

Valuing old skills in a new world

Jane Milburn

Abstract

The transformational shift during the past two decades in the way we source, use and discard our clothing has major social and environmental implications. Clothing is at its cheapest due to international companies accessing low-wage labour in developing nations, which now produce the majority of garments sold in Australia. Consumption has risen as prices have fallen. Based on the global average, people buy twice as much clothing as two decades ago, while other data show that Australians are the second-largest consumers of new clothing in the world after North Americans. The outsourcing of clothing requirements to global industrial supply chains has led to a population-wide loss of knowledge of and skills for the process for making clothing. It has also fostered disregard for the time and resources involved. The absence of simple sewing skills means an inability to repair a garment or re-sew a button, creating dependency, lack of autonomy and waste. Second-wave feminism in the 1970s, which saw Western women embrace education and professional careers while diminishing domestic duties—along with the busyness of modern lifestyles—have contributed to the loss of sewing and other life skills such as growing and preparing food. Since consumers need to eat and dress every day to survive and thrive, the turn back to localism and self-sufficiency evident in the slow food movement is sparking growing interest in more hands-on approaches to clothing and textiles.

Introduction

The fashion wheel turned full circle when avant-garde Dutch designers Viktor & Rolf upcycled garments and fabrics from seasons past into dramatic new pieces for their 2016 collection, as featured in *Vogue* magazine (for an example, see Figure 1). While these leading-edge designers

are celebrated in a current exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren's upcycled collection proved to be prophetic. They have made upcycling hot. Everything old can be new again, when recast in a fresh and creative way.

Figure 1. Viktor& Rolf Fall 2016 collection



Source: <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2016-couture/viktor-rolf/slideshow/collection#5>

The clothes that people choose to wear represent how individuals show up for the world. They give an indication of the wearer's values, age, stage and status. The wearer wants to be unique but perhaps not too different. However, conscious consumers are also beginning to see beyond visual appearances as they apply the same scrutiny to clothing as to food—clothing affects individual health, the health of others and the health of the planet.

The Slow Food movement emerged in 1989 in Italy as a response to fast food and in defence of local food traditions and wholesome unprocessed

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choices. Despite the ready availability of convenient, fast, processed, industrial food choices, many people are returning to preparing their own meals because these fast options can be unhealthy and unsatisfying. Slow clothing, now emerging as a grassroots response to fast fashion, considers the ethics and sustainability of garments, as well as comfort and connection to the making process.

Clothing across time

Across centuries humankind has progressed from hunter-gathering food and wearing garments that were handmade from skins and fibres to now sourcing what is needed from international industrial supply chains. In earlier times people valued their clothes, having a few quality items for Sunday best alongside many well-worn hand-me-downs for the rest of the week.

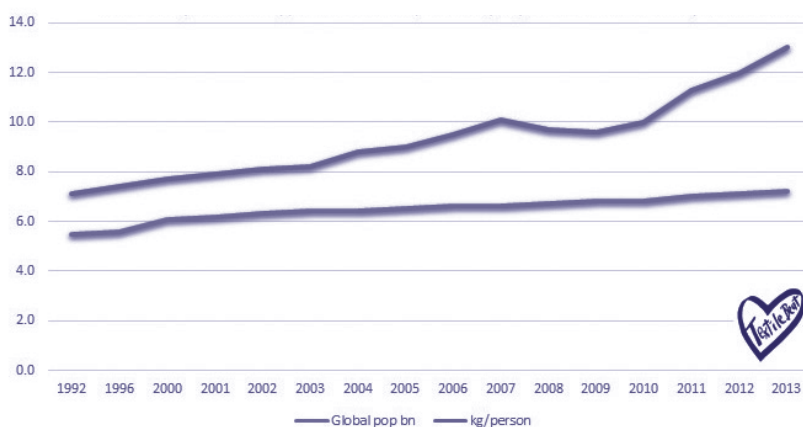
In the past two decades, world apparel fibre consumption has doubled while the global population has increased by 30 per cent. Annual average consumption of 7 kilograms per person in 1992 increased to 13 kilograms by 2013 (Figure 2).

While the global data (Figures 2 and 3) show the average was 13 kilograms/person in 2013, other region-specific figures reveal the disparity between developed and developing nations. Textile World (Figure 4) information indicates that Australasians absorbed an average of 27 kilograms/person in 2015. This makes Australians the second-largest consumers of new textiles after North Americans (37 kilograms/person per year) and ahead of Western Europeans (22 kilograms/person per year), while the average in Africa, the Middle East and India is only 5 kilograms/person per year.

There are still only 365 days in the year, yet Australians buy four times the clothing we did 20 years ago. The ready availability of fast fashion, bought on impulse from global companies, is driving excessive purchasing of new clothing that is often discarded after only a few wears. In *Wardrobe Crisis* (Press, 2016), fashion journalist Clare Press said that each year Australians send \$500 million worth of clothing to the tip.

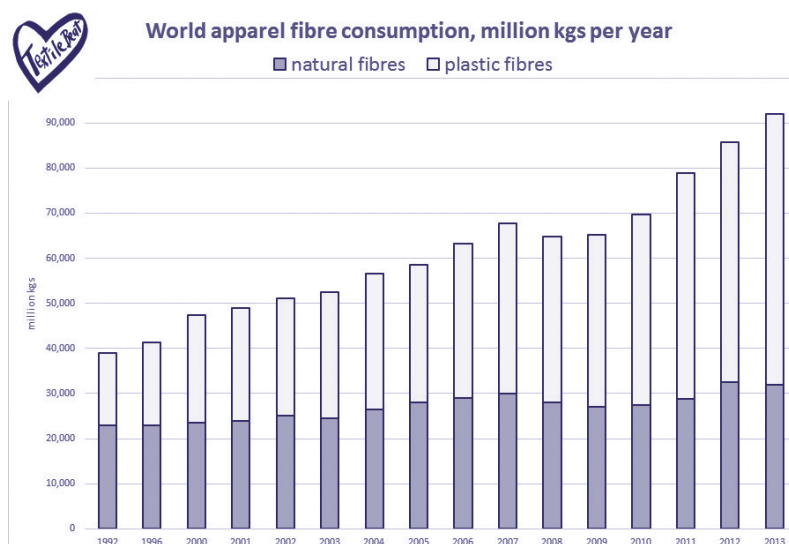
Australians bought about one billion items of clothing in 2010 (Wells, 2011) which equates to about 45 items each—nearly one item per week. Consumers are being seduced by marketers and cheap prices into the habit of wearing clothes only a few times before replacing them with

Figure 2. Global apparel fibre consumption vs population



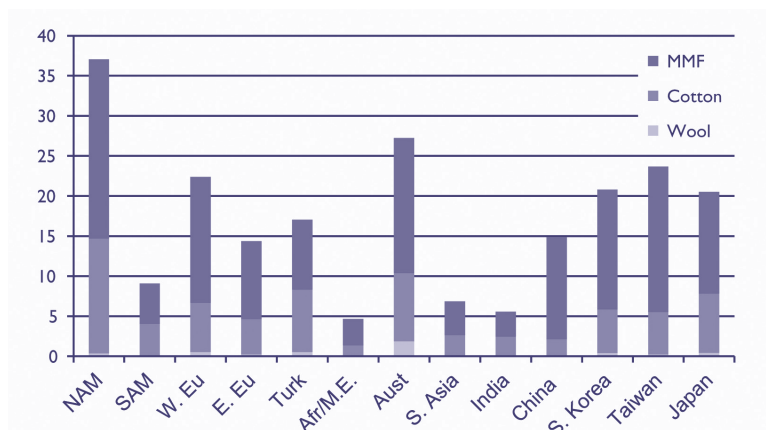
Source: <http://textilebeat.com/with-conscience/>

Figure 3. Global apparel fibre consumption



Source: <http://textilebeat.com/tag/global-fibre-apparel-consumption/>

Figure 4. Global Final Consumer Demand, 2015



Source: Textile World
www.textileworld.com, <http://www.textileworld.com/textile-world/fiber-world/2015/02/man-made-fibers-continue-to-grow/>

new ones. The unsustainable nature of this disposable clothing culture is self-evident.

Clothing is at its cheapest (Figure 5) due to international companies accessing low-wage labour in developing nations, which now produce the majority of garments sold in Australia.

Figure 5. Women's clothing is the cheapest in 25 years



Source: ABS, CommSec in Alan Kohler, April 2015, www.alankohler.com.au

To make clothing at a cheap price, global companies are exploiting vulnerable workers in developing nations and increasingly using synthetic fibres. In 2014, Castle (Choice, 2014) reported that about 90 per cent of clothes sold in Australia are now made overseas, mostly in Asian factories with environmental and labour protection laws less strict than elsewhere in the world, at a fraction of their true cost. This is leading to river systems being contaminated and people being poisoned by those contaminants while others are killed in factories and locations that are largely out of sight and mind. The Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh in 2013 exposed the ugly truth. About 1130 workers were killed, more than 2000 were injured and 800 children were orphaned. At the time of the collapse, those workers were shut in an unsafe factory, filling an order for cheap clothing for people in developed nations such as Australia.

In recent decades there has been a significant shift towards clothes made from synthetic fibres derived from petroleum. Research has shown synthetic clothing to be shedding microplastic particles into the ecosystem (Browne et al., 2011). Two thirds of new clothing is now made from petroleum-based synthetic fibres such as polyester and acrylic. Only one third is made

from natural fibres, mainly cotton as well as wool, linen, bamboo and wood. Just a decade ago, half were synthetic and half were natural—now the ratio is two thirds synthetic and one third natural (Figure 3).

Browne et al.'s (2011) research shows these synthetic clothes are shedding microplastic particles into the wastewater stream every time they are washed. These particles then enter the food chain and come back in the fish we eat (Catalyst, March 2016). Synthetic clothes are believed to take decades—perhaps centuries—to break down if buried in landfill, as many are. Natural fibres also come at an environmental price in the production phase, but natural fibres are biodegradable and do not bioaccumulate.

Fashionable change becomes waste

By definition fashion is the latest style of clothing, accessories, hair or behaviour. Fashion is ever-changing and as such it is not sustainable in a finite world.

Fashion automatically comes with perceived obsolescence—the orchestrated creation of dissatisfaction that underpins continuous consumerism in modern capitalist societies. A continuous stream of new garments is purchased as older garments, no longer considered socially valuable, are shed to the second-hand clothing trade or into the waste stream.

Australians now produce about 50 million tonnes of waste each year, averaging over two tonnes per person. The *State of Waste* report (Ritchie, 2016) states, 'From 1996 to 2015, our population rose by 28 per cent but waste generation increased by 170 per cent. Waste is growing at a compound growth rate of 7.8 per cent per year' (p. 16). This means that unless behaviour change occurs, the volume of waste we generate will double every decade.

Textiles are a growing part of the urban waste stream due to cheaper prices and increasing volumes of poorer quality cast-offs. Local councils report that between 3 and 8 per cent of household waste is textiles although most Australians are encouraged to, and do, donate unwanted clothing to charities for redistribution. Donated goods have generated important revenue for charities but this landscape is changing. The sheer volume of surplus clothing generated by fast fashion means for-profit clothing recyclers see an opportunity to sell the surplus to developing nations. Cast-off clothes are now swamping nations such as the African Republic

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of Ghana, where a local historian reported in the *Herald Scotland* (2014) that these cast-off clothes are destroying native textile industry and threatening culture. The global second-hand market isn't a long-term solution to the problem posed by increasing clothing consumption. As *The Economist* (2016) reported, South African countries are moving to ban Western cast-offs to protect their local industries in the face of the unrelenting second-hand influx. In India, Western clothing is not sold as clothing, rather it is immediately reconstituted into blankets and homewares (Aeon, 2016).

In *Clothing poverty: The hidden world of fast fashion and second-hand clothes*, Brooks (2015) said, 'Evidence throughout this book has shown that the capitalist development of the world economy spawned the exploitative fast-fashion system, and also gave rise to the international inequalities that have fuelled the boom in the second-hand clothing trade' (p. 241).

Personal conversations with charity groups indicate that between 15 and 25 per cent of clothing donations end up in landfill, about 15 per cent become industrial rags, and the remaining 40 to 55 per cent enter the global second-hand trade. According to the National Association of Charitable Recycling Organisations (2013), Australia exports more than 70 million kilograms of cast-off clothing every year—that is 3 kilograms for every Australian—where it is sold for \$1 per kilogram, mainly to the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan and Malaysia.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) said that over half a million tonnes (500 million kilograms) of leather and textiles are discarded to landfill each year. That equates to 23 kilograms of leather and textiles (including carpets) for every Australian. While almost all could be recycled, only a small portion actually is recycled.

Australians are not alone in being wasteful. In the United Kingdom, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall (2016) (from the *River Cottage* television series) has declared war on waste. In a recent documentary series *War on Waste*, Episode 2 (YouTube, 2016) produced for the BBC, he stands atop a pile of cast-off clothes outside a shopping centre. The pile contains seven tonnes of clothes as 10 000 separate garments, which Fearnley-Whittingstall reported is the quantity discarded in Britain every 10 minutes.

The need for change

Australians live in a consumer society. They are encouraged to spend 'for the good of the economy' and it is often cheaper to replace than repair. They are urged by marketers to indulge in cheap clothing consumption—but is it responsible?

There is a significant disconnect between the consumption drivers of modern economies and the reality of living in a finite world. Popular culture seems to be all about convenience with fast food (take-away coffee, bottled water, food in disposable packaging) and fast fashion that requires minimal effort from the user. Business makes money out of selling us many things that the consumer just does not need. Sometimes the 'ethical, sustainable' badge is just another way to sell a slightly improved version of the same product.

Activities such as recycling, saving water and making ethical food choices require effort, time and commitment. With the risk of dangerous climate change acknowledged by nations worldwide through the United Nations' Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals in place, it is time to consider ways that individuals can contribute by reducing their footprint through sustainable living skills and strategies.

On the supply side, sustainability can be achieved through localising design, production and distribution, developing transparent production systems and developing products with a longer useable life. However, on the demand side, greater sustainability in clothing consumption can be achieved through clothing repair and less frequent laundering.

There is growing recognition of the need to develop a circular economy, with the intention of reducing waste and avoiding pollution through regenerative and closed-loop approaches. Brands that recognise the need to address the ethical and sustainable aspects of their business models are making some changes at the design and production ends of the supply chain. American outdoor clothing company Patagonia is an acknowledged leader in sustainability, offering a repair service and recycling program for its products. Innovative Netherlands-based MUD Jeans company is pioneering a leasing model for jeans and includes 20 per cent recycled cotton in its products. And Brisbane-based Sustainable Fashion, for example, is making ethical, natural and local garments designed to minimise the footprint of their customers' wardrobes.

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One of the world's largest fashion brands H&M has acknowledged that far too much fashion goes out with the household waste and ends up in landfills, with resources being extracted at the production end and wasted at the consumption end. In its *Conscious Actions Sustainability Report 2015*, H&M wrote, 'Like other industries today, the fashion industry is too dependent on natural resources and we need to change the way fashion is made. This is why we are so committed to our mission to reuse garments and close the loop on textiles. By collecting old clothes and turning them into new updated styles instead of letting them go to waste and by investing in new innovation and technology, we are taking important steps towards a circular economy' (p. 4).

As well as improving sustainability in production and marketing, H&M's espoused strategy extends to influencing consumer actions post-purchase, to reduce the footprint by caring for clothes:

Caring for our clothes at home represents about 26% of all of the greenhouse gas emissions in a garment's life. Our challenge is to create affordable fashion that our customers will love from season to season and that is easy to care for with the lowest possible impact. We need to inspire our customers to be more conscious in the way they care for their clothes, for example as regards washing and drying, and make it easy and effortless to recycle any garment that might no longer be wanted (H&M, 2015, p. 10).

The words might sound good yet H&M's business model remains based on selling more clothes, built on the consumption ethos of volume and throughput of regularly changing trends that enable quick profit.

While conventional business models focus on keeping product prices low through increasing efficiency in production, Niinimäki and Hassi (2011) consider other offerings that respond to changing consumer needs and sustainability. Their paper *Emerging design strategies in sustainable production and consumption of textiles and clothing* suggests strategic innovations to run textile and clothing businesses in different and more sustainable ways. With the short life span of products being one of the main problems in an industrial system based on planned obsolescence, they suggest design strategies that focus on extending products' usefulness. These strategies include long-life guarantees and design that generates emotional attachment to products.

Such attachment can come with products that can be easily personalised and customised, or from halfway products that offer users a more active role in the design process—including kits that provide creative experiences. Another option is open-source fashion where designers:

'sell design skills through patterns and construction information but the end-users implement the final design outcome. Open source fashion is not led by large companies or retailers. Hence the individual consumer has a leading role in decision-making, turning the consumer from a passive consumer into an active maker, and this deepens the feeling of achievement and in turn increases product satisfaction' (p. 1880).

Another strategy is providing design services using digital technologies that enable designers to take the tailor-made suit to another level, creating individual looks that match consumer requirements and increase the likelihood of a long life-span. Other service offerings can be renting, leasing or exchanging garments and services that upgrade, update, repair or modify products to extend their useful life by delaying their psychological obsolescence for consumers.

The clothing consumption cycle includes buying, using and disposing of garments. It is in the 'using' stage that consumers can extend the life of garments through effective maintenance and storage strategies. It has been estimated (WRAP, 2015) that extending the life of clothes by just nine extra months of active use reduces their carbon, water and waste footprints by around 20–30 per cent. However, the loss of everyday sewing skills mean most Australians lack the ability to mend and upcycle clothing, assuming they have the time and inclination to so do.

Upcycling and skilling for the future

Personal observation of clothing churn in Australia led the author (Jane Milburn of Textile Beat) to spend 2014 in counter-culture activity, refashioning discarded clothing using creative sewing techniques with the 365-day 'Sew it Again' (2016) campaign. This social-change project aimed at shifting thinking about the way clothing and textiles are consumed. The project demonstrated creative ways to upcycle existing clothing and empowered individuals to tap into the 'greenest' clothing of all, that which already exists in wardrobes and charity shops. The project engaged sewing skills, encouraged

a culture of thrift, and showed heartfelt concern about the downside of fast fashion. The project continues in 2016 in a broader context as *The Slow Clothing Project* (Textile Beat, 2016).

Textile Beat's contention is that creative upcycling of existing clothing is a way to bring the mindfulness and resourcefulness of sewing into the 21st century. Because new clothing is so affordable, few bother with sewing from scratch. Yet the interest in home cooking, home baking, home gardening and home renovation demonstrates that people want to be resourceful and 'do for themselves' because of the rewards it brings for wellbeing, health and living.

Author and activist Tara Moss recently wrote about why she is finally learning to sew (Victory Lamour, 2016). She wrote:

Over the years it became clear I needed to learn how to mend my own clothing, fix a busted seam before it rendered a garment unwearable, and sew buttons on in a way that didn't immediately make them fall off again. I also wanted to be able to make clothing and cosplay outfits from scratch and from recycled materials, but had no skills whatsoever in either respect, having never been taught any sewing or mending skills, and having never put time into learning.

Moss had downplayed the value of these skills in her younger years, in part because sewing, mending and dressmaking have been considered feminised skills in the 1990s. She chose to associate with traditionally 'masculine' endeavours such as motorbike riding and to avoid things like learning to sew. She went so far as to say that her younger self would have been embarrassed to be seen with a sewing needle. It is ironic, she said, that a feminist woman would avoid things precisely because they are considered feminine and in doing so, become less self-sufficient.

The teaching of practical life skills such as cooking and sewing has been in decline in Australian schools for three decades. Yet the connection between healthy-eating behaviours and teaching children to cook and grow food has been recognised by teachers, health groups, food leaders and governments. The rise of television cooking shows and access to cooking classes outside of school hours is providing some opportunities to learn these skills, although more is needed.

Pow (2011) reported social researcher Mark McCrindle (*The Sunday Mail*, January 2011) as having said, 'We live in a throw-away culture where, rather than repair something, we will buy a new one, even if it is just a matter of darning holes or sewing on buttons'. And in the United Kingdom, Ward (2012) reported in the *Daily Mail* that seven out of ten young people don't know how to sew on a button.

Recent classroom experiences from Textile Beat workshops (Milburn, 2016) revealed that most children have not used a needle and thread by the age of 10 years. The implications of the lack of everyday sewing skills are not immediately obvious. Older family members who retain these skills often provide the necessary support—otherwise items will simply be replaced rather than repaired. The dependency and wastefulness of these strategies will become more evident in time.

In an *Examination of apparel maintenance skills and practices: Implications for sustainable clothing consumption*, Norum (2013) discusses the knowledge gap in basic sewing skills among American consumers over time through the shift away from household activities. Norum said maintenance that can enhance the life of clothing included washing, drying and repairing, 'If we believe that consumers need to make changes in their behaviour towards more sustainable clothing consumption, they need the skills to do so ... skills that were traditionally learned in the home or in secondary school' (p. 135).

Norum (2013) said while the decrease in Family and Consumer Science school programs in the United States meant the opportunity to acquire such skills had diminished, the curriculum could:

tie in sewing/mending skills with sustainable consumption as a way of appealing to younger generations while providing the skills they need. The delivery of such instruction, in settings that may also extend beyond the school environment, may wish to consider the use of new technologies (e.g. social media, videos) in reaching consumers. There is no doubt that new instructional technology is being adopted ... using fashion blogs to capture the attention of students prior to introducing sewing skills may be one approach. Using Pinterest to gather ideas for in-class repurposing projects is another. Students could then repurpose an item from home using techniques gained in class (p. 135).

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Developing a repair culture

The reasons people discard clothing include it being surplus to requirements, not fitting anymore, not appealing anymore or being in need of repair.

While we can foster a repair culture—as the British did with wartime ‘make-do and mend’ strategies and the Japanese with boro stitching creating new textiles from old—there is a social stigma that individuals must recalibrate as care. Visible mending could be interpreted as a confident creative statement about sustainable values, rather than as evidence of impoverishment.

The prejudice against a culture of repair due to embarrassment about poverty and thrift is canvassed by writer Ruth Quibell (2016) in an article ‘Quirky habits of happiness’ in *Womankind* magazine. She reflected on prejudice against repair manifested as ready acceptance of waste in the pursuit of everyday perfection.

In contrast, The Repair Café (2016) initiated by Martine Postma in Amsterdam in 2009 is now a global movement with cafés set up as free meeting places for people interested in repairing things together. The Repair Café website (2016) states:

We throw away vast amounts of stuff. Even things with almost nothing wrong, and which could get a new lease on life after a simple repair. The trouble is, lots of people have forgotten that they can repair things themselves or they no longer know how. Knowing how to make repairs is a skill quickly lost.

Governments are making changes too. In the *Guardian* newspaper (19 September 2016), Orange reported that the Swedish Government, in a leading move to tackle the growing global throw-away culture, is introducing tax breaks on repairs to everything from bicycles to washing machines so it will no longer make sense to throw out old or broken items and buy new ones. The proposal included a plan to slash the tax rate on repairs to bicycles, clothes and shoes from 25 per cent to 12 per cent.

Sew in the end

What people wear impacts on their health in ways that are only beginning to be fully understood. Clothing does for people on the outside what food does on the inside—nourishes our body and soul, which can be enhanced by

the consumer becoming more involved in the making process. Financial, social and emotional benefits flow from making sustainable and ethical clothing choices by upcycling. Leading designers such as Viktor & Rolf and major companies like H&M are using upcycling as part of the journey to closed-loop production methods that can reduce the environmental footprint of the \$1.5 trillion fashion industry. Meanwhile, individuals with skills can enjoy the independence and autonomy of being able to upcycle, make, mend and adapt their own clothes. They can gain a sense of achievement and emotional attachment to their original work, while having clothing to wear that works for their own body shape. Additionally, they know that no-one suffered in the making.

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