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What are the environmental costs of current consumer trends, behaviours and purchasing decisions?

The environmental cost of online purchase returns

In an increasingly technological world, the number of goods purchased online is constantly rising. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Amazon's UK sales grew by 82% *(Hillier, 2021)* as consumers no longer had the freedom to visit the high street and pick the item they wanted. However; the product may look different online, the colour and material are different to what was expected or does not fit correctly. To overcome this consumers have begun 'bracketing' - ordering multiple items with the knowledge that they can be returned free of charge *(Manayiti and Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2022)*. With that comes an increasing amount of goods being returned to the company, which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Between 2020 and 2021, the US saw a 78% increase in the number of goods returned, costing $761bn *(Manayiti and Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2022)*. I have found that online purchase returns mainly impact the environment by being sent to landfill as a cheaper option than reselling, as well as the carbon footprint caused by their transportation.

When we, as consumers, return a product which we purchased online we assume that it will be back on the online shelf in a matter of days, however, this is not always the case. It is estimated that less than half of returned items go back on sale at full price *(Glasheen, 2019)*. With 16.6% of all goods bought being returned, there is an increasing strain on 'reverse logistics' companies *(Manayiti and Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2022)*. In order to build brand loyalty, most companies allow consumers to send back orders free of charge meaning that the company must cover all costs of returns. An online returns processor, Optoro claims that it would 'cost 66% of the average item's selling price to cover the cost of its return back to the seller' *(Manayiti and Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2022*). Businesses must employ staff to sort through returns, to identify those in resellable condition from those not. With the number of returns increasing, businesses are sending returns to landfill as it is far cheaper than reselling them. Returned products are stored before usually being resold at reduced prices due to damage or reduced demand, increasing the incentive for firms to send returns to landfill instead. This is primarily why fast fashion is such an unsustainable market, the businesses simply cannot afford to resell returned goods as it counteracts the cost to produce the item initially.

The landfill process is notorious for its environmental impacts. Not only does it take 7,600 litres of water to make a pair of jeans *(Preuss, 2019)*, but it can also take a single garment more than 200 years to decompose in landfill *(Rio ESG, 2022)*. During this process, its materials produce toxic chemicals, methane gas and deposit dyes into groundwater and soil, polluting our air, oceans and river-ways. On top of this, luxury brands such as Burberry would rather burn products than resell them at a lower price at risk of tarnishing their image. They justify this by claiming that they are producing thermal energy. All this has devastating impacts on the environment and its wildlife *(Morwenna Ferrier, 2018)*.

Evidently returning an online purchase increases its carbon footprint. When returns enter the reverse supply chain the item has to be collected by a courier or taken to a drop-off point to then continue its journey in lorries, container ships or air freight in order to get back to the warehouse. In 2020, both the shipping and returns of goods totalled 37% of all greenhouse gas emissions *(Igini, 2021)*. In 2019, there were 5.3 million delivery vehicles worldwide which are expected to increase to 7.2 million by 2030, contributing to a 6 million tonnes increase in carbon emissions between these years *(Igini, 2021)*. This increase is a large contributor to the climate crisis. As the urgent need for climate action becomes evermore paramount this ever-growing demand for convenience from online consumers puts increasing pressure on resources and consequently the environment.

In an attempt to reduce or even eliminate these environmental impacts, some brands have begun charging customers to return items *(Thorpe-Woods, 2020)*. By charging customers they are firstly reducing the cost of reverse logistics meaning that they are more likely to be able to afford to return items to the shelves. They also prevent the consumption of unnecessary items as people are reluctant to pay return fees. Zara, Next and Uniqlo have all adopted this strategy in order to reduce waste and ultimately prevent the vast amount of unused goods ending up in landfills.

A more environmentally conscious way to shop would be primarily to purchase high quality goods which will not need to be returned, and last for a long time. Unfortunately, this is not a reality for the majority of consumers. For those who do need to return goods, doing it in store rather than online is more likely to reduce carbon emissions, as it has to travel less far to be sold on, as well as this, the product is more likely to be resold. It is also important to order from companies which have a good reputation for using less packaging and sustainably processing your online purchase returns.

In conclusion, the environmental cost of online purchase returns is sizable and contributes greatly to the ever-worsening climate crisis. Companies need to take greater responsibility for how they process returns and make every effort possible to prevent these goods from entering landfill, despite the high cost that may be implemented upon them. From a consumer point of view, people need to be more conscious of what they are ordering online to reduce bracketing, perhaps by looking into measurements of clothing and ordering accordingly, or reading reviews by previous buyers. Both consumers and companies should be more conscious of the environmental impacts created in the online shopping process particularly in returning goods. If both consumers and companies work together to reduce the scale of unnecessary purchases and returns, the impacts implemented upon the environment will be greatly reduced.

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