

Second-hand clothing industry turning the tide on fast fashion

"We don't have enough resources to keep feeding this monster" - the stark words of warning about the new clothing industry from Maria Chenoweth, chief executive of Traid, a UK charity working to stop clothes being thrown away.



Image credit: Burst via Pexels

Chenoweth says the average lifetime for a garment in Britain is just 2.2 years and McKinsey's *State of Fashion* report concluded that more than half of fast-fashion items are thrown away in less than a year. This trend is exacerbated by, what's described by a British MP as, "the Instagram look and chuck mentality".

One estimate is that 11 million clothing items a week in the UK go to landfill (or 300,000 tonnes a year). The equivalent South African statistics are hard to track but the move towards disposable fashion here has been just as marked, especially with the relentless rise of cut-price chains like Mr Price and H&M. And a recent Gumtree SA survey showed 65% of respondents owning 10 or more items of clothing which they never used.

On several levels, excessive consumption of new clothing is environmentally damaging and, according to many experts, unsustainable. Stephanie Campbell of the UK Love Your Clothes campaign, believes "the single most important action we can all do is to prolong the life cycle, which starts by never putting clothes in the bin."



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19 Dec 2018



Fast-growing segment

Increasing awareness of this issue has given rise to a growing eco-movement in favour of second-hand clothing. Fashion blogger Charlotte Yau reports that "from reselling, recycling, gifting, swapping and reusing, the second-hand industry is becoming one of the largest growing consumer segments".

Online trading sites like Gumtree are booming in this category and, globally, there's a new genre of specialist pre-owned designer clothing consignment sites like HEWI (Hardly Ever Wore It). Even the legendary Selfridges in London had a second-hand pop-up store last year. Top fashion designers are starting to buy in as well with Stella McCartney launching 'The Future of Fashion is Circular' campaign to encourage consumers to purchase sustainable clothing that retains value and then resell it to expand its lifespan, avoiding landfill or an incinerator.

Estelle Nagel of Gumtree SA says the market for second-hand clothing is significant in South Africa with more than 20,000 second-hand clothing items listed, and there's a definite shift in attitude. "The status issue was big for so many people – they weren't confident to admit to buying second-hand but now it seems smart, savvy and eco-friendly. Previously unthinkable second-hand niches like wedding dresses and matric dance outfits are growing all the time.

"The secondhand market makes even more sense in a tough economy. As Nagel points out: "you win both ways by making money on your own old clothes and saving money on the replacements".

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