

Consumerism and Textile Disposal

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Executive Summary

This paper explores the correlation between consumerism and textile disposal, focusing on the fast fashion industry, on a small and large scale. Textile waste makes up 9.2% of landfill waste in Nova Scotia, some of which takes up to 200 years to decompose. The manufacturing of clothing is one of the largest factors contributing to greenhouse gases, and is notorious for the unfair conditions it subjects its workers to. One of the largest culprits of this is fast fashion. In recent years, due to the influence of social media, fast fashion sites have exploded in success. Because of the influence of social media, opinions towards clothing have shifted, and people are buying and disposing of more and more clothing to keep up with current, fast paced trend cycles. Social media advertising has influenced consumers to continue buying low-cost and low quality clothing items and textiles, contributing to the amount which ends up in landfills. Using methods such as advertising to show how overconsumption of textiles negatively affects the environment to create a larger shift in perception of how people view fashion, or methods such as “circular fashion”, where sustainability and recyclability is the priority.

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In Pictou County, textile waste is advised to be donated at drop off bins throughout the county, or at the waste facility. Consumers are also advised to reuse and recycle textiles. However, with the influx of textile waste going up 58% since 2017 (Divert Nova Scotia), textiles currently make up about 6% of all disposed material in Nova Scotia in 2023, and 9.2% of waste in landfills (Government of Nova Scotia). The manufacturing of clothing produces 2.1 billion tonnes of greenhouse gases a year (Whalen), and the fashion industry was credited by the World Economic Forum as the third largest polluter. Despite this, fashion consumption is at an all-time high (Weber).

With the recent phenomenon of micro-trends, influenced by the fast paced, instantaneous gratification of social media, fashion trends seem to fade in a blink of an eye. With online shopping, and the presence of low-cost and low quality clothes online stores such as Shein or Temu, who target primarily young women, clothes that exist outside of the trend cycle, likely cease to exist outside of a landfill. The presence of social media has greatly affected consumerism, as brand advertising via social media “influencer” becomes more and more present, studies show a correlation between the number of “influencers” a consumer follows and the amount they consume (Lin). With this endless consumption, it is no wonder that an endless amount of clothing is wasted every year. In Canada alone, an estimated billion pounds of clothing ends up in landfills every year (Media Relations). As a teenager, I have first person experience with fast-fashion, and the brisk speed of trend cycles contributes to textile waste. This paper examines how individualistic consumerism affects, and eventually leads to textile waste, and what can be done to stop it.

In November 2023, the Shein app was downloaded over 27500 times in Canada, and its peak month was May 2020, with 325000 downloads (Sukhanova). Fashion consumption is at an all time high (Weber), and with fast fashion's low prices, people are buying low-cost and low-quality garments, only to use them, dispose of them, and buy more. The low-cost is also a part of the appeal of fast fashion. Many people use retail as a form of entertainment or therapy, and they get the most joy from finding an item they want to buy at a low price. "When consumers can obtain clothing at a cheaper price, they get the maximum sense of pleasure from their brain" (Lin). Another reason for the low-cost, is the cheap labour fast fashion companies employ. Child labour and inadequate conditions are common in fast fashion. The social detriment caused by fast fashion is equally as dire as the environmental impact.

Locally, in Pictou County, textiles are encouraged to be donated to second-hand stores such as Salvation Army and Value Village, however the donation of clothes does not stop the repeated buying of them. 5% of items donated to Value Village that are not sold end up as true waste, and 95% are somehow reused or recycled, but the textiles that do end up in landfills can take up to 200 years to fully decompose. Individually, ways to avoid our textiles ending up in landfills would be to steer clear of fast fashion, and instead opt for higher quality staple pieces, which you are guaranteed to wear, buying from brands such as Patagonia which are committed to sustainable practices, repairing your own textiles, or using damaged textiles to create new items or use them in compost.

However, on a larger scale, where consumer's purchasing of fast fashion is at an all-time high, there must be a shift in the way society views consumerism and textiles. Currently, textiles are indicative of social status, with young women reporting genuine fear of not participating in

current trends, or not wanting to repeat an outfit. When interviewing 18 year old Andrea Vargas, Krista Schlueter for the New York Times reports that she “doesn’t like to repeat”. With social media influencers portraying a new outfit everyday, the target audience of most fast fashion outlets are willing to keep buying and buying. It is easier said than done in creating a perspective change on fast fashion, however educating people on the real environmental damage it causes can sway people into more sustainable shopping habits. Personally, I had begun to become more conscious of what I was purchasing after learning about the factors in play. Potential public service advertising on social media that is popular with teens may help this effort.

Using methods such as textile recycling, or the “circular” method, where a garment is made with what materials can be recycled best, and prioritises the recyclability of textiles. Instead of using synthetic fabrics like polyester, made up of crude oil and take years to decompose, using higher quality fabrics which can decompose fairly quickly, like linen, will reduce time spent in landfills. Although phasing synthetic fabrics out seems unlikely, redesigning the fashion industry must happen in order to keep clothing and other textiles outside of landfills.

In Nova Scotia, textiles makeup 9.2% of landfills, and contribute to 2.1 billion pounds of waste every year in Canada. As fashion consumption is at an all time high, much of the fashion consumed ends up in landfills. This is influenced by social media, where social status is influenced by what you are wearing. The presence of social media influencers, who are always wearing a new outfit, has influenced consumers to buy more textiles than they need, all to keep up with trend cycles. To change the environmental damage this causes, there must be a rethinking of fashion altogether, where sustainability and recycling takes the biggest priority.

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