

Fashion: A look into its sustainability

Fast fashion is extremely detrimental to the environment as fashion production consumes large amounts of water and is heavily polluting because of dyeing, finishing, and fibre production processes. In addition to this, the massive turnover rate of clothes in order to cater to ever-changing trends results in rapid design, production, and distribution which ultimately increases carbon emissions and wastage. However, with the green movement making its way around the world, Singapore has swiftly followed suit with much progress being made in terms of greater sustainability and reducing our waste – including the textile aspect of it. More stores such as The Fashion Pulpit, Refash, and Threadlightly have sprouted, and they curate donated clothes to offer a variety of clothing with quality guaranteed. These companies promote the idea of shopping second-hand to reduce wastage, and market it in a way that is socially and aesthetically palatable to make it appealing for consumers who are new to the sustainability movement. In addition to these stores, there are traditional thrift stores like The Salvation Army, New2U, and Lucky Plaza Bazaar which is a popular thrift spot, along with an influx of Instagram accounts selling second-hand clothing. The New Paper even reported in 2019 that 60% of the Lucky Plaza Bazaar customers are young people, proving that second-hand clothing has become a popular option for many Singaporeans these days.

This is great progress in terms of shifting away from fast fashion and moving towards a more sustainable mode of consuming fashion. Given that textile waste is a huge problem in Singapore with 168,000 tonnes of textile, clothes, and leather waste generated as of 2019, of which a mere 4% is recycled, the second-hand fashion business model aims to greatly reduce this wastage and give clothes another lease of life. In recent years, thrifting has become more socially acceptable, and has even been popularized due to the way it is portrayed on social media applications – specifically through Instagram and TikTok. These applications often see a large number of young users flaunting their thrifted finds by styling them in different manners and highlighting the unique, one-of-a-kind outfits that fast fashion is not able to provide. Thus, the perception of thrift shopping has shifted from being undesirable to being trendy, with many young Singaporeans being more aware of shopping second-hand and adopting it into their lifestyles. This sounds like a good thing, as choosing to thrift shop is a much better alternative than consuming fast fashion.

However, it also sparks several concerns.

Firstly, there are worries regarding the gentrification of thrift-shopping. Due to the sudden increase in popularity of thrifting, places like America have often seen the increase in demand driving up prices of clothing at thrift stores. As thrifting is an activity that used to be unique to people of lower socio-economic classes, this price hike can be extremely detrimental as the people who need these clothes may be unable to afford them anymore. Additionally, the rise in popularity of thrifting may also deprive others of a healthy selection of clothes as the trendier pieces get snapped up by the masses, leaving fewer desirable pieces for those who need affordable clothing. As such, the shifting preference for sustainable clothing inadvertently comes with negative social impacts as people may not consider the ethical implications that arise from the gentrification of thrifting, especially if they are privileged enough to disregard the price of clothing. While the change in prices of clothes has not been investigated in Singapore after the boom of thrifting, America can be used as a case study to observe these potential implications.

Additionally, thrifting has become synonymous with shopping second-hand and is not confined to physical locations such as brick-and-mortar stores, pop-up stores, or garage sales. While this might boost accessibility in terms of time and mobility for many, this system can be abused by those who see it as an opportunity for profit-making. Recently, many sellers on Instagram, Etsy and Depop buy cheap items from thrift shops and upsell them on their platforms as “vintage”, or justify hefty price increases as curation fees. Once again, this is essentially gentrifying thrifting as prices are pushed up and it isolates people of lower socio-economic statuses that thrifting aimed to serve in the first place. The problematic nature of this is further amplified when sellers take advantage of the green agenda and buy fast-fashion pieces from AliExpress and Taobao and market them as second-hand, which is counterproductive to the sustainability movement.

Finally, second-hand shops on Instagram have turned consumption into a sport, whereby “clothing drops” are hyped up and users have to comment first in order to get the item. The inherent competitive nature in procuring said pieces of clothing through such a system encourages impulse buys because people often have a fear of missing out. They are thus more likely to camp out for such “clothing drops” to comment first, without considering how the clothes might fit them or whether or not they need it in the first place, which does not align with conscious consumerism. The popularity of thrifting might therefore come at the expense of overconsumption as impulsive buyers perpetuate wasteful behavior in the secondhand market, thus negating the essence of sustainability in fashion.

However, it must be acknowledged that the very presence of alternatives to fast fashion along with a growing number of people who shop second-hand in a responsible manner creates a very optimistic outlook for sustainability in fashion in Singapore. More people are also opting to upcycle their clothes on their own, which is enabled by tutorials on Youtube, Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok. With the green movement gaining traction, an abundance of information is now accessible online for consumers to pick up tips about embarking on a more sustainable lifestyle which is incredibly helpful especially for beginners. Although more effort must be placed in educating Singaporeans about irresponsible buying and selling behaviors, sustainability in fashion remains hopeful and can be improved with more discourse in time.