

Financial pressures make sustainability difficult for fashion brands: Tech tools & pro-active consumers are the only saviours



UNIQLO's Jeans Innovation Centre introduces various technologies and innovations to reduce water usage of washing regular fit jeans by up to 99 per cent.

Synopsis

Did you know that around 85% of garments produced every year end up in the dump?

Open your wardrobe. How many pieces of clothing do you see?

Hold on. Let's put a pin on that question, and answer this first. From skinny and ripped jeans to crop tops and cocktail dresses, how many clothes have you worn since the pandemic began in March 2020?

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If the answer is a handful, you are a victim of fast fashion, just like the rest of us. And it is more dangerous than you can imagine. Your habit of hoarding fashion

And, it is more dangerous than you can imagine. Your habit of hoarding fashion trends and buying new ones is making the world die faster.

According to a 2020 World Economic Forum (WEF) report, the fashion industry results in 10 per cent of carbon emissions caused by humans. Moreover, the apparel-makers of the world are the second-largest consumers of water, polluting rivers and oceans.

As more and more people got used to the comfort of their homes due to the pandemic, shopping for trendy and cheap clothes turned into a leisure activity.

The same WEF study revealed that production of clothing has almost doubled since 2000. And the worst news is, around 85 per cent of these garments end up in the dump every year.

Akshay Narvekar, founder and CEO of Mumbai-based Bombay Shirt Company (BSC), feels fast fashion has left the apparel industry broken. "The industry has seen no change over the last few decades. Inventory build-up by brands has led to an environmental crisis that society is only starting to recognise now," he says.

Calling the fashion industry notorious for being one of the most-polluting industries, Amrish Kumar, MD of designer label Ritu Kumar, said sustainability is the key to the future. "The advent of fast fashion caused a shift from this traditional philosophy, but we are seeing a shift back towards the classic idea," he says.

'Fast fashion' trend, termed after the business model, means mid-range clothing brands replicating styles from high-end fashion designers using low quality fabric at affordable prices. This further pushes the brands to find the cheapest source of labour available, ultimately translating to low wages, long working hours, high temperatures, unsanitary conditions and in many cases labour exploitation.

Narvekar says the only way to change this is to slow down and consume consciously. "Not only does it make good business sense, but also good planet sense".

Sustainability 101

How to determine if a product or brand is sustainable

Source of clothes:
Where are materials sourced from?

Production process: How are raw materials made?

What's the condition of the factory workers?

How is it affecting Mother Earth?



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What Is Sustainable Fashion?

Buying sustainable clothes is fashion with responsibility. Sustainable fashion comes in many forms - from promoting and producing environmentally, socially and ethically conscious products to encouraging mindful consumption.

But, how should one ensure they are using environment-friendly products? The answer is simple - they need to come from a natural source, or be produced without causing any environmental damage (no chemicals or fertilizers). They can also be recycled from non-biodegradable synthetic material like plastics or nylon to form a reusable product.

Sustainable fashion means buying less and using more. Narvekar describes 'sustainability' as a complex theory that can be confusing. "It's a long, never-ending journey to achieving complete sustainability," he mentions.

Yet, in his attempt to explain the concept better, the BSC head says that "the most-sustainable piece of clothing is the one you already have".

On the other hand, Kumar believes that achieving complete sustainability is decades away. However, he feels steps are being taken in the right direction. "Conversations around sustainability are the first step towards achieving these goals," he said.

While the road to sustainability is long, supply chain start-up Increff's co-founder, Anhsuman Agarwal, feels that brands can use technology to make responsible choices. The Bengaluru-based firm offers cloud-based solutions to

fashion brands and retailers in order to improve their inventory efficiency and help them meet sustainable goals.

As consumer habits are changing, many customers are opting brands whose value they can identify with. Reusing, recycling, trading and donating apparel are becoming more common in the fashion world. Conscious consumers have started choosing quality over quantity.

Harkirat Singh, Managing Director of Aero Club (makers of Woodland), thinks consumers are becoming more selective towards their fashion choices. "Fashion industry is about emotional attachment, loyalty and excitement for specific brands. In the future, brand love and loyalty will very much be dependent on the sustainability attributes that it enables or builds with its consumers," he pointed out.



Bombay Shirt Company also provides free lifetime alterations on all its products, so that they could be worn for years to come.



Reducing The Environmental Impact

From selection of raw materials during ethical manufacturing to carefully packing and shipping the final product to the customer, sustainability extends to all facets of the product.

Agarwal of Increff, founded in 2016 and backed by Sequoia Capital, stresses on the use of new-age technology that can help brands implement sustainable practices and limit carbon emission and pollution. "Predictive algorithms and tech tools can be used to capture emerging and evolving trends and patterns early. They can also be used to target and price products, appropriately," he says. "Sourcing and manufacturing the right quantity, as per the demand, can help brands sell more at higher margins, and significantly save on costs of overproduction and stocking".

Agreeing with Agarwal, Singh goes on to add, "Unless technology can help us recycle fabrics and garments more efficiently, the current cost of collecting raw materials will further challenge the fashion industry."

While some brands opt for technology to check the environmental-friendly boxes, others try to make the most of things that come under the ambit of constantly-evolving sustainable fashion.

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BSC isn't a completely sustainable brand, but Narvekar maintains that it tries its

best to make eco-friendly choices - surrounding sourcing, producing and selling. "We want our consumers to slow down and consume consciously. We don't make a shirt until the order comes through. Our 'no-inventory model' means we don't have huge volumes of clothes lying in our factories that get thrown into landfills if they're not bought", he explains.

In a bid to repurpose "almost every last scrap of fabric", BSC also transforms them into bow ties and pocket squares. The brand also provides free lifetime alterations on all its products, so that they could be worn for years to come - claiming that this encourages people to buy less and use what they already have.

Last year in January, BSC collaborated with conscious denim brand 'Korra' - sourced from Italy and Japan - that uses organic or recycled raw materials for the products, less water (15 ml as compared standard 40 ml) for the fabrics and leftover fabric scraps for packaging.



Ritu Kumar's collection includes saris, priced at Rs 15,000, made from soya and other natural fabrics.

Despite a tough pandemic year, Ritu Kumar launched Label Basics, a collection of comfortable garments for the work-from-home generation, at the start of the pandemic. The brand also included saris made from soya, natural fabrics, expanding to its organic collection - priced at Rs 15,000.

The label proudly claims that sustainability is an important part of the brand's DNA since its inception. The brand feels revival of classic Indian handicrafts and prints is an important facet of sustainability. Kumar believes making a brand entirely sustainable isn't an overnight—job. "It is a slow process, but transparency is key".

Like Ritu Kumar, Woodland, too, experienced a difficult pandemic when the overall business slowed down. Woodland (synonymous with the Tree Logo) that entered India in the early '90s has specially developed a yarn called 'PureGreen' that is made by processing non-bio-degradable pet bottles that are hazardous to the **environment**.

As far as footwear is concerned, under the Pro Planet Community initiative, Woodland mastered the technique of using discarded rubber to make footwear. Using recycled rubber ensures minimum use of precious resources during the manufacturing process, which in turn helps save natural resources and energy, reduces greenhouse gas emissions and slows global warming.

Japanese casualwear UNIQLO - founded in 1949 - also claims to be on the path to sustainability for more than 20 years. From choosing good materials and crafting them into quality clothing to delivering the products to customers, the wholly-owned subsidiary of Fast Retailing takes sustainability seriously. A spokesperson for the brand said that these carefully crafted garments can also be given a second-lease of life through its recycling program.

UNIQLO's Jeans Innovation Centre introduces various technologies and innovations to reduce water usage of washing regular fit jeans by up to 99 per cent. It also recycles polyester material made from post-consumer PET bottles to support the more efficient use of resources. "This year, recycled polyester comprises of 32 per cent to 75 per cent of the quick-drying 'DRY-EX Polo Shirt' and 30 per cent of the 'Fluffy Yarn Fleece Full-Zip Jacket' and 'Fluffy Yarn Fleece Pullover Shirt'," spokesperson said.

The Challenge: Reusing, Repairing, Remaking & Recycling

Fashion industry identifies a looming gap when it comes to meeting social and environmental targets.

According to a March 2021 report by the Business of Fashion, around 15 largest listed fashion companies including Hermes & LVMH were lagging behind in their social and environmental targets of the Paris climate agreement and UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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For a lot of fashion brands that are struggling to cope financially, the added

pressure of 'going green' might just be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Bengaluru-based Increff is a tech partner to fashion brands like Reliance Trends, Soch, Pepe Jeans, Tommy, CK, Myntra, Mango, Blackberrys, Libas, Levi's Hummel, Celio, PUMA, Adidas, GAP, ONLY, among other, across India and globally. Agarwal confirmed that sustainability is challenging for big fashion brands as the demand is high. Hence, it is difficult to source sustainable fabrics at a large scale, consistently.



Woodland has specially developed a yarn called 'PureGreen' that is made by processing non-bio-degradeable pet bottles.

For an industry to achieve its green goals, sustainability must be practised in the various stages of the product's life - beginning from designing, acquiring and producing of raw materials to manufacturing, transporting, storing and marketing. Singh clarifies that most companies are unable to achieve their green targets when they fail to make it through all these stages. "The fashion industry encompasses a complex web of factors including human rights, affordability,

supply chains and materials," he added.

Talking about the luxury segment, the future remains more uncertain due to the issues with supply channels, a complete mismatch in demand and supply and unused inventory rotting in warehouses. During the pandemic, customers'

interest has shifted towards transparency and sustainability. Ritu Kumar MD said conglomerates will take time, effort and financial backing to meet these demands. "It is perhaps easier for smaller brands to overhaul their systems more efficiently compared to large-scale companies," he shared.

Money Vs Environment | Sustainability Is Not Equal To Pocket-Friendly

Clothing has the power to change the world for the better. Then, why haven't all fashion brands become sustainable yet?

It's not as easy as you may think. It takes a lot for fashion brands, financially, to be sustainable.

Any brand planning to go sustainable will have to go through a complete overhaul of the manufacturing process and technology update. Companies that cannot afford to go through a complete revamp will struggle the most as they will have to work in phases to make their product sustainable.

Such brands will have two options - either absorb these additional costs or will increase the prices of their offerings which will alienate a portion of their customer base. Both these routes will, in turn, negatively affect the company's bottom line.

Additionally, existing manufacturing processes need to be dismantled and replaced with something new. After this, attaining efficacy is a difficult and time-consuming process. "Attaining sustainability is an expensive process and is reflected in the price of the garment. Going through a complete overhaul involves a steep learning curve for the company and its leaders," confirmed Kumar.

As far as production is concerned, the increasing cost of procuring raw materials is one of the biggest challenges the fashion industry faces when going sustainable. "Not only the cost of growing or procuring, but the price of transforming and treating the raw materials needed for making new fabrics and design lines have been on the rise for a long time now," Singh shared.





(L-R) Amrish Kumar, MD of Ritu Kumar, Akshay Narvekar founder of Bombay Shirt Company, Harkirat Singh, Managing Director of Aero Club, and Increff co-founder Anhsuman Agarwal.

Harvesting good-quality cotton, the most-widely used natural fibre in the world, demands a lot of care. The cotton plant must be planted separately to ensure no pesticides or chemicals are used during growth and production. This process alone brings up the overall cycle cost of the final product.

In addition, third-party certification and validation are necessary for the credibility of sustainable sourcing and manufacturing. "It involves tremendous effort and cost for any brand in the beginning, but in the long run, sustainable fashion will lead to higher revenues and margins as more and more customers are willing to pay for it," informed Agarwal.

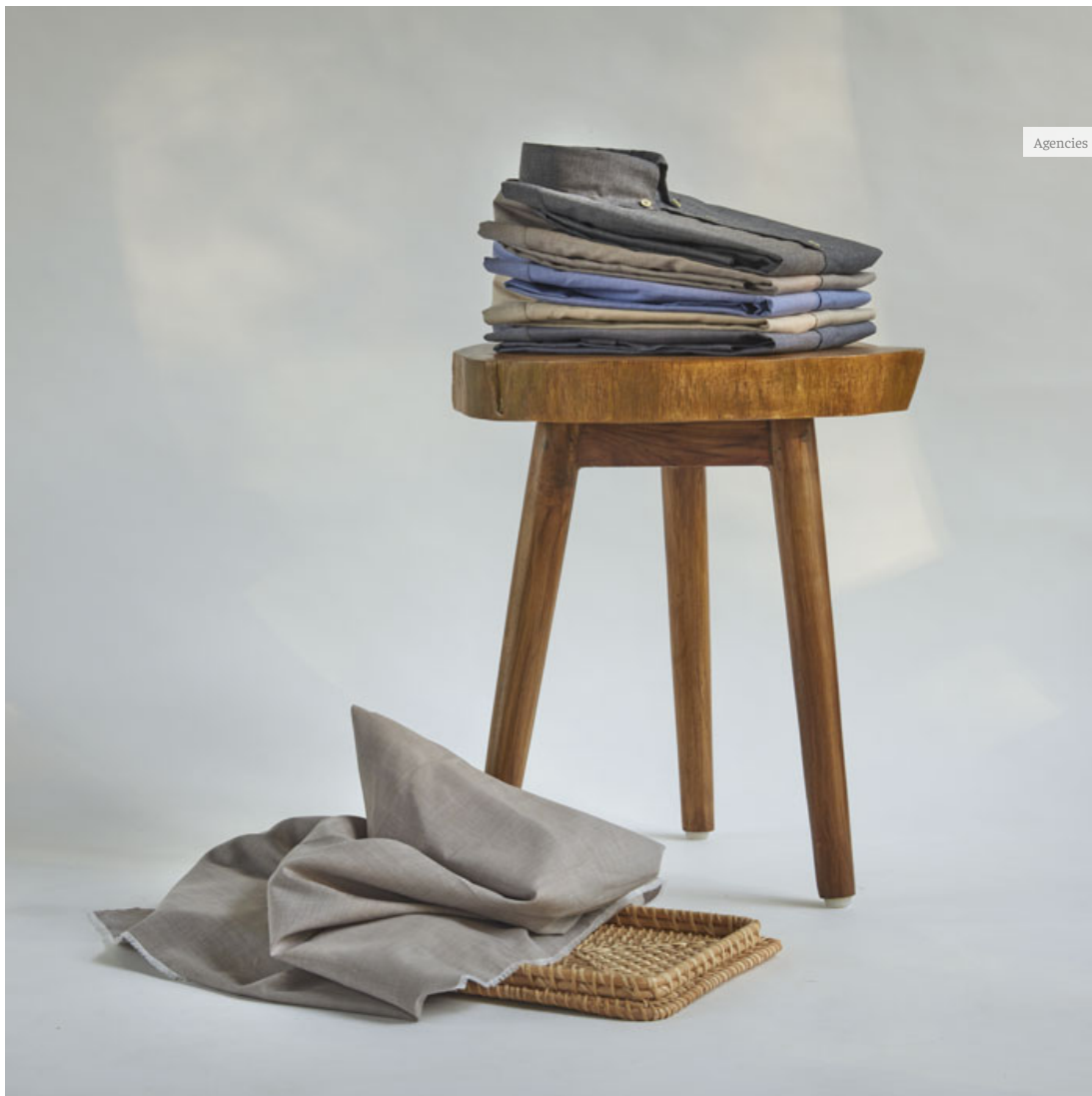
Making an environmentally-friendly product price-sensitive will start with an integrated sustainable business model. As the demand for sustainable fabrics grows, the market forces will come into play and push more brands to provide sustainable fashion to a larger market at a reasonable price.

Making World A Better Place | How Are You Responsible?

Sustainability is no longer a conversation restricted among fashionable elites. With the increasing awareness of the harmful impact of fast fashion on the ecosystem, the journey towards a sustainable future will not only be driven by fashion brands, but also by consumers.

While brands need to implement sustainable practices to receive acceptance from society, consumers, on the other hand, need to shop responsibly for good quality, long-lasting clothes that can be resold or donated for a better cause.

Narvekar is confident that sustainable fashion doesn't have to be expensive. For a customer to stay invested in purchasing sustainable fashion, he said that they should be able to enjoy a world-class experience.



Agencies

Bombay Shirt company follows a 'no-inventory model' which means it don't make a shirt until the order comes through.



Despite how long and arduous the journey to sustainability is, Agarwal feels brands need to start implementing smart technologies to build efficiencies in

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their system to cut unnecessary expenses. Sustainable value-driven partnerships, incremental benefit, deliver quality services, and cost-effective supply chains are some steps that will ensure the incremental cost of sustainable fashion is not huge.

The buying behaviour of consumers also depends on their earnings. While some customers are willing to pay more for premium sustainable fashion, a large community still finds it difficult and challenging to identify merchants that are committed to sustainable retailing.

Singh feels that the pandemic may have affected some attitudinal and behavioural changes in consumers. "For sustainable fashion to be successful, it is important for both consumers and companies alike to rethink the world of fashion," he added.

Meanwhile, many millennials are also opting for second hand shopping, similar to the concept of popular brands like ThreadUp, eBay, OLX and Quikr which have set up online stores to revive the second-hand market.

Many brands and retailers have also come forward to take up this trend. Second-hand shopping has some unique and vintage styles to stand out in current fashion trends. It's time to transform pre-loved clothing into re-loved clothing," said Agarwal.

The Future Of Sustainable Fashion?

Most fabrics in India were used for unstitched clothing such as saris, handmade by crafts-people and artisans. Clothes are passed on from parent to child to grandchild, truly standing the test of time.

Old fabrics and clothes were patched together to make household items such as bed covers, rugs, etc. In the most rudimentary state, unwearable clothes are used for cleaning and mopping. Textile in India is reincarnated, and thus, sustained.



LOOK IN THE FUTURE

- No inventory. Fabrics and raw materials will be ordered in real time, algorithmically, through tech & data platforms
- Each garment will be made to order, customised to suit your personality
- Brands will produce garments that are high quality, meaning they will last longer. You will buy less, but better
- Brands will invest in eco-friendly raw materials that are skin-friendly
- Brands and retailers will offer repair facilities for their clothes
- Clothes that can't be repaired will be redesigned as per the latest trend
- Technology will help optimise sourcing, production, distribution and sales

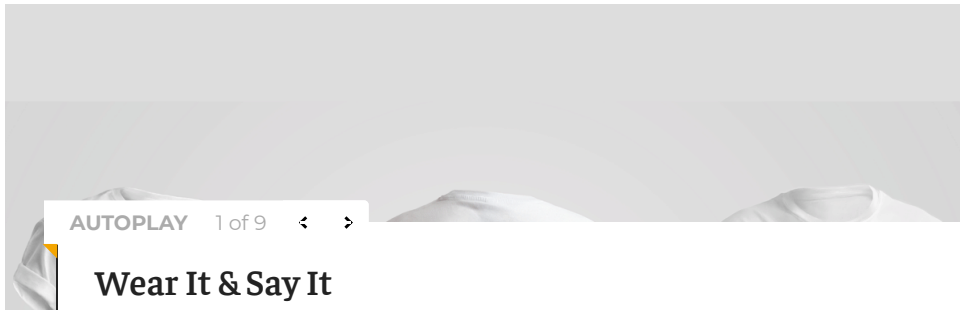
THE ECONOMIC TIMES
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Narvekar said that sustainability and conscious consumption have always been in every Indian's DNA. He advises local brands to learn from the mistakes of the West. "We hope that we can learn from how this adversely affects our planet and skip that phase in India altogether," he added.

On the other hand, Kumar feels the West has a lot to learn from the East when it comes to matters of sustainability. "'Unsustainable' is a more western concept. In India, traditional crafts and textiles have always leaned towards sustainability, there has hardly been any fashion waste in India," he pointed out.

While affordable fast fashion comes at a cost, we - as citizens of the world - have a shared responsibility to work towards the betterment of the environment.

Tees That Talk: Fashion As A Political Tool Has Always Been About Optics, Subliminal Cues A...



Wear It & Say It

Anyone who says fashion is not political has not noticed the length of former American president Donald Trump's red ties or thinks US Vice-President Kamala Harris' sneakers-with-suits look is happenstance.

From the suffragette white and the keffiyeh as a symbol of Palestinian self-determination to Che's beret and Time's Up bracelets, fashion as a political tool has always been about optics, subliminal cues and nuance. But it's never hidden, in fact it's all about wearing your ideology on your sleeve. And nowhere is this more evident than in the slogan T-shirt — an incredibly visible vehicle used by people to voice opinions or support movements. Every protest or social movement has produced a talking T-shirt.

Here's a short history of the tee that talks.