

WELLNESS

2,700 LITERS OF WATER = ONE T-SHIRT

How the style industry is fashioning a new approach to sustainability

BY MARIAM MAKATSARIA

SITTING ON THE carpeted floor, pen and paper inside the diamond formed by my legs, I slide open the bottom drawer of my dresser. This is where I store my everyday basics, the T-shirts I throw on and casually tuck into a pair of jeans whenever I'm in a rush. It's all neatly folded and stacked like cereal boxes at the grocery store (Marie Kondo style), with a few camis slightly out of alignment. There's the tee I won in a singing competition back in college—still somehow talcum white. There's a T-shirt with the word "butterbeer," a little souvenir I bought for myself on my first trip to Universal Studios a little over two years ago. There are others that haven't felt warmth in years, but I keep them for sentimental reasons.

I pull out a T-shirt and check its care label. It's slightly faded and crinkled, like an old receipt you'd find at the bottom of your purse months after a shopping trip, but I can still make out what it says: *100 percent cotton. Machine wash cold.* Kneading the age-softened

fabric, I suddenly hear a small voice saying, "That's 2,700 liters of water." It takes about that much—close to 713 gallons—to make cotton for a single T-shirt. That's enough to meet an average person's drinking needs for about 2 1/2 years. *Seventeen*, I write. That's how many T-shirts I own. And that's how many liters of water? I don't even want to do the math.

About a week ago, I had a conversation over the phone with Lance M. Cheramie, Ph.D., a professor at the University of Arkansas whose research focuses on sustainability in apparel merchandising and product development. We talked about an issue I think about a lot: sustainable fashion. He told me that factoid about tees and water. "Just think of making a pair of jeans," Lance was matter-of-fact. "One pair of jeans, we're talking about greenhouse gases. It's as much as a car driving about 80 miles. (He later told me he completed his dissertation on carbon emissions and greenhouse gases).

In an ethically sourced nutshell, sustainable fashion is a movement that looks at the ethical implications of the fashion supply chain—starting with the design of a garment; moving on to the extraction of raw materials, production, manufacturing, transport, distribution and storage, and ending with the disposal phase. "The discarded clothing, some of it is nonbiodegradable," Lance said, his cadence picking up speed. "Depending on what it's made of, it can sit in landfills for up to 200 years. I mean,

that's a long time for waste. That's a lot of waste."

That stuck in my mind, and it's the main reason I decided to take a close, hard look inside the belly of my overstuffed wardrobe. The first thing you see in my walk-in is a five-tiered shoe rack, with sandals, pumps and boots of varying heights arranged like a blooming piano score

If I were in one of Lance's classes, he'd probably ask me about my shoes. "One of the things I ask my classes is," Lance went on, "*How many of you have 10 pairs of shoes?* Everybody raises their hands. I go up 20, 30, 40, 50 until I get to 100. And yes, I do have some students who have a 100 pairs of shoes." We both laughed

at this, but I remember wondering what my own number was. *One, two, three...* I start counting under my breath. *Twenty-nine.* Actually, if I'm being honest, it's more like 30. (I neglected to include the battered pair of flip-flops parked near the door, which I only use when walking my dog).

"So one thing you might have to ask yourself when you're shopping is, *How much do I think I'm going to wear this?*" I remember him saying. "*Am I going to wear it, like, 20 times a year? Am I just going to wear it one time a year? Two times? Is it worth it?*"

Is it worth it? As someone whose closet is forever changing and molting its skin, I ask myself this question a lot. Shopping is sort of a tradition I share with my mom, and has been for as long as I can remember. We get together over jeans and dresses the same way families get together over pot roast and pumpkin pie. (But that's not to say we don't plan gatherings around a meal, because we do. We really do.) When we shop, we talk about everything, our conversations punctuated by the slight screech of hangers dragging along metal racks. Lately, as I've developed a love for thrifting, we even work together to give retired clothes a new life. I'll send her a photo from the inside of my local Goodwill's dimly lit fitting room and ask her if an '80s dress I found with a tear in the side is salvageable. My mother—who, I'm most certain, can outcraft Martha Stewart on any given day—often replies with an enthusiastic yes and one-too-many heart emojis.

Thanks to the resurgence of '80s silhouettes, wearing secondhand clothes is increasingly in vogue. The other good news is, as Lance mentioned, people are becoming more thoughtful and curious shoppers. What we're demanding more and more is transparency. Being able to know not just where our clothes came from, but the nitty-gritty on how they were made, by whose hands and in what conditions. Because aside from environmental factors, there's the human impact, too. The apparel industry employs millions of workers—mostly women, and tragically, in a lot of cases, children—across the world, where unfair pay and unsafe working conditions are the order of the day.

Many point fingers at the fast fashion industry. Fast Fashion really began to take root somewhere in the 1980s, and the idea was to pluck trends and inspiration from the catwalk,

dream up similar designs and manufacture them inexpensively—and more importantly, quickly. Like, very quickly, in a matter of a couple of weeks. Naturally, an accelerated process like this means cutting corners by using synthetic fibers that don't decay, turning a blind eye to environmental impacts and unethical practices in subcontracted factories. (To really understand why this is important, consider the fact that, globally, fashion is a \$3-trillion-a-year industry.)

In fact, the main reason I'm having this conversation with Lance—the thing that really pushed me to ask questions about eco-fashion—is Zara. Yep, the same Zara that's known for being the national emblem of the nefarious fast-fashion empire.

Back in July, for the first time, the Spanish company announced that it's going green, pledging to only use sustainable fibers for its merch by 2025. Other noteworthy initiatives on the report include transitioning to zero landfill waste, cutting out single-use plastics and using renewable sources of energy.

While this was met with a lot of skepticism (brows were arched about whether a brand that cranks out hundreds of new designs a week can ever *really* fulfill that promise), there's something positive to be said about the initiative. After having so many sustainable leaders in the slow-fashion arena—think: Patagonia and Allbirds—we're starting to see a shift happen in the fast-fashion industry. (In 2010, another major fast-fashion player, H&M, rolled out its "Conscious Collection" made with materials such as recycled polyester and organic cotton.)

On the haute couture end of the spectrum, you've got industry heavy-hitters the likes of Stella McCartney, who are going above and beyond in sourcing nature-friendly materials such as re-engineered cashmere, viscose derived from sustainably managed

forests, recycled nylon and polyester, just to name a few. (The luxury label's entire sustainability plan is readily available on its website.)

"Sustainability has been around for a very long time, but it's just now coming to the surface even more, because of these brands that are taking a stance against climate change or wanting to be more sustainable or taking action to preserve the environment," Lance said. Even though they still have a ways to go (Lance said apparel companies must strive to overcome economic limitations and educate consumers more), there's progress. Fashion, they say, is a reflection of the times, and now, both companies and consumers are trying, more urgently than ever, to pay rapt attention to issues that matter—to get it right, not perfect.

As I burrow deeper into my closet, I realize that a lot of my favorite garments are made by brands that focus on combating the lack of sustainability in the fashion industry. And none of these labels churns out clothing that is ugly or overly expensive, which used to be a long-held belief about sustainable fashion due to lack of options, as Lance pointed out. (I personally held that belief not too long ago.)

And just like the industry, my wardrobe has a ways to go. As I begin to work on my closet—sell and donate unworn items, invest in high-quality basics and figure out a clothing recycling plan for those torn garments I'll never wear—I know I'm happy to pull my socks up, too. 💎

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