

# MADE TO WASTE?

## THE PROBLEM WITH PACKAGING IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

More often than not, every fashion item we purchase comes in some form of packaging. Whether it be plastic or paper bags from stores, plastic bags for individual garments, or the cardboard boxes for shoes, packaging has become ubiquitous in the journey of clothes.

Though commonly associated with finished products (in the consumer-facing phase), packaging is used throughout the entire value chain in pre-consumer phases.<sup>1</sup> In order to protect the raw materials, textiles, notions and finished products, packaging is used by different suppliers and manufacturers to reduce damage during transportation. Packaging plays a crucial role as goods may easily be damaged by water or handling, which can lead to cancelled orders.<sup>2</sup> Hence, every item produced has gone through multiple layers of packaging before they reach consumers.



However, most packaging gets discarded after use, thus, becoming waste.<sup>3</sup> Common materials used in packaging include plastic, tape, cardboard/paper and styrofoam. At present, most packaging is not recycled, and ends up in landfills. Not only does this create a problem for a land-scarce country like Singapore, but waste also negatively impacts our environment and biodiversity.



### Closer Look: Plastic Packaging

For example, plastics are one of the most common materials used in packaging,<sup>4</sup> due to its wide availability and hydrophobic properties. But it is also one of the most common polluters of our environment. In most cases, the plastic used is not biodegradable, and will eventually break up into microplastics that will affect marine life, farmland soil and air we breathe.

In a study by WWF and PACT on reducing plastic waste, they emphasized the excessive use of plastic packaging in the fashion industry. On average, the global fashion industry uses approximately 180 billion polybags and 100 billion hangers annually - with less than 15% of polybags being recycled globally.<sup>5</sup>

### Packaging Waste in Singapore

Singapore Environment Council (SEC) found that in 2021, Singapore produced 1.82 million tonnes of domestic waste, which needed to be incinerated - the equivalent of 11 million kilograms of carbon dioxide (KgCO<sub>2</sub>e) emitted.<sup>6</sup> Packaging waste made up one-third in terms of the total domestic, post-consumption waste (in terms of weight), with 55% being plastic waste.<sup>7</sup> Currently, plastic recycling rates in Singapore remain at only 4%, with the majority ending up in Semakau Landfill.<sup>8</sup> With Semakau's limited capacity concerns over land-scarcity, packaging is has become of Singapore's key priorities in achieving zero-waste.<sup>9</sup>

And the fashion industry contributes to a large portion of the problem. The same study by WWF and PACT found that Singaporean consumers buy about 34 pieces of brand new apparel each year, which leads to approximately **190 million polybags** being used annually.<sup>10</sup>

## Changing Consumer Trends

United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) has reported that the fashion sector is currently the second-largest global economic activity.<sup>11</sup> And with packaging used at every stage of production, the amount of packaging-related waste produced by the industry can no longer be ignored.

Globally, unsustainable packaging has gained much attention, with consumers and producers becoming more aware and concerned with issues like overpackaging and materials used in packaging that is associated with the industry. A joint study by KPMG and SEC found that 70% of Singaporean consumers feel that there is too much packaging.<sup>12</sup> In the fashion industry, examples of this would include individual garment bags, polybags typically used in e-commerce, and shrink wraps used to secure large stacks of goods during the manufacturing process.

Consumers preferences are thus changing, with 95% of Singaporean consumers showing interest in buying more eco-friendly packaging across industries.<sup>13</sup>

Second-hand packaging is also gaining popularity too - a study by Singapore start-up Package Pals showed that over 60% of respondents were receptive towards second-hand packaging in women and men's fashion categories for online purchases.<sup>14</sup>

## Moving Towards a Circular Economy

These changes in consumer preferences are a great start, and present an invaluable opportunity for industries to reduce their packaging waste and create sustainable packaging.<sup>15</sup> As companies begin to make this transition, governments have also strengthened their stance on reducing packaging waste, showing a global trend towards circularity and waste-reduction.

In Singapore, initiatives such as the Packaging Partnership Programme (PPP) and the Mandatory Packaging Reporting requirements (MPR) are a continuation of a joint initiative by the government, industry and NGOs to promote sustainable packaging and its waste management. PPP supports sustainable packaging efforts in Singapore by recognizing the efforts of companies who have made significant improvements, and provides resources to help companies make the transition towards reduce, reusing and recycling their packaging waste.<sup>16</sup> The newly released Technical Guidelines (TR 109:2022) on sustainable packaging practices also "specifies guidelines, criteria, and best practices in implementing the 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) for Business-to-Business and Business-to-Consumer packaging, taking into consideration practices that are sustainable in Singapore's context" (NEA, 2022).<sup>17</sup> TR 109:2022 was released on 7 Oct, 2022, developed by a "multi-stakeholder Working Group appointed by Singapore Standards Council and overseen by EnterpriseSG" (NEA, 2022).<sup>18</sup>

## Call to Action

It is important to recognize that in order to turn sustainable packaging from a niche into the norm, a joint effort from consumers, manufacturers, suppliers and supporting partners needs to occur. With more innovation, education and transparency, all players can work towards reducing packaging waste and creating a more circular future.

### As a consumer:


As mentioned above, consumers play an important role in closing the loop when it comes to fashion-related waste like packaging. Help to alleviate the issue of packaging waste by taking steps towards the circular economy - for example, start by refusing single-use packaging and using your own reusable bags. For the packaging that we do use, ensure that we properly recycle what we can, and upcycle or reuse as much packaging as possible. Lastly, we can also choose brands that have processes in place to reduce packaging, such as those who offer initiatives to return and reuse packaging. While these may seem like small steps, they can create collectively create an impact to close the loop of waste in our fashion eco-system.

### As a company:

If you are an organization in the fashion value chain, there are many opportunities to make significant improvements with regards to sustainable packaging. For example, the Technical Guidelines (TR 109:2022) and Mandatory Packaging Reporting guidelines (MPR) mentioned above both focuses on the 3Rs of packaging waste. By following such guidelines and applying them to the fashion industry, organizations can make a huge impact to reduce packaging waste at the source of its use. Some examples of this include phasing out unnecessary packaging (reduce), reusing packaging for as long as possible (reuse), and choosing packaging made out of recyclable and compostable materials, or investing in R&D related to reducing packaging waste (recycle). Not only are these plans environmentally friendly, but can also be cost effective in the long run.

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For more tips and information, visit our consumer education portal, [bethechange.fashion](https://bethechange.fashion), where you can learn more about how to contribute to a zero-waste future, as both consumers and companies in the fashion value chain. **Solving the packaging problem within the fashion community is one that requires joint effort from all members of our community, so let's start today.**

Pledge your commitment to building a sustainable fashion future on our website ([here](#)).   
If you are interested to find out more, stay tuned to our website and social media for more articles and events on sustainability in the fashion industry.



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