Curvy, Thrifty, and Thriving: A Look Into Size Inclusivity and Sustainability

The year is 2020. A freshman at the Savannah College of Art and Design is invited to thrift with her newest friends. At this point in her life, most of her clothing is from department stores, given to her on various holidays and special occasions, and hand-me-downs. But she wants a wardrobe of her own.

An up-and-coming online retailer, Shein, offers her trendy, budget-friendly new looks, available for purchase from the comfort of her bedroom. No more changing rooms to have breakdowns in when the size eight that fit her last year no longer works. The only problem is, she wants to be sustainable, and Shein is not that. So, she decides to go with her friends, eager to find a diamond in the rough of the thrift bins, but when she gets there, the horrors of a chubby childhood come back to haunt her and once again, nothing fits. That freshman was me, but this is a tale that most plus-sized youths of today understand because, frankly, size inclusivity and sustainability don't always go hand-in-hand.

Most retailers that you see in shopping malls across America, like Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle, and Urban Outfitters, do not cater to bigger bodies. Project Cece claims this is due to higher upfront costs, not enough demand to cover those costs, and a lack of eco-friendly fabrics made for plus-sized clothing.

Aerie, the intimate apparel subsidiary of American Eagle, did not launch a body positivity campaign until 2014–37 years after the company was founded. Online fashion vendors that proudly feature plus-sized styles, like Shein and Fashion Nova, are not eco-friendly. According to Time Magazine, Shein produces 6.3 million tons of carbon dioxide each year, which is anything but sustainable. But what even is sustainability?

Justin Lee, a research analyst for Ubuntoo, an environmental solutions platform based dually in Amsterdam and Atlanta, defines sustainability as "something that can be managed for an extended period of time that is both beneficial for the environment and the social circles directly impacted by that environment, regardless of their background." Lee notes the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental, and how each of these parts cohesively plays a major role in the realm of sustainability. Companies and corporations, most of whom have promised to be "carbon neutral by 2030," or sometime in the near future, seek out Ubuntoo's help to research alternative and more sustainable materials.

Platforms like Ubuntoo and other zero-waste initiatives are the unspoken heroes of the fashion industry. Mosha Lundström-Halbert, co-founder of Therma Kōta, a zero-waste outerwear and home goods fashion brand, also defines sustainability in her own terms. "Being sustainable is completely self-defined. For [Therma Kōta], and what I would encourage other brands to do is to think about how they can do their best…in terms of their environmental impact."

The problem of greenwashing, an advertising/marketing strategy that feigns environmental friendliness, also hurts the industry. "I like to discuss a lot about media literacy, and actually draw attention to greenwashing when I see it," Lundström-Halbert shares. Therma Köta goes above and beyond other brands who use greenwashing as a tactic to sell clothes. With the scraps leftover from each shearling coat made, they create a pair of mittens free with every purchase.

Aside from sustainability, Therma Kōta shares in their mission statement their dedication to creating "warm, evocative and glamorous coats that anyone could wear, regardless of their size." Each garment is made *after* purchase, and the designers tailor them specifically to the consumer's measurements. Not only does this prevent excess inventory, an issue that places

millions of tons of textile waste in landfills annually, but it gives plus-sized clientele a wider variety of sustainable options.

Lundström-Halbert additionally highlights how smaller brands, as well as brands owned by BIPOC creators, are often more environmentally conscious. “If you look at Indigenous brands, or Black owned brands, a lot of times, brands that are an extension of one's heritage, and are drawing upon cultural traditions within their work, they'll be more sustainable, because that's the way…traditions have been upheld.” She also voices her discrepancies with fast-fashion practices. “It's only in fairly recent times that the culture has become inherently wasteful…There’s so much cheap, ugly, trendy crap out there…I think if you look at a lot of like more artisanal practices, they're not [wasteful]. They are just by nature more sustainable.”

The future of sustainability and size inclusivity not only relies on current sustainable companies and brands, but on young creators. Caroline Scott, winner of the 2023 Atlanta Sutsainable Fashion Week student contest, explains her reasoning behind creating her own sustainable lingerie line. “I thought that if I am going to be contributing to this industry, I need to take away some of its negative impact.” Scott’s collection, entitled Doll Parts, is made completely from upcycled vintage lingerie of all shapes and sizes and designed for a more modern appeal.

If more designers and companies implement size-inclusive, sustainable practices, the industry will change drastically. For us mere mortals, though, Project Cece gives three ways to produce change: “amplify the voices of influencers and activists who talk about inclusivity in fashion…reach out to your favourite ethical brands, [and] support size-inclusive sustainable brands.”