

Addressing Rage: The Fast Fashion Revolt

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Wearing clothing from the past is all the rage now. Different styles and aesthetics of vintage and historical clothing, original or appropriated, are popular with fashion wearers and home sewers. [Social media](#) is rich with images of anachronistic clothing and the major pattern companies have a large range of historical sewing patterns available. Butterick McCall, for example, have a [Making History](#) range of patterns for sewers of clothing from a range of historical periods up to the 1950s. The [1950s styled fashion](#) is particularly popular with pattern producers. Yet little research exists that explains why anachronistic clothing is all the rage.

Drawing on 28 interviews conducted by the author with women who wear/make 1950s styles clothing and a survey of 229 people who wear/make historical clothing, this article outlines four key reasons that help explain the popularity of wearing/making anachronistic clothing: It argues that there exists rage against four 'fast fashion' practices: environmental disregard, labour breaches, poor quality, and poor fit. Ethical consumption practices such as home sewing quality clothes that fit, seeks to ameliorate this rage. That much of what is being made is anachronistic speaks to past sewing techniques that were ethical and produced quality fitting garments rather than fashion today that doesn't fit, is of poor quality, and it unethical in its production.



Fig. 1: Craftivist Collective Rage: Protesting Fast Fashion

Rage against Fast Fashion

Rage against fast fashion is not new. Controversies over [Disney](#) and [Nike's](#) use of child labour in the 1990s, the anti-fur campaigns of the 1980s, the widespread condemnation of factory conditions in Bangladesh in the wake of the [2016 Rana Plaza collapse](#) and Tess Holiday's [Eff Your Beauty Standards](#) campaign, are evidence of this.

Fast fashion is "cheap, trendy clothing, that samples ideas from the catwalk or celebrity culture and turns them into garments ... at breakneck speed" (Rauturier). It is produced cheaply in short turnarounds, manufactured offshore by slave labour, with the industry hiding these exploitative practices behind, and in, complex supply chains. The clothing is made from poor quality material, meaning it doesn't last, and the material is not environmentally sustainable. Because of this fast fashion is generally not recycled and ends up as waste in landfills. This for Rauturier is what fast fashion is: "cheap, low quality materials, where clothes degrade after just a few wears and get thrown away".

The fast fashion industry engages in two discrete forms of obsolescence; planned and perceived. Planned obsolescence is where clothes are designed to have a short life-span, thus coercing the consumer into buying a replacement item

sooner than intended. Claims that clothes now last only a few washes before falling apart are common in the media (Dunbar). This is due to conscious manufacturing techniques that reduce the lifespan of the clothes including using mixed fibres, poor-quality interfacing, and using polyester threads, to name a few.

Perceived obsolescence is where the consumer believes an otherwise functioning item of clothing to no longer to be valued. This is borne out in the idea that an item is deemed to be "in vogue" or "in fashion" and its value to the consumer is thus embedded in that quality. Once it falls out of fashion is deemed worthless. Laver's "fashion cycle" elucidated this idea over eighty years ago.

Since the 1980s the fashion industry has sped up, moving from the traditional twice annual fashion seasons to the fast fashion system of constantly manufacturing new styles, sometimes weekly. The technologies that have allowed the rapid manufacturing of fast fashion mean that the clothes are cheaper and more readily available. The average price of clothing has dropped accordingly. An item that cost US\$100 in 1993 only cost US\$59.10 in 2013, a drop of 41 per cent (Perry, *Chart*). The average person in 2014 bought 60 per cent more clothing that they did in 2000. Fast fashion is generally unsaleable in the second-hand market, due to its volume and poor design and manufacture. Green notes that many charity clothing stores bin a large percentage of the fast fashion items they receive.

Environmental Rage

Consumers are increasingly expressing rage about the environmental impact of fast fashion. The production of different textiles places different stresses on the environment. Cotton, for example, accounts for one third of the fibres found in all textiles, yet it requires high levels of water. A single cotton shirt needs 2,700 litres of water alone, the equivalent to "what one person drinks in two-and-a-half years" (Drew & Yehounme). Synthetics don't represent an environmentally friendly alternative. While they may need less water, they are more carbon-intensive and polyester has twice the carbon footprint of cotton (Drew & Yehounme). Criticisms of fast fashion also include "water pollution, the use of toxic chemicals and increasing levels of textile waste". Textile dyeing is the "second largest polluter of clean water globally." The inclusion of chemical in the manufacturing of textiles is "disruptive to hormones and carcinogenic" (Perry, *Cost*).

Naomi Klein's exposure of the past problems of fast fashion, and revelations such as these, inform why consumers are enraged by the fast fashion system. The [State of Fashion 2019 Report](#) found many of the issues Klein interrogated remain of concern to consumers. Consumers continue to feel enraged at the industry's disregard for the environment (Shaw *et al.*) any many are seeking alternative sources of sustainable fashion.

For some consumers, the ethical dilemmas are overcome by purchasing second-hand or recycled clothing, or participate in [Clothing Exchanges](#). Another alternative to ameliorating the rage is to stop buying new clothes and to make and wear their own clothes. A recent article in [The Guardian](#), "Don't Feed the Monster! The People Who Have Stopped Buying New Clothes" highlights the "growing movement" of people seeking to make a "personal change" in response to the ethical dilemmas fast fashion poses to the environment.

While political groups like [Fashion of Tomorrow](#) argue for collective legislative changes to ensure environmental sustainability in the industry, consumers are also finding their own individual ways of ameliorating their rage against fast fashion. Over recent decades Australians have consistently shown concern over environmental issues. A 2016 national survey found that 63 per cent of Australians considered themselves to be environmentalists and this is echoed in the ABC's *War on Waste* programme which examined attitudes to and effects of clothing waste in Australia.

In my interviews with women wearing 1950s style clothing, almost 65 per cent indicated a distinct dissatisfaction with mainstream fashion and frustration particularly with pernicious 'fast fashion'. One participant offered, "seeing the *War on Waste* and all the fast fashion ... I really like if I can get it second hand ... you know I feel like I am helping a little bit" [Gabrielle].

[Traid](#), a network of UK charity clothes shops diverts 3 000 tonnes of clothes from landfill to the second-hand market annually, reported for 2017-18 a 30 per cent increase in its second-hand clothes sales (Coccoza). The Internet has helped expand the second-hand clothing market. Two participants offered these insights: "I am completely addicted to the *Review Buy Swap and Sell Page*" [Anna] and "Instagram is huge for girls like us to communicate and get ideas" [Ashleigh].

Slave Rage

The history of fashion is replete with examples of exploitation of workers. From the seamstresses of France in the eighteenth century who had to turn to prostitution to supplement their meagre wages (Jones 16) to the twenty-first century sweatshop workers earning less than a living wage in developing nations, poor work conditions have plagued the industry.

For Karl Marx fashion represented a contradiction within capitalism where labour was exploited to create a mass-produced item. He lambasted the fashion industry and its "murderous caprices", and despite his dream that the invention of the sewing machine would alleviate the stress placed on garment workers, technology has only served to intensify its demands on its poor workers (Sullivan 36-37). The 2013 Rana Plaza factory disaster shows just how far some sections of the industry are willing to go in their race to the bottom.

In the absence of enforceable, global fair-trade initiatives, it is hard for consumers to purchase goods that reflect their ethos (Shaw *et al.* 428). While there is much more focus on better labour practices in the fashion industry, as the Baptist

World Aid Australia's annual [Ethical Fashion Report](#) shows, consumers are still critical of the industry and its labour practices.

A significant number of participants in my research indicated that they actively sought to purchase products that were produced free from worker exploitation. For some participants, the purchasing of second-hand clothing allowed them to circumnavigate the fast fashion system. For others, mid-century reproduction fashion was sourced from markets with strong labour laws and "ethically made" without the use of sweat shop labour" [Emma]. Alternatively, another participant rejected buying new vintage fashion and instead purchased originally made fashion, in this case clothing made 50 to 60 years ago. This was one was of ensuring "some poor ... person has [not] had to work really hard for very little money ... [while the] shop is gaining all the profits" [Melissa].

Quality Rage

Planned obsolescence in fashion has existed at least since the 1940s when Dupont ensured their nylon stockings were thin enough to ladder to ensure repeat custom (Meynen). Since then manufacturers have deliberately used poor techniques and poor material – blended fabrics, unfinished seams, unfixed dyes, for example – to ensure that clothes fail quickly. A 2015 UK Barnardo's survey found clothes were worn an average of just seven times, which is not surprising given that clothes can last as little as two washes before being worn out (Dunbar). Extreme planned obsolescence in concert with perceived obsolescence can lead to clothes being discarded before their short lifespan had expired. The *War on Waste* interviewed young women who wore clothes sometimes only once before discarding them.

Not all women are concerned with keeping up to date with fashion, instead wanting to create their own identity through clothes and are therefore looking for durability in their clothes. Many of the women interviewed for this research were aware of the declining quality of clothes, often referring to those made before the fast fashion era as evidence of quality clothing. For many in this study, manufacturing of classically styled clothing was of higher concern than mimicking the latest fashion trend.

Some indicated their "disgust" at the poor quality of fast fashion [Gabrielle]. Others have specific outrage at the cost of poorly made fast fashion: "I don't like spending a lot of money on clothing that I know may not necessarily be well made" [Skye] and "I got sick of dresses just being see through ... you know, seeing my bras under things" [Becky]. For another: "I don't like the whole mass-produced thing. I don't think that they are particularly well made ... Sometimes they are made with a tiny waist but big boobs, there's no seams on them, they're just overlapped together ..." [Vicky].

For other participants in this research fast fashion produced items were considered inferior to original items. One put it this way: "[On using vintage wares] If something broke, you fixed it. You didn't throw it away and go down to [the shop] and buy a new one ... You look at stuff from these days ... you could buy a handbag today and you are like "is this going to be here in two years? Or is it going to fall apart in my hands?" ... there's that strength and durability that I do like" [Ashleigh]. For another, "vintage reproduction stuff is so well made, it's not like fast fashion, like Vivien of Holloway and Pin Up Girl Clothing, their pieces last forever, they don't fall apart after five washes like fast fashion" [Emma]. The following encapsulates the rage felt in response to fast fashion.

I think a lot of people are wearing true vintage clothing more often as a kind of backlash to the whole fast fashion scene ... you could walk into any shop and you could see a lot of clothing that is very, very cheap, but it's also very cheaply made. You are going to wear it and it's going to fall apart in six months and that is not something that I want to invest in. [Melissa]

Fit Rage

Fit is a multi-faceted issue that affects consumers in several ways: body size; body shape; and height. Body size refers to the actual physical size of the body, whether one is underweight, slim, average, muscular or fat. Fast fashion body size labelling reflects what the industry considers to be of 'normal sizes', ranging from a size 8 through to a size 16 (Hackett & Rall). Body shape is a separate, if not entirely discrete issue. Women differ widely in the ratios between their hips, bust and waist. Body shape distribution varies widely within populations, for example, the 'Size USA' study identified 11 different female body shapes with wide variations between populations (Lee *et al.*). Even this doesn't consider bodies with physical disabilities. Clothing is designed to fit women of 'average' height, thus bodies that are taller or shorter are often excluded from fast fashion (Valtonen). Even though Australian sizing practices are based on erroneous historical data (Hackett and Rall; Kennedy), the fast fashion system continues to manufacture for average body shapes and average body heights, to the exclusion of others.

Discrimination through clothing sizes represents one way in which social norms are reinforced. Garments for larger women are generally regarded as less fashionable (Peters 48). Enraged consumers label some of the offerings 'fat sacks', 'tents' and 'camouflage wear' (Colls 591-592). Further, plus size is often more expensive and having been 'sized up' from smaller sizes, the result is poor fit. Larger body's therefore have less autonomy in fashioning their identity (Peters 45). Size restrictions can lead to consumers having to choose between going without a desired item or wearing a size too small for them as no larger alternative is available (Laitala *et al.* 33-34).

The ideology behind the thin aesthetic is that it is framed as aspirational (Barry) and thus consumers are motivated to purchase clothes based upon a desire to fit in with this beauty ideal. This is a false dichotomy (Halliwell and Dittmar 105; Bian and Wang). For participants in this research rage at fashion fashions persistence in producing for 'average' sized women was clearly evident. For a plus-size participant: "I don't suit modern stuff. I'm a bigger girl and that's not what style is these days. And so, I find it just doesn't work for me" [Ashleigh]. For non-plus participants, sizing rage was also evident:

I'm just like a praying mantis, a long string bean. I'm slim, tall ... I do have the body shape ... that fast fashion catered for, and I can still dress in fast fashion, but I think the idea that so many women feel excluded by that kind of fashion, I just want to distance myself from it. So, so many women have struggles in the change rooms in shopping centres because things don't fit them nicely. [Emma]

For this participant reproduction fashion wasn't vanity sized. That is, a dress from the 1950s had the body measurements on the label rather than a number reflecting an arbitrary and erroneous sizing system. Some noted their disregard for standardised sizing systems used exclusively for fast fashion: "I have very non-standard measurements ... I don't buy dresses for that reason ... My bust and my waist and my hips don't fit a standard. You know I can't go "ooh that's a 12, that's an 18". You know, I don't believe in standard sizing basically" [Skye]. Variations of sizing by brands adds to the frustration of fashion consumers: "if someone says 'I'm a size 16' that means absolutely nothing. If you go between brands ... [shop A] XXL to a [shop B] to a [shop C] XXL to a [shop D] XXL, you know ... they're not the same. They won't fit the same, they don't have the same fit" [Skye].

These women recognise that their body shape, size and/or height is not catered for by fast fashion. This frees them to look for alternatives beyond the product offerings of the mainstream fashion industry. Although the rage against aspects of fast fashion discussed here – environmental, labour, quality and fit – is not seeing people in the streets protesting, people are actively choosing to find alternatives to the problem of sourcing clothes that fit their ethos.

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