



Waste couture: why recycled clothes are this year's model

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Faced with a nation that is - or thinks that it is - savvy about the environment and social ethics, British retailers have had to reform. High street names are now falling over themselves to impress with their "green" and "fair trade" credentials. And many smaller firms have come up with innovative ways to give customers what they want without trampling all over the planet.

Yet within this climate of heightened corporate social responsibility is a growing sense that consumers are having the wool pulled over their eyes.

To take one recent example, J Sainsbury was exposed as an hypocrite when it was revealed that a designer bag made to promote awareness of green issues was made using cheap labour in China and was neither organic nor fair trade.

The clash comes because ethical consumerism has taken off at a time when the £2 top at Primark has made clothes almost a disposable commodity.

Figures compiled for the Department for the Environment show that clothes consumption is rising rapidly, up 60 per cent by volume over the past four years. A report from The Institute for Manufacturing at Cambridge University estimates that we each spend £780 a year buying 77lbs of clothes, a total of 2.15 million tons.

Fast-fashion, like fast-food is easy on the wallet and provides a quick-fix retail hit. And, like-fast food, it has an unwelcome side-effect: excess. Just one eighth, by volume, of garments bought each year are recycled. Most discarded clothes end up in landfills.

It is in this age of rising awareness and over-consumption that several retailers started to recycle clothes. New technology and canny designers are creating fashionable clothes out of everything from bottles to blankets.

Labels such as Traidremade, Worn Again, Junky Styling and Goodone, take used garments or materials and conjure them into someone new. Prices range from just a few pounds for a top to £185 for a trendy jacket cut from men's suit cloth.

Maria Chenoweth-Casey, the chief executive of Textile Recycling for Aid and International Development (Traid), a charity with 870 UK textile banks and eight shops, has been recycling clothes since 2001. "Buying recycled clothing at Top Shop strikes me as a fad - it will die out. The aim must be to educate people about the choices they have," she said.

Since its inception in 1999, Traid has recycled 20,000 tons of textiles and created 65 UK jobs.

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The funds raised are ploughed into sustainable projects around the world.

Galahad Clark, a scion of the Clark's shoe empire, is a director of Terra Plana, which sells recycled shoes under the Worn Again label. "We can make shoes out of a huge range of items: old parachutes, prison blankets, rubber tyre linings. We are currently working on a deal with Virgin to use their old seat covers."

Over at Junky Styling - a recycling fashion label in Brick Lane, East London, founded by Kerry Seager and Annika Saunders - garments are created outcutoffs from unwanted men's suits with an eye for the best quality materials.

Big high street retailers have made similar forays into the sector, although several say their projects are still at the "experimental stage". Earlier this month, Marks & Spencer and Bhs unveiled ranges of kids' uniforms made from plastic bottles that have been chopped up, melted and then made into a polyester yarn which is woven into cloth. M&S said that because recycled polyester is hard to source, prices are slightly higher than for the standard school range. Even so, a whole uniform for the youngest children costs just £20.

Mark Roberston, a spokesman for Ethical Investment Research Services (Eiris), says that "ethical issues are now part of a company's general risk assessment" pushing them higher up the corporate agenda. "As well as the risk to a firm's reputation, managing these issues badly can show poor governance. We find companies that tackle these issues best tend to be the best managed."

A report due out tomorrow from Tomorrow's Company, a not-for-profit business think-tank, says that the role and purpose of the business of the future is: "To provide ever better goods and services in a way that is profitable, ethical and respects the environment, individuals and the communities in which it operates."

However, as firms scramble to raise their ethical profiles, the danger is that these drives are misguided, or too concerned with appearances.

Even Worn Again - a brand created on ethical principles - came under fire recently for manufacturing its products in China.

Mr Clark says that it is "not ideal to have to ship materials from the UK to China to make shoes" but adds that there are lots of excellent materials otherwise heading for UK landfill. He also admits that the glue the company uses to make some shoes is "a bit toxic - which sticks in my gullet a bit".

Meanwhile, M&S is, in effect, shipping Taiwanese waste to the UK in the form of uniforms and upping the firms' "carbon footprint" in the process.

On a wider scale, most second-hand clothes collected in Britain are shipped in bales to traders in Africa or Eastern Europe and then sold in markets. Only a tiny proportion is used for re-made clothes.

And the Cambridge University study raises concern that trade in second-hand clothes in Africa inhibits the development of local industry.

Junky Styling's goods - all put together at their HQ in Brick Lane - have become so popular that they are shipped all over the world, to Tokyo, Athens, Switzerland, Paris and Italy, at some cost to the environment.

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Ms Seager says that although Junky Styling ships clothes abroad the materials used are high-quality (therefore not man-made) and long-lasting. "We don't believe in disposable fashion. We make clothes to last five years or more. The problem is the buy-one-get-one free mentality."

In the same way that the food industry revolution, Slow Food, was founded to put the emphasis back on quality and sustainable production processes, Slow Fashion could do the same. However, to succeed, retailers must consider the consequences of all their actions rather than a conveniently selected few.

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