

Design & Fashion Stories / Good practices All Europe Countries Greening Featured Stories

Does Clothing Rental Really Have A Positive Impact On The Environment?

CREATIVESUNITE

Co-funded by
the European Union

Clothing rental services promise sustainability, but research reveals a surprising twist: consumers may actually increase their environmental footprint through unexpected behavioral patterns that negate potential ecological benefits.

Joëlle Vanhamme, EDHEC Business School and Valerie Swaen, Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain)

Is renting clothes instead of buying them truly better for the planet? As the textile industry faces growing scrutiny for its environmental impact, clothing rental services promise consumers the opportunity to refresh their wardrobe frequently while lowering their carbon footprint. But is this solution as eco-friendly as it appears?

This is the question we sought to answer in our recent study. We chose to examine the hidden effects of consumer behaviour when using access-based services (ABS) instead of owning clothes.

Beware of the rebound effect

Our qualitative and quantitative studies highlight a surprising fact: far from always reducing the ecological footprint, clothing rentals can actually encourage increased consumption among certain types of consumers! The cause? The rebound effect, a phenomenon that occurs when the expected environmental gains are reduced, cancelled out or even reversed by compensatory behaviours on the part of consumers.

These issues are part of a wider debate on the limits of solutions perceived as ecological and on how consumers and businesses can react to avoid the pitfalls of overconsumption disguised under a different name.

CREATIVESUNITE

Co-funded by the European Union

ABS are built on a simple idea: instead of owning a good, the consumer benefits from it temporarily in exchange for the payment of a monetary contribution. Possession is no longer an imperative. This paradigm shift has been made possible by the rise of digital platforms in transport (Uber), leisure accommodation (Airbnb), household appliances and, more recently, fashion.

Popular flexibility

Clothing rentals, once reserved for special occasions such as weddings or galas, are now available for everyday wear. Platforms such as Le Closet and Coucou allow consumers to hire designer clothes for a few days or a few weeks, before returning them to rent new ones.

Consumers especially value the flexibility and variety these services provide. They can stay up-to-date with fashion trends without committing long-term, all while engaging in a consumption model presented as more sustainable. Textile production is among the most polluting industries, especially with the rise of fast fashion. In principle, subscribing to a clothing rental service should not only limit the quantity of clothes produced, but also extend their life by offering them to several successive users.

When the cure turns to poison

Through conducting interviews with 31 users of Franco-Belgian clothing rental platforms, we identified various rebound effects that challenge the idea that renting clothes is inherently more sustainable than buying them.

Rebound effects occur when efficiency gains or practices that are supposed to be sustainable, such as clothing rental, paradoxically lead to an increase in consumption.

The easy access – variety and low cost of rented clothes can encourage a more frequent use of the service, or even lead to buying clothes impulsively (some people even buy clothes they initially rented!) – can cancel out the expected environmental benefits of renting instead of buying (direct rebound effect).

On the other hand, someone who saves money by renting clothes may use those funds to buy other goods or services in other product categories (high-tech products, travel, household equipment, etc.), thereby increasing their total consumption and their ecological footprint.

Our quantitative study of 499 users allowed us to reach this conclusion, but it is crucial to understand that these effects are not homogeneous and vary according to consumer groups and their psychological motivations.

The rebound effect is not homogenous

Our study identifies two of the five groups analysed – representing about one-quarter of clothing rental service users – as particularly prone to experiencing negative rebound effects.

The "thrill and pleasure seekers" group (7%) is characterised by a strong search for stimulation and hedonistic motivations and is mainly made up of men. For them, renting clothes does not reduce their overall consumption, and on the contrary, it can increase it by stimulating their desire for novelty and diversity.

The group of "contextually apathetic spenders" (18%) displays paradoxical behaviour: although they are not particularly motivated by pleasure or stimulation, and reduce their consumption of clothes by renting, they increase their purchases in other product categories after renting clothes. They are also the least frugal, which reinforces their propensity for indirect rebound behaviour. They tend to be young urban men, often single and highly educated. These results highlight the need to address the diversity of consumer behaviour within the sharing and ABS economy, and to adapt strategies for each consumer group.

Other avenues for responsible fashion

Although ABS have the potential to promote more sustainable consumption habits, they can also encourage behaviours that negate these benefits – or worse, exacerbate environmental impacts. This research, therefore, challenges the assumption that clothing rental services are inherently sustainable.

What are the avenues for more responsible fashion? As ABS gain in popularity, it becomes crucial to understand how to maximise their ecological potential while minimising undesirable rebound effects. To achieve this, businesses and consumers alike may need to rethink their approach.

The implications for managers and policy-makers are clear: it is not enough to promote clothing hire as a sustainable solution. With around a quarter of users of clothing rental services likely to exhibit negative rebound behaviour, it is essential to identify these consumers and provide them with appropriate information and incentives to limit these effects.

Finding other incentives

Rental companies' communication strategies need to be differentiated according to consumer segments. For people looking for stimulation and pleasure, hedonic incentives unrelated to the clothes rented, such as competitions, games, rewards or gifts, can be effective. For apathetic consumers, reminders of the negative consequences of their behaviour can make them think more carefully about their choices.

Companies should avoid solely emphasising the inherently hedonic aspects of clothing rentals, as this approach may inadvertently reinforce negative rebound effects. Instead, they should highlight the ecological benefits and promote value co-creation with consumers, addressing their needs while minimising environmental impact.

For example, clothing rental services could encourage the more responsible long-term rental of eco-designed products from brands that share the same ecological values. Instead of promoting the rapid rotation of items, they could encourage users to reduce the frequency of exchanges and limit the number of items that can be rented at the same time.

Efforts on all fronts

Companies could also raise consumer awareness about the environmental impact of their choices by sharing data, such as the carbon footprint of rented clothes or the number of additional uses a rented garment achieves compared to a purchased one.

Clothing rental companies should collaborate to share information and develop a deeper understanding of the environmental impacts of their practices. Through such cooperation, they can better target consumer segments and promote more responsible consumption behaviours.

At the same time, consumers play a crucial role in transforming fashion toward more thoughtful consumption. This shift begins with rethinking their relationship with fashion and adopting a minimalist approach that priorities quality over quantity.

Consumers can also choose "ethical" pieces – responsibly manufactured garments that combine style and durability. Before renting a garment, they might ask themselves, "Do I really need this?" Such mindfulness can help prevent impulse rentals and reduce environmental impact.

Achieving sustainability in clothing rental platforms requires a shared commitment from both businesses and consumers. Only through collaborative efforts can these apparel – based services deliver on their promise: reducing fashion's carbon footprint while fulfilling consumer aspirations.

Joëlle Vanhamme, Professeur de marketing, EDHEC Business School and Valerie Swaen, Professeure ordinaire, Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain)

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.