

Why mending it, not ending it, should become latest fashion trend for consumers

October 4 2022, by Bev Betkowski



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Want to save the world? Start with your clothing.

One of the best ways to keep your garments in the closet—and out of the

landfill—is to pick up a needle and thread, or pay someone else to do it, when a button pops or a hem drops.

That mindset needs to be taken up by more people, especially men and the younger generation, according to recent University of Alberta research that looked at who was most likely to repair their [clothing](#).

Women, particularly as they grew older, were the most likely to make their own fixes, and though men were the most likely to pay for repairs, uptake for paid help was low among both genders and all ages, according to an [online survey](#) of 512 North American consumers.

Those findings pinpoint a need for anyone interested in sustainability to be more open to making or paying for repairs, says study lead Rachel McQueen, a clothing and textiles scientist in the Faculty of Agricultural, Life & Environmental Sciences.

"It's important to think about making things last. The clothing we own has already been made by someone, and to not value them for what they are is troubling. In some shape or form, they're going to persist and contribute to the polluting of our environment."

Hitting the brakes on fast fashion

Awash in a world of "[fast fashion](#)"—a constant churn of cheap, plentiful clothing—it's all too easy for consumers to simply toss and replace garments that only need minor repairs, she adds.

"Much of the clothing we buy in the stores today is relatively inexpensive and so it's easy to come by and replace. Instead of paying money to get it repaired, some people say, "I might as well just buy something new." That's a mentality that really needs to shift."

The wasteful cycle of buy, wear, tear and toss "is creating an environmental disaster," she says, noting that textiles aren't easily recyclable. Even [natural fibers](#) like wool and cotton can still cause problems in the environment if they end up in landfills or floating in the world's oceans.

Prior to the 1960s, before the shift to mass-produced, ready-to-wear garments, clothing was valued more, used to its fullest extent, "and people took the time to mend it," McQueen notes.

Repairing clothing supports a healthy circular economy, which is based on the idea of using clothing to the fullest and keeping it in use for a long time, before it gets to the point of being broken down to its fibers, and recycled or returned to the earth, McQueen adds.

"You get as much value out of your clothing for as long as possible."

Including and valuing paid repair as part of that cycle adds to the economy by supporting sewing and tailoring services "while also doing something good for the environment," McQueen says.

Donating used clothing doesn't necessarily always lead to reuse, or end up with recycling, she notes.

"Supply far outstrips the demand in the second-hand clothing market, so there's only so much of it being reused."

Skilling up for sustainability

Though it's traditionally been thought of as the domain of women to sew on buttons or fix busted zippers, the skill set or willingness to pay for repairs needs to extend beyond gender and age, the study suggests.

The research showed that people of both genders aged 18 to 24 were equally likely to have their clothing repaired for free and that men were more likely than women to use unpaid forms of repair. That likely means they're relying on wives, mothers and grandmothers who have sewing skills, but at some point that help will dry up, McQueen says. The findings were similar to those from an [earlier study](#) involving U of A respondents.

"People should be taking the opportunity now to learn from their mom or grandma or whoever the unpaid repairer is, so they can eventually do the work themselves. And if they learn the skills, they can be an unpaid repairer for someone else."

Though buying new clothing is tempting for younger consumers, they should also understand that keeping and using what they have instead "is a great thing to be doing," McQueen adds.

The [fashion industry](#) also needs to step up in making clothing consumption more sustainable, she says.

Companies aren't likely to market repair as a high priority, since that cuts into the cycle of buying new and the services are hard to scale up cost-effectively, but McQueen suggests they can still encourage their consumers to make repairs.

"Marketing campaigns could say something like, 'Holes happen, pick up a needle and thread,' to turn repair into a trendy thing."

Government policies could also subsidize and encourage paid repair as part of sustainability practices. As well, McQueen suggests [community organizations](#) could host repair events—something she is planning to start soon in the Department of Human Ecology.

Frugal fashion tips

A stitch in time saves nine. Make repairs to clothing as soon as you notice holes, tears or other needed fixes. "It's going to be easier to fix and hide a small hole than a large one," says McQueen.

Go pro. "When a zipper fails, don't write off the whole item," she advises. "Take it in and get it repaired by a professional who has the skills. At the end of the day you are either paying for something new to replace that item, or you're keeping what you've got for longer. A repair is usually still cheaper than buying a new item, and even for an item of poor quality, through active repair, you can improve the construction of the garment."

Shop at home. People typically only wear 20 to 30% of what they own, so take a second look at what else is hanging around. "Shop in your wardrobe and think about wearing something you haven't worn for a while, rather than buying something new."

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Why mending it, not ending it, should become latest fashion trend for consumers (2022, October 4) retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-10-latest-fashion-trend-consumers.html>

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