

Dressed for the Occasion, Not the Long Haul

Picture the last time you attended a wedding, a formal dinner, or a job interview that called for something sharper than your usual rotation. There is a decent chance you bought something new, wore it once, and then watched it collect dust on a hanger you never reach for.

You are not alone. Across Europe, an estimated 40 percent of clothing sits completely unworn in people's closets. That figure alone makes a compelling case that something has gone wrong with the way people buy clothes, and a growing corner of the fashion industry is betting that renting, not owning, might be part of the answer.

Fashion rental, the practice of borrowing clothing for a set period before returning it, has moved steadily from niche to mainstream. The global rental apparel market brought in roughly \$6.26 billion in 2023 and is projected to climb further in the coming years. What was once a quirky alternative for budget-conscious shoppers now attracts everyone from students to lawyers, and the platforms facilitating it range from corporate subscription services to peer-to-peer apps where ordinary people lend directly from their own wardrobes.

The appeal cuts across different motivations. For some, it is purely financial. Designer pieces that retail for thousands of dollars become accessible at a fraction of the cost, which means wearing a Chanel jacket to a dinner party is no longer a privilege reserved for people who can actually afford Chanel. Platforms like Rent the Runway, Hurr, and By Rotation have built their models around exactly this logic: give customers the experience of wearing something exceptional without the commitment of owning it. One user on By Rotation reportedly recouped 85 percent of a dress's retail value simply by lending it out several times, a return that selling the same piece secondhand would never have matched.

For others, the draw is less about money and more about convenience and conscience. There is a growing fatigue with the cycle that fast fashion has normalized: browse, buy, wear once, discard. Social media accelerates this loop by making outfits feel dated almost immediately after they appear online. Rental short-circuits the whole process. Instead of purchasing something you will wear to one event and then feel vaguely guilty about, you borrow it, return it, and move on.

This is where the environmental argument enters, though it deserves a more careful look than it typically receives. Rental advocates often point to figures suggesting that borrowing a single garment can reduce water usage by roughly 24 percent and cut carbon emissions by around 3 percent compared to buying new. Those numbers come primarily from Rent the Runway's own commissioned research, which is worth noting.

In contrast, a Finnish study raised a legitimate counterpoint: the transportation required to ship clothes back and forth, combined with the energy cost of repeated professional cleaning, can erode the environmental advantage considerably. This is particularly true for everyday items

like jeans or winter coats that a buyer would otherwise wear hundreds of times over several years.

The honest conclusion is that rental is not automatically greener. It depends on what you are renting, how far it travels, and how often it would otherwise have been worn. A ball gown purchased for a single occasion makes an obvious case for rental. A pair of denim jeans that would have lasted a decade in someone's regular rotation makes a much weaker one. As Maxine Bédard of the New Standard Institute has pointed out, rental and sustainability are not the same thing. Ultimately, wearing what already hangs in your closet remains the most environmentally responsible option available to most people.

That nuance, however, does not undermine the model so much as refine it. Furthermore, the peer-to-peer corner of the rental market is particularly worth watching, partly because it extends beyond occasion wear. Platforms like Tulerie and By Rotation encourage users to think of their wardrobes not as private collections but as shared resources. Founders of these apps describe members forming friendships, developing more deliberate buying habits, and gradually shifting away from impulse purchases toward fewer, higher-quality pieces they are willing to put into circulation. One By Rotation founder noted that since joining the platform, she went from buying three or four items every six weeks to just two, choosing things built to last rather than built to trend.

Technology is making the mechanics of all this smoother. Inventory tracking, automated return reminders, and data-driven recommendations help rental platforms manage logistics that would otherwise be chaotic. Trust has also become a design challenge in its own right. Some platforms interview applicants before granting access, while others use rating systems to restrict high-value rentals until a user has established a track record. The goal in both cases is the same: make strangers comfortable enough to share things they care about.

None of this means fashion rental will replace ownership anytime soon. People who wear the same pieces constantly, have unusual sizing, or simply prefer knowing exactly what will be in their closet on any given day may find the model more trouble than it is worth. Dry cleaning requirements, return deadlines, and the occasional damaged item are real friction points that ownership does not carry.

Still, the momentum is hard to ignore. A generation that already streams its music, rents its cars by the hour, and shares its vacation homes has no particular attachment to the idea that a dress must be bought to be worn. The wardrobe may simply be the last major category waiting to catch up.

- 1) Have you ever bought an expensive clothing item for a specific occasion and then never used it again?
- 2) How important is it to you to own the things you wear, rather than borrow or rent them?
- 3) Has social media affected your own timeline for replacing or upgrading your wardrobe?

- 4) How much does the way you dress affect how you feel about yourself or how others perceive you?
- 5) Would you feel comfortable wearing a high-end outfit that had already been rented out to several strangers?
- 6) What specific type of consumer or lifestyle do you think benefits the most from fashion rental platforms?
- 7) What specific cultural factors in Korea might encourage or discourage the widespread adoption of fashion rental?
- 8) Do you believe the desire for physical ownership will eventually become an outdated concept for future generations?

Picture	(v)	to imagine or visualize a situation or scenario	Picture yourself arriving at the party without a gift. How would you feel?
Sharp	(adj)	neat, stylish, and well put-together in appearance	He always looked sharp at family events, even when everyone else dressed casually.
Rotation	(n)	a regularly repeated cycle of items, tasks, or people used in turns	She cooks the same five meals in rotation and sees no reason to change.
Compelling	(adj)	convincing and persuasive; difficult to argue against	The documentary made a compelling case for reducing meat consumption.
Corner	(n)	a small, specialized segment of a larger field or market	He found a quiet corner of the internet dedicated entirely to vintage maps.
Project	(v)	to forecast or estimate a future figure or outcome based on current data	Forecasters projected heavy rain all weekend, so the festival was moved indoors.
Quirky	(adj)	unusual or unconventional in a mildly eccentric but appealing way	The cafe had a quirky habit of naming every sandwich after a famous musician.
Facilitate	(v)	to make a process easier or help something happen more smoothly	A mutual friend helped facilitate their reconciliation after years of not speaking.
Cut across	(phr v)	to apply to or be relevant for several different groups or categories at once	The love of street food cuts across generations and social backgrounds.
Exceptional	(adj)	unusually good; well above what is considered normal or average	Her memory for names and faces was exceptional, and people noticed immediately.

Recoup	(v)	to get back money that was previously spent or lost	He sold his old camera gear and managed to recoup most of what he had paid.
Fatigue	(n)	a state of exhaustion or declining enthusiasm caused by overexposure to something	After three weeks of travel, a deep fatigue had set in and she just wanted to go home.
Discard	(v)	to throw something away because it is no longer wanted or useful	He went through his wardrobe and discarded anything he hadn't worn in two years.
Short-circuit	(v)	to bypass or interrupt a process before it runs its natural course	One honest conversation was enough to short-circuit what could have been a nasty argument.
Vaguely	(adv)	in a slight or unclear way; not strongly or with any real certainty	She was vaguely familiar with the neighborhood but couldn't find the right street.
Garment	(n)	a single item of clothing	She pulled every garment from her suitcase looking for something to wear to dinner.
Commission	(v)	to officially request and pay for something to be created or produced	They commissioned a local artist to paint a portrait of their dog as a birthday gift.
Worth noting	(exp)	deserving attention; important enough to keep in mind	It is worth noting that the cafe only got bad reviews during its first week of opening.
Counterpoint	(n)	an argument or perspective that directly challenges another	Just as everyone agreed to leave early, she raised a counterpoint nobody had considered.
Erode	(v)	to gradually weaken or reduce something over time	Years of cancelled plans slowly eroded the friendship until they stopped calling altogether.
Nuance	(n)	a subtle difference or layer of complexity in how something should be understood	Picking up the nuance of humor in a second language takes years of real exposure.
Undermine	(v)	to weaken or damage something gradually, often in a subtle way	Checking his phone at dinner had started to undermine her trust in his attention.
Refine	(v)	to improve something by making small but meaningful adjustments	She spent the afternoon refining her grandmother's recipe until it tasted just right.

Deliberate	(adj)	carefully considered and intentional rather than rushed or accidental	His move to a smaller town was deliberate, driven by a desire for a quieter life.
Circulation	(n)	the movement of something through a system or among a group of people	Once the rumor got into circulation, it had completely changed within a few hours.
Mechanics	(n)	the practical details of how a process or system works	The idea sounded fun, but nobody had thought through the mechanics of sharing one car for ten days.
Chaotic	(adj)	in a state of complete disorder and confusion	The kitchen was chaotic by the time all four kids were trying to make breakfast at once.
Track record	(n)	a history of past behavior used to judge future reliability	Given his track record of being late, nobody was surprised when he missed the train.
Friction point	(n)	a specific aspect of a process that causes difficulty or frustration	The biggest friction point in any group trip is usually agreeing on where to eat.
Attachment	(n)	a feeling of connection to something that makes it hard to give up	Despite the broken handle, she couldn't throw away the mug. The attachment was too strong.