

'I didn't buy new clothes for a year and it was the best thing to happen to my wardrobe'

5 With consumerism brought to a standstill by the coronavirus, the call to change how we shop is more relevant than ever. One responsible fashion expert shares lessons from his year-long Extinction Rebellion fashion boycott

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10 A few weeks ago, I found myself standing in the apartment of Matthias, a Berlin biker who was selling his leather jacket on a local classifieds website. The jacket wasn't for me, but I left with stories about when the Cramps played the 90s, and tips for German surf bands.

15 Almost 12 months ago, I signed up to Extinction Rebellion's Fashion Boycott, a year-long pledge to buy only secondhand – which is how I ended up chatting rock'n'roll in a stranger's apartment. The boycott is framed as a protest against a destructive and exploitative industry – which it definitely is – but it is also an amazing opportunity to change your relationship with an inescapable part of modern life. As the coronavirus pandemic brings consumerism to a standstill, the call to change how we shop is even more apt.

20 I have spent most of my professional life as a fashion editor, plugged into an industry that never stops making new things. The idea of shopping only secondhand seemed scary – even impossible. Some people love nothing better than diving into a pile of pre-owned mystery garments; not me. How am I going to find something I like? Should I just stop buying clothes?

It turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to my wardrobe.

25 There's a lot of information out there already on the ins and outs of shopping secondhand. You need to be patient and you need to know where to look. The thrill of the hunt is a joy in itself.

30 But for me, the most rewarding part of my detox was stepping away from the non-stop newness that fashion is built on. There's no influencers or celebrities when you are shopping secondhand. No must-haves, no weekly drops. No hyped trainers. That freed up so much mental space to think about clothes and what I want from them.

35 Shopping secondhand is slow. If you're not a natural-born thrifter, it doesn't make sense to spend hours on resell apps and in secondhand shops unless you are going to find something you will hold on to. Think smart – what do you need and where's the best place to find it?

40 You need to know your measurements, too. I built a spreadsheet with measurements of the garments that fit me, as well as the ones that don't. So now I know that I like my jumpers with a 55-62cm chest. More than that and it's too baggy. Any less and it's not baggy enough. No more worries about finding something that fits online, where most sellers provide measurements, or will if you ask for them.

45 Once you know what you are after, it's about being patient. Setting alerts and saving filters on apps helps narrow down the odds, as does Gem, an app and search engine just for secondhand. There's a thriving ecosystem of expertly curated shops on Instagram that do the hard work for you, too.

50 My best finds came from classifieds. On Kleinanzeigen, a German version of Gumtree, I found a man giving away a high-end suit because it had a few minuscule moth holes in it. I paid him €5 (£4.50) to post it to me. Plus, of course, Matthias and his almost-perfect jacket.

55 The majority of secondhand pieces out there are womenswear, but that doesn't mean there's a shortage of great menswear. Using eBay and Kleinanzeigen, it wasn't hard for me to get hold of five suits that were in great condition and cost €110 for the lot, plus a bit more for my local tailor to alter them here and there.

60 Fashion's ideal consumer is stressed, anxious and permanently attached to a PayPal account. The industry thrives when consumers are never satisfied, when they are always looking for something new. The endless cycle of trends and catwalk shows are part of a system that has been expertly designed to manufacture desire. It's not about what we need, it's about making us want things that we don't need.

65 Stepping away from it all is a chance to think about what you really need from your clothes. The trend forecaster Li Edelkoort recently called the corona outbreak "a quarantine of consumption", and "a blank page for a new beginning". Despite the turmoil around us, we've got an opportunity to change our shopping habits for the better.

70 My year-long detox showed me that I need much less than I thought I did; I just need clothes that speak to me, that I can really own. Ones that make my limbs feel a little lighter, and the weight of the world a little less heavy.

75 It's also about standing up to an industry that, to date, is not taking anywhere near enough action to reduce its impact on the planet. Boycotting fashion for a year sends a message to the brands and corporations making phoney sustainability "commitments": if you don't take this seriously, we'll walk away from you.

Extinction Rebellion puts it best: "Unplugging ourselves from consumerism means living more enriched lives and waking up to the things that really matter ... What could be more threatening to an industry that thrives on making us feel we need more?"