

Home > Topics > Sustainability

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Americans Trash 600 Pieces of Clothing Over Their Lifetimes, Study Finds

By Christopher Hall



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According to a new survey, America can add throwing out clothing to its list of national past times, along with baseball and apple pie.

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It's no secret that the fashion industry has a problem with waste. But Trunk Club, the personal styling service bought by Nordstrom in 2014, says that consumers who don't understand how to care for their clothing are also to blame. In response, it is working to reduce its impact on the environment through a new information campaign.

"When you're building your wardrobe, it's important to think about how you'll take care of those pieces," Maggie Mee, head of merchandising for Trunk Club, said. "Understanding the different fabrics and the best ways to clean them can make laundering your clothes a lot easier and will keep your clothing lasting you longer."

On Thursday, the styling service released the results of a survey to better analyze waste habits among Americans when it comes to apparel. It found that, on average, Americans throw away no less than 10 items a year as a result of fabric shrinkage, color loss or damage. Trunk Club says this is because consumers don't have a proper awareness of how to take care of the clothing they buy, opting to simply purchase more instead.

"We were amazed to learn how much people are over-laundering their garments, especially those made of quality fabrics. We lose an incredible 600 pieces of clothing in our lifetime because we don't properly care for them. When in doubt, always look at the clothing care tag first," Mee explained.

That may be a problem. The survey also revealed that 43 percent of respondents rarely or never bother to read the care instructions that come attached to their garments. Another 21 percent also admitted to rarely or never following the instructions on the tag, even if they are aware of the information on it.

One of the main causes of the dissatisfaction and eventual abandonment of apparel among Americans is a dislike of "finicky fabrics" that may require more specific and labor-intensive care routines, according to Trunk Club. Chief among them is silk, followed by cashmere, suede, leather and sequined clothing. A full 36 percent of respondents said they just don't purchase silk due to the care involved.

Trunk Club also identified the top 10 types of clothing that consumers say have the most difficult upkeep. Not surprising, suits, dress shirts, blazers and sport coats are the four items hardest to maintain. Sweaters and dresses follow on the list, along with boots, shoes, denim and outerwear.

Storage can be an issue in keeping clothing in top shape, as well. More than half (56 percent) of respondents reported hanging their sweaters, a big no-no according to Trunk Club, but were split when it came to denim. Just less than half (48 percent) answered that jeans are to be folded while 47 percent hang them up.

In October, Trunk Club also released its own cost-per-wear calculator to help consumers conceptualize how much they spend each time they wear their clothing based on its initial cost and wear frequency. The calculator provides helpful tips like, “No need to wash jeans after every wear...in fact, one of the marks of premium denim is that they don’t need to be washed in order to regain their shape” to combat over-laundering.

Over the past few years, the fashion industry has put a greater emphasis on water conservation and waste reduction as consumers demand greater transparency and sustainability from apparel brands. Mills have begun to use less water and a new startup has taken Trunk Club’s cost-per-wear calculator’s advice to heart by encouraging people to stop washing their denim so much.

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