Campus Activism: Ethical Shopping

There’s a big problem with the way my generation spends its money, specifically on clothing and electronics.

A lot of people my age spend money on the newest clothing trend or the newest Apple device. Chain stores and obsessive shopping of cheap clothing is constantly promoted in popular culture, movies, magazines, and advertisements. I don’t have a problem with not buying expensive clothing: Buy what you can afford, but don’t buy what you don’t need.

The problem is devices and clothing that we purchase aren’t intended to last — cheap clothing and electronics that we’re prepared to replace is the same as throwing our money away. It’s actually worse, because instead of literally wasting money, we are putting money into industries that exploit cheap labor, and when we throw away our ripped clothes, they often end up in landmines. Even if you donate old clothing to Goodwill or the Salvation Army, the clothes often don’t end up in the right place. These
stores only have so much space, so when clothing is not sold, it goes from there to a by-the-pound for profit. Clothing that no one wants can also find its way to other poorer countries, such as India. There are industries in India devoted to recycling this material, and often this makes cheap blankets that are sold primarily to countries in Africa. But imagine what would happen if this industry tanked and mounds of clothing were dumped and unprocessed. The apparel industry is the 2nd most polluted industry in the world, after oil. We often don’t think about who labored over the clothing we’re wearing right now, how much they were paid, or where our money to purchase it went toward. Even when a country has a genuine desire to make sure its workers are treated well at every stage of clothing development, it’s very difficult to ensure that, as the example of Patagonia has demonstrated.

TV shows and movies promote shopping as a social activity (see Friends as a prime example), instead of something you do when you actually need something. Which is ridiculous and insulting to people who can't afford to constantly shop, not to mention insulting to women who are often portrayed as obsessed with shopping and self-image (which leads into a whole other discussion about the fashion imagery and body images, EVERYONE should read Naomi Wolf's The Beauty Myth). That aside, the desire to have the newest trend is a crazy play on our social instincts that results in such a waste of clothing and devices.

A couple of ways college students can help:

1. Shop at Thrift Stores
2. Swap clothing with friends
3. Don’t buy clothing that you don’t need
• When you donate clothing, make sure it will be reused. For instance, donate to places where the clothing is going towards a specific goal, like a hurricane relief project or a program like Big Brothers Big Sisters.

• When you support a store or company with your money often, know what you are putting your money towards: do your research.

One cool thing about UMass is our store has a sustainability commitment and has been increasing the number of sustainable products we carry.

Additional Articles About the Apparel Industry:

• Impact on the environment
  ◦ Another article that claims fast fashion is destroying the planet

• Apple, Samsung, and Sony faced child labour claims
  ◦ And a more recent article from November 2017 specifically about Apple
  ◦ Amnesty International’s report on which companies are taking adequate measures to confront child labour in the Congo

• Nike and how it recovered from its sweatshop problem, and how consumers influenced that

• Read Naomi Wolf’s The Beauty Myth for the psychological, sexist, racist side of the fashion/beauty industry

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