



SUSTAINABILITY IN FASHION AND THE RISE OF THE CONSCIOUS CONSUMER

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It's Christmas party season and my in-box is full of 'must-have' looks for all occasions, but this year I will be revisiting the pressure to buy a new outfit for every event. I'm dialling it down because, like many consumers – and brands – I'm thinking more ethically about fashion and sustainability, so I'll be planning my wardrobe accordingly, wearing pieces more than once and mixing old with new.

We know it's a challenge for fashion to become more sustainable, especially fast fashion where cost, volume, and speed of manufacture take priority, but if our current levels of consumption continue, fashion will account for more than a quarter of our total impact on climate change by 2050.

TECHNOLOGY IS A BIG ENABLER OF THE INSTANT GRATIFICATION OF FAST FASHION

but it's also a key driver of change towards more ethical practices.

Social media can turn a backlash against unethical behaviour into a national news story within minutes —look at the outrage generated when Burberry was caught destroying unsold goods to “protect its brand.” The company was compelled into an overnight change of policy.

Digital exposes brands behaving badly, but it also gives them a space to spell out sustainability practices, provide visibility about where their

products are sourced, and connect with customers who care about the issues, so they can call out good behaviour as well as bad.

Likewise, e-commerce is not just a quick way to lay your hands on the latest fashions, it's also the place where people go to buy and sell pre-owned items on sites like Depop and eBay. There has even been a rise in the popularity of second hand luxury fashion, with players such as Vestiaire Collective and HEWI cornering the market. The stigma of “second hand” has become the cachet of “vintage.”

Social media has played its part in the acceleration of fast fashion by relentlessly encouraging the pursuit of the new, but it is also at the forefront of a more sustainable movement and a changing consumer mindset.

More thoughtful influencers like The Frugality started out a few years ago with an ethical message, mixing old with new. Others are starting to follow suit, spurred on by Guardian fashion editor Jess Cartner-Morley, who wrote recently about her eco-makeover in pursuit of a better planet.

Many brands are making their own moves towards more sustainable goals, with Uniqlo leading the way, perhaps because the issue is taken more seriously in Asia, where the sweatshops and the environmental impacts of waste are so much closer to home.

ASOS, H&M and Zara all have eco-conscious collections alongside their main lines, and ASOS has introduced electric delivery vans in central London, while John Lewis and Waitrose have promised to use bio-methane in all delivery trucks by 2028. Given the scale of the problem, these might feel like token gestures, but they demonstrate the direction of travel.

While H&M is still very much a fast fashion retailer, its parent group is investing in new concepts like Arket, a chain of stores that launched under a sustainability banner last year. Again these are only beginnings, but they show that H&M Group is serious about expanding its business model beyond fast fashion.

For upmarket propositions, where cost is less of an issue, there is an opportunity to lead the way. Stella McCartney was one of the first designers to think about ethics and fashion, and has set a long-term example of how to build a fashion business on ethical practices, leading the way for other environmentally conscious brands such as Reformation who have gained a cult like following.

Despite Stella's influence, the UK is Europe's worst offender for throwaway fashion. We currently buy almost twice as many clothes as consumers in Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, but we can all do our bit to be more ethical in our fashion choices. Starting with that Christmas wardrobe.

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