

# FAST & FATAL



**ANG YIYING** looks at the problems linked to making cheap clothing and how you may be contributing to them

**J**ust as fast food is bad for your health, fast fashion – mass-produced clothes that tend to get replaced quickly – is bad for the planet's health.

Your latest buy from retail or online shops could be making the problem worse.

The clothing and textile industry as a whole contributes 8 to 10 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, while 20 per cent of industrial waste water pollution worldwide originates from the industry, based on statistics from the United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion.

And while you may be swapping plastic straws for a reusable metal straw to fight plastic waste and pollution, you may not realise that some clothes also contain microplastics that end up in the world's oceans.

Microplastics, which are plastic particles under 5mm in size, are considered particularly

problematic because their minuscule size makes them hard to remove from oceans and they can also enter the food chain as fish ingest them.

A 2017 report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature said that 98 per cent of primary microplastics entering the oceans come from land-based activities.

One of the chief culprits is the washing of synthetic textiles, for instance, materials such as polyester or nylon which are made from chemicals as opposed to those made from plant-based fibres.

For all the resources that go into making clothing and the pollution that result from the processes, many clothes end up being tossed.

Worldwide, one garbage truck worth of textiles is dumped into a landfill or incinerated every second, based on a report by UK charity, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

Singapore, too, has a high-waste problem.

Last year, the country produced 219,800 tonnes of textiles and leather waste, of which only 6 per cent were recycled, based on National Environment Agency waste and recycling statistics.

## SOAKING UP WATER

The water footprint of a product is calculated by adding up the unseen water – a concept known as "virtual water" – required for the production process. Here is how much some items need:

- A pair of jeans weighing 1kg: 10,850 litres of virtual water (135 standard bathtubs full)
- Bedsheets weighing 900g: 9,750 litres of virtual water (122 bathtubs full)
- A T-shirt weighing 250g: 2,720 litres of virtual water (35 bathtubs full)

*The Water Footprint of Cotton Consumption (2005)*



Salvation Army Thrift Store workers sorting through donations and storing them in bags for distribution in 2008. The Salvation Army Red Shield Industries currently receives up to 10 tonnes of donations daily during the non-peak period. It said it does not track the volume of clothing received, but noted that clothes make up the bulk of the donated items. About 5 to 10 per cent of donated clothes come with price tags, said Mr Paul Chay, general manager of The Salvation Army Red Shield Industries. ST FILE PHOTO



A clothes swap event organised by NUS Students Against Violation of the Earth. PHOTO STUDENTS AGAINST VIOLATION OF THE EARTH

## CLEARING OUT CLOSETS

Students staying on campus tend to get rid of their clothes before they move out, so observed a National University of Singapore (NUS) environmental group.

Since 2013, the NUS Students Against Violation of the Earth (Save) has been running the Green Wardrobes programme where unwanted clothes collected on campus are sent for textiles recycling.

Based on updated figures provided by the group, the amount

of clothing it has collected over the years totals more than 18,000kg.

The two "Green Wardrobes" boxes located at University Town and Prince George's Park Residences are filled to the brim about once every two weeks, said NUS Save vice-president (partnerships) Lavanya Prakash.

But donations peak at specific times. "Amount-wise, people tend to donate at one shot during the check-out period (when people move out of their dorms), or before exams start," she said.

The 18-year-old environmental studies student said that seeing the amount of clothing donated prompted her to research the environmental impact of fast fashion, and to also change the way she shops.

She said: "I now try to borrow clothes from my family, buy second-hand clothing from stores, such as Refash, or do online thrifting from Instagram pages. I try to buy only the clothes I need, and encourage my friends and family to do the same."



Yale-NUS students Tammy Gan (left) and Annika Mock, both 21, founded Conscious Living Collective. Ms Gan is wearing a \$10 dress from an influencer market – where influencers sell their clothes and apparel – while Ms Mock is wearing a \$3 dress she bought from New2U Thrift Shop. ST PHOTO SHINTARO TAY

## Raising consciousness about consumption

**A** group of 10 Yale-NUS students has been tackling throwaway fashion by collecting unwanted clothes from their peers and organising pop-up thrift stores.

So far, they have organised the pop-ups thrice: twice on campus, and once at The Red Box at Somerset.

Their idea is to promote second-hand clothing, which is more environmentally friendly than tossing old clothes and buying new ones.

Calling themselves Conscious Living Collective, the group was formed in August last year. Founder Tammy Gan, 21, said that a friend got her interested in the zero waste movement, and she learnt more from attending a zero waste event organised by the National Youth Council.

But it was watching *The True Cost*, a documentary about the supply chain of the fashion industry and its environmental and human costs, that catalysed her to act.

"It was so groundbreaking for me because I was a complete capitalist consumer... I would buy all these clothes and I didn't realise that it would be so bad for other people," she said, adding that she used to buy fast fashion clothes monthly.

She rounded up friends who also wanted to do something

about promoting sustainable fashion. Their original idea to create zines to raise awareness of the cause evolved into that of pop-up thrift stores, which they felt had more direct impact.

In their system, people who donate clothes earn points – based on the quantity and type of items – that they could use to buy items from the thrift store. Co-founder Annika Mock, 21, said of the points system: "We wanted it to be such that once you donated clothes, you were in the circular aspect of it, and you could be involved in getting clothes back."

A circular system or circular economy is one which minimises waste and pollution.

The collection process was a reminder of how many unwanted garments people had. Said Ms Gan of the roughly 400 pieces of clothing collected for the group's first pop-up thrift store: "By going to people's rooms to get clothes, we got that many clothes."

Going forward, the collective wants to do more by organising a fair to showcase people who make their own things, and to also encourage individuals to voice their environmental concerns by organising a workshop about how they can write to businesses and governments.

Find out more on Instagram @consciousliving.co