



#SecondhandSeptember isn't enough: the truth about fashion's waste crisis

TAKE ACTION NOW PODCAST

by [Tammy Gan](#) 29/09/2021 Last updated on 29/09/2021 Reading Time: 11 minutes

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As we approach the end of #SecondhandSeptember and celebrate a month of raising awareness of the importance of reducing firsthand consumption, perhaps it's time to ask questions about how the movement and hashtag can go further. Amidst calls to

How the movement and messaging can go further: How can we decolonise fashion and ask more questions about how we can adopt a more actively anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist approach to environmentalism, is #SecondhandSeptember, as we know it, no longer enough? What more can #SecondhandSeptember do?

What does #SecondhandSeptember help to do?

#SecondhandSeptember is in full swing. Complete with brands launching secondhand campaigns, influencers encouraging their audiences to shop secondhand, and consumers posting their second outfit pictures with the hashtag. The campaign is now in its third year, and it's only getting bigger. Nonprofit group, Oxfam, wanting to get everyone to shop only secondhand for thirty days, started the campaign two years ago.

And as far as campaigns go, #SecondhandSeptember has accomplished a fair amount. Since its conception, the practice of shopping secondhand has only grown in popularity. ThredUp, a secondhand online marketplace based in the US, launched a global report earlier this year. [The report](#) found that the resale market is growing eleven times faster than traditional retail. In recent years, we've also seen a normalising of thrift shopping. To a point where it's even been described as a "[lifestyle](#)" for our younger generation. That translates to a lot more saved clothes, and increased consciousness of consumption habits.

Not to mention, #SecondhandSeptember has also made space for conversations around accessibility within the sustainable fashion movement. Sustainable fashion blogger, photojournalist and labour activist [Aditi Mayer](#) noted that the "early days of the sustainable fashion movement was dominated by a narrative that focused on buying power. It severely limited who could engage with the movement. #SecondhandSeptember allows us to explore a buying power that isn't restricted to financial privilege."

She shared that with the campaign, we can begin to discuss how "low-income communities have historically thrifted out of economic necessity." We can talk about who shops secondhand, and why. And there, we can talk about how sustainability has been practiced within certain communities. And then we can begin to have these communities lead the movement instead. (Rather than, that is, assuming that sustainability is a new idea birthed from the environmentally-conscious.)

More than a hashtag

But, as sustainable fashion writer, researcher and advocate [Shen Xingyun](#) told *Green Is The New Black*, "The fixation on a hashtag for change has proven to be ineffective to address the nuances of the issue. The movement is about so much more than just shifting consumption habits and patterns."

"There are deeper issues at play here," she said. "Namely, that the secondhand fashion industry is a symptom of the problem." <https://greenisthenewblack.com/secondhandseptember/>

chain in itself. That its trade runs, traditionally, on the same colonial values of the fashion industry. And that it is, despite the mainstream narrative, not a charity model where clothing can miraculously do in a geographically separate society.” What Shen is pointing to is the truth about fashion’s waste crisis—the not-so-hidden secret behind the secondhand industry. Consumers may think that by shopping secondhand, they are doing “good”. This is true. But to what extent, and at what cost is this “doing g



IMAGE: Via [Garment Worker Diaries](#) | IMAGE DESCRIPTION: A photo of five cotton farmers, holding up cotton plants in their hands, are standing in front of a field, and are wearing bright colours, red, green, orange and blue.

To understand all this, we need to first explore how “colonial values are rooted in the structures and systems of fashion”. Shen explained that “from its material sourcing production: e.g. cotton farming intrinsically linked to the transatlantic trade of enslaved people... to its production: off-shoring practices and race to the bottom pricing principle exploiting mostly women of colour,” the fashion industry is modern neocolonial force. The global secondhand clothing trade, “typically between wealthy nation resource-rich, but economically exploited countries”, is then, no exception.

The truth behind secondhand clothing consumption

Here’s what the secondhand clothing trade actually looks like. Wealthier consumers in wealthier nations consume clothes at an unsustainable rate. The secondhand clothing industry absorbs *some* of that. *Some* of it gets circulated within wealthier countries, in vintage shops, charity shops, swap systems. But where does the rest go? Where is the “away”? Countries in the “Global South”. Such as countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and more, under the guise of “donations” and “charity”.

Well-meaning consumers sometimes don’t even know where their secondhand clothes end up. Or the fact that they even end up in other countries outside of their own. This is in part because of [new](#) within the industry. Other times, even because of policymaking failure or inadequacy. Consumers as citizens pass on their clothes to recycling initiatives, in good—but sometimes misplaced—faith. They

that textile recycling does what it's supposed to do. "Textile recycling typically refers to using chemical and mechanical processes to separate different blends in waste textiles into regenerated yarns, which are then referred to as recycled (material), e.g. recycled polyester." explained Shen. This is likely what you might imagine happens.

But this textile recycling doesn't actually happen all the time. (The industry has even been called out in its "infancy". Not to mention, recycled materials come with their fair share of problems, in product and post-production.) Instead, in some countries and with some initiatives, it ends up looking "like a process of shipping our waste in numerous bales of clothing to other countries." "Charity" turns into waste, dumped in places without a second thought.

Following the trail...

To find out more about the truth behind fashion's waste crisis, and in the hopes of following the trail of waste colonialism, *Green Is The New Black* spoke to two storytellers who are in the business of truth-telling. Filmmaker Nikissi Serumaga, one half of the new podcast "Vintage or Violence", a six-part limited series that serves as an introductory dive into the world of secondhand clothing in Uganda, says that "80% of our clothing purchases in Uganda are secondhand."



IMAGE: Via [VINTAGE OR VIOLENCE](#) / IMAGE DESCRIPTION: A snapshot of co-hosts Nikissi Serumaga and Bobby Kolade chatting in a room. They are sitting opposite each other on a table with documents, glasses of water and more on it. Sunlight filters through the room. Kolade, while Serumaga is talking with her hand in the air.

If that piece of information doesn't shock you enough, here's another. The country has been producing its own high-quality cotton for over a hundred years. (How did it get to this point? That's a question that "Vintage or Violence" explores.) Yet, today, Uganda imports massive amounts of clothing via containers. "Each container is full of bales of clothes: 550 to 750 of them. And containers are coming in every week. The moment they land from the Global North, "they meet a perfect example of organised chaos. Fierce competition, and the intensity of 'the gamble', that is buying secondhand clothes, as a business."

Serumaga shared further that when the importers buy these bales, "there is limited knowledge of what they've bought. Though they know they've bought a bale of, say, women's shirts or men's suits, the quality, make, and other aspects of the contents are only visible once you've bought and cut open the bale. Every purchase is a huge risk, and a few wrong purchases can easily sink a business."

The situation endures beyond countries

Ghana faces a similar reality on the daily. Liz Ricketts, fashion waste campaigner, who heads up the organisation the OR Foundation, has been documenting the situation in Ghana for over a decade. The product? "[Dead White Man's Clothes](#)". An immersive, multimedia research project into Ghana's Kantamanto Secondhand Clothing Market. Ricketts found that some 15 million used garments pour into Accra, Ghana, every week. From the UK, Europe, North America, and Australia. But, more shockingly, much of it leaves the market as waste. Not because they're unwearable—that's actually only a small percentage but because people are going into debt buying this clothing."

Ricketts explained that they don't have money to buy it, and there isn't the requisite infrastructure to deal with it. So "the waste ends up in people's backyards. It really invades people's homes, their environment in a way that's extremely unjust." The clothes, though wearable, end up having no value. Because of the sheer volume it arrives in, the economic situation these retailers are forced into, and the lack of recycling technology. "Even waste pickers that we work with at the sites, they're busy recovering plastic and metals... but the clothing has no value to them."

The excessive clothing consumption in the Global North is essentially forced upon these retailers in Africa. As Serumaga put it, they don't—and shouldn't—need the Global North. "The Global North needs us," she emphasised, "as a dumping ground."

Can countries resist the imports?



Contrary to what trade, globalisation and development narratives will tell you, this isn't a two-way

relationship where both parties benefit. This isn't an idealistic capitalistic exchange—nor was it ever meant to be. This is how capitalism works. Exporting problems to “peripheries”, with the promise of creating “value”. In the end, what happens is that wealthier countries continue to benefit. While poor countries are forced to take what they can get. “There's a lack of reciprocity. People are burdened with excesses of the linear economy in the Global North,” Ricketts said.

Countries in Southeast Asia too, are struggling with this excess. Shen said that to her understanding Southeast Asian countries “have been regulating the rate of textile imports from wealthy countries to minimise economic disruption in—that is, the supply and demand of—their domestic textile and clothing markets.” While these Southeast Asian markets have been more able to leverage some control, it seems African countries have not been so lucky.

Serumaga shared that from 2015 to 2016, East African countries came together to discuss a ban of secondhand clothing imports. Some amongst them wanted to stand up to the fact that they had some purchasing power. Because of these secondhand clothes, that had created an entire industry so dependent on the Global North, while simultaneously eliminating any opportunities for them to establish a “meaningful textile industry that would gainfully employ millions of people along the supply chain honour their local tradition and craft. While these countries were debating the ban, American secondhand exporters “caught wind of it and lobbied their government to put an end to the ban. And they did.”

So today, the dumping continues, unregulated and unrelenting.





IMAGE: Via [The OR Foundation](#) | IMAGE DESCRIPTION: A snapshot of an early morning in Kantamanto Market, Ghana. Many people in the foreground, dressed in various colourful outfits. The backdrop is of trucks filled with bales of unopened clothing, and stacks of clothes hanging from them. The market is in full swing.

Greenwashing...

The cherry on top is that all of this is happening under the guise of “charity” and “sustainability”, which are neither of those. Despite this being the truth of fashion’s waste crisis, Ricketts said that brands and organisations still “feed citizens this oversimplified narrative that when they donate their clothes, it’s ‘recycling’, or it’s ‘charity’. When people are told it’s going to someone ‘in need’, they don’t think twice about it. It allows us not to question our behaviour.” This “behaviour” of course, isn’t just about the wealthier consumer’s individual consumption habits. It’s about the wider system that enables and encourages, and depends on, this consumption.

Fashion companies “position secondhand clothing trade as this catchall, as inherently sustainable,” Ricketts explained. “This is a really uncritical position,” she added. It doesn’t take into account how “sustainable” only refers, in this case, to a Global North definition. Such a narrative allows for companies to maintain a veneer of doing good, when they’re still contributing to the core problem: overproduction. “People think it’s very radical to talk about the fact that there’s too much clothing on the planet. But it’s just a fact. For me, by showing what’s happening in Kantamanto, we’re proving that there’s no market anywhere in the world that’s capable of absorbing the sheer quantity of stuff that these companies are pumping out every single minute.”

And beyond diverting attention away from the core problem, what companies are doing is also continuing to sell lies to the general public.

... or “delusion marketing”?

Ricketts shared that H&M’s Loop recycling machine that they debuted earlier this year, which promises consumers the opportunity to “level up” and “evolve”... would require 50,000 years to recycle just one week’s worth of waste from Kantamanto. This goes to show that “the current technology is so far from absorbing any meaningful amount of waste”. But also that these companies are not just greenwashing—they’re “delusion marketing”—a term that Ricketts says they like to use because “greenwashing” isn’t strong enough.

Essentially, companies like H&M are feeding consumers delusion marketing messages. Telling them it’s okay to continue buying more stuff. Because, hey, look! We’re “recycling”. Ricketts remarked that “people don’t realise the compounded cognitive dissonance that consumers in the Global North are experiencing”. She added that it’s no wonder that “we don’t ask any of the same questions as we do in the firsthand supply chain. We don’t ask who’s performing the labour, is their job safe, who’s making

profits, the environmental impacts, none of that..."

All these companies that want you to help them do good, do the thinking for you. You simply need to recycle your clothes at your nearest drop-off point.



IMAGE: Via [The OR Foundation](#) | IMAGE DESCRIPTION: A black background with yellow specks edited on it. The text, in yellow, top left reads: "In our oversupplied linear fashion economy", with an arrow pointing to the text on the bottom right: "every garment is waste until proven otherwise."

What does the industry need to do?



So what do we do about all this? Tackling overproduction is one thing, Ricketts shared. “We need to back production by a minimum of 80%.” But beyond that, we also still need to deal with the waste that exists. We need to invest money and intellectual resources into resale, repair, and yes, recycling technology. And on top of all that, we can no longer have a system in which economically exploited people continue to be exploited. “As long as garment workers don't earn a living wage, and as long as retailers in Kantamanto are indebted to the system, they have no agency in changing this system. They don't have the right to exit it.”

This is why organisations like The OR Foundation are working on the ground through “holistic direction” to “break the cycle of exploitation and dependency that corrupts the secondhand ecosystem and traps people in debt”. There are no easy solutions to this massive problem. Serumaga added that it's about making space for conversations between the right people to “find solutions that work best for different contexts, people and economies.” A ban clearly wasn't the best solution. And in any case, there's no one-size-fits-all.

For us, #SecondhandSeptember ought to trigger deeper conversations. “The uncomfortable truth is that all of us,” Serumaga shared, “are likely benefiting from someone's exploitation in such a deep-rooted way that our existence looks like it will crumble immediately when we recognise it. Phones, computers, clothes, our coffee. But it won't. What acknowledging the truth actually does is create space for us to rethink what consumption, waste, and businesses can look like.”

Beyond secondhand outfit pics

#SecondhandSeptember now looks like “largely white faces, bodies, women and locations,” Serumaga said. “I love that folks have taken responsibility for their consumption, but we need to centre other voices and lives and experiences.”

Which is another way of saying: fewer outfit snaps, more talk about the truth behind #SecondhandSeptember. Ricketts echoed these sentiments. She shared that she's “not interested in cancelling the campaign”. “I want to add to it. Let's talk about how sustainability isn't the same across the Global North and the Global South.” Rather than buying and creating *more* secondhand outfits. “Basically, what we have now is people consuming secondhand in the same way they consume first-hand. These million-dollar resale platforms are doing good work. But why are they making more shopping so convenient? Why does that continue to be the priority?”

We can still appreciate secondhand clothing, and keeping clothing in the loop. But we can add nuance to that. We can talk about how the globalised secondhand clothing trade is killing our planet. And how it's killing communities together with it. #SecondhandSeptember should go beyond telling clothing stories to telling stories of how there's too much clothing washing up on other's shores, and consequently, entrenching injustice. “The real opportunity here is being more than a consumer, and more than a participant in the economy,” Ricketts shared.

We need to be sitting with each other and with the uncomfortable truth, so we can work our way to a collective solution

FEATURED IMAGE: Via [The OR Foundation](#) | IMAGE DESCRIPTION: A snapshot of a man sitting amongst piles of bales of clothing, smiles at the camera. There are accompanying notes to the image, from The OR Foundation. "Once a retailer has purchased bales from an importer, she'll pay a kayayo to carry the bales to a storage unit. Storage costs roughly 3GHS per bale per week. Some retailers buy only one bale a week. Others may buy 10. Retailers have different strategies, depending on how long they've been in the market, their relationship with importers, access to capital and import trends related to the type of garment they sell."

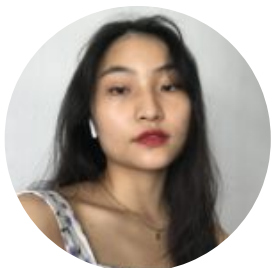
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Tammy (she/her) is an activist-in-progress and digital creator and communicator based in sunny, tropical Singapore. Her mission is three-fold: (1) to make climate justice activism and theory more accessible; (2) to create digital and physical community and learning spaces towards a more just, regenerative, and loving world within our current one; (3) and to mobilise the best parts of social media in service of all this.



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