

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Ownership is the antidote to fashion's eco impact

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Jennifer Lopez walked during the finale of Versace's show in a recreation of a dress from 20 years ago. Image credit: Versace

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK Changing the discourse and attitude around rewearing garments is the solution to fashion's waste problem, and it could encourage consumers to invest more in their closets.

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Fashion has become disposable as consumers constantly chase the new, and social media has exacerbated the problem as even regular consumers are concerned about not being photographed in the same outfit twice. In a discussion between fashion stylist [Andrew Gelwicks](#) and [Halston](#) fashion director and [Decades](#) owner Cameron Silver at Initiatives in Art and Culture's Fashion & Design Conference on Nov. 14, the speakers argued that "It's Chic to Repeat," pointing to famous women who are leading the charge in owning their fashion and style.

"We live in a culture that really has an embracing of disposable fashion, and because of social media, the notion of wearing something more than once is suddenly seen as a faux pas," said Mr. Silver.

"And we want to demystify the idea that ownership means something and how we find a new balance in a world with a new economy the sharing economy where accessible and affordable fashion sometimes becomes accessible," he said. "The power of really owning something and owning the memories you make in those things."

Attachments over trends

Americans are addicted to fast, affordable fashion, and for many the idea of style is tied to constant newness.

According to the speakers, just in the United States, 10.5 million tons of clothing is thrown out each year. There are also 100 billion items of clothing produced per year, for a global population that is only 7 billion.

Extending the life of a garment by just nine months would reduce the carbon, waste and water impact of fashion by 20 to 30 percent.



What happens to fashion after its lifespan is one of the industry's biggest issues. Image credit: Stella McCartney

Instead of constantly acquiring disposable fashion, the speakers noted that there is a long history of owning and rewearing clothing being its own version of a status symbol.

Socialite Nan Kempner used to say that she would rewear items to prove that she owned them rather than having borrowed them.

Some early screen icons had multiple moments in the same dress. For instance, Ingrid Bergman wore the same dress to two Academy Award ceremonies in a row, while Grace Kelly re wore an Edith Head-designed dress to a premiere and later to the Oscars.

More recently, stars including Cate Blanchett, Tiffany Haddish and Kirsten Dunst have recycled pieces for multiple appearances. During a monologue on "Saturday Night Live," Ms. Haddish explained that she was going to get her money's worth out of her \$4,000 white McQueen gown.

For its show during Milan Fashion Week, Versace decided to recreate a 20-year-old moment that broke the then-nascent Internet. During the show's finale, Ms. Lopez strutted down the runway in a jungle print dress reminiscent of the spring/summer 2000 gown she wore to the Grammy Awards that year.

Similarly to the dress from two decades ago, this update also went viral. Within 48 hours, the appearance generated \$9.4 million in media impact value, with more mentions pouring in during the following days ([see story](#)).

The British royal family and politicians such as Michelle Obama have also been seen in the same item more than once.

These repeats have been met with mixed media reactions, with some judging women for rewearing clothing.

Aside from stars receiving potential backlash for rewearing the same thing twice, there is also the potential for negative press when samples are worn by multiple personalities.

Mr. Gelwicks noted that this becomes a consideration and a conversation with his clients, as they weigh competing with others and ending up in a "Who wore it better?" article. He said that the media could take a more positive approach towards reporting on this by framing duplicates instead as an analysis of how the same item was styled differently.

There is a growing acceptance of vintage and archival fashion, including among celebrities. One of the personalities leading the charge is Kim Kardashian, who has worn archival looks from brands including Mugler.



Kim Kardashian with Thierry Mugler in vintage Mugler. Image credit: Thierry Mugler

However, Mr. Gelwicks said that getting brands to lend out past season garments is a challenge, since companies only want to show the new.

"Fashion is so much about constantly reinventing and new, new, new, and more," Mr. Gelwicks said. "And as a stylist when working with celebrity clients who are promoting a film or doing an awards show, a lot of the pressure they feel is to be seen in the newest, or fresh off the runway or something that's never been seen before.

"One of the topics that's been coming up more is how chic it is to take a look back though instead and dip into the archives," he said. "But a lot of houses are so resistant to it. And even if it was last season, and I request a look, [they say], 'Oh, that's been archived.' It was just on the runway a few months ago.

"And it's kind of mind boggling that we can't use these, even if they've never been worn or they've been worn once or twice, that they're now deemed irrelevant almost."

For luxury brands, lending out vintage is an opportunity to prove that their clothing has longevity and is worth the investment.

Owning style

As consumers seek out the new, rentals are also picking up.

Along with companies such as Rent the Runway, retailers and brands are getting into renting.

Bloomingdale's recently debuted its own rental subscription service, becoming the first luxury retailer to enter the increasingly competitive space.

Although other high-end retailers have linked up with subscription services or partnered with secondhand resellers, this marked the first time a traditional bricks-and-mortar brand is merging the two. Interest in subscription services and secondhand apparel is on the rise, particularly among millennials who look to balance convenience with sustainability ([see story](#)).

While positioned as an eco-friendly alternative to buying, the speakers noted that the constant shipping and dry cleaning associated with renting makes it less green than it seems.

The speakers also argued that owning and actively wearing a closet allows consumers to make memories in their clothing in a way that they cannot if they are only renting garments all the time.

To drive a sustainable overhaul of the fashion business, the focus needs to be on consumer education, getting shoppers to buy less but buy better quality clothing.

During a panel at the FT Business of Luxury Summit on May 21 moderated by *Financial Times* Paris correspondent Harriet Agnew, speakers pointed out the ways in which their companies are working to extend the lifecycle of fashion. Whether through repeated rental wears, long-term ownership or the circular economy, luxury is playing a part in helping the fashion business become greener ([see story](#)).

Finding a balance between renting and owning is the answer. Luxury brands can also encourage consumers to buy instead of renting by making some styles available only for purchase.

"I don't think the rental platforms are going away, but if we go too far into a rental world where ownership doesn't

mean anything, what is going to happen to fashion brands, if they don't actually sell anything?" Mr. Silver said. "So we have to find that pendulum of ownership, luxury, free love, archival, vintage, accessible, faster fashion, if we can find a way to have a slower fast fashion transparency.

"I think that's going to be the conversation [through which] those brands will sort of address the way a true modern consumer shops and help create a balance," he said.

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