

Is the reuse of clothing environmentally friendly? The replacement rate brings us to the core question

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baltic2hand

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Overconsumption also causes problems with second-hand clothes. Buying second-hand clothes is responsible if it replaces buying a new product.

Buying clothes at flea markets or second-hand online stores may have previously brought a good conscience, but this form of consumption has also recently received critical attention. Overconsumption is a problem with second-hand clothing as well.

The market for second-hand clothes is constantly growing but also welcome, as the climate impact of manufacturing new clothes is large: the textile industry's greenhouse gas emissions are estimated to be around 4–10 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions (Finnwatch 2022). However, buying second-hand clothes is not without its problems, as the growing purchase of second-hand clothes may actually accelerate the consumer culture (Siljamäki 2024). When there is a functioning secondary market channel for clothes, you can buy new clothes without worrying, for example on a whim.

In September 2024, Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat published a column with a rather provocative title: "I thought I was a good person when I bought clothes from a flea market – now it turns out that the opposite is true" (Laine 2024). The column refers to a study commissioned by the Finnish marketplace Tori.fi and its sister companies (Schibsted 2024), according to which the sale of recycled clothes does not reduce the climate damage that is caused by buying them. According to the study, consumers often buy more used clothes than new ones, so transporting them from the seller to the buyer increases their negative climate impacts (Perttunen 2024).

Replacing a new product with a used one is responsible

Buying used goods is responsible when it replaces buying a new product. If, on the other hand, you buy a second-hand item, even though you don't really need it, it doesn't have the same positive effects. (Schibsted 2024.)

The term replacement rate (RR) refers to how effectively used products replace buying new ones. Calculating the replacement rate is important in order to get an idea of whether reuse is good for the environment. Studies show that if consumers buy both new and used clothing instead of only buying used clothing, reuse does not necessarily have positive environmental effects. (Delanoëije & Bachus 2022.)

If the secondhand market is flooded with low-quality fast or ultra-fast fashion clothing, the clothes are unlikely to last very long after being reused, which may result in the consumer needing to buy a completely new garment.

A study commissioned by Tori.fi, which caused a stir, looked into the replacement rate. According to the study, clothing purchases made on Tori replace 48 percent of new clothes. The study examined Schibsted's market platforms, which also include platforms from Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Finland had the lowest replacement rate of the countries studied. (Schibsted 2024.)

Similar figures were also reached in a study by Vinted, an online marketplace for recycled fashion, which found that purchases made through Vinted replaced 40 percent of new purchases (Vaauy & Vinted 2023). Delanoeijs and Bachus (2022) studied the replacement rate in Flanders, Belgium, and according to the study, only about 15 percent of textiles purchased secondhand replaced new ones. According to a study commissioned by Humana in Spain (2023), 70 percent of Humana's customers replace new textiles with used textiles. The amounts therefore vary, as do the research methods, so the figures are not completely comparable.

According to Delanoeijs and Bachus (2022), the quality of reused clothing can increase the replacement rate. This requires investments in product design and materials to ensure that they are durable. It also requires consumers who buy high-quality clothing and put them into circulation on the secondhand market. If the secondhand market is flooded with low-quality fast or ultra-fast fashion clothing, the clothes are unlikely to last very long after being reused, which may result in the consumer needing to buy a completely new garment. Many secondhand stores have already banned the sale of ultra-fast fashion clothing.

Breaking free from overconsumption

The textile industry currently faces major problems that are not easy to solve. The industry produces huge emissions and chemicals and consumes water, even in vain: the European Environment Agency (EEA 2024) has estimated that 4–9% of textiles on the European market end up as waste before anyone has even used them. In addition, working conditions in textile factories can be poor or even dangerous, and forced or child labor is not uncommon. On the other hand, clothing can be a way to express our identity, and the textile industry is also a major employer.

The circular economy is presented as a solution to many problems. However, new circular economy business models do not automatically mean better solutions for the environment. Environmental benefits are achieved if circular economy models avoid new production, extend the useful life of products and reduce waste. (Nordic Council of Ministers 2024.)

In all consumption it is important to remember the magic words: buy only what you need. The most important thing is to wear the clothes you already have. If you buy, buy clothes that will last a long time. When you know your own style, choose quality products and learn to take care of them. They will last a long time, and the need to buy new clothes will decrease.

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Source

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