

RETAIL CONSUMERS & END-USERS

Who
&
How



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INTRODUCTION

Once we have transformed recycled textile products into fabrics, these fabrics are then used to make textile products for consumers. Then, these products are transferred to the retail sector, where they are sold in shops or online.

Retail is broadly defined as the process of selling consumer goods or services to customers through multiple channels of distribution to earn a profit. The term “retailer” is typically applied where a shop or a chain of shops offers products to customers.

Retail and consumer shopping habits are particularly relevant to the textile industry. For many, shopping is often thought of as a recreational activity. Recreational shopping, however, frequently involves activities that do not result in a purchase (e.g. window shopping or browsing). It is important to note that there is a wealth of literature available on the socio-political impact of shopping habits, and this article will only scratch the surface of a much larger conversation.

TEXTILE PRODUCTS AND END-USERS

When we think of customers buying textile products, we generally think of shops on the highstreet or in shopping centres. While shops are certainly the most common outlet for these products, there is a wide range of buyers for textiles. The healthcare industry, for instance, uses an immense amount of textile products (e.g. bedsheets, uniforms, surgical gowns, etc.). In the hospitality sector, textiles are used to furnish hotel rooms with towels and restaurants with upholstery and tablecloths. Additionally, governments and militaries require special uniforms, tents, and technical textiles (e.g. personal protective equipment, bullet-proof materials, etc.).

In these professional areas, the end-users are not the ones buying the textiles. Instead, this is done by professional purchasing experts: buyers. Because awareness of the textile industry’s significant environmental footprint is growing, buyers for organisations are now under pressure to take this into account when purchasing textile products. Buyers for the Dutch military, for example, are now insisting that military textiles must contain a minimum amount of recycled materials and that military textile waste is recycled.

HOW DOES THIS CONNECT TO REFLOW?

First of all, the staff responsible for public procurement could be convinced that setting a minimum target on recycled content would create market pull and contribute to business cases for recycling organisations. In this way, recycled textiles could be employed in technical areas and technical areas could provide textiles to recycling organisations. Secondly, we must look beyond the fashion industry and consider a variety of sources of discarded textiles for recycling. The advantage of textile waste from the public sector is that it is usually well-defined material without too many auxiliaries. Home textiles are already part of the Reflow programme.

RETAIL

IMPACT & SUSTAINABILITY

A lot has been written about the negative impact of the clothing industry on the climate. While the textile industry has a reputation for being the “second biggest polluter”, this is simply [not true](#). Agriculture, tourism, and oil and gas production are all bigger polluters than the fashion industry (which actually [comes in 10th](#)). However, while other industries have a larger carbon footprint, we must still work to minimise the environmental impact of the textile and clothing industry.

One of the biggest issues in the clothing industry is supply chain logistics. For example, yarn is spun at a facility in location A and is then transported (sometimes over thousands of kilometres) to a weaving mill in location B. After weaving, the product is then transported to a dye or printing shop in location C (occasionally on the other side of the globe). Once the product has been dyed, it is then transported to clothing factories in location D.

The European clothing industry usually [imports](#) its clothing and textile products from countries like China, Bangladesh, Turkey, India, Pakistan, the United States, and Cambodia. Yet, because of the unpredictable dynamics of the fashion industry, these sources may change from month to month. We must therefore ask the question: do these unpredictable dynamics lead to “fast fashion”, or is it the other way around?

The fashion industry has created a market where an item of clothing, due to constantly changing fashion trends, must be replaced as quickly as possible after its purchase (e.g. buy it, wear it, toss it). To remain competitive in this field, retailers must drive their prices down to the lowest possible level. Such low prices are only possible under the following conditions:

- Abandoning the relationship between value of a product and the material it is made of (i.e. dematerialisation of the textile industry).
- Keeping labour costs as low as possible. The social cost of low-cost textile products is therefore extremely high. These costs, however, are not reflected in the price of the garments, but are indirectly paid by society (see [this article](#) for more information).
- Keeping the time to market as short as possible and avoiding stock. Consequently, the time between offering products at normal retail prices and offering them at discounted sale prices is decreasing. This is so the new collection can be on display as quickly as possible.
- Adjusting the scale of production to fit transportation possibilities. In this case, the sea container is the determining measure and the transport costs are kept as low as possible if the container is filled.

HOW DOES THIS CONNECT TO REFLOW?

Currently, this supply chain can only function with advanced IT systems and logistics software. Taken together, all these aspects constitute a heavy burden on our environment. The Reflow project aims to change this. There are many ways to counter this environmental burden. Changing the way the overall supply chain functions would, obviously, be the ideal way to achieve this. However, changing this massive, powerful, and extremely competitive business structure would be exceedingly difficult and therefore beyond Reflow's capabilities. However, there are many things that can be done indirectly (many of which were described in previous chapters). Reflow's key concerns can be summarised as a focus on increased recycling and prolonged use.

FASHION LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

Not everything is doom and gloom. Fashion is also an important mode of expression for people—and it's fun! Like art, fashion can be thought of as an aesthetic expression at a particular time, in a particular place, and in a particular context. By wearing specific clothing styles, people can express personal, social, and/or political statements.

Style could be loosely defined as a coherent and persistent manner of dressing generally linked to a specific culture, social class, or movement. Fashion, on the other hand, can be defined as the manner of dress during a certain time period within a certain social context. With the increasing mass-production of consumer commodities at lower prices, sustainability has become an urgent issue amongst politicians, brands, and consumers. We are now seeing many designers moving away from big industry labels and designing fashionable clothing with minimal environmental impact.

From our perspective at Reflow, these designers deserve our support because they represent a group of stakeholders who design textile products with minimal environmental impact in mind. Modern fashion design should be about applying design, aesthetics, and natural beauty to clothing and accessories.



Above: *Designers at TextileLab Amsterdam aim to bring about social change in the field of textiles, fashion and materials. They explore the potential of dyeing with bacteria as a less harmful alternative to standard industry dyes. Photo by Waag and was retrieved from Flickr in June 2021.*

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