

A CRITIQUE OF FASHION

*Why Our Clothes Get Old
Before They Wear Out*

STILL
WEARABLE

ALREADY
OUTDATED



Noosophy AI

under the direction of Hieronymus Anonymus

Éditions Noosophie

A Critique of Fashion

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AI Generation and Editorial Responsibility

This book was developed through a collaboration between Hieronymus Anonymus and an AI Noosopher. Hieronymus Anonymus initiated the project and defined its subject and aims. The AI Noosopher contributed to documentary research, structuring, drafting, comparison of arguments, source-to-target checks, factual verification, coherence audits, and editing. The text is therefore neither raw model output nor a human-written text merely corrected by AI: it results from an iterative process of generation, critique, verification, and human arbitration. Decisions about the book's aims, validation, and publication remain human.

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INTRODUCTION — WE DON'T JUST BUY CLOTHES

There is probably something in your closet that still works perfectly well and that you no longer wear. It is not torn. The zipper still closes. The fabric has not suddenly stopped keeping you warm. Nothing obvious has failed. Yet the garment stays where it is. Maybe the cut feels dated. Maybe you have seen yourself in it too many times. Maybe it belongs to a version of you that no longer feels current. Maybe you cannot even explain what changed. You just stop reaching for it.

That ordinary experience contains most of the problem this book is about. Human beings are remarkably good at making objects socially old before they become materially worn out. We can also reverse the process. A jacket ignored for twenty years can become desirable again when the same silhouette returns. The fabric did not learn what a trend was in the meantime. Our way of seeing it changed.

This book begins with that gap. It is not an argument against clothing, beauty, decoration, or the pleasure of changing how we look. That would be an easy critique, and a shallow one. We do not dress only to protect skin from weather. Clothes place a body in a situation. They can signal belonging or distance, work or ceremony, seduction or modesty, seriousness or play, age, gender, status, memory, rebellion, or simply taste. They can be plain, extravagant, practical, ridiculous, moving, beautiful, unnecessary, or all of those things in different settings.

That richness is not a regrettable corruption of some purely functional form of dress. It is part of what humans have made clothing into. The problem begins when that social flexibility meets an economy that depends, in part, on repeated sales. A

durable garment can perform its practical function for years. From the wearer's point of view, that is usually a success. But an industry does not survive on the durability of what has already been sold. It has to sell again. Companies can find new customers, enter new markets, improve products, or diversify. They can also benefit from something far less dependent on physical failure: a rapid change in symbolic value.

What still works can begin to feel old. What was enough can begin to feel inadequate. What was distinctive can become ordinary. What looked right can stop looking like the present. I will call that process symbolic obsolescence.

The phrase is an analytical concept used by this book. It overlaps with what scholarship on obsolescence often calls style obsolescence or psychological obsolescence, but I use it more broadly for the loss of social value by an object that remains materially usable. It does not require a secret plan in which a single actor decides when each trend must die. Symbolic obsolescence can emerge from competition, imitation, media, platforms, marketing, status, boredom, and genuine desire for novelty without anyone controlling the whole system.

That is one reason fashion is more complicated than a story about manipulation. Fashion can promise individuality while depending on imitation. It can help us say "this is me" through forms that other people must recognize if the message is going to mean anything. It can make change pleasurable while making stability feel aesthetically suspect. It can absorb rebellion, normalize what was once distinctive, discard a look, and then bring it back years later as a new possibility.

Its creative energy is real. So is its ability to make value move. The material world moves more slowly. To make a garment is to grow, extract, or manufacture fiber; spin yarn;

weave or knit fabric; dye and finish it; cut and sew it; move it through a supply chain; sell it; wash it; repair it or fail to repair it; and eventually reuse, recycle, burn, or discard it.

The chapters ahead will reconstruct that chain without pretending that every garment has the same footprint, every company follows the same model, or every consumer responds to fashion in the same way. The argument is not that one object should be put on trial. The argument is that we need to understand the relationship between symbolic speed and material throughput. A change in taste can happen almost instantly. A garment does not disappear when our interest does. If cultural value moves every few weeks while fibers, labor, emissions, and waste remain in the world much longer, then a social rhythm begins to have physical consequences.

The same standard will be applied to solutions. A local improvement can be real without changing the system that keeps reproducing the problem. A more durable garment can help. So can repair, resale, better information, cleaner production, or recycling. But none of those should be treated as a magic label. The relevant question is what the change actually does to use, replacement, total volume, working conditions, and waste.

This book therefore will not search for the perfect consumer or the perfect product. Its final question is more demanding: how can we keep the pleasure of getting dressed without requiring such a large and rapid flow of objects? Can fashion continue to produce novelty without making the old immediately worthless? Can we keep clothing as play, creation, language, and frivolity while slowing the material system underneath it?

Can a garment last without asking desire to stand still? The forgotten garment in the closet will remain our thread through the book. It still knows how to do what it did yesterday. Understanding why we no longer want to wear it lets the critique move away from individual guilt and toward the relation itself: between object and meaning, desire and market, culture and matter, the speed of the eye and the speed of the world.

That is where a critique of fashion begins.

CHAPTER 1 — THE ANIMAL THAT WEARS CLOTHES

Before criticizing fashion, we need to give clothing back its full complexity. A rushed critique usually begins with a tempting story. Human beings once had a simple need: protection from cold, rain, and exposure. Then consumer society taught us to want colors, labels, silhouettes, shoes, accessories, and overflowing closets. In that story, necessity is rational and fashion is an artificial excess layered on top. The story is useful because it is clean.

It is also wrong. We do need clothing for material reasons. Fabric has weight, texture, strength, breathability, insulation, and limits. A coat can retain heat. A work garment can protect skin. Shoes can reduce injury. Technical clothing can manage moisture, rain, sun, abrasion, visibility, or occupational hazards. A garment has to fit a moving body well enough to do what it was made to do.

But the moment clothing is worn, it also enters a field of interpretation. A jacket can signal a job. A uniform can grant access, establish authority, or impose discipline. Ceremonial dress can mark a passage. Religious dress can make affiliation visible. Sportswear can identify a practice or a community. A color, cut, fabric, or shoe can be read as formal, cheap, elegant, vulgar, youthful, old-fashioned, luxurious, practical, rebellious, or absurd.

None of those meanings is permanent. They vary across places, periods, groups, and situations. That does not make them unreal. Clothing occupies a strange position: it sits against the body while facing the social world. It can protect privacy and

make a person legible at the same time. It can conceal and present in a single gesture. That position helps explain why dress carries so many functions at once—and why reducing fashion to consumption misses its object before the critique has even begun.[1]

A Tool Against the Weather — and Much More

The protective function of clothing is real and should not be dismissed as trivial. In some settings, clothing is first a technology of the body. It retains heat, moves moisture away from skin, blocks ultraviolet radiation, creates a barrier against chemicals or debris, increases visibility, or reduces the chance of injury. Rain gear, safety boots, firefighting equipment, high-altitude clothing, medical garments, and many work uniforms cannot be understood merely as symbols. Their material construction performs functions that no cultural interpretation can substitute for.

Yet even the most functional clothing rarely stays confined to function. A uniform can become a sign of competence or rank. A piece designed for a sport can migrate into everyday streetwear. Military garments can move into civilian wardrobes, then become fashion references. Workwear can become a marker of authenticity or style long after it leaves the worksite. The social meaning does not simply sit on top of the material object. It can change how the object is worn, preserved, copied, priced, and eventually produced.

Modesty provides another example. What a society expects a person to cover, in which setting, and for what reason varies dramatically across cultures and historical periods. Clothing therefore does more than hide a body that already has a fixed social meaning. It helps define what a particular society treats as private, respectable, sexual, formal, exposed, or

inappropriate.[2] Ceremony works in a similar way. People do not usually dress the same way for sleep, work, a funeral, a wedding, a court appearance, a religious service, a protest, and a party. Clothing helps make the situation recognizable. It announces that this moment is not ordinary.

The rules may be explicit or barely spoken, but we often know when we have violated them. A garment can be clean, warm, comfortable, and perfectly functional—and still feel completely wrong for the room. That “wrongness” matters. It tells us that the value of clothing can never be reduced to its physical ability to cover a body. A garment can succeed materially and fail socially in a particular context. Fashion will later exploit the distance between usefulness and social adequacy. But it did not invent that distance. It builds on something much older: we dress in a world of other people, including people whose gaze we only anticipate.

The Body Becomes Legible

Getting dressed makes some kinds of information available. That does not mean clothes tell the truth about the person wearing them. A suit can be borrowed. A logo can be counterfeit. A uniform can impose an identity its wearer does not share. A person can deliberately confuse expectations. Clothing is always an imperfect sign. And still, we read it.[3] We infer a role, an occasion, a profession, a level of formality, a presumed group, a relationship to money, risk, age, convention, or status. We do this quickly and often incorrectly. We also know other people do it to us.

That is why choosing what to wear to a job interview, a first date, a funeral, a courtroom, or a political demonstration does not feel irrational. Clothing is part of the first scene in which a person becomes visible. The interpretation is not only external.

We look at ourselves too. A garment can feel like us, or create the uncomfortable sense that we are performing a role we do not inhabit. It can increase confidence without possessing any magical property in the fabric. It can alter posture, movement, and the way we imagine we are being seen.

Clothing therefore gives us a relatively reversible way to test a position. We can try on a form, notice what it does to us, keep it, reject it, combine it differently, or grow into it. Two opposite simplifications become tempting here. The first says that clothing “expresses identity,” as though every person carried a stable inner essence that fabric simply translated outward. The second says that clothing is nothing but convention imposed from outside.

Real life is less tidy. Dress is usually a negotiation. We inherit categories, sizes, gender codes, workplace expectations, cultural references, price structures, beauty ideals, and markets we did not design. Yet we can combine them, resist them, exaggerate them, ignore them, use them strategically, or enjoy them. Clothing works a little like a social grammar. Grammar does not force everyone to say the same sentence. It creates shared structures that make some sentences immediately intelligible and others surprising.

The same is true of dress. A deeply personal outfit can still be assembled from signs that are collectively recognizable. Individuality is not erased by the group. It is simply never the only author of meaning.

Dressing for Yourself, Dressing for Other People

Contemporary style advice often repeats the idea that we should dress “for ourselves.” There is something worth protecting in that claim. No one should be reduced to other

people's judgments, and the pleasure of wearing something can exist without immediate approval from anyone else. But the clean opposition between "myself" and "other people" falls apart under inspection. The self doing the choosing has already grown up among images, prohibitions, memories, admired people, embarrassing moments, class signals, gender expectations, subcultures, stores, schools, workplaces, media, and families. What feels personal can have a social history and still be genuinely personal.

We may love a color because it recalls a person or a place. We may hate a cut because it belongs to a period of our life we no longer want to inhabit. An inherited jacket can be worth more to us than its material or resale price could ever explain. We may choose something nearly invisible because we do not want attention, or something impossible to ignore because being seen is the point.

Clothing can carry all of these motives because it works on visibility. Visibility can be liberating. Changing clothes lets a person explore appearance without permanently altering the body. Someone can change silhouette, play with gender codes, enter a musical scene, mark a conviction, construct a theatrical look, or simply interrupt the image they presented yesterday. Clothing offers a special kind of plasticity: it can change a great deal without requiring everything else to change.

The same plasticity can become a constraint. If a group has dress codes, ignoring them can carry costs: credibility, employment, access, safety, belonging. Those costs are not equally distributed. An eccentricity praised on one body can be punished on another. The same outfit can be read differently depending on the body wearing it, the wearer's occupation,

perceived gender, age, social class, or setting. The point is not that people have no freedom in dress.

It is that freedom operates inside conditions that are not evenly shared. That matters later because a critique of fashion can easily become another command. “Just wear what you want” can be as naive as “follow the trend.” People make real choices, but they make them in different social spaces with different penalties for getting the code wrong. Any serious critique has to hold both sides: clothing can support autonomy, and that autonomy is never absolute.

The Value of the Useless

Severe critiques of consumption often overlook something obvious. People can love clothes because they are beautiful, funny, excessive, strange, impractical, or unnecessary. A garment may offer no additional protection, solve no social problem, and last no longer than a plainer alternative—and still create real joy. Embroidery no one needs, an impossible sleeve, a lining almost no one will see, a shoe that is absurdly impractical, a color with no functional defense: uselessness is not automatically a human failure.

Across societies, people spend time and skill making forms that exceed necessity. We decorate bodies, buildings, tools, rooms, rituals, and ordinary objects. We can debate the resources involved, who bears the cost, and when ornament becomes wasteful. But we cannot simply conclude that anything unnecessary is therefore worthless. A life limited to strictly necessary functions might consume fewer decorative objects. It would also lose a vast amount of human creation.[4]

Fashion draws much of its strength from this territory. It does not sell only solutions to needs. It participates in ornament,

metamorphosis, invention, theater, pleasure, and play. That is why critiques based solely on material rationality tend to fail. Telling someone that they already own “enough clothes” does not answer the question of why they want the one they are looking at. They may not need it.

But desire is not identical to need, and a serious critique has to understand desire before it can discuss how much material cost society should accept in order to satisfy it. No desire deserves satisfaction simply because it exists. No pleasure automatically justifies its cost. But contempt for pleasure is a poor starting point for understanding a system that knows how to organize pleasure so effectively.

The problem of fashion is not a war between necessity and frivolity. It is the question of how legitimate aesthetic play becomes tied to material circulation whose speed, volume, and consequences can become difficult to sustain.

The False Promise of Purely Functional Clothing

At this point, a radical solution may seem obvious. End fashion. Standardize clothing. Make garments simple, durable, repairable, and almost timeless. If nobody cares about novelty, much of the replacement cycle disappears. The idea has a certain logic. It solves the problem partly by deleting the human activity that created it. Even a uniform does not necessarily abolish distinction. People wear it more or less strictly. They alter the fit, choose different shoes, style their hair, add an accessory, roll a sleeve, break a minor rule, or use the uniform itself as a sign.

Even supposedly “timeless” clothing belongs to an era, a milieu, and an aesthetic. The attempt to escape the language of dress can simply create a new language with different signals.

More importantly, the purpose of this book is not to turn economic and ecological criticism into asceticism. We do not need to prove that beauty is useless in order to show that some production systems are unsustainable.

We do not need to condemn ornament in order to criticize the speed at which objects are replaced. We do not need to eliminate difference in order to reduce waste. The harder and more interesting question is how to preserve the social and aesthetic richness of clothing while reducing its dependence on permanent material renewal. For the purposes of this book, that requires three working distinctions.

A garment is the material object worn on the body. Dress is the broader set of practices and codes through which clothing takes its place in social life. Fashion is the dynamic through which forms gain, lose, and sometimes regain value over time. These definitions are tools for the argument. They are not meant to replace broader scholarly definitions of dress, which can include body modification, adornment, and other forms of appearance beyond garments themselves.[5]

Now the critique can begin. Not because human beings should retreat into purely functional fabric, but because clothing is powerful precisely because it is never only fabric. It protects, presents, connects, separates, transforms, disguises, decorates, and classifies. It sits against the body while speaking to the group. That richness is what makes the social machine of fashion possible. The next chapter therefore will not ask why people like clothes.

It will ask how forms begin to circulate, how they become desirable, how they help us belong and distinguish ourselves at the same time—and why that circulation keeps producing the need for something new.

Documentary Notes

[1] Joanne Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice," *Fashion Theory* 4, no. 3 (2000): 323–347, <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270400778995471>; Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10, no. 4 (1992): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X9201000401>. Scope: these works support treating the dressed body as material, social, and communicative rather than reducing clothing to physical protection.

[2] William N. Stephens, "A Cross-Cultural Study of Modesty," *Behavior Science Notes* 7, no. 1 (1972), <https://doi.org/10.1177/106939717200700101>; see also Entwistle, 2000. Scope: norms of bodily coverage vary enough across contexts to justify treating modesty as socially situated rather than uniform.

[3] Lawrence B. Rosenfeld and Timothy G. Plax, "Clothing as Communication," *Journal of Communication* 27, no. 2 (1977): 24–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1977.tb01823.x>; Richard A. Feinberg, Lisa Mataro, and W. Jeffrey Burroughs, "Clothing and Social Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 11, no. 1 (1992): 18–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X9201100103>. Scope: clothing can carry social meaning without providing a mechanically reliable reading of personal identity.

[4] Joanne B. Eicher, "The Anthropology of Dress," *Dress* 27, no. 1 (2000): 59–70, <https://doi.org/10.1179/036121100803656954>. Scope: the anthropology of dress includes adornment, bodily modification, and supplements to the body, supporting a conception broader than strict material necessity.

[5] Roach-Higgins and Eicher, "Dress and Identity," 1992. Scope: their scholarly definition of dress is broader than the garment / dress / fashion distinction used here, which remains a working analytical convention of this book.

CHAPTER 2 — FASHION'S SOCIAL MACHINE

A garment can be beautiful without being fashionable. It can be practical without being desirable, expensive without being prestigious, old without looking dated, common without being neutral. It can also become suddenly interesting even though nothing about its material construction has changed. That shift is where clothing enters fashion. The previous chapter asked why clothing can carry so much social meaning in the first place. The next question is how some forms begin to move through a population: how they become visible, desirable, familiar, ordinary, embarrassing, forgotten, and sometimes desirable again.

Fashion is not a mysterious property inside an object. It is a relationship among forms, people, groups, institutions, and time. That relationship has a strange feature: success changes the thing that succeeds. A rare silhouette may feel distinctive. Once it spreads, it becomes recognizable. Once it becomes ordinary, it may lose some of its power to distinguish. After disappearing long enough, it may acquire the distance needed to feel fresh again.

Fashion therefore does not simply produce preferences. It produces movement in preference. What matters is not only whether a form is liked, but where it stands in its social trajectory. That is why individual taste cannot explain fashion by itself. A person can sincerely love a silhouette and find it clumsy a few years later. We can believe we simply “got tired of it” while our eye has changed along with the people and images around us. The reverse happens too: something that once looked ridiculous becomes familiar, then normal, then attractive.

This does not make personal taste fake. It means taste develops in an environment of visibility, imitation, comparison, memory, and distinction. Fashion begins when those relations become part of the value of the form itself.

When Difference Becomes a Trend

Not every difference becomes fashion. One person can wear something unusual and inspire no one. A community can preserve a form of dress for generations without treating novelty as a virtue. A workplace can impose a uniform precisely to reduce visible variation. Fashion requires a different process: a form has to circulate as something recognizable, desirable, and located in time. Its origin is often impossible to isolate cleanly.

A cut may appear in several places, be adopted by a designer, associated with a visible musician or athlete, amplified by a subculture, picked up by a retailer, copied at several price points, remixed by creators online, and eventually appear so widely that no single origin explains its spread. The innovation may not even be dramatic. A hem shifts. A pant leg widens. A shoe gets bulkier. A familiar garment is worn in a slightly different proportion.

Fashion does not depend on absolute invention. It depends on a difference becoming legible as a difference that matters. That legibility is essential. A variation no one notices cannot easily function as a social signal. A trend begins when enough people can recognize, even without naming it, that a form is becoming current. It attracts attention. It repeats. The repetition still feels like momentum rather than saturation.

Repetition then does two opposite things. First, it can legitimize. A look that seemed awkward on first sight can

become intentional on the tenth. The eye learns. What once looked disproportionate begins to look current. What looked unfinished starts to look deliberate. Familiarity changes judgment. This is one reason a trend can feel as though it became beautiful after we had already rejected it. But repetition also contains the possibility of exhaustion.

A shoe that once signaled rarity becomes recognizable, then common. A color that distinguished a few people spreads until it distinguishes almost no one. A silhouette that made someone feel ahead of the crowd becomes simply what the crowd is wearing. At that point, new differences become valuable to anyone who still wants distinction. Fashion contains a built-in paradox: the diffusion that confirms a trend can also prepare the conditions for its decline.

Belonging Through Imitation, Existing Through Difference

One of fashion's oldest paradoxes is that people can search for individuality by doing what many other people have just started doing. Georg Simmel placed imitation and differentiation at the center of fashion. Herbert Blumer later challenged the idea that fashion could be explained only as lower social groups copying elites. Forms can emerge through multiple pathways and become fashionable through collective selection, not just a simple top-down cascade.[1]

That matters because imitation is not the opposite of individuality. An adolescent adopting the signs of a music scene, a lawyer dressing within professional expectations, a runner wearing a brand associated with a sport, or a guest choosing clothes that fit an event is not necessarily surrendering personality. They are using a shared grammar. A language does not become impersonal because everyone uses the same words.

What matters is how those shared materials are combined, inflected, and used in a particular setting.

Clothing can work the same way. Belonging, however, always has an outside. If a style makes it easier to recognize who is “in,” it can also make those who are “out” more visible. Not having the right garment, not knowing how to wear it, or appearing behind the current code can produce embarrassment, misrecognition, or exclusion. The stakes vary. Wearing the wrong shoes to one gathering may be funny. Wearing the wrong thing in another setting can cost credibility, access, or safety.

That variation is why fashion is not merely private taste. Distinction is equally complicated. It does not always mean a conscious desire to dominate. Often it is much more ordinary: the wish not to look exactly like everyone else. Many people want something that lives in an intermediate zone—recognizable enough to be understood, unusual enough not to feel interchangeable. Too strange, and the form may not be legible.

Too common, and it stops differentiating. Fashion works constantly along that border. This is also why the commercial promise to “express yourself” is neither pure truth nor pure manipulation. Clothing really can help people compose a public version of themselves. But they compose it from a repertoire that has already been produced, distributed, priced, ranked, promoted, and made visible by other people. We choose. We do not choose the whole field in which the choice occurs.

Fashion therefore holds together two desires that look contradictory but often reinforce each other: to be recognized and to remain distinct. Belong enough to be understood. Differ enough not to disappear. As long as both desires remain active,

perfect stability in clothing is unlikely. Every shared form creates new opportunities for variation around it.

Class, Prestige, and the Power to Name

Forms do not circulate through a socially flat world. Not every body, group, magazine, platform, institution, celebrity, editor, retailer, or designer has the same power to make a garment look desirable, respectable, current, or prestigious. The same object can be read differently depending on who wears it, where it appears, what it is paired with, and what story people know about it. Fashion does not simply organize aesthetic difference. It can reproduce and rearrange social hierarchy.[2]

Price is one obvious mechanism, but not the only one. A garment may carry prestige because it is rare, difficult to obtain, associated with craftsmanship, attached to a famous house, worn by a desirable group, or connected to a particular cultural history. A materially similar object may be dismissed because it seems too available, too imitated, or associated with a group from which others want distance.

Clothing is unusually effective as a status signal because it combines immediate visibility with classification. That logic is not limited to luxury. A cheap garment can become culturally valuable because it is vintage, obscure, difficult to find, linked to a scene, or perceived as authentic. Workwear can become high fashion after being removed from the work that gave it meaning. Technical footwear can become streetwear. An unfashionable old jacket can become expensive because the category around it changes.

Prestige does not follow price in a straight line. It is built through stories about scarcity, origin, expertise, authenticity, use, and belonging. That exposes a subtler kind of power: the

power to name. Calling something elegant, vulgar, authentic, basic, timeless, dated, avant-garde, cool, embarrassing, or “so last year” is not merely neutral description. Such judgments help position the object socially. Bourdieu’s work on taste made the larger point: aesthetic judgments are socially structured, and some groups have far greater resources for making their judgments visible and legitimate.[3]

This becomes especially clear when fashion travels across social boundaries. Dominant groups are not always the source of the forms they later celebrate. Styles can emerge from popular cultures, professional practices, marginalized groups, or countercultures, then be absorbed into much larger markets. That movement can bring recognition, money, and wider circulation. It can also detach a sign from its history, enrich actors far removed from those who created it, or turn a lived practice into an aesthetic option.

There is no universal rule that turns every cultural exchange into theft. Cultures have always borrowed, mixed, imitated, and changed one another. The opposite simplification is equally bad: saying that all circulation is innocent because everyone influences everyone else. Power relations, who can profit, who controls the story, and how the people who first carried a sign are treated all remain relevant.

The only responsible method is to examine the case.

When Rebellion Becomes Merchandise

Commercial fashion has an extraordinary ability to sell the signs of its own rejection. Styles that emerge in subcultures as markers of separation or resistance can become visible, recognizable, and eventually marketable. A look born from refusal can turn into a collection. A garment associated with

marginality can later appear in a luxury campaign. A sign that once carried social risk can become something a consumer purchases in order to borrow the appearance of risk.[4]

That does not make every act of sartorial rebellion meaningless. Clothing can create solidarity, make a group visible, open room for new identities, and disrupt expectations. A style can matter deeply to the people who first use it. But once the form is visible, it can be copied independently of the experience that gave it meaning. This separation between form and function is crucial. A torn jacket can be the result of poverty, a practical consequence of work, the uniform of a music scene, a deliberate aesthetic choice, or an expensive product manufactured to look worn.

The observable material is not enough to tell us what the sign means. Fashion thrives in this ambiguity because it can turn traces of necessity into style and traces of rebellion into options. Commercialization is not always an external force imposed on a subculture. People inside a scene may start brands, sell designs, expand their audience, and build businesses around the aesthetic they helped create.

At that point, the line between appropriation and voluntary diffusion becomes harder to draw. Again, the useful questions are concrete: who decides, who benefits, what history remains visible, what gets erased, and what becomes possible or impossible when the form enters a larger market? This capacity for absorption also explains why it is so hard to symbolically “leave fashion.” Rejecting fashion can become fashion. Anti-fashion can develop recognizable codes. Minimalism can become a status system. Wearing visibly repaired clothing can become a distinction. Secondhand can become a carefully

curated aesthetic rather than an escape from aesthetic hierarchy.

That does not make critique futile. It means social distinction does not disappear just because we change the objects through which it operates.

When the Ridiculous Comes Back

Fashion's social movement may be easiest to see when an old form returns. A cut disappears. People mock it. A decade or two passes. It reappears, sometimes slowly and sometimes all at once, and the same basic form becomes desirable again. Elizabeth Guffey's work on retro culture helps explain why the past can become a resource for the present rather than merely something left behind.[5]

The returned form is rarely identical to its earlier version. Materials change. Proportions change. The body wearing it changes. The cultural associations are different. The garment comes back surrounded by new objects and new meanings. Still, the return reveals something fundamental. "Outdated" was never a stable physical property of the garment. If the same basic form can move from desirable to ridiculous and from ridiculous back to desirable, then its value lives partly in a temporal relationship.

Something can become too recent to feel interesting, then distant enough to be rediscovered. That mechanism feeds vintage markets, but it is larger than vintage. Fashion has an enormous archive. An industry that needs continual novelty does not have to invent unprecedented forms every season. It can reactivate, recombine, resize, restyle, and rename. "New" in fashion often means new to this moment, not new in the history of dress.

This makes the category of “timeless” more fragile than it sounds. Some garments do move more slowly through the fashion cycle. They can remain acceptable across more settings, or change only gradually. That can make them easier to wear for a long time. But no visible object is literally outside culture. What we call timeless may simply be a form whose social depreciation is unusually slow, or whose returns are frequent enough to create continuity.

That distinction matters for the rest of this book. There is no magical wardrobe outside history. What we can reasonably seek are clothes whose social life lasts closer to their material life. The smaller the gap between those two timelines, the less physical replacement is required by every movement of taste. We can now see why fashion is both attractive and unstable. It gives us a language for belonging, distinction, experiment, memory, status, and recognition.

But the language changes as people speak it. A successful distinction becomes common. A rebellion becomes legible enough to be copied. A convention creates room for a new deviation. A rejected past becomes usable again. Fashion is not simply a sequence of changing garments. It is a social machine that changes the value of forms by moving them through bodies, groups, institutions, images, and time.

The next chapter asks what happens when that old social dynamic is industrialized, accelerated, and turned into a business model that can make things feel obsolete long before they stop working.

Documentary Notes

[1] Georg Simmel, “Fashion,” *American Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 6 (1957): 541–558, <https://doi.org/10.1086/222102> (original text published 1904); Herbert Blumer, “Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection,” *The*

Sociological Quarterly 10, no. 3 (1969): 275–291, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1969.tb01292.x>. Scope: Simmel places imitation and differentiation in tension; Blumer argues against reducing fashion to a purely class-downward diffusion model.

[2] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1984; original French edition 1979). Scope: aesthetic preferences and judgments are socially structured and can participate in distinctions among social groups.

[3] Bourdieu, *Distinction*. Scope: “the power to name” is the book’s analytical phrasing, not a quotation attributed to Bourdieu.

[4] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Methuen, 1979); Monica Sklar, Jessica Strübel, Katharine Freiberg, and Sara Elhabbassi, “Beyond Subculture the Meaning of Style: Chronicling Directions of Scholarship on Dress since Hebdige and Muggleton,” *Fashion Theory* 26, no. 6 (2022): 715–735. Scope: these sources support analysis of subcultural style, circulation, and commercialization without implying that every case follows the same sequence.

[5] Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (Reaktion Books, 2006). Scope: the return of past styles is treated as reinterpretation in the present, not exact repetition of an earlier social meaning.

CHAPTER 3 — MAKING CLOTHES OBSOLETE

There is an obvious way for a garment to become useless. It wears out. The fabric tears. The zipper breaks. The sole separates. The insulation stops insulating. The color or structure degrades beyond what the wearer will accept. Repair becomes impossible or unreasonable. The object reaches the end of its material life. Fashion knows another kind of death. The jacket still closes. The pants are intact. The shoes could go hundreds of miles farther. The dress still performs exactly the function it performed on the day it was bought.

And yet we stop wanting it. It looks old. The cut feels wrong. We have seen it too often. It belongs to a version of ourselves we no longer want to present. Something we once admired now feels embarrassing or merely tired. Nothing comparable has happened to the material. The object has become obsolete without becoming unusable. That distinction is central to contemporary fashion. If repeat sales depended only on physical wear, well-made clothes could create a simple limit: they can last a long time.

Desire creates another route. The garment does not need to fail. It only needs to stop feeling worth wearing.

Two Ways an Object Dies

Any business that repeatedly sells durable goods lives with a basic tension. For the owner, a good product is usually one that keeps working. A warm, repairable, well-made coat that lasts fifteen years is a success. Its purchase price can be spread over years of use. It requires little replacement. It provides what the buyer wanted for a long time. For a company that has to keep selling coats, the same durability creates a problem of timing.

The company can grow by finding new customers, taking market share, entering new regions, improving the product, or selling other things. But in a mature market, there is another powerful possibility: persuade people who already own a functioning product that replacing it would still improve their lives. One route is physical: make the product fragile enough that replacement becomes necessary. Another is symbolic: let the object remain functional while its desirability declines.

This book calls that second process symbolic obsolescence. The phrase is my analytical term. It overlaps with what scholarship often calls style obsolescence or psychological obsolescence, but it is deliberately broader. It describes the loss of social or personal value in an object that still works. It is also different from planned obsolescence in the strict sense. Planned obsolescence implies that a producer or seller deliberately induces replacement. Symbolic obsolescence does not require that kind of centralized intention. It can emerge from competition, imitation, media, platforms, group behavior, marketing, boredom, creative experimentation, and the ordinary desire for novelty.[1]

To see why, it helps to separate two ages. Material age is the condition of the garment itself: the fibers, seams, closures, structure, strength, and ability to perform its practical functions. Symbolic age is the garment's position, at a particular moment, within collective systems of taste, status, identity, and desirability. The two can move almost independently. A twenty-year-old coat can suddenly look excellent because it is now "vintage." A six-month-old jacket can feel dated. Worn-in shoes may gain value because they display use, while a nearly new pair can feel stranded in a trend that has already moved on.

Matter ages through physical processes. Fashion can make an object age much faster than its material—and, just as important, can make it young again. The periodic return of old silhouettes proves the point. A cut can disappear for fifteen years, then return to stores and feeds. People who kept the earlier version may discover that the garment now resembles what is being presented as new.

“Outdated” was never stored in the fabric. It was a relation between the object, a historical moment, and a collective way of looking.

Turning Time Into a Market

Fashion does more than sell garments. It organizes a calendar. A form becomes new, current, familiar, ordinary, old, dated, forgotten—and sometimes newly desirable. The sequence feels natural because we are used to it, but there is no physical law that makes a pant leg ridiculous after a certain number of years. Fashion creates a present. It tells us, often without saying so explicitly, what looks like now.

Once the present is defined, the recent past becomes visible too. Some shapes signal immediacy; others begin to signal that their moment has passed. Commercially, that is enormously useful. The body’s practical needs change, but relatively slowly. People need protection from climate and activity. They need replacements when garments wear out, bodies change, jobs change, or circumstances change. Social desire can be refreshed much faster.

Winter does not have to become colder for someone to want a new coat. The old coat only has to stop representing the same present. Collections help organize this rhythm. Seasonal collections retain a relationship to actual weather, but

commercial seasons do more than react to climate. They create scheduled moments of renewal. Between major seasons come pre-collections, capsules, collaborations, limited releases, drops, and continuous online updates.

Change stops being an event. It becomes the normal state of the offering. Yesterday's store has to look different enough tomorrow to justify another visit. The app opened on Monday has to offer enough novelty by Friday to justify another scroll. The catalog is no longer only a set of products. It is a feed. That shift matters. In a clothing economy, the object is central. In an accelerated fashion economy, renewal itself becomes part of what is being sold.

The scale of American spending makes the point without telling us anything about any single purchase. U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis data put 2025 personal consumption expenditures on clothing and footwear at about \$561.8 billion. [2] That figure is household consumption spending, not the revenue of a single "fashion market," and it should not be treated as one. Its function here is simply to show the size of the economic arena in which repeated replacement takes place.

When a social present can be sold over and over again, time itself becomes part of the market.

Dissatisfaction as a Business Resource

It would be too simple to imagine a powerful industry injecting artificial desires into passive consumers. People genuinely enjoy change. A new silhouette can be fun. A different color can alter mood. A garment can change posture, confidence, or the way a person sees themselves in a mirror. Trying on a new appearance can be playful, serious, liberating, ridiculous, or all of those at once.

Novelty has power before advertising touches it. The commercial opportunity lies in organizing that real human capacity into repeatable cycles. Curiosity, aesthetic pleasure, imitation, distinction, belonging, reinvention, and the enjoyment of transformation are not inventions of the apparel industry. They are resources the industry can continuously activate. A garment therefore sells more than fabric. It sells possibility. The invitation is less “own me” than “see who you might be with me.”

The difficulty is that possibility has a short half-life. Once the garment is owned, novelty begins to become familiarity. The extraordinary piece joins the ordinary closet. The transformation that felt vivid at the fitting-room mirror becomes the background of daily life. This is normal human adaptation. It is also commercially useful. The pleasure of change can be restarted by another change. The problem is not desire.

The problem begins when a system depends on satisfaction remaining temporary enough to protect the next sale. Traditional advertising helps by attaching clothing to a body, mood, place, group, or way of living. But explicit ads are only part of the visual environment in which taste develops. Movies, music, celebrity culture, street style, magazines, runway images, stores, creators, influencers, and social platforms all participate in the circulation of forms.

We do not invent every preference in isolation. We learn how to look. A strange shape becomes visible, then familiar, then attractive, then ordinary. And sometimes its very success begins to weaken it. A trend that spreads widely can lose the distinctiveness that helped make it valuable. No conspiracy is required. Designers want to create. Companies want to sell.

Consumers want to change. Groups want belonging. Individuals want distinction. Media want new images. Platforms want continued attention.

Each participant can follow a locally understandable logic. Together, those logics can create an accelerating system in which everyone helps make existing things feel older.

From Seasons to Microtrends

Fast fashion did not invent the social dynamics described in the previous chapter. It industrialized speed. The classic fast-fashion model combines shortened production and distribution cycles with the ability to respond quickly to visible demand and emerging trends. Low prices and relatively short use can intensify the model, although brands and products differ.[3] The shift is less about the existence of fashion change than about its pace, scale, and organization.

A system can notice a form, reproduce it, distribute it widely, and move on. Digital media make that circulation denser. Fashion blogging, Instagram, creator culture, and newer short-form platforms have changed who produces fashion imagery and how quickly it travels.[4] An outfit that once circulated mainly among people physically present can now be photographed once and shown to thousands or millions of people. That creates a peculiar kind of wear.

The garment may barely have been worn, while its image feels exhausted. Wardrobe research suggests that social media can discourage outfit repetition for some people, although that finding cannot be generalized to every population or treated as a universal behavioral law.[5] The distinction matters. A piece of clothing can acquire symbolic fatigue before it acquires material wear. Platforms also blur old roles. Brands publish

directly. Consumers become creators. Influencers become retailers or designers. Audiences comment, rank, remix, buy, and feed signals back into the same systems that monitor engagement and demand.

That does not prove that social media mechanically shortens every trend. The evidence supports a more cautious claim: digital media accelerate the circulation of images, information, feedback, and commercial signals, creating conditions in which fashion cycles can accelerate without establishing one universal speed for all of them.[6] The distinction between conditions and causes matters throughout this book. Fashion is not a machine with one button.

It is a network in which many actors can push in the same direction without agreeing on a single plan.

The Garment Did Nothing Wrong

At this point, the critique can easily turn into a sermon. Stop liking new things. Stop caring how you look. Buy nothing until the garment you own physically falls apart. Become rational. That would misunderstand the problem. A serious critique of fashion does not ask human beings to stop being aesthetic, social, and symbolic creatures. It asks why satisfying those capacities has become tied to so much material replacement.

We can enjoy changing appearance without needing every change to begin with newly manufactured clothing. We can enjoy fashion without accepting that every movement in taste requires new extraction, new production, new freight, and another object that may soon be unwanted. We can play with signs without treating every material support for those signs as disposable. This is the decisive mismatch: Fashion can move quickly.

A garment is physically slow. A symbolic code can change this week. Polyester does not vanish with it. A trend can disappear from view while the material created for that trend remains in closets, resale channels, warehouses, landfills, incinerators, or export streams. An economy that translates every movement of desire into a corresponding movement of matter converts cultural volatility into physical accumulation. That is why “how do we make greener clothes?” cannot be the first question.

We also have to ask why so many clothes need to be made. If the social life of a garment is much shorter than its material life, improving the material alone cannot close the gap. Available estimates suggest that clothing use has fallen significantly over recent decades. The European Environment Agency, drawing on widely cited sector estimates, has repeated an order-of-magnitude decline of roughly 36 percent in clothing use time over twenty years.[7] That number should not be treated as a universal measurement of American closets. Its importance is the underlying relationship: a durable product produces its expected benefit only when it is actually used for a long time.

The harder question is therefore cultural as much as technical. How do we preserve value without freezing taste? The real opponent may not be novelty. It may be novelty’s dependence on making the previous thing feel worthless. A freer aesthetic system could produce new forms without requiring older ones to become embarrassing. Trends could still exist without turning every former trend into trash. People could mix, alter, borrow, revisit, and reinterpret what already exists.

That would preserve fashion while slowing the conversion of aesthetic pleasure into material throughput. The coat in the

back of the closet has not undergone a transformation equal to the loss of value we assign it. It did not become less warm. Its seams do not know a new collection arrived. Its color has no idea whether it is “in.” It simply continues to exist.

Our gaze moved. The political, cultural, and economic question of fashion may begin exactly there: How much should every movement of our gaze require the material world to move with it?

Documentary Notes

[1] Jurgita Malinauskaite and Fatih Buğra Erdem, “Planned Obsolescence in the Context of a Holistic Legal Sphere and the Circular Economy,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 41, no. 3 (2021): 719–749, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/gqaa061>. Scope: the literature distinguishes style or psychological obsolescence; “symbolic obsolescence” remains a broader analytical term specific to this book and is not synonymous with planned obsolescence.

[2] U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Personal consumption expenditures: Nondurable goods: Clothing and footwear,” annual current-dollar series DCLORC1A027NBEA. 2025 observation: \$561.764 billion. Scope: this is U.S. household personal consumption expenditure for clothing and footwear, not a proprietary fashion-industry market-size estimate and not the revenue of U.S. apparel retailers.

[3] Gérard P. Cachon and Robert Swinney, “The Value of Fast Fashion: Quick Response, Enhanced Design, and Strategic Consumer Behavior,” *Management Science* 57, no. 4 (2011): 778–795, <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1100.1303>; European Environment Agency, “Textiles” thematic material. Scope: fast fashion is associated with rapid response, trend capture, low prices, and often short use; the category should not erase variation among companies and garments.

[4] Marco Pedroni, “Two Decades of Fashion Blogging and Influencing: A Critical Overview,” *Fashion Theory* 27, no. 2 (2023): 237–268, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2021.2017213>; Marco Pedroni and Emanuela Mora, “Influencers, Niche Magazines and Journalistic Practice in Italy: Toward a New Fashion Editorial System,” *Fashion Theory* 27, no. 7 (2023): 957–984, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2023.2284000>. Scope: these works document the institutionalization of influencers and transformation of fashion mediation.

[5] Helen Maguire and Frances Fahy, “Unlocking Insights in the Everyday: Exploring Practices to Foster Sustainable Maximum Use of Clothing,” *Cleaner and Responsible Consumption* 8 (2023): 100095, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clrc.2022.100095>. Scope: this qualitative Irish study identifies social media as one factor that can affect outfit repetition; it does not establish a universal effect.

[6] Synne Skjulstad, “Vetements, Memes, and Connectivity: Fashion Media in the Era of Instagram,” *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 2 (2020): 181–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2018.1491191>; Pedroni and Mora, 2023. Scope: digital circulation and changing fashion mediation are documented; a mechanical shortening of every trend’s average lifespan is not established.

[7] European Environment Agency, *Textiles and the Environment: The Role of Design in Europe’s Circular Economy*, Briefing 01/2022, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2800/006659>. Scope: EEA reports an order-of-magnitude decline of about 36 percent in clothing use time over twenty years. It is used here as evidence of a broad durability/use problem, not as a measurement of all U.S. wardrobes.

CHAPTER 4 — SELLING A SELF WITH THE CLOTHES

Buying clothes is almost never just an exchange for fabric. Even when the practical need is real, clothing arrives surrounded by meanings. It can promise a body, a mood, a level of seriousness, a social position, a way of being seen, or a version of ourselves that feels more possible once we can put it on.[1] That is one reason the clothing market expands so easily beyond material need.

A person can be fully dressed and still feel badly dressed. A closet can be crowded and somehow contain “nothing to wear.” The missing thing is no longer coverage. It is fit between a person, an image, a situation, and an anticipated gaze. Sometimes that fit matters. Clothes can help people inhabit a role, claim an identity, experiment with an appearance, make belonging visible, or leave behind an old version of themselves. There is no reason to reduce every such change to manipulation.

The critique begins when these human powers of transformation become renewable markets for inadequacy—when a garment is sold not only as a new object, but as repeated evidence that the more desirable person is one purchase away.

Buying a Possible Self

The fitting-room mirror condenses a large part of fashion’s power. We are not only checking whether the garment fits. We are checking what the garment does to the person in the mirror. A cut lengthens or shortens. A shoulder line sharpens or softens. A color changes the overall impression. A fabric makes

movement rigid or fluid. We know the pants will not make us smarter. We know a jacket will not manufacture courage.

But it can change the way we enter a room. That is enough to make the experience meaningful. Clothing therefore works unusually well with stories of transformation. The “before” and “after” do not need to be dramatic. A person may want to look more professional, more relaxed, more adult, younger, more creative, more discreet, more serious, more eccentric, or simply different from yesterday. Those possibilities contradict one another, which is precisely why there can be so many markets.

There is no single desirable self. There are many possible selves attached to different moments, groups, ambitions, and fears. Advertising can move attention away from the garment and toward one of those projected selves. The message need not say, “this jacket is well made.” It can show a person whose posture, surroundings, relationships, body, and apparent ease create an entire world. The jacket becomes the material handle on a much larger fantasy.

What the buyer receives is finite. What the image allows the buyer to imagine can be enormous. This mechanism does not require consumers to believe the fantasy literally. People know that campaigns are staged. They know lighting, casting, styling, editing, and location are selected. An image can influence without being mistaken for a documentary fact. Fiction works because it can become a reference point. The commercial force of this is especially strong during ordinary moments when identity feels more open to revision: a new job, a breakup, weight change, a birthday, a move, a relationship, a school year, a major event, or simple boredom.

Clothing offers one of the fastest and least irreversible ways to materialize change. A great deal can shift in an hour without

changing the body permanently. That plasticity is valuable. It is also extremely easy to monetize.

When the Body Is Asked to Fit the Clothes

The relationship becomes more troubling when the question changes. Instead of asking whether the garment fits the body, the market begins asking whether the body fits the garment. Sizing systems, cuts, campaign imagery, and dominant silhouettes create bodies of reference. Those references affect women and men, though not in identical ways. Experimental research on thin-ideal fashion advertising has found increased appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction among female participants after exposure.[2] That does not prove that fashion creates one body ideal by itself. It shows that fashion imagery can be one part of an environment in which certain bodies become more visible, rewarded, and desirable.

Trends can shift which parts of the body are emphasized. A season can favor a narrow waist, oversized shoulders, a long leg, a visible stomach, a particular kind of muscularity, or the concealment of the same features that another period exposed. The body has not changed as quickly as the frame around it. That matters because body dissatisfaction is not only a comparison to one fixed ideal. It can be renewed when clothing changes what it rewards or makes visible.

Precision is important here. Fashion is not the sole source of body norms. Family, medicine, entertainment, sports, sexuality, social media, class, gender, and personal experience also shape the body as a social object. Countermovements, specialized markets, designers, and communities have widened the range of bodies represented in fashion. The system is not uniform. But diversity does not eliminate the economic question. A market can profit by multiplying opportunities to feel mismatched.

Clothing occupies an ambiguous position in that process. It can protect someone from an unwanted gaze. It can make a body feel inhabitable. It can provide a form in which a person finally feels right. It can also turn shopping into self-evaluation. A size that will not close, a cut designed around a different body, or a product image shown almost exclusively on bodies unlike one's own can make the garment and the person seem to be judged at the same time.

The confusion becomes commercially useful when products are sold as corrections: clothing that promises to slim, lift, hide, shape, lengthen, smooth, or make the wearer look younger. Someone may genuinely want and enjoy those effects. The critical question is different. At what point does an industry stop merely dressing existing bodies and begin helping define the flaws that its products then promise to solve?

Gender, Sexualization, and Legibility

Clothing is one of the most immediate ways gender becomes socially readable. Depending on the context, dress can reinforce gender expectations, negotiate them, blur them, exaggerate them, or refuse them. The codes are neither universal nor fixed. A color, material, shoe, length, or accessory can be read as masculine, feminine, neutral, or transgressive in one time and place and differently in another.[3] Fashion can tighten those boundaries and loosen them at the same time.

One part of the market can sell conventional femininity while another sells androgyny. One campaign can intensify a traditional masculine ideal while another turns its violation into a product category. That is not necessarily inconsistency. A large market does not need to settle cultural conflict. It can sell to several sides of the conflict at once. The same is true of sexualization. What a culture reads as sexual does not depend

only on how much skin is visible. It depends on cut, pose, styling, context, gaze, association, and expectation.

One era emphasizes one part of the body; another emphasizes something else. So counting inches of fabric cannot tell us whether a look is sexualized. The moral trap here is obvious. Showing the body is not automatically submission to the market. Covering it is not automatically liberation. A person can choose a highly sexualized appearance because they enjoy it. They can also be pushed toward modesty or respectability. A rhetoric of empowerment can become advertising just as a rhetoric of tradition can become advertising.

The useful question is not how much body people ought to show. It is which norms are operating, who can violate them without penalty, and how markets translate those tensions into sellable forms. Fashion is unusually good at doing this because it does not have to resolve contradictions. It can sell conformity and escape, modesty and exposure, hard masculinity and gender fluidity—sometimes at the same time.

Dressing Your Age

Age creates another set of expectations that clothing makes visible. “Dress your age” is not a neutral description. It implies that there are appropriate ways for different ages to appear and that a person can get the relationship wrong. Research on fashion and aging has documented the pressure, especially on women, to negotiate femininity, visibility, youthfulness, and respectability through dress.[4] The commercial tension is almost perfect.

Aging can create real new needs. Bodies change. Work changes. Mobility changes. Climate tolerance, fit, and comfort can change. But the market can also turn an ordinary transition

into a problem requiring a new wardrobe. A person can be warned not to “look old” while also being warned against looking as though they are trying too hard to appear young. Between those judgments sits a narrow zone of acceptable age.

Fashion can move that zone. Youth is often associated with novelty, though not equally in every market segment. Older consumers are not ignored; they can be offered other ideals—quality, refinement, restraint, agelessness, rejuvenation. The point is not that one age is sold and another excluded. The point is that the market can organize several different ways of avoiding age-related inadequacy. This reveals a broader pattern.

Transitions in life create legitimate clothing needs. Starting work, becoming a parent, changing size, aging, entering a new community, or taking on a new role may genuinely require different clothes. But the same transitions can become invitations to rebuild the entire wardrobe around a new identity. Adaptation and symbolic replacement can look very similar from the checkout screen.

The Brand: Buying a Visible Name

A brand compresses an extraordinary amount of assumed information into a sign. A name can suggest quality, price, history, national origin, social class, scarcity, taste, subculture, craftsmanship, or status. The logo is a shortcut. It lets an object borrow a reputation larger than its material. Sometimes that reputation reflects real differences. Brands may invest in design, fabric, quality control, manufacturing, service, repair, distribution, or long-term consistency. It would be absurd to pretend that every product is materially identical and only the logo changes.

The opposite mistake is equally naive. Price does not mechanically track material quality or durability. Part of the value can come from recognition itself. Experiments on luxury branding show that visible prestigious labels can increase perceived wealth and status, and in some settings alter how the wearer is treated.[5] Those findings concern recognizable luxury/status signals; they do not prove that every logo functions that way.

Counterfeiting demonstrates the same separation from another angle. If material were the only thing that mattered, copying the sign would have little value. The fake exists because the name carries value apart from the physical object. That value depends on collective recognition. A logo nobody recognizes cannot do much social work. Branding therefore functions partly as infrastructure for recognition. Once a name accumulates enough desire, it can command a price that cannot be explained by material function alone.

This does not erase artistry or craftsmanship. It means the company is also selling social meaning. That meaning has to be maintained through stores, images, collaborations, scarcity, events, celebrity association, history, storytelling, and continued visibility.

Advertising Sells a World

Fashion advertising often places the product inside a scene much larger than the product. A classic model in consumer research describes advertising and fashion systems as mechanisms that move cultural meaning toward consumer goods.[6] The practical logic is easy to recognize. Freedom is hard to buy directly. So are confidence, rebellion, calm, intelligence, sophistication, desirability, or belonging. A garment has a price and a stock number.

Advertising places the object next to the desired abstraction until the path between them becomes easy to imagine. That is why a fashion image can contain a car, a beach, a party, an apartment, a city street, a silent room, a group of friends, or a solitary person who seems perfectly at ease. The clothing may occupy only a small part of the psychological proposition.

The ad sells a world into which the garment appears to provide entry. Social media makes the boundary between advertising and ordinary observation harder to see. A garment may appear in content posted by a brand, a paid influencer, a celebrity with a business relationship, an affiliate creator, a friend, or a stranger who simply likes what they bought. Those images do not all have the same commercial status.

FTC guidance recognizes that distinction. The Federal Trade Commission's Endorsement Guides, revised in 2023, distinguish endorsements involving material connections from ordinary product comments; material connections that could affect how an audience evaluates an endorsement should be disclosed clearly and conspicuously.[7] That distinction matters because it prevents a conceptual shortcut. Not every attractive outfit in a feed is an ad. But feeds can still function as commercial environments even when individual posts are not advertisements.

A person may learn that a silhouette is current because they see it repeatedly across sponsored content, editorial coverage, creators, friends, entertainment, and ordinary users. Persuasion can therefore be explicit or ambient. No single image has magical power. There is always distance between seeing, desiring, and buying: price, taste, skepticism, habit, financial constraint, or simple indifference can intervene. The influence is cumulative. When certain objects are repeatedly associated

with certain kinds of beauty, status, leisure, romance, or competence, those associations become part of the environment in which choice occurs.

The question is not whether people are manipulated or free, as though only one answer could be true. People can make real choices inside a field of visible possibilities that other actors have spent enormous resources shaping.

The Inadequacy Market

The mechanisms in this chapter converge on what I will call the inadequacy market. This is not an established scientific category. It is the book's name for a recurring commercial structure: selling not only a garment, but a way to reduce the perceived distance between the person someone is and the person they feel they should become. More attractive. More professional. Younger. More confident. More relaxed.

More disciplined. More original. More appropriate to the body, job, age, peer group, or moment. The phrase does not imply that all clothing purchases begin in self-rejection.[8] Many do not. People buy clothes because they need them, like them, collect them, enjoy craft, replace worn items, participate in a tradition, or simply want something beautiful. Nor does the industry have to invent every insecurity it can monetize.

Humans compare themselves, seek recognition, fear exclusion, and worry about being seen correctly in many areas of life. Markets are often most effective when they discover tensions that already exist. They can then amplify, segment, aestheticize, and repeatedly attach products to them. The renewable quality of the promise is essential. No garment can permanently answer the question "am I enough?" It may create real pleasure, confidence, fit, or social ease.

But bodies change. Jobs change. Age changes. Relationships change. Norms change. The desired self changes. The promise can therefore be made again. This is where inadequacy meets symbolic obsolescence. A garment can become obsolete because the trend moved. It can also become obsolete because the self it once represented no longer feels desirable. The object ages together with the person we projected into it. A critique of fashion should not try to abolish this play.

We will probably keep using clothing to experiment, seduce, belong, distinguish ourselves, mark transitions, and feel different. The aim is to separate that human capacity from a business logic that benefits when every temporary self becomes insufficient fast enough to require another object. Clothes can help us feel more legible, comfortable, or aligned with an image we choose. They do not need to persuade us that we were defective before putting them on.

A fashion less dependent on inadequacy might be less efficient at producing endless replacement. It might also be more honest about what clothing can offer: not a new person, but a new form in which the person already there can recognize themselves for a while.

Documentary Notes

[1] Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10, no. 4 (1992): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X9201000401>; Elena Millan and Jonathan Reynolds, "Self-construals, symbolic and hedonic preferences, and actual purchase behavior," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 21, no. 4 (2014): 550–560, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2014.03.012>. Scope: clothing can participate in identity, and some purchases have symbolic and hedonic dimensions.

[2] Vanessa M. Buote et al., "Setting the bar: Divergent sociocultural norms for women's and men's ideal appearance in real-world contexts," *Body Image* 8, no. 4 (2011): 322–334, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2011.06.002>; Marika

Tiggemann and Zoe Brown, "Labelling fashion magazine advertisements: Effectiveness of different label formats on social comparison and body dissatisfaction," *Body Image* 25 (2018): 97–102, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2018.02.010>. Scope: the experimental advertising results cited here involve female participants and should not be mechanically generalized to all people.

[3] Linda B. Arthur, "Dress and the Social Construction of Gender in Two Sororities," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 17, no. 2 (1999): 84–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X9901700203>; Ben Barry, "(Re)Fashioning Masculinity: Social Identity and Context in Men's Hybrid Masculinities through Dress," *Gender & Society* 32, no. 5 (2018): 638–662, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243218774495>; Anna Peter Magyarlaci and Alastair Pipkin, "'Curating That Confusion': Nonbinary Dress Strategies and Their Implications on Identity Development," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, OnlineFirst (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X251360329>. Scope: these contextual studies converge on dress as a site of gender legibility and negotiation.

[4] Julia Twigg, "How Does Vogue Negotiate Age?: Fashion, the Body, and the Older Woman," *Fashion Theory* 14, no. 4 (2010): 471–490, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174110X12792058833898>; Rachel Thorpe, "Ageing and the presentation of self: Women's perspectives on negotiating age, identity and femininity through dress," *Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 2 (2018): 203–219, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783318766167>. Scope: these works focus primarily on women and particular national contexts.

[5] Young Jee Han, Joseph C. Nunes, and Xavier Drèze, "Signaling Status with Luxury Goods: The Role of Brand Prominence," *Journal of Marketing* 74, no. 4 (2010): 15–30, <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.74.4.015>; Rob M. A. Nelissen and Marijn H. C. Meijers, "Social benefits of luxury brands as costly signals of wealth and status," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 32, no. 5 (2011): 343–355, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2010.12.002>. Scope: these findings concern luxury and status signaling, not all brands.

[6] Grant McCracken, "Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods," *Journal of Consumer Research* 13, no. 1 (1986): 71–84, <https://doi.org/10.1086/209048>. Scope: the transfer of cultural meaning is a theoretical framework, not a measurement of the effectiveness of every campaign.

[7] Federal Trade Commission, *Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising*, revised 2023; FTC, "Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers." Scope: under FTC guidance, an unexpected material connection that could affect how consumers evaluate an endorsement should

be disclosed clearly and conspicuously. An ordinary recommendation with no brand relationship is not automatically an advertising endorsement.

[8] “Inadequacy market” is the native U.S. rendering of the book’s analytical concept *marché de l’insuffisance*. Scope: it synthesizes separately documented mechanisms involving dress and identity, body norms, age, brand status, and advertising. It is not presented as an established scientific category and does not claim to explain every clothing purchase.

CHAPTER 5 — WHAT A GARMENT HIDES

A shirt folded on a store shelf looks like a simple thing. Fabric, seams, buttons, a label, a price. Almost everything that made it has vanished from view. You cannot see the field or oil well behind the fiber. You cannot see the spinning mill, the dye house, the cutting room, the sewing line, the freight terminal, the subcontracting agreements, the production deadlines, or the eventual waste stream. By the time the shirt reaches the rack, the chain that produced it has been compressed into an object that appears finished, clean, and self-contained.

Fashion did not invent this separation. Modern economies routinely place distance between consumers and the material conditions of production. Clothing simply makes the distance unusually easy to overlook. A T-shirt is light. Its supply chain is not.

That distinction matters in the United States, where the clothing market depends heavily on global production. In 2023, the United States imported \$79.3 billion worth of apparel and was the world's largest single-country apparel importer; about 70 percent of those imports came from Asian countries.[1] The country of origin printed on a label tells us where a particular legally defined stage of production occurred. It does not tell the whole story of where the fiber was grown or extracted, where the yarn was spun, where the fabric was woven or knitted, where it was dyed, or whose decisions shaped the schedule and price.

To judge the garment only at the moment of purchase is therefore to arrive near the end of a much longer story. The point is not to discover a single hidden sin behind every shirt. A

distant supply chain is not automatically unjust, and a local one is not automatically good. Manufacturing can provide wages, industrial capacity, and economic opportunity. A synthetic fiber can perform better on one measure and worse on another. A factory can improve while the business model around it remains damaging, or a product can be expensive without being responsibly made.

The task is harder and more useful: put the missing stages back into view.

Before There Is a Garment, There Is a Material

Every garment begins as matter that must be grown, extracted, or manufactured. Cotton, wool, polyester, nylon, viscose, lyocell, and other fibers do not belong on a simple moral ladder. Natural fibers can require land, water, fertilizers, pesticides, or livestock. Synthetic fibers are largely tied to fossil feedstocks and energy-intensive industrial processes. Man-made cellulosic fibers add their own chemical and forestry questions. The impact of a material depends on where and how it is produced, how much is used, what happens during manufacturing and care, how long the garment stays in use, and what happens at the end.[2]

This is why a fiber name on a hangtag tells us less than it seems to. “Natural,” “recycled,” and “synthetic” can each describe materially different realities. The fiber then has to become cloth. It may be spun into yarn, woven or knitted, scoured, bleached, dyed, printed, softened, coated, treated for water resistance, given stretch, stabilized, or finished for easier care. Those processes can require substantial amounts of energy, water, and chemicals, depending on the textile and the technique.

Many of those treatments are useful. A finish that keeps rain out, extends wear, prevents a fabric from shrinking, or makes a work garment safer is not pointless simply because it uses chemistry. The real question is whether the benefit justifies the substances, energy, emissions, worker exposure, and end-of-life complications involved. Then geography multiplies. A single garment may pass through several countries before it reaches the United States. Fiber can come from one place, yarn from another, fabric from a third, dyeing from a fourth, and final assembly from a fifth. The complexity is not accidental. Global specialization can lower costs, build expertise, and connect producers to enormous markets.

But complexity also makes responsibility easier to fragment. When a brand can say that it did not own the factory, a factory can say that it did not set the retail price, a buyer can say that it did not employ the worker, and a consumer can say that the label did not reveal the rest of the chain, every statement may contain part of the truth. The problem is that the chain still exists as a whole even when no single participant controls all of it.

Garment Making Is Still Human Work

Clothing looks like a mature industrial product, but much of garment assembly remains labor-intensive. Cutting can be automated. Logistics can be optimized by software. Some sewing operations can be mechanized, and technology continues to change production. Yet many garments still require sequences of human handling and sewing that resist the kind of full automation common in other manufacturing sectors. That matters because a very low retail price is never only a story about cheap material and efficient machines.

The textile and clothing sector employs more than 90 million people worldwide, most of them women.[3] For many producing countries, garment manufacturing is not merely an environmental or labor-rights problem imported from wealthy consumer markets. It is also an important source of employment, export earnings, industrial experience, and household income. Any serious critique has to hold both facts at once. It also has to hold the failures.

Low wages, excessive hours, insecure employment, weak worker representation, and health and safety risks remain documented across parts of the industry. The collapse of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh on April 24, 2013 killed 1,138 workers and injured more than 2,500.[4] The catastrophe became a global symbol because it made visible, in one horrifying event, a relation that is usually abstract to the shopper: the safety of a building thousands of miles away can be part of the real cost of a garment sold here.

Rana Plaza should not be used as shorthand for every factory or every producing country. That would turn one disaster into a caricature of an entire industry. But neither should distance be allowed to turn production into an abstraction. The relationship between brand and factory also needs more precision than the familiar picture of an all-powerful Western company facing a passive supplier. Supply chains include factory owners, subcontractors, workers, purchasing agents, logistics firms, governments, financiers, brands, and retailers. Suppliers make decisions. Governments set and enforce rules. Workers organize, bargain, move, or sometimes have very limited room to do any of those things.

Power is distributed. It is not necessarily distributed equally. Purchasing practices help explain why. Unrealistically short

lead times, late design changes, sudden order adjustments, rush orders, low purchase prices, and the threat of moving volume elsewhere can place pressure on suppliers that eventually reaches workers through overtime, wage constraints, subcontracting, or production intensity. Research from the ILO, Better Work, and labor scholars has documented these links without reducing poor working conditions to a single cause.[5]

For an American reader, forced-labor risk is not an issue outside the perimeter of the market. The U.S. Department of Labor's current List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor includes garments, textiles, and footwear among the manufacturing goods that appear frequently on the list, and it identifies specific apparel supply chains in which child labor, forced labor, or forced-labor inputs are a documented concern. [6] That does not mean that an imported garment is presumptively tainted. It means that labor conditions are a live supply-chain question, not a historical footnote.

The Price Tag Doesn't Show Every Cost

A retail price combines many different things: material, manufacturing, freight, warehousing, advertising, stores or fulfillment, wages in retail, returns, unsold inventory, financing, taxes, and profit. The proportions vary by product and company. There is no honest universal formula that says a fixed percentage of the price of a shirt went to the person who sewed it. But the absence of a universal breakdown does not make the visible price complete.

A polluted river may not appear on the receipt. Neither does a worker's exposure to a hazardous substance, the public cost of waste management, greenhouse-gas emissions, or the future burden of a material that persists long after the garment has lost its market value. Economists call many such effects externalities

when costs or benefits fall on people who are not fully represented in the transaction that generated them. The concept matters here because “cheap” has more than one meaning. A garment can be cheap for the buyer because some costs are genuinely low. It can also be cheap at the register while part of its cost is paid somewhere else, by someone else, or later.

The reverse mistake is just as easy. A high price is not proof of justice. Luxury products may use better materials, more labor, more durable construction, or highly skilled craft. They may also command a premium because of scarcity, brand recognition, distribution strategy, advertising, or status. Price can tell us something about a product. It cannot tell us everything about the conditions under which the product exists.

A more revealing question is: who pays which cost, and who has the power to move that cost? The buyer pays the listed price. A worker may pay in time, intensity, or health. A community may absorb pollution or water stress. A municipality may finance part of the waste system. A supplier may carry inventory risk. A brand may pass risk down the chain, or a powerful supplier may pass it to smaller subcontractors. None of these possibilities produces a moral verdict by itself. They simply prevent us from treating the retail price as the total economic reality of the garment.

Moving Clothes Around the World

The global path of a garment is often described with a dramatic image: it travels around the world before reaching the closet. Sometimes that image is useful. Sometimes it is sloppy. Distance matters, but so does the mode of transport. A container ship moving a large load across an ocean is not equivalent to airfreighting a small batch under deadline pressure. A

garment's transportation footprint depends on weight, distance, routing, load efficiency, and the logistics system around it.

Speed changes that system. When fashion is organized around very short commercial windows, production has less room for delay. A company trying to respond to a trend before the trend moves on may choose faster and more energy-intensive logistics than a company operating on a slower calendar. The cultural speed discussed earlier in this book can therefore become physical: it changes inventories, production schedules, shipping choices, and the tolerance for uncertainty.

E-commerce adds more movement, especially when garments travel in small parcels and when returns trigger another sequence of handling, transportation, inspection, repackaging, discounting, resale, liquidation, or disposal.

Here, it would be a mistake to manufacture a U.S. number simply because a well-documented estimate exists for Europe. One of the better-documented estimates comes from the European Environment Agency, which has estimated that roughly 4 to 9 percent of textile products placed on the European market are destroyed before ever being used.[7] That estimate applies to Europe, not the United States. Its value here is narrower: it shows that overproduction and returns can create a material waste stream before a product has even delivered the use for which it was made.

The mechanism exists beyond Europe; the percentage does not automatically travel with it. Unsold goods expose the deeper difficulty. Fashion is a business of prediction. Companies have to decide what to make before they know exactly what will sell. The faster the assortment changes and the more styles, colors, and sizes a seller carries, the more complicated the uncertainty becomes. Markdowns, transfers, outlet sales, liquidation, resale,

recycling, storage, and destruction are not equivalent outcomes. Yet the mere existence of large volumes of finished products that never reach meaningful use is already a sign that material efficiency cannot be judged only at the factory gate.

The Footprint Doesn't Stop at the Factory

A garment continues to use resources after it is sold. It is washed, dried, ironed, dry-cleaned, repaired, stored, and eventually discarded. Depending on the garment, the use phase can account for a significant share of certain impacts, while for other garments production dominates. Climate, electricity mix, washing habits, dryer use, detergent, and frequency of care all change the result. Again, slogans fail because garments differ.

Synthetic textiles also raise the problem of microfiber and microplastic release. Washing is one release pathway, and available research suggests that the first washes can be particularly important. But the quantity released varies widely with fiber, yarn, fabric construction, garment age, washing method, and other conditions. No single shedding rate describes all synthetic clothing.[8]

Chemical choices also follow the garment beyond dyeing. Some treatments remain in the product during use. Some can be released. Some make later recycling harder. A circular system therefore has to care not only about how many garments are collected but also about whether the products were designed in ways that make their materials safe and technically usable in a next cycle. This changes how environmental comparison should work.

It is not enough to ask which fiber had the lower impact at the moment of manufacture. We also have to ask how long the garment is worn, how often it is washed, whether it can be

repaired, whether it displaces another purchase, and what happens when the owner is finished with it. A garment that performs slightly better per unit can still be part of a worse total outcome if lower prices or a greener image help drive much higher volumes. Efficiency per item and material throughput are related questions. They are not the same question.

After the Closet

The cleanest story about unwanted clothing ends with a donation. A shirt leaves one closet, enters another, and keeps doing its job. That happens. Reuse can extend the useful life of a garment, sometimes by years. But donation is not a teleportation device from one wearer to the next. It is an entry into another system of sorting, resale, export, recycling, downcycling, and disposal. Not every donated or collected item finds another person who wants to wear it.

The American waste numbers make the scale difficult to ignore. The Environmental Protection Agency's most recent national material-flow data for this category are from 2018. EPA estimated that Americans generated about 13 million U.S. tons of clothing and footwear at end of life that year. About 1.7 million tons were recycled, while about 9.1 million tons were landfilled; reuse occurs before EPA's "generation" stage and is therefore not included in those figures.[9]

Those numbers are old enough to require a date every time they are used. They also combine clothing and footwear, and they do not tell us how many garments were bought, how long they were worn, or how much was resold before becoming waste. But they establish something important without guesswork: in the United States, discarded clothing is not a marginal waste stream. Recycling is not an easy escape hatch.

Garments are complicated objects. A single piece may contain cotton and polyester, elastane, lining, sewing thread, buttons, zippers, coatings, prints, labels, adhesives, and chemical finishes. Separating those components can be technically difficult and economically unattractive. Mechanical recycling may shorten fibers. Chemical recycling can require tightly controlled feedstocks and significant infrastructure. Material recovered from clothing may become insulation, wiping cloths, stuffing, or other products rather than new garments of comparable quality.

Clothing-to-clothing recycling remains extremely limited relative to the amount of material entering the system. European agencies and strategy documents have used an order-of-magnitude estimate of about 1 percent of clothing material being recycled into new clothing.[10] That figure is not a U.S. recycling rate and should not be presented as one. Its value is to show how far the idea of a closed textile loop remains from the current reality.

This does not make recycling pointless. It changes its place in the sequence. If a garment can be avoided when it is not needed, worn longer when it already exists, repaired when it fails, or reused by another person, more of its embodied material and labor remain useful. Recycling matters when those options are exhausted. It becomes misleading only when it is used to suggest that the original production carried no material cost.

Circularity is not a better trash can. It begins with keeping value in use.

Who Carries the Real Weight of a Garment?

After following the chain, the phrase “wearing a garment” takes on a second meaning. The consumer wears the object.

Other people and places carry parts of the conditions that made the object possible. Workers carry production schedules. Producing regions carry some of the water use, energy demand, chemical risk, and industrial waste. Public systems carry part of the burden of discarded products. Future generations inherit some of the emissions and persistent materials. Companies carry some risks and transfer others. Consumers receive a product whose physical lightness can conceal a very large geography.

The American market makes this geography especially clear because so much apparel is imported. Yet import dependence should not be turned into a moral shortcut. “Made abroad” is not a synonym for exploitation, just as “Made in USA” is not a guarantee of justice or low environmental impact. The relevant question is what actually happened in the chain: under what labor conditions, with what materials, under what commercial pressures, and with what consequences.

This is where the earlier chapters of the book become physical. Fashion creates and circulates meanings. People use clothes to belong, distinguish themselves, experiment with identity, and enjoy beauty. Industries accelerate those movements and turn them into repeated opportunities to sell. None of that is weightless once it becomes production. A trend can disappear in weeks. The fiber does not. A social signal can lose its force overnight. The dye, labor, transport, and waste remain part of the world.

That mismatch is the material core of the critique. The problem is not that one T-shirt is simply “bad,” or that one factory can stand in for an entire system. The problem is that enormous amounts of matter and labor can be mobilized to keep pace with symbolic value that moves much faster than

either of them can. Once we see that, the next question is unavoidable.

Which solutions actually reduce the burden, and which ones merely give the same rate of renewal a cleaner story?

Documentary Notes

[1] U.S. International Trade Commission. Apparel: Export Competitiveness of Certain Foreign Suppliers to the United States. Publication 5543, 2024. Scope: In 2023 the United States imported \$79.3 billion in apparel, was the world's largest single-country apparel importer, and sourced about 70 percent of apparel imports from Asian countries. This establishes the scale and geography of U.S. apparel imports; it does not by itself establish the labor or environmental conditions of any particular garment.

[2] Joint Research Centre. "Unlocking the potential of bio-based textiles." JRC Explains, February 5, 2025; Joint Research Centre. Preparatory Study for Textiles: 2nd Milestone Report. 2024. Scope: Fiber families shift pressures among land, water, energy, fossil inputs, chemicals, and end-of-life pathways. No universal hierarchy of fibers is inferred.

[3] International Labour Organization. Decent Work Challenges and Opportunities in the Textiles and Clothing Sector. March 28, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.54394/PKJM3600>. Scope: More than 90 million people work in textiles and clothing worldwide, with a predominantly female workforce; the sector combines major employment with persistent decent-work deficits.

[4] International Labour Organization. "Rana Plaza: More needs to be done to ensure workplace safety." April 25, 2021. Scope: The death toll used here is 1,138, with more than 2,500 injured. Rana Plaza is treated as a revealing disaster, not as a description of every garment factory.

[5] Starmanns, Mark. Purchasing Practices and Low Wages in Global Supply Chains: Empirical Cases from the Garment Industry. ILO, Conditions of Work and Employment Series 86, 2017; Münch, Florence. Sourcing Practices in the Garment Industry: The Root Cause for Poor Working Conditions. Better Work Discussion Paper 45, August 2022; Anner, Mark S. "Predatory purchasing practices in global apparel supply chains and the employment relations squeeze in the Indian garment export industry." *International Labour Review* 158, no. 4 (2019): 705–727. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12149>. Scope: Prices, lead times, order changes, and buyer asymmetries can contribute to poor working conditions without constituting a single universal cause.

[6] U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs. List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor. Current list published

September 5, 2024. Scope: The list contains 204 goods from 82 countries and areas and identifies garments, textiles, and footwear among manufacturing goods that recur in documented child-labor or forced-labor concerns. It is a risk-awareness and research instrument, not proof about every product from a listed country.

[7] European Environment Agency. The Destruction of Returned and Unsold Textiles in Europe's Circular Economy. Briefing 01/2024. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2800/752>. Scope: The 4–9 percent estimate applies to textile products placed on the European market. It is retained as a documented comparative example and is not presented as a U.S. estimate.

[8] European Environment Agency. Microplastics from Textiles: Towards a Circular Economy for Textiles in Europe. Briefing 16/2021. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2800/512375>. Scope: Synthetic textiles are a recognized source of microplastics; washing-related release can be especially high early in a garment's life and varies substantially by textile and method.

[9] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Nondurable Goods: Product-Specific Data" and "Frequent Questions regarding EPA's Facts and Figures about Materials, Waste and Recycling." 2018 national data. Scope: EPA estimated 13 million U.S. tons of clothing and footwear generated at end of life in 2018, about 1.7 million tons recycled, 2.2 million tons combusted with energy recovery, and 9.1 million tons landfilled. EPA states that reuse occurs before its "generation" stage and is not included in those figures. These are the most recent complete national Facts and Figures data across materials/products and must not be described as 2026 data.

[10] European Environment Agency. Management of Used and Waste Textiles in Europe's Circular Economy. Briefing 03/2024. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2800/229868>; European Commission. EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles. COM(2022) 141 final, March 30, 2022. Scope: About 1 percent of material in clothing is recycled into new clothing in the order-of-magnitude estimate used by European institutions. This is not presented as a U.S.-specific recycling rate.

CHAPTER 6 — SOLUTIONS THAT AREN'T ENOUGH

Once the costs of fashion become visible, the solutions can sound wonderfully simple. Buy a greener fiber. Choose a responsible brand. Buy local. Buy secondhand. Buy something recyclable. For every problem, there is an adjective. The appeal is obvious because almost everything else can remain unchanged. Consumers keep shopping. Companies keep selling. The products just become progressively better. There is real value in that approach.

Some materials are preferable in some contexts. Some companies improve durability, traceability, purchasing practices, or working conditions. Repair can prevent replacement. Secondhand can extend use. Recycling can recover material. Shorter supply chains can make some kinds of oversight easier. None of these should be dismissed simply because they are incomplete. The mistake begins when a partial improvement is promoted as a complete solution. A lower-impact fiber does not answer the question of volume.

A secondhand purchase added on top of new purchases is not the same as a secondhand purchase that replaces a new one. A recyclable garment is not necessarily recycled. An expensive garment is not necessarily durable. A local garment is not automatically fair. And no individual shopper can reconstruct an entire global supply chain from a hangtag and a browser tab. The goal of this chapter is not to mock individual action.

It is to put each action back at the scale where it actually works. A real transition will need better products, better business practices, better information, and better choices. But if

the argument of the previous chapters is right, the problem also involves the speed and volume of replacement. A solution that makes every garment somewhat better while allowing the total flow of garments to keep growing may reduce some harms and leave others remarkably intact.

Buying Better Is Better — but Not Enough

“Buy better” is good advice as far as it goes. It asks us to prefer durability, repairability, stronger labor standards, lower impacts, and quality that can support long use. That is far better than pretending consumer choices never matter. The ambiguity lies in the verb. Buying better can mean replacing some purchases with better ones. It can also mean adding a new category of “better” purchases to a level of consumption that never declines.

Those are not the same outcome. Imagine a garment that cuts one particular impact in half compared with a similar garment. If twice as many garments are purchased, the per-item gain can disappear at the system level. Real life is more complicated than that toy example. Environmental burdens are multidimensional. Not every extra purchase has the same impact. But the principle survives the complexity: efficiency per item and total throughput are different questions.

Durability has the same condition. A coat designed to last fifteen years does not generate the expected benefit if it is replaced after two winters for symbolic reasons. An imperfect garment already owned and worn for years can, in some cases, avoid more new production than a technically superior product bought as an addition. The best material cannot repair symbolic obsolescence by itself. Buying better becomes structurally important when it helps people buy less often, keep things longer, and reduce the amount of new production required.

At that point, quality and lower throughput begin to reinforce each other. But that creates a business problem. An industry that depends on high unit sales cannot necessarily generalize a world of longer product life and lower replacement without changing how revenue is earned. The solution is no longer only a better garment. It is a different relationship between value and volume.

When Green Becomes a Sales Pitch

Every successful critique eventually produces a commercial vocabulary. Fashion has an impressive one. Conscious. Responsible. Sustainable. Eco. Natural. Recycled. Circular. Some of those words refer to real improvements. Others can work mainly as atmosphere. Greenwashing begins when the impression of environmental virtue exceeds what the available evidence supports. Sometimes that is simple deception: a false claim. More often it is selective framing. A small favorable attribute is highlighted while the rest of the product or business model disappears. A vague environmental word replaces a measurable statement. A tiny capsule collection is presented as evidence of company-wide transformation. Recycled content is allowed to suggest that the whole garment is “circular.”

Textiles make this especially easy because the underlying system is genuinely complicated. A shopper cannot quickly reconstruct the implications of a fiber, blend, dye, finish, country of assembly, certification, recycled-content percentage, energy source, expected use life, and end-of-life pathway. The company often knows far more than the buyer. Transparency therefore cannot mean simply telling consumers to research harder.

The American regulatory context is different from the European one, but the basic truth-in-advertising principle is

clear. The Federal Trade Commission's Green Guides advise marketers not to make broad, unqualified environmental claims such as "green" or "eco-friendly," because those claims are difficult to substantiate. Environmental claims should identify specific benefits clearly and should not exaggerate a small attribute into an overall environmental advantage.[1] That is important—and limited.

The Green Guides are federal guidance for environmental marketing claims. They are not a textile-specific national law that makes every vague sustainability term illegal, and they do not solve the material problem behind a truthful claim. A perfectly accurate green claim can still become a reason to buy something unnecessary. That is the deeper paradox. A person who already owns enough clothing may purchase another garment precisely because the new garment is marketed as the responsible choice.

Criticism of replacement becomes a reason for replacement. The conclusion is not that products should stop improving. It is that the sustainability of a product has to be evaluated together with the role it plays in the consumption system. A lower-impact collection added to an ever-faster calendar is not the same achievement as a change that reduces volume, extends use, and alters the incentives to replace.

Secondhand Does Not Erase the First Market

Secondhand looks like the most direct response to overproduction. The garment already exists. Let someone else use it. At its best, that is exactly right. If a person wears a garment that would otherwise have been discarded, use is extended. If the secondhand purchase replaces a new purchase, additional production and its associated pressures can be avoided. The crucial word is replaces. Five used garments

purchased in addition to five new garments are not equivalent to two used garments that replace two new purchases.

Secondhand is not sustainable by definition. Its effect depends on what changes in the flows of production and use. Digital resale platforms have made circulation vastly easier. Clothing that might once have remained in a closet can reach a new buyer quickly, often across a much larger geography. That success has also turned resale into a major market of its own. The 2026 ThredUp Resale Report, produced with GlobalData, estimates that the U.S. secondhand apparel market could reach \$78.8 billion by 2030 and reports that in 2025 U.S. secondhand grew nearly four times faster than the broader retail clothing market.[2]

Those are industry market-modeling estimates, not government statistics and not evidence that resale automatically reduces environmental impact. Their importance here is different. Secondhand is no longer a marginal alternative sitting outside the fashion economy. It is increasingly part of the fashion economy. That creates opportunity and risk. Low prices, frictionless transactions, and the feeling of shopping “better” can encourage impulse purchases or higher turnover. Recent research has documented rebound and complementarity effects in some secondhand contexts: used and new purchases can grow together rather than one replacing the other.[3]

That does not mean secondhand causes overconsumption in every case. It means the environmental value of reuse depends heavily on substitution and use. A garment that changes hands and is worn for years is doing something materially different from a garment that is bought, photographed, resold, replaced, and moved again every few weeks. Resale can recognize residual value and encourage better purchasing. It can also

make clothing feel like inventory in a permanently rotating personal store.

The same infrastructure can support both outcomes. The relevant measure is not how many transactions occur. It is how much new production and waste those transactions actually avoid.

Recycled Is Not the Same as Circular

Recycling offers an even more seductive picture. Make the garment. Wear it. Put it in the right stream. Turn it back into fiber. Make another garment. If that loop worked cleanly, with little loss and at large scale, much of the material problem would be transformed. It does not yet work that way. Clothing is difficult to recycle. A single garment can combine cotton and polyester, elastane, lining, sewing thread, zippers, buttons, coatings, prints, adhesives, labels, and chemical finishes.

Separating these materials can be technically difficult and economically unattractive. Mechanical recycling can shorten fibers. Chemical systems can require controlled feedstocks and substantial infrastructure. Recovered material may end up in insulation, wiping cloths, stuffing, or lower-value applications rather than new garments of comparable quality. The United States illustrates the difference between “recycled” and “closed loop.” EPA’s most recent complete national waste data are from 2018. For clothing and footwear, EPA estimated about 13 million U.S. tons reaching end of life, with roughly 1.7 million tons recycled—a 13 percent recycling rate.[4]

That does not mean 13 percent of clothing became new clothing. European strategy documents have used an order-of-magnitude estimate of only about 1 percent of clothing material being recycled into new clothing.[5] That number is not a U.S.

rate; it is retained because it shows the much narrower challenge of garment-to-garment circularity. Recycling matters. It can reduce waste and demand for some virgin materials. But its position in the hierarchy matters too.

Avoiding an unnecessary product, using an existing garment longer, repairing it, enabling real reuse, and recycling it when it can no longer be used are not equivalent operations. Recycling is valuable near the end of the chain. It becomes misleading when it is used to justify unlimited production at the beginning. “Recyclable” is a capacity claim. Circularity is an actual system outcome. Between the two sit collection, sorting, contamination, infrastructure, economics, technology, markets, and design.

The circle exists only if the loop actually closes.

Local, Expensive, Handmade: Three Shortcuts

“Local” feels like a powerful answer because it seems to shorten everything at once. Production is closer. Oversight seems easier. Transportation may be reduced. Jobs are geographically nearer to the people buying the product. All of those can be genuine advantages. But local assembly tells us little by itself about where the fiber came from, how the fabric was processed, what energy was used, what chemicals were involved, how workers were paid, how long the garment will last, or how many units are produced.

A T-shirt sewn in the United States can still be part of a global material chain. Distance should not be isolated from the rest of the lifecycle either. Mode matters. A slowly shipped product across an ocean can have a different freight profile from a smaller quantity moved urgently by air. In a European lifecycle scenario, air made up about 8 percent of long-distance freight

but roughly 90 percent of the modeled climate impact of the sea/air freight mix.[6]

That does not make distance irrelevant. It shows why “local” cannot serve as a one-word lifecycle assessment. High price creates a similar shortcut. Quality costs money. Better materials, skilled labor, higher wages, small production runs, careful construction, and repair service can all legitimately raise a price. But price also contains branding, scarcity, rent, marketing, distribution, and margin. Expensive does not mean durable. It does not mean fair.

Luxury makes the ambiguity visible. Luxury can preserve craft, support repairable objects, and give time to production steps that fast fashion compresses. It can also depend on frequent novelty, artificial scarcity, status, and large symbolic premiums. Luxury and fast fashion are not the same model. Treating one as automatically good and the other as automatically bad prevents us from seeing the mechanisms they sometimes share.

Handmade production deserves similar respect without mythology. A garment made by an identifiable craftsperson or small workshop can make labor visible and preserve valuable skill. It can also use problematic materials, high energy, or produce an object that is rarely worn. Small scale is a characteristic. It is not a moral verdict. Local, expensive, and handmade can all be part of a better system. None is a substitute for asking the harder questions:

How much is produced? How long is it used? Under what working conditions? From what materials? With what effects?

The Responsible Consumer Cannot Carry the System

Once the chain becomes complicated enough, the final fantasy is the perfect consumer. This person understands fibers, certifications, labor standards, freight, chemicals, green claims, repair, resale, recycling, and every relevant trade-off. They never buy too much. They never misread an environmental label. They never have an urgent need, a low budget, or an hour in which they simply cannot investigate a pair of socks as though conducting a supply-chain audit.

That expectation is impossible. Information is uneven. So are money, time, access, attention, transportation, repair services, body sizes, workplace needs, and local retail options. Reviews of sustainable fashion consumption repeatedly find barriers including price, skepticism, limited information, limited availability, and the effort required to find alternatives.[7] Sustainable purchasing is not a simple test of character. Low prices also perform a real social function: they make clothing accessible.

Any transition that ignores this risks becoming an ecology of class, in which wealthier consumers can purchase visible virtue while lower-income consumers are blamed for the market they have the least power to escape. The answer cannot be to preserve artificially low prices forever by pushing costs elsewhere. It has to make durability and decent production more accessible. Responsibility therefore has to be distributed. Manufacturers can design for longer life and repair.

Brands can change purchasing practices and volumes. Retailers can change return, inventory, and resale systems. Public policy can change information requirements, waste rules, incentives, and producer obligations. Consumers still matter. They simply cannot carry the entire system on the way to the

checkout. This also helps us abandon purity. Keeping an imperfect garment already owned may be more coherent than discarding it immediately to buy an “ethical” replacement.

A visible repair does not have to be perfect to delay replacement. Continuing to use something after learning troubling facts about how it was produced does not mean endorsing those facts. The goal is not to construct the identity of the good consumer. It is to reduce actual harms, waste, and unnecessary throughput. We can now distinguish a false exit from a useless practice. A false exit is not necessarily something bad.

It is something useful that is being asked to solve more than it can solve. Secondhand does not erase overproduction. Recycling does not eliminate the need for long use. Local does not guarantee justice. Price does not guarantee quality. A green label does not prove a transformed business model. The conscientious shopper cannot substitute for industrial policy. The last chapter can therefore stop searching for the perfect product.

The question becomes larger: What would a clothing culture look like if it kept fashion’s pleasure, creativity, difference, and change while requiring less material replacement? The way out may not be learning how to keep buying forever in exactly the right way. It may be building a system in which beauty, novelty, and play need a new object less often.

Documentary Notes

[1] Federal Trade Commission, “Environmental Claims: Summary of the Green Guides,” and Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims, 16 CFR Part 260. Scope: FTC guidance advises against broad, unqualified general environmental benefit claims such as “green” or “eco-friendly” and calls for clear, specific qualification and substantiation. The Green Guides are not

presented here as a textile-specific federal prohibition equivalent to later European legislation.

[2] ThredUp, 2026 Resale Report, conducted with GlobalData, April 2, 2026. Scope: GlobalData's market modeling projects a \$78.8 billion U.S. secondhand apparel market by 2030 and reports that U.S. secondhand grew nearly four times faster than broader retail clothing in 2025. This is industry-sponsored market research, not an official statistic and not evidence of environmental benefit by itself.

[3] Sihem Dekhili, Mohamed Akli Achabou, and Thuy-Phuong Nguyen, "When the pro-ecological intentions of second-hand platforms backfire: An application in the case of Vinted," *Journal of Cleaner Production* (2024): 144399, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2024.144399>; Meital Peleg Mizrahi and Ori Sharon, "Secondhand fashion consumers exhibit fast fashion behaviors despite sustainability narratives," *Scientific Reports* 15 (2025): 34968, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-19089-1>. Scope: these studies document rebound or complementarity risks in particular contexts, not a universal law of secondhand consumption.

[4] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Nondurable Goods: Product-Specific Data" and associated 2018 Facts and Figures tables. Scope: EPA estimated 13 million U.S. tons of clothing and footwear generated at end of life in 2018 and about 1.7 million tons recycled, for a 13 percent recycling rate. EPA's category-level recycling measure does not mean garment-to-garment recycling.

[5] European Commission, EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles, COM(2022) 141 final, March 30, 2022; European Environment Agency materials on textile circularity. Scope: the approximately 1 percent garment-to-garment figure is an order-of-magnitude estimate used by European institutions and is not presented as a U.S. national recycling rate.

[6] Joint Research Centre, Environmental Improvement Potential of Textiles (IMPRO Textiles), 2014. Scope: the baseline long-distance transport scenario assumed 92 percent sea freight and 8 percent air freight. The model treated air transport's climate-change impact per tonne-kilometer as about 100 times sea freight; on those assumptions, air accounts for about 90 percent of the modeled climate impact of the sea/air mix. This is scenario-specific, not a universal freight ratio.

[7] Valerio Schiaroli, Luca Fraccascia, and Rosa Maria Dangelico, "How can consumers behave sustainably in the fashion industry? A systematic literature review of determinants, drivers, and barriers across the consumption phases," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 483 (2024): 144232, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2024.144232>. Scope: the review of 217 articles

identifies price, skepticism, knowledge, availability, and effort/access among recurring barriers to sustainable fashion consumption.

CHAPTER 7 — AFTER DISPOSABLE FASHION

A critique can destroy the thing it is trying to save. If the conclusion of this book were that reasonable people should stop caring about clothes, abandon trends, eliminate ornament, and wear a strictly functional wardrobe until every piece physically fails, then the argument would have misunderstood its own subject. Fashion is not only waste. It is also a language of forms, a social game, a way of changing appearance, a field of craft and creation, and one of the places where people experiment with who they are.

Those living functions are precisely what made it possible to build an enormous renewal machine around them. The way out is therefore not the abolition of fashion. It is loosening the bond between symbolic change and material replacement. A color can return without requiring a new closet. A silhouette can change without turning everything before it into waste. A garment can be altered, traded, borrowed, repaired, resold, recombined, inherited, or simply kept while other forms appear.

The new does not have to kill the old in order to be new. That changes the policy question. Instead of asking only which garments people should buy, we can ask what kind of system would preserve the material value of clothing longer while allowing aesthetic value to keep moving. How do we slow matter without freezing culture?

Durability Is Not Immobility

Durability is often presented as fashion's opposite. The durable object is imagined as stable, sober, almost static. Fashion means change. The opposition is false. A garment can last while changing function, owner, combination, meaning, or

cultural status. Material durability does not require symbolic stillness. It creates more time in which change can happen without reproducing the object. Designing for durability begins with very ordinary decisions.

Seams have to hold. Closures have to survive use. Colors have to remain acceptable. High-friction zones have to resist failure. Parts should be replaceable when that is technically reasonable. The garment should tolerate the care it is likely to receive. A durable product also has to remain wearable. There is little environmental virtue in a technically indestructible garment that becomes socially unusable after a season.

Technical design and aesthetic design therefore have to be considered together. Some garments can tolerate changes in body size. Some can be adjusted, layered, restyled, or worn in several ways. Some silhouettes move more slowly through fashion cycles than others. The goal is not to invent an eternal style. It is to make small symbolic changes less likely to destroy the usefulness of an intact object.

Care belongs inside the same problem. Knowing how to wash without unnecessary damage, remove a stain, sew on a button, preserve leather, store knitwear, or avoid heat that degrades a material extends the value of clothing. The loss of those skills can increase dependence on replacement. Rebuilding them does not mean romanticizing a past in which households supposedly had endless time for domestic labor. Care can be supported by better product information, professional services, laundries, alteration shops, repair businesses, warranties, and products designed for maintainability.

Repair is the clearest case. A failed zipper does not have to mean a dead coat. A worn sole does not have to mean a dead shoe. A torn seam is not the same thing as an exhausted

garment. But repair exists only when it remains technically and economically possible. A product that cannot be opened, a proprietary part that cannot be obtained, a construction that cannot be altered, or a repair price close to replacement can eliminate the option before the owner ever decides.

Making repair normal therefore requires more than individual virtue. It requires repairable products, parts, skills, services, price structures, and business models that make repair a realistic choice.

Circulation without Acceleration

A durable garment does not have to stay with the same person forever. Bodies change. Tastes change. Jobs change. Children grow. People move. Use changes. Circulation is therefore a logical part of any system that wants more use from existing material. Donation, lending, swapping, rental, consignment, and resale can preserve value instead of destroying it. But circulation has a trap. It can become rotation. The relevant measure is total use, not transaction count.

A coat worn by several people over twenty years is a form of circularity. A garment bought, posted, resold, replaced, and moved again every month may circulate constantly while supporting a very high rate of consumption. The same distinction applies to resale platforms. A platform is not sustainable because it generates many transactions. It contributes to a lower-material system when existing objects substitute for new production and receive more use.

That criterion matters for business models. A circular company should not be judged only by how efficiently it moves products. It should be judged by whether it helps avoid production and waste. Rental requires the same caution. It can

make excellent sense for clothing used rarely: formalwear, event clothing, specialized gear, costumes, or other pieces that would otherwise spend most of their lives unused. The benefit depends on how many additional wears the system creates, whether rental substitutes for ownership, how often the garment is cleaned, how far it travels, and how long it survives repeated use.[1]

No model is circular because the business plan uses the word. Memory adds another kind of value. A garment inherited from a parent, borrowed from a sibling, or passed to a friend carries a history that does not fit neatly into a resale price. Not every shirt should become an heirloom. But a culture in which some things can acquire memory has one more reason not to treat every object as interchangeable inventory.

Transform Instead of Replace

Fashion has never required a factory-fresh object for every change in appearance. A large part of what people seek in fashion is transformation itself. That transformation can come from altering what already exists. Shorten a hem. Move a button. Dye a garment. Add embroidery. Remove a sleeve. Patch a knee. Change the shape. Layer it differently. Combine it with something that makes it read in a new way.

Those practices are often treated as hobbyist side notes. They go to the heart of the problem. If symbolic novelty can be produced with material already in circulation, cultural speed no longer requires the same industrial throughput. The feeling of change can survive while the number of new objects entering the system falls. Personalization can also resist symbolic obsolescence. A garment changed by its owner becomes less interchangeable with the anonymous version on a rack.

Visible repair, patching, tailoring, embroidery, altered proportions, or accepted wear can create distinction that was not purchased in finished form. That does not mean everyone should sew. Most people do not have the skill, time, space, or interest. An economy of transformation can be professional. Tailors, cobblers, alteration shops, repair studios, customization services, small manufacturers, and designers can earn money from extending and changing existing things instead of only replacing them.

That would change the role of design too. Creating does not have to mean producing ever-larger numbers of finished objects. Designers can create modular pieces, adaptable systems, repairable constructions, alteration programs, patterns, services, or ways of reworking what already exists. Aesthetic imagination is not naturally tied to increasing textile tonnage.

Make the System Pay for What It Puts Into the World

Culture alone will not fix a market in which replacement remains easier and cheaper than durability. Policy matters where individual choices meet structural incentives. Rules can change what has to be paid for, what information has to be provided, and what can be discarded. The American policy landscape is fragmented rather than uniform, which makes state examples especially important.

California's Responsible Textile Recovery Act, adopted as SB 707 in 2024, is building an extended producer responsibility system for apparel and textiles. CalRecycle approved Landbell USA as the producer responsibility organization in February 2026, and producers of covered products were required to join it by July 1, 2026. The current implementation schedule calls for a needs assessment in 2027, regulations no earlier than July 2028,

an approved producer plan by July 2030, and full implementation in 2031.[2]

That timeline matters. California does not yet have a fully operating statewide textile take-back system simply because the law exists. The infrastructure, regulations, fees, performance standards, and implementation still have to be built. Massachusetts has taken a different route. Since November 1, 2022, textiles have been banned from disposal or transport for disposal in the state, subject to specified exemptions for contaminated materials.[3] The two examples do different things.

Massachusetts acts directly on disposal. California is building a producer-responsibility system intended to finance and organize collection, repair, reuse, and recycling. Neither policy by itself solves overproduction. A disposal ban can fail if recovery infrastructure is weak. Producer fees can become a cost of doing business without changing design enough. A system can collect more and still fail to reduce total throughput. The principle is nevertheless important:

the end of a product's life should not be treated as a problem belonging only to the last person who held it. If a company puts large amounts of material into a market, the system can require that company to participate in what happens when that material is no longer wanted. That shifts part of the cost upstream. It also changes what governments can measure.

Once collection, reuse, repair, and recycling become organized responsibilities rather than voluntary afterthoughts, performance can be evaluated more directly. The test has to remain effects, not labels. Do garments last longer? Are they easier to repair? Does reuse actually substitute for new production? Does more material return to productive use? Does

disposal fall? Do fees change design and volume, or merely get passed through? Does the system improve labor and environmental outcomes, or create new burdens elsewhere?

Regulation is not the opposite of aesthetic freedom. A market can leave enormous room for style while placing much stronger conditions on how products are made, marketed, collected, and discarded.

Reinvent Prestige

A lower-throughput fashion system will struggle if prestige continues to reward novelty almost exclusively. People replace things not only because they stop functioning. They replace them because continued use can become socially invisible while the new purchase is visible. A slower system therefore needs other forms of value. Vintage already proves that age can become desirable. Patina can increase value. Wear on workwear can be read as authenticity.

A rare older garment can become more attractive precisely because it survived. This can become elitist or speculative. That does not erase the underlying lesson: old is not the same thing as worthless. Visible mending can shift the same relation. A repair does not always have to disappear. A patch, darn, replaced panel, or reinforced seam can become part of the design rather than evidence of failure. Scholarship on visible mending documents the practice as craft, fashion, and cultural resistance without implying that every repair carries the same social meaning.[4]

Prestige can also move toward knowledge. Recognizing a material. Understanding construction. Knowing how to care for something. Knowing who made it. Appreciating fit, repair, or technique. A fashion culture less dependent on volume would

not have to become less sophisticated. It could become more attentive to details that speed currently hides. None of this can be commanded by a public-awareness slogan. Social value does not move because an agency announces that keeping clothes is now cool.

But designers, media, celebrities, retailers, repairers, institutions, and communities all help decide what becomes visible. Repeating an outfit can be visible. Repair can be visible. Transmission can be visible. Creative reuse can be visible. If visibility participates in symbolic obsolescence, it can also participate in changing what counts as desirable. The important shift occurs when long use can be read as a choice rather than simply lack of choice.

That does not mean romanticizing poverty. Forced wear is not the same as chosen durability. The goal is to make continued use socially possible without turning deprivation into virtue.

Save Creation. Save Frivolity.

One thing still needs protection. The right to want something completely unnecessary. A spectacular dress. An absurd shoe. An impossible sleeve. A color that serves no practical purpose. A strange object someone made because it gives pleasure.

Fashion would be poorer if every garment had to justify itself before a tribunal of necessity. Frivolity, as I use the word here, is not the absence of value. It is the freedom to spend attention, skill, time, and some resources on form because form can produce joy, play, surprise, beauty, or pleasure. A sustainable society has no reason to become visually gray. The problem begins when frivolity becomes materially gigantic.

One extraordinary garment that requires a great deal of labor can be materially costly without producing the same kind

of system effect as millions of nearly disposable garments manufactured, devalued, and replaced at high speed. Volume, duration, and use still matter. That forces us to distinguish creation from the industrial requirement for novelty. A designer can make something new without demanding that millions of people own it.

A runway can function as research, theater, proposition, or cultural experiment rather than a machine in which every idea must be translated immediately into maximum units. A craft can remain extravagant. A wardrobe can still contain ridiculous things. Saving frivolity means separating aesthetic freedom from the requirement for endless growth. We can want wonder without wanting disposability. We can enjoy metamorphosis without confusing a changed image with a multiplied pile of objects.

We can keep fashion as a social art of time without requiring every present to become future waste.

After Disposable Fashion

What would a wardrobe look like after disposable fashion? There would not be one correct answer. Some people would own very little. Others would own more. Some would love vintage. Others would buy new technical clothing, handmade pieces, secondhand, rental, tailoring, or clothing designed to be altered. Success would not be measured by the smallest possible number of garments. It would be measured by how much use society gets from the material, labor, energy, and infrastructure it mobilizes.

New clothing would continue to exist. Garments wear out. Bodies change. Needs appear. People require uniforms, safety equipment, weather protection, performance clothing,

formalwear, and ordinary replacements. Creation also needs material. The difference is that new would no longer have to be the default answer to every desire for change. Repair, recombination, alteration, lending, resale, rental, and simply continuing to wear something would exist as ordinary competitors to replacement.

Businesses would have to learn to earn money from duration. Some might sell fewer units but more quality, repair, care, alteration, take-back, or service. Some resale and rental systems could become genuinely substitutive rather than additive. Producers could carry more responsibility for end-of-life costs. Designers could continue producing desire while moving more of that desire toward forms of value that do not always require more material.

None of this eliminates contradiction. Durable garments can be expensive. Repair can fail. Secondhand can cause rebound. Rental can create transport and cleaning burdens. Producer responsibility can shift costs. A niche can become status. Slow fashion can become another distinction system. There is no pure solution waiting to be discovered. There can be systems that observe their effects and correct them. This book began with an intact garment we no longer wanted to wear.

We can now see why that garment was never only an object. It sat inside a social machine that gave it a time and a value. It sat inside an industry that could convert changes in value into new sales. It sat inside a material chain that made every replacement heavier than the movement of attention that triggered it. The solution is not to freeze attention.

We will change our minds. We will invent forms. We will become bored. We will rediscover things we once mocked. We will want to look different. That mobility belongs to culture. The

real question is whether matter has to follow every oscillation at the same speed. A society that preserved the pleasure of transformation without constantly destroying the value of what it already owned would not necessarily have abolished fashion.

It may have freed fashion from an obligation that was never aesthetic in the first place: the obligation to keep selling new material. Clothing could then remain what it has always been at its most interesting: matter slow enough to last, and form free enough to change.

Documentary Notes

[1] European Environment Agency, *A Framework for Enabling Circular Business Models in Europe*, 2021; Eri Amasawa, Taylor Brydges, Claudia E. Henninger, and Koji Kimita, “Can rental platforms contribute to more sustainable fashion consumption? Evidence from a mixed-method study,” *Cleaner and Responsible Consumption* 8 (2023): 100103, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clrc.2023.100103>; Felix M. Piontek, Eri Amasawa, and Koji Kimita, “Environmental implication of casual wear rental services: Case of Japan and Germany,” *Procedia CIRP* 90 (2020): 724–729, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procir.2020.01.076>. Scope: rental benefits depend on substitution, number of wears, cleaning, transport, and garment type; no business model is assumed circular by name.

[2] California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle), “Textile Stewardship” and “Textile PRO Application,” *Responsible Textile Recovery Act (SB 707)*. Scope: CalRecycle approved Landbell USA as the PRO on February 27, 2026; producers of covered products had to join by July 1, 2026; the current implementation timeline includes an initial needs assessment in 2027, regulations no earlier than July 1, 2028, an approved plan in 2030, and full implementation in 2031. These milestones do not mean the complete system is already operating.

[3] Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, “MassDEP Waste Disposal Bans” and “Clothing and Textile Recovery.” Scope: textiles have been banned from disposal or transport for disposal in Massachusetts since November 1, 2022; certain contaminated textiles are exempt. This is a state disposal policy, not a nationwide U.S. rule.

[4] Kate Sekules, “Optics of Obvious Mending,” *Fashion Theory* 29, no. 7 (2025): 899–928, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2025.2526257>. Scope: visible

mending is documented as fashion, craft, and cultural practice; no universal status effect is inferred.

CONCLUSION — WEARING WHAT STILL EXISTS

We can return now to the garment left in the closet. At the beginning of the book, it was a small mystery. How does an intact object become useless without ceasing to work? After following fashion through the body, social groups, desire, industry, supply chains, waste, and possible alternatives, the answer is clearer. The garment did not become useless in the same way a broken object becomes useless.

Its place changed. That place is produced collectively. Clothes protect us, but they also present us. They let us belong and distinguish ourselves. They carry gender, age, prestige, memory, taste, desire, work, ceremony, rebellion, and play. A form can become current, then ordinary, then dated, then valuable again. None of that is unreal simply because it is symbolic. The problem begins when the speed of those meanings directly commands the speed of matter.

Preferences and social signs can move much faster than the labor, energy, fibers, infrastructure, and waste already embodied in a garment. Disposable fashion confuses two different freedoms: the freedom to change, and the need to replace. We are going to keep changing our minds. We will find beautiful things we once found ugly. We will want to present ourselves differently. We will keep enjoying ornament, color, exaggeration, surprise, and sometimes the completely unnecessary.

A more sustainable society has no reason to become a duller one. It only has to learn to let material things last longer than some of our preferences. No solution will make that transformation pure. Durability can become a status symbol.

Secondhand can supplement new purchases instead of replacing them. Rental can shift impacts into cleaning and transportation. Repair can be impossible. Regulation can create unintended effects.

Producer responsibility can change incentives without reducing volume enough. A slow-fashion niche can become expensive, exclusive, and self-congratulatory. That is why the standard cannot be purity. It has to be effects. How much material was mobilized? How much use did it produce? Which costs moved elsewhere? Which possibilities were preserved? What became easier to repair, reuse, or avoid? What actually changed? Fashion does not need to disappear.

It needs to lose an obligation that was never aesthetic: the obligation to make every new present a reason to devalue the one before it. Then the garment in the closet can be seen differently. Not as embarrassing evidence of an outdated self. As material that still exists. Material that can be worn, altered, repaired, lent, sold, given away, stored, or simply left alone until the eye changes again.

Because it will. And that is fine. What we have to learn is not how to freeze the eye. It is how to stop forcing the material world to run after it.

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What Is the Noosophic Movement?

The Noosophic movement is a project of inquiry, knowledge-sharing, and transformation. It seeks to understand reality more accurately, connect bodies of knowledge that are often studied separately, make important knowledge accessible, and turn these understandings into works, practices, tools, or institutions that can be tested against their effects and corrected.

It is therefore not limited to a philosophy. It can work on education, health, agriculture, economics, politics, human relationships, culture, institutions, science, spirituality, or artificial intelligence. Depending on the subject, it may produce a book, a method, an experiment, a critique, a practical tool, or an institutional proposal.

A central idea of the movement is that accumulating knowledge is not enough. We must also learn to connect different kinds of knowledge without conflating them. Understanding agriculture, for example, means looking at soils, plants, energy, economics, labor, eating habits, and environmental effects together. But connecting these dimensions does not mean reducing them to a single explanation: each field retains its own methods and standards of evidence.

The movement also seeks to transmit knowledge. Some important knowledge should not depend on a lucky encounter, the social environment into which someone was born, or a late discovery. Part of Noosophic work is therefore to identify, verify, condense, and make genuinely accessible the knowledge that can help a person understand the world, take care of

themselves, exercise their rights, and become more autonomous.

The movement takes its name from Noosophy, which in its philosophy refers to a truth or structure of reality that exists independently of how we understand it. In other words, the world does not become true because we have managed to explain it: it exists and operates independently of our theories, beliefs, and institutions. We may understand some things correctly, be wrong about others, or still grasp only a small part of them.

This is why the Noosophic movement does not treat its own texts as infallible. An idea must remain open to comparison with available knowledge, confrontation with objections, testing where possible, and correction when it does not hold up well against reality.

Noosophy is therefore not merely something to think about. The Noosophic movement seeks to make what is understood useful, transmissible, and transformative in the real world.

How This Book Was Produced

This book was produced through successive stages rather than through the automatic generation of a complete text. Its subject, objectives, and general directions were first defined by a human. The AI Noosopher then contributed to exploring the subject, researching and comparing sources, developing possible structures, and bringing out arguments, objections, and areas of uncertainty.

The manuscript was developed progressively, chapter by chapter. Proposals were reviewed, discussed, corrected, or rejected when they did not fit the project, contained

insufficiently supported claims, or oversimplified the subject. Distinct phases of documentary research, drafting, critique, coherence checking, source-to-target comparison, factual verification, and assembly were used when necessary.

Artificial intelligence is therefore not treated here as a source of authority. It acts as an active tool for research, formulation, comparison, and testing. The proposals it produces can be wrong and remain revisable.

The public edition, if released, remains subject to human validation and the human decision to publish. This method seeks to use the capabilities of artificial intelligence without transferring to it decisions about the purpose of the book, choices of value, or the decision to publish.

About Hieronymus Anonymus

Hieronymus Anonymus is the human initiator of the Integrative Noosophy project. His work focuses on connecting fields of knowledge and practice that are usually kept separate, and on experimenting with new forms of collaboration between humans and artificial intelligence. He takes part in the conception, discussion, revision, and validation of works published by Éditions Noosophie.

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Why do we stop wearing clothes that still work? Fashion does more than cover bodies. It organizes signals, belonging, difference, status, and desire. Its greatest power may be making a usable object feel socially old before it is materially worn out.

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The aim is not to abolish the pleasure of getting dressed, creativity, or change. It is to separate the freedom to change from the need to replace, and to restore value to duration, repair, reuse, and the long life of things.

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