

## NY Times - Opinion

### This Is the Reality of America's Fast-Fashion Addiction

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By Rachel Greenley

I'm a seasonal worker in a warehouse of an online superstore. Five days a week, I make \$18.75 an hour standing at a station with yellow bins brimming with returned clothing. My job is to determine — in less than two minutes — whether a garment should be resold.

I look for tears, stains and missing buttons. I peer into bathing suits for hygiene liners. I turn sweatshirt arms inside out to check for ripped seams and residual deodorant. I flip shoes over to see if the soles are dirty, and cautiously slip my gloved hands inside. Recently, I discovered a pair of worn socks buried in the depths of knockoff Timberland boots.

Even when the item passes my evaluation, embedded in the fabric is a deeper thread to unravel: Why do we buy disposable clothing that is made by low-wage workers and that tax an overtaxed environment?

Having previously crafted business strategy at the online superstore's headquarters, I'm now in graduate school, and I took this job to study how the company's focus on speed and scale affects the warehouse worker. Are corporate ways of working at odds with the realities on the warehouse floor? I soon learned that reality comprises an onslaught of [fast fashion](#): the category of rapidly produced cheap clothing created by the likes of Topshop, Zara, H&M, Shein and Forever 21.

During a shift I process scores of shapeless apparel made of cheap, synthetic fabrics. Most of the items come from Chinese manufacturers with [odd brand names](#) like SweatyRocks and AUTOMET, as if created by a bot. Poor quality is not a reason to reject an item from being resold. The flimsy body-con club dresses, threadbare flannel button-ups and strangely colored polyester maxi dresses lack tags, as if the brands prefer not to be associated with their clothes. I consult customers' comments, which cite poor quality: tacky material, didn't match image, no shape. Last week, I picked up a beige crop sweater with a hulking torso but oddly tiny T-Rex sleeves. Checking the image of the item on the superstore's website, I found a picture with batwing sleeves. Such disparities between the online image and the actual item are common. It's akin to a dating app profile of a man who is pictured with a full head of hair but has been bald for decades.

The best days at the warehouse are Sundays. English and Spanish pop music plays loudly, and we can choose our work stations. I work next to two young moms who started on the same day I did. In the din of beeping scanners, gliding conveyor belts and endless bins of returns, our heads bow over clothing until we call to each other and hold up a toddler-size pink taffeta dress — we coo — or a faded T-shirt fraudulently returned in place of a new one — we grimace. We roll our eyes when our 20-year-old manager's responses to our questions have a consistent "Duh, Mom" tone.

During breaks, we complain about how hard it is to wrangle maxi dresses into resale bags. We laugh about how we arrived on our first day with shiny clean hair and a full face of makeup, and now we just roll out of bed. There's a freedom I hadn't expected — from appearance, from soft skills, from endless emails, from anxiety that used to seep in on Sunday nights. Yet, my job is just as much stitched to

consumerism as my corporate role was. And stock proceeds from that white-collar job subsidize my warehouse work; the hourly wage doesn't cover my bills. Regrettably, I'm no [Barbara Ehrenreich](#).

Of the 75 million [garment workers](#) worldwide, it's estimated that less than 2 percent make a living wage, according to [2017 data compiled](#) by one advocacy group. When we buy fast fashion from the comfort of our couches, we support a system in which low-wage workers (most of them people of color) make the clothes at one end of the world, and other low-wage workers (many of them also people of color) process the returns, unseen in the concrete suburbs of American cities.

Now, one could argue that garment work may actually raise people out of poverty and give them choices they didn't have. But America's stock market incentivizes ever-rising growth. If consumers won't accept higher prices to increase a brand's profit, manufacturers will cut corners in other ways, such as with low wages or [unsafe working conditions](#).

Think about the economics of a \$26.99 [SweatyRocks shirt](#). How can that price cover the cost of materials, labor, global shipping and delivery to your doorstep — not to mention the cost of it potentially being returned to a warehouse, where a person has to evaluate whether you wore the shirt while walking your dog? If the shirt gets scanned to the unsellable bin, it may then end up in a landfill where the polyester will take as much as two centuries to biodegrade. Indeed, 66 percent of discarded clothes end up in landfills each year, and another 19 percent are incinerated, according to [a 2018 Environmental Protection Agency report](#). Brands point to sustainability efforts, but [fast fashion is simply incompatible](#) with sustainability. We operate under an economic belief that growth is unlimited. Our natural resources are not.

As the day winds down at the warehouse, a manager will ask, "Want to know your rate?" — the average number of units processed per hour. I fluctuate between 23 and 26. That is another correlation between the job I used to do and the one I'm doing now: data. In a gleaming office tower boardroom, I used to attend intense weekly business reviews. I processed paper then, not clothes. Each corporate manager needed to know an exorbitant depth of data, and the vice president of my division seemed to take perverse pleasure in watching his underlings squirm. On any given day, there's someone like me in a boardroom, prepping to answer why return processing is up or down. Instead of reporting data, I'm now embedded in that data.

One of the young moms I started with recently went back to school to earn her high school diploma. The other appreciates that this job is during her son's school hours. I'm still trying to answer my initial question. What I've learned in the meantime is that, whether I'm in the office tower or the warehouse, I'm part of a pattern sewn together with overseas garment workers, cargo ship crews, delivery drivers, corporate managers trying to explain data points, and warehouse workers. We support a system of throwaway clothes that didn't deserve their trip around the world or the number of hands that touched them.

Rachel Greenley, a former tech executive, is a seasonal warehouse worker and an M.F.A. student working on a memoir about cultural divides.