

Black Friday's environmental impact is an e-waste crisis



By [Lindsey Schutters](#)

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As Black Friday deals sweep across South Africa, consumers are eagerly replacing their old appliances and electrical items. However, this annual shopping frenzy is exacerbating the country's e-waste problem, warns non-profit organisation Circular Energy.



Source: Hans Ripa/Unsplash

South Africa is currently grappling with the fastest-growing waste stream in the country: electronic waste. Each citizen generates between 6 to 7 kg of e-waste per year, but only a small fraction (7% to 12%) is formally recycled. This Black Friday, the influx of discarded appliances could further strain the already overwhelmed waste management systems.

Circular Energy, an environmental advocacy group and producer responsibility organisation (PRO), highlights that all items dependent on an electrical current, or those with a plug, cable, or battery, can and should be recycled when no longer in use. These items often contain hazardous materials that pose a significant threat to the environment when improperly discarded.



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For every gram of recyclable materials not recovered, tonnes of raw materials must be mined or manufactured, causing further environmental harm.

SA lags behind in implementing regulations

Despite these risks, South African consumers are not yet in the habit of recycling their unwanted electrical and electronic items. The country lags behind in implementing Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) regulations, which require manufacturers, importers, and resellers of recoverable items to fund legally compliant recycling schemes.

Consumer e-waste can be divided into two main categories:

TVs and other large CRT displays: These electronics contain lead and other heavy metals, which can be harmful if not recycled properly.

Computers and laptops: Consisting largely of plastic and other materials that can go to waste when broken or old, these devices are often tossed in with regular rubbish when disposed of.

There is a third category of e-waste that is rising exponentially because of the rapid pace of development and accelerated upgrade cycles: lithium batteries. All those powerbanks, smartwatches and smartphones that will get thrown away can have dangerous consequences.

According to a study by CSIRO, [lithium-ion battery waste is growing by 20% per year](#) and could exceed 136,000 tonnes by 2036.

Some of the sources of lithium battery waste include [single-use vapes](#), which are often discarded after use. More than half of people that buy these vapes bin them, according to the research. While each vape contains just 0.15g of lithium, the scale of the waste means about 10 tonnes of the metal is ending up in landfills.

Recycling lithium batteries can reduce the total environmental impact

However, not all lithium batteries end up in landfills. Some are recycled or reused for other purposes. A review of research into the second life and recycling of lithium-ion batteries suggests that the recycling rates are far higher than some statistics suggest. A new study found almost 100,000 tons of waste batteries were recycled last year – about half of what reached end-of-life.

Recycling lithium batteries can reduce the environmental impacts of mining and disposal, as well as recover valuable materials for alternative use or new batteries. However, recycling lithium batteries is not yet widely practiced or optimised, due to technical, economic, and regulatory challenges.

Lithium batteries can be hazardous waste if they are not fully discharged or properly handled. They can catch fire, explode, or leak toxic substances that can harm air, water, and soil quality.



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As Black Friday approaches, South Africans face a dilemma: what to do with their old and unwanted electronic devices? A recent campaign by a retailer and a public relations firm offered rewards for e-waste, but experts say this is not a

sustainable or responsible solution.

South Africans are unaware

According to Circular Energy, many South Africans are unaware of the harm that e-waste can cause. Some sell their old devices to informal traders, who strip them for parts and dump the rest in landfills.

Others fix and resell them, without complying with the new [EPR regulations](#) that aim to reduce e-waste and promote circular economy. Both practices can result in toxic substances such as lead, mercury, and cadmium leaching into the soil and water, affecting wildlife and human health.

Circular Energy urges South Africans to see their e-waste not as a source of income, but as a potential threat to future generations. The company says that recycling e-waste can recover valuable materials, save energy, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It also creates jobs and opportunities for social and economic development.

Circular Energy invites South Africans to [join its mission to save the planet by using its free and convenient service to collect and recycle their e-waste](#), whether on Black Friday or any other day.

ABOUT LINDSEY SCHUTTERS

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