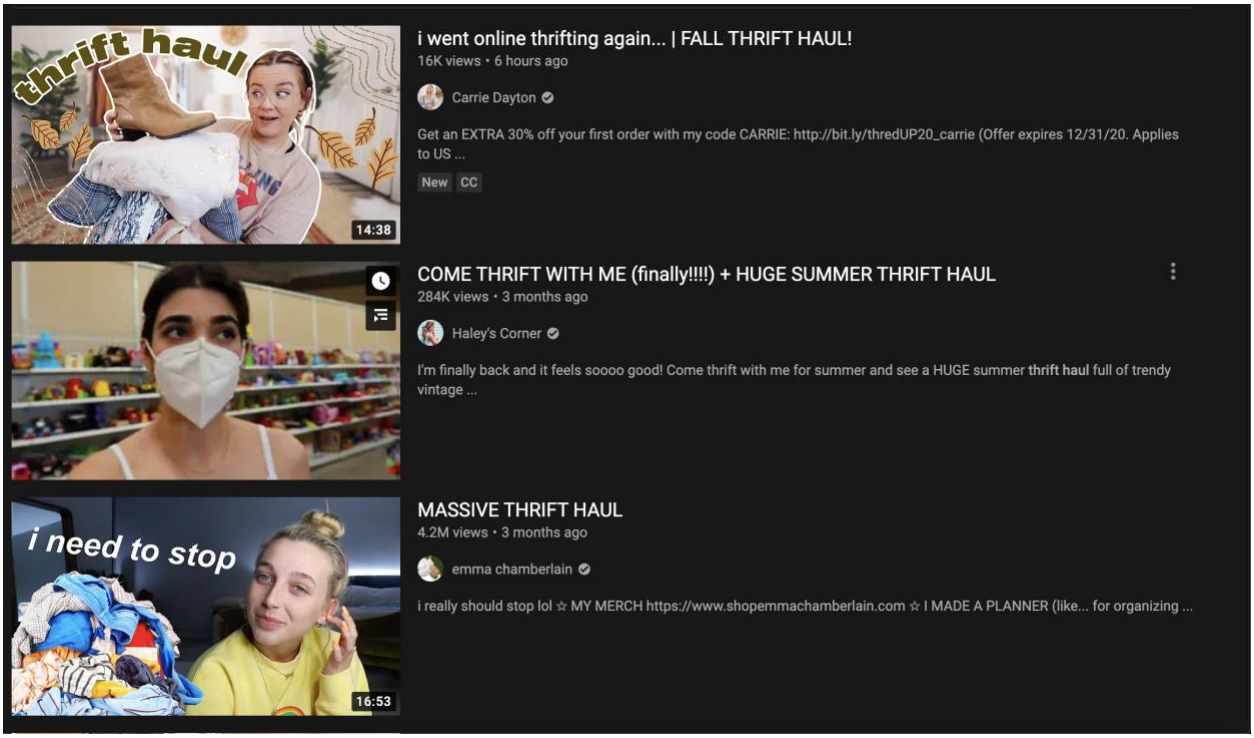
Emma continued, “It was really hard at first. Finding brands with sustainable missions can be really overwhelming. Once I found a few companies to start off with, I felt more comfortable. I kept all the clothing in my wardrobe pre-sustainable so it’s not like I needed to completely rebuy my closet. But I recognize that being able to buy exclusively sustainable is a privilege. The clothes are a lot more expensive and I feel lucky to be able to shop this way.”

Though ideal, it is unrealistic to attempt to convince an entire population of consumers to spend quadruple what they are currently spending on clothing.

A cheaper alternative to sustainable fashion is resale. Resale is the sale of any type of previously owned item. Over the past three years, resale has grown 21 times faster than the actual retail industry. The unprecedented growth can be mainly attributed to the younger millennial and Gen Z generations, who consist of over 40 percent of purchasing power internationally. Annually, almost 77 percent of people aged 18-29 will buy secondhand.

Thrifting was introduced into American culture in the 1920s by the creation of secondhand companies like Goodwill and Salvation Army. People would donate unwanted clothing to be sold at reduced costs. Goodwill became a primary source of shopping for working class families. Consequently, a classist stigma that the clothes were dirty and cheap emerged around secondhand shopping. The stigma around thrifting still exists today, especially among the older generations, which explains a generational gap in the thrifting economy.

In 2008, there began a notable increase in thrift sales. With video streaming platforms such as YouTube becoming more popular, younger consumers were encouraged to buy secondhand. Famous creators posted videos showing off their thrifted clothing.



These videos received millions of watches from impressionable viewers, removing some of the stigmas associated with thrifting. Just as celebrities influenced Vogue fashion trends, they expanded the secondhand market.

Avid thrifter in *Affordable Magazine* writes, “Unfortunately, society places value on having the latest styles over seeking out sustainable pieces. But for me, thrifting flipped that narrative: It taught me to not only love the hunt but to ditch the guilt around not being able to afford the trendiest bag. As it turns out, great style doesn’t have to cost a pretty penny.”

Instead of going into a style-specific store and choosing from the clothes they created for “model customers”, consumers are able to handpick pieces that aren’t associated with a larger image. Thrifting has redefined personal style to go beyond the fashion trends created by corporate boards.

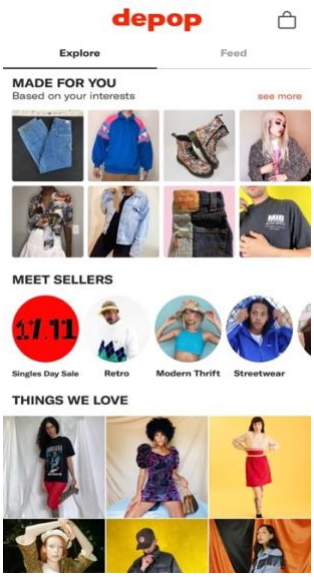
My roommate Danielle noted: “Finding something at a thrift store is more exciting than finding something at a store in a mall. I feel accomplished being able to dig through bins and put together cute outfits. The clothes I find feel more unique than something I could find at a store; a million other people could buy the same thing. I also have less guilt about buying a lot of clothing—it feels like recycling.”

Shelby Smith of the *Current* reminded readers of the environmental effects of thrifting in her piece *Thrifting: The New Fast Fashion*, “With the existential dread of climate change ever looming, it’s encouraging to young shoppers to be able to minimize their environmental impact while also being able to express themselves through their wardrobe.”

In 2018, Goodwill resold 58,000 tons of clothing. Those are 58,000 tons that would have ended up in landfills. 58,000 tons that would have spent nearly 200 years emitting toxic gases into the air. The cycle of clothing waste is being broken up.

With many turning to thrift stores, profits of greedy Fast Fashion companies have decreased. By 2028, the resale industry is expected to be larger than the Fast Fashion industry.

There are over 25,000 different brands dedicated to secondhand clothing. Some have begun to personally invest in secondhand consumption by selling their closets directly to others through websites such as Depop and Poshmark.



Depop defines itself as, a “fashion marketplace app where the next generation come to discover unique items. With a global community buying, selling and connecting to make fashion more inclusive, diverse and less wasteful. This is what transforming fashion looks like.”

Many sellers on the site will buy clothing from thrift stores and sell it with an added “finder’s fee”, or even modify the clothing in some way for resale. The modern thrifting economy is creating a new money-making market for young people.

As people are starting to flock to thrift stores, many legitimate concerns surface about increased prices or lack of clothing for those who truly need it. A study by Brigham Young University found that, “lower-income families see secondhand shopping as a necessity, whereas higher-income shoppers view it as a commodity.”

When wondering down the aisles of thrift stores, it can be hard to avoid feelings of guilt. For families hunting along-side us, thrifting isn’t a fun shopping excursion, it’s simply a way to

put clothing on their back. It's important to recognize the privilege of being able to decide where your clothing comes from.

"Walking through Goodwill I feel a mix of pride for not supporting Fast Fashion but also guilt for taking away clothing that someone might need them more than I do," my roommate Juliet told me.

In 2010, Goodwill had a flat rate for all merchandise, everything was worth a similar amount by pound. In 2020, many consumers began to notice a variation in the prices and an overall increase for the cost of goods at thrift stores.

A popular Depop seller wrote, "The thrift store wants to make more money, but they're nonprofit. Their goal shouldn't be to make more money. It should be to make a better impact on the community and the environment."

The rise in thrift prices should not be blamed on consumers trying to help the environment, but instead on the capitalistic nature of all businesses. Blaming consumers, has been the scapegoat of the fashion industry for decades. Around 2.5 million tons of clothing are donated each year. Goodwill circulates donated goods to over 3,200 locations around the country. There is not a shortage of clothing. More consumptions simply mean that there is a greater rotation of clothing and less waste produced by Goodwill when donations aren't sold.

To try and stay loyal to community values, Goodwill does have large outlets with bins that include clothing that hasn't been sold in other store locations that is exclusively sold at a flat rate of 99 cents per pound. "It's like the last step before it's either sent to recycling plants or thrown away," a thrifter said. "There's enough stuff for everyone."

No company is perfect. By nature, the American capital system is greedy and corrupted. There will never exist a completely ethical and sustainable business model in the fashion

industry. But, buying secondhand is a strong solution for conscious consumers to reduce their environmental footprint and feel better about the ethics of the clothes they wear. The rise in resale and sustainability is a start to cleaning up the stain that the Fast Fashion industry has left on the planet.

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Four months have passed since Eric last delivered my Shein package. In October, we only threw away 9 bags of garbage.

My friends and I have gone entirely sustainable. We rely exclusively on thrift stores and enjoy shopping relatively guilt-free. We are all as obsessed with digging through clothing bins as we once were with online malls.

There is no way to be a perfect consumer. But shoppers need to start to understand that clothing is not disposable. It should not be bought just to be thrown away but purchased with intention to live many lives. It is time to consider the production of clothing as we do food.

“Fast Fashion isn’t free. Someone, somewhere, is paying.”

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