

# Eco-conscious fashionistas hampered by geographical barriers to return clothing

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Eco-conscious consumers are not well-served by clothing companies claiming green credentials, as shoppers' location has a major impact on the effectiveness of clothing return schemes, a new study reveals.

Environmental circular economy initiatives for activewear companies are limited by where firms and consumers are located, preventing them from being fully effective.

The [clothing industry](#) is one of the biggest global polluters, with fast fashion companies creating cheap clothing that gets thrown away after one or two uses and ends up in landfill. According to the European Parliament (2020), less than half of used clothes are collected for reuse or recycling, and only 1% of used clothes are recycled into new clothes.

As the environmentally damaging impacts of the fashion industry are highlighted, some companies have explored implementing 'greener' circular economy policies to reduce waste. This includes initiatives intended to extend the life of clothing (repairs and resale) and for customers to give back or trade in old purchases to be up/recycled, resold or donated.

New research from the University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, and the University of Georgia and Buffalo State University (both in the U.S.), explores these post-consumer policies in the athleticwear sector, to see how geography impacts their effectiveness. It has been [published](#) in the *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*.

Professor John Bryson, Chair in Enterprise and Economic Geography at Birmingham Business School, said, "Activewear is an area of the fashion market that is growing dramatically as consumers become more aware of healthy lifestyles. Often these products and brands associate themselves with a broader environmental ethic—such as encouraging consumers to have a closer relationship with nature, which can be reflected in product advertising."

"For our study, we examined 17 'eco-friendly' activewear companies based in Europe and the US that had a post-consumer circular economy

policy, such as returning clothing for mending, store credit, recycling or donation. We wanted to see how geography impacted these 'Waste Reduction Networks.' These networks might be configured locally, regionally, nationally or internationally."

Researchers found that each company had a different Waste Reduction Network to keep its products out of landfills. For example, US firms *éclipse* and *Girlfriend Collective* have a program where customers return old clothing for store credit or money off their next purchase. On the other hand, Swedish manufacturer *Filippa K* has created a second-hand market for consumers to resell used garments.

However, the study found that seven firms had take-back schemes for reuse for upcycling (*Vaude*, *Filippa K*, *Globe Hope*, *Veja*, *Pact*, *Mate the Label*, and *Girlfriend Collective*), where a consumer's physical location plays an important role, despite many of them selling globally online and through stockists.

Professor *Vida Vanchan* said, "*éclipse*, *Filippa K*, and *Girlfriend Collective*'s return initiatives align with their sustainability principles, but for companies that ship globally, these schemes will be limited to domestic customers.

"*Eclipse* requires customers to return clothing to its headquarters in Colorado, and *Filippa K*'s preowned market is restricted to those in Sweden. *Girlfriend Collective*'s initiative is only available in the US even though it ships to Canada, the UK, and Australia, among other global markets.

"It is not practical to think that a customer in the UK is going to pay for something to be sent all the way to Colorado, which would have an [environmental impact](#). These Waste Reduction Networks are only really effective for those who can easily access them."

The case is the same, if not worse, for mending services. Mending services from activewear firms may only be available in certain locations. For instance, French company Veja only has cobblers available in two French stores but sells its sustainable shoes through 3,000 retailers in 50 countries.

The study outlines that there are other kinds of Waste Reduction Networks which can be implemented internationally, like providing repair guidance on websites.

Professor Bryson concludes, "All the activewear companies we looked at have taken steps to improve their environmental impacts and reduce waste, and that is to be applauded. However, we have found that the consumer Waste Reduction Networks offered by these companies are very limited by geography.

"Despite the fact that a lot of these companies sell their products internationally, the Waste Reduction Networks only operate on a local, regional or at most national level.

"One way to help bridge this gap could be to work with intermediaries like e-Bay, Vinted or Depop which have enjoyed huge popularity with eco-conscious consumers.

"Company-led post-consumer product initiatives need to be supplemented by investments in waste management systems that ensure that most of the clothing is recycled rather than landfilled, which will likely need support from government. These initiatives are to be welcomed, but they need to be more accessible to meet the scale of the environmental problem caused by [waste](#) clothing."

**More information:** John Bryson et al, Localised Waste Reduction Networks, Global Destruction Networks, and the Circular Economy,

*Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/cjres/rsae026](https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsae026)

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