
Intro to Sustainable Fashion

A Guide By The Green and Blue Journal

Welcome

After years of independently researching the sustainable fashion sector, I decided to create a formal “guide” to compile all the information I have learned. In this guide, I cover the basics — what is sustainable fashion? — and the not-so-basics — shared in the form of 25 answers to unique but important questions. Sustainable fashion, as you will learn, is complex and constantly developing. This guide should be used as an introduction to the topic but by no means covers everything. For weekly updates on what is happening with sustainability in fashion, check out The Green and Blue Journal website and newsletter.

Website: <https://www.thegreenandbluejournal.com>

Newsletter: <https://thegreenandbluejournal.substack.com>

I hope you find this guide informative and interesting.

-Katherine Albertson

The Green and Blue Journal Founder and Editor

Definitions and Key Challenges

Environmentally Sustainable Fashion

Definition: Fashion products that are produced and sold with consideration of their impact on the environment.

Example: Shoes made using recycled plastic that was taken from the environment.

Key Challenges:

- ❖ Greenhouse gases out of control due to production and shipping.
- ❖ Natural resource contamination from chemicals used during dyeing and processing.
- ❖ Physical pollution caused by apparel, packaging, and material fibers.

Socially Sustainable Fashion

Definition: Fashion products that are produced and sold with consideration of their impact on people.

Example: Clothes that are cut and sewn in factories where employees are paid living wages and work in safe environments.

Key Challenges:

- ❖ Lack of transparency between suppliers and brands and brands and consumers.
- ❖ Subcontracted and outsourced supply chain operations which can lead to hidden social and environmental problems.

Economically Sustainable Fashion

Definition: Fashion products that are produced and sold with the purpose of making a profit.

Example: A small brand making enough revenue to cover operating costs, employee salaries, growth investments, and make a profit.

Key Challenges:

- ❖ Big retailers have become dependent on selling a lot of clothes to make up for low profit margins, as the fast fashion model loses popularity with consumers, these brands need to figure out how they will sell fewer clothes while still remaining profitable and not alienating consumers who have become accustomed to cheap clothes.

For a deeper look at key terms and concepts discussed in this guide, check out the Deep Dive page on thegreenandbluejournal.com

Sustainability Ladder

Instead of just separating the “regular” brands from the “sustainable” brands with an unmovable line, consider brands being ranked on a ladder or scale. This way, brands can move up or down, becoming more or less sustainable depending on the initiatives they implement and changes they make to their operations. The idea of a sustainability ladder lets historically unsustainable brands — fast fashion — shed that reputation, and it holds historically sustainable brands — small and local — accountable as they grow in size. It gives brands more incentive to be good and keep moving upward. It offers consumers a way to hold brands accountable. It creates an easy way to distinguish real sustainability from so-called “greenwashing”. While each brand or consumer will rank sustainable initiatives differently depending on their passions and priorities, some ideas are undoubtedly better for the planet and people.

At the top of the sustainability ladder, imagine the following initiatives:

- ❖ Environmental: Complete circularity, Carbon negativity, Exclusive use of non-toxic chemicals and dyes, and Significantly reduced physical pollution, including packaging and textile fibers.
- ❖ Social: Full transparency from supply chain to customers, Living wage salaries for all employees throughout the value chain
- ❖ Profit: Decent profit margins while still maintaining excellent environmental and social sustainability

At the bottom of the sustainability ladder would be:

- ❖ The introduction of a collection or an item that addresses a singular environmental or social problem.
- ❖ A brand that incorporates some level of sustainability but still prioritizes growth and profit above all else.

In between would be varying degrees of progress, such as making all cotton products organic instead of just releasing an organic cotton collection. Ultimately reaching the top of the sustainability ladder, and staying there, will be difficult for many brands to achieve, especially as new ideas come along that are put on a bar above the current top initiatives. The ladder concept is a great motivator for brands to keep reaching for the next bar to do better than before. After all, being better is what sustainability is all about.

Analyzing a Sustainable Brand

Below is the guide that The Green and Blue Journal uses to analyze and rate a brand. Five categories — materials, production, wearability, inventory, and initiatives — are examined to get a whole picture of sustainability across the brand.

Materials:

- ❖ Examine ten random products and determine what percentage use sustainable materials.
 - ❖ A material is sustainable if it is better than the conventional option (E.g. organic cotton is MORE sustainable than conventional cotton; partially recycled polyester is MORE sustainable than 100% virgin polyester)
 - ❖ 90-100% of the ten products use sustainable materials (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ 75-90% of the ten products use sustainable materials (4/5 rating)
 - ❖ 50-75% of the ten products use sustainable materials (3/5 rating)
 - ❖ 25-50% of the ten products use sustainable materials (2/5 rating)
 - ❖ 0-25% of the ten products use sustainable materials (1/5 rating)
- ❖ Use the rating system above to get the total score of the Materials (#/5 rating)

Production:

- ❖ Determine what method of production is used.
 - ❖ Made to order (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ Small batch (4/5 rating)
 - ❖ Large batch, upfront production (1/5 rating)
- ❖ Determine how much garment workers are paid.
 - ❖ Living wage (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ Minimum/Fair wage (4/5 rating)
 - ❖ No information (1/5 rating)
- ❖ Determine how factories are powered.
 - ❖ Clean/renewable energy (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ Uses energy-saving practices (3/5 rating)
 - ❖ No information (1/5 rating)
- ❖ Determine if supply chain tracking is possible and/or easy.
 - ❖ Present and easy for consumers to find (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ Present but not easy for consumers to find (3/5 rating)
 - ❖ No information about supply chain tracking, including where individual materials came from (1/5 rating)
- ❖ Average the ratings from each section together to get the total score for the Production (#/5 rating)

Wearability:

- ❖ Determine if clothes fit a “timeless” style which can be worn on repeat.
 - ❖ If the answer is “yes” (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ If the answer is “no” (3/5 rating)
- ❖ Determine if clothes can be worn multiple ways or with multiple outfits.
 - ❖ If the answer is “yes” (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ If the answer is “no” (3/5 rating)
- ❖ Determine if clothes are made to last a long time based on customer reviews and brand reputation
 - ❖ If clothes are made to last/get good reviews about being high-quality (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ If clothes are made cheaply/get bad reviews about being low-quality (1/5 rating)
- ❖ Average the ratings from each section together to get the total score for the Wearability (#/5 rating)

Inventory:

- ❖ Count how many new (new=products made with more than 50% virgin materials) products available on the brand’s website.
 - ❖ If there are less than 100 new products (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ If there are between 100-200 new products (3/5 rating)
 - ❖ If there are more than 200 new products (1/5 rating)
- ❖ Count how many products are available at a reduced price.
 - ❖ If there are less than 20 products at a discounted price (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ If there are more than 20 products at a discounted price (1/5 rating)
- ❖ Average the ratings from each section together to get the total score for the Inventory (#/5 rating)

Initiatives:

- ❖ Count how many initiatives (greenhouse gas reduction programs, circularity programs, waste management programs, etc.) are incorporated by the brand
 - ❖ Four or more extra initiatives implemented (5/5 rating)
 - ❖ Three extra initiatives implemented (4/5 rating)
 - ❖ Two extra initiatives implemented (3/5 rating)
 - ❖ One extra initiative implemented (2/5 rating)
 - ❖ Zero initiatives implemented (1/5 rating)
- ❖ Use the rating system above to get the total score of the Initiatives (#/5 rating)

Total brand rating:

- ❖ Average all the ratings from each of the five sections to get the total brand rating (#/5)

****This is a basic rating system designed to give consumers an idea of what to look for when analyzing a brand’s sustainability.****

Compare and Contrast

General

Sustainability versus Environmental/Social Sustainability

Sustainability:

- The most widely accepted definition for sustainability is “meeting our own needs without compromising future generations’ ability to meet their needs.”
- While the term is most often associated with protecting the environment, sustainability refers to social equality and economic development as well.

Environmental Sustainability:

- Similar to “sustainability” but with the focus solely on the environment/people.
- Economic development is considered, but it is not the priority compared to preserving the environment or protecting people.

Most brands use the term “sustainability” to encompass everything from better manufacturing processes to circularity instead of using the proper terms “environmental sustainability” or “social sustainability”. This can lead to confusion and outrage amongst consumers who expect more from self-described “sustainable” brands. To fix the issue and better communicate with consumers, brands should offer clear definitions of the buzz words on their website. For our part, consumers can be more aware of which terms are being used and continue to learn new definitions of terms that we may not be familiar with.

Fast Fashion versus Slow Fashion

Fast Fashion:

- Fast fashion is a term used to describe a model of production.
- The Sustainable Fashion Glossary from Condé Nast and the London College of Fashion provides a more specific definition: “a model of fashion production and consumption that relies on a fast turnaround of styles and products.”
- In other words, fast fashion refers to clothes produced more frequently than the industry standard for clothing release.

Slow Fashion:

- Clothing that is produced and released less often than the industry standard.
- Typically designed to be durable and timeless.

Fast fashion has a bad reputation because of its environmental and social impact. Overproduction of clothing has resulted in mountains of trash, and cheap clothes can be linked back to what is being called “modern-day slave labor”. As an alternative, the concept of “slow fashion” has gained traction with consumers and fashion activists. One problem is that slow fashion, which discourages buying new clothes frequently, can be a bad business model. Brands are now trying to find an in-between option where selling clothes is still profitable but more sustainable.

Sustainable Fashion versus Ethical Fashion

Sustainable Fashion:

- Fashion that takes people, planet, and profit into account.

Ethical Fashion:

- Fashion created for the “right” reasons and the “right” way.
- Ethical fashion tends to focus on people and treating them with dignity and fairness.
- Ethical fashion is broader than sustainable fashion since the term can be open to interpretation based on what each person and brand values.

Both terms generally mean the same thing, but ethical fashion is slightly outdated. Being “ethical” is a concept that is difficult to define and even more difficult to regulate. “Sustainable fashion” has a widely recognized definition that makes it — just a bit — easier to regulate brands that don’t follow the guidelines.

Local Production versus Global Production

Local Production:

- Producing within the same country or community where the majority of sales are made.
- Economically supports the community and creates jobs.
- Reduces transportation related greenhouse gas emissions.

Global Production:

- Sources cheapest labor and materials from around the world.
- More transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions through the use of ships and planes.
- Creates economic opportunities in developing countries.

Local production is praised as being the most humane and environmentally friendly option. In reality, limiting production to western countries excludes other solutions that may actually be more sustainable. Traditional production practices like those found in parts of South America and Africa can be the key to slow and sustainable clothes making. It is also naive to think that all manufacturing in western countries like the U.S. and U.K. are ethical.

Small Businesses versus Large Corporations

Small Business:

- Run by an individual or small group of people.
- Less overall revenue and profits.
- Less power and less control over supply chain operations.

Large Corporation:

- Often has a global presence.
- Makes revenues in the hundred of millions or billions.
- Has more money and power to push sustainability initiatives forward.
- More difficult to manage sourcing and production due to the sheer number of suppliers.

While small businesses rightfully get praise for boosting local economies and promoting more ethical practices, large corporations have a role to play in advancing sustainability as well. Large corporations

— H&M Group, LVMH, and Nike — have the publicity, money, and influence to make real changes in the fashion industry at a rate that smaller brands or individual consumers don't. However, large corporations also struggle with keeping track of their vast supply chains and subcontracted manufacturers. Determining which is more sustainable all depends on the brand's goals and initiatives.

Supply Chain versus Value Chain

Supply Chain:

- All the steps it takes to get products from idea to physical item for consumers.
- From material sourcing to finished products being delivered to customers.

Value Chain:

- Adds value which separates products from competitors.
- Focuses on production in addition to customer satisfaction.

In the supply chain, partners such as suppliers and manufacturers are considered the main stakeholders. In the value chain, investors and shareholders are considered the main stakeholders. When discussing sustainable fashion, the term “supply chain” is most frequently used as environmental and social issues arise predominantly in the supply chain process.

Conscious Consumer versus Regular Consumer

Conscious Consumer:

- Makes thoughtful and considered purchases.
- Cares about social and/or environmental sustainability.
- Price may be a secondary or less important factor.

Regular Consumer:

- Cost and desire are the most important factors when shopping.
- Sustainability may be considered but is less important than price.

Studies have shown that the two most important considerations when shopping are cost and desire. Does the consumer want it? And are they willing to pay for it? Conscious consumers may ask themselves the same questions, but they also factor in sustainability and ethics, often placing them above cost and desire. It is typical that younger consumers are more likely to shop consciously than their older counterparts, but today all shoppers are more aware of their purchases as sustainability continues to gain publicity.

Fashion Show versus Digital Presentation

Fashion Show:

- A physical event that typically takes place during Fashion Week.
- Fashion Week is an organized showcase that occurs twice a year (fall and spring). Takes place in New York, London, Paris, and Milan.
- Fashion shows used to include just runway shows, but now more physical showings, including showcases and parties, occur.

Digital Presentation:

- Some kind of presentation that is shared digital rather than in-person.

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- Includes videos, lookbooks, photographs, video games, social media livestreams and more.

During COVID-19, fashion shows were canceled or paused. Since social distancing has lessened, digital presentations — filmed in person but without an audience — have been the option of choice for many brands and designers. Digital presentations allow for more inclusivity and have a smaller carbon footprint than fashion shows, but whether or not they are successful marketing tools remains to be seen.

Sustainable Influencer versus Regular Influencer

Sustainable Influencer:

- Promotes sustainable shopping and/or partners with sustainable brands.
- Encourages thoughtful consumption and may share statistics or educational tools with their audience.
- Sustainable influencers do not always have a formal background in the topic they are talking about and should not be considered trusted experts unless they have the appropriate credentials.

Regular Influencer:

- Shares suggested purchases or advice with their audience.
- Gets paid either from company partnerships or from their audience in exchange for marketing or a product.
- An influencer is not automatically an ethical person.

Some wonder if “sustainable influencer” is an oxymoron because encouraging excessive consumption of new items is an unsustainable practice, even if the clothes come from “good” brands. On the flip-side, studies have shown that influencers just talking about sustainability is helping to awaken consumers to the flaws of fashion. For influencers, the impact they can have depends on how they approach the subject and what partnerships they choose.

Initiatives

Greenwashing versus False Advertising

Greenwashing:

- A term that has gained popularity amongst consumers and fashion activists to describe “unbelievable” sustainability claims from a brand.
- Has come to include false advertising, misleading claims, and inadequate sustainability initiatives.
- It is just as easy to accuse a brand of greenwashing as it is for a brand to claim it is sustainable because both terms have multiple meanings and loose regulation.

False Advertising:

- Pertains specifically to advertising and marketing that includes lies or purposefully misleading claims.
- “False advertising” has a more narrow definition than “greenwashing”.

“Greenwashing” is widely used to represent sustainability that is believed to be misrepresented. However, recently activists and consumers have been using the term to describe sustainability

initiatives that are inadequate compared to what is needed by the fashion industry. As “greenwashing” develops more definitions and becomes less clear, it may be helpful to use different terms or phrases to describe specific situations. False advertising allows consumers and brands to recognize the problem clearly and address it easily.

Transparency versus Traceability

Transparency:

- Being open and honest with consumers about the internal and often hidden practices at a company.
- Transparency can include sharing where products are sourced from, the conditions inside manufacturing facilities, and the diversity of employees.

Traceability:

- Refers specifically to production and being able to trace the steps from material sourcing to final sale.
- Traceability is becoming more important as consumers demand transparency in the supply chain, where most of fashion’s problems originate.

The past decade has seen transparency become an integral part of a sustainable brand’s operations. Consumers and activists want to see that brands know the details about their business and they are ethical enough to share with the public and investors. Traceability is a sector in the transparency field gaining more traction, especially as technology like blockchain finds its footing in the fashion industry. Increased traceability will provide more social sustainability in the supply chain and give much-needed regulation to carbon offsetting programs.

Carbon Neutral versus Carbon Negative

Carbon Neutral:

- First, the greenhouse gas emissions from a product or operation are converted into a carbon equivalent. For example, 1 kg methane = 84 kg carbon dioxide.
- Then carbon equivalent emissions are neutralized by a process called “offsetting”. Offsetting can be an investment in carbon negative processes (tree-planting) or an investment in zero-emission or low-emission technology (solar power farms).

Carbon Negative:

- Similar process to carbon neutrality, but instead of just canceling the carbon equivalent emissions, more offsets are purchased so the product/operation is actually good for the environment (instead of just less bad).
- The term “climate positive” is interchangeable with “carbon negative”.

There is some debate over whether or not offsetting is a cheat way of lowering an environmental impact. Environmentalists agree that reducing emissions should be a priority before offsetting, however, for fashion brands looking to become carbon negative — Gucci and Reformation — offsetting is a necessary part of their plan. With the rise in offsetting, an investment in regulation is needed so brands can effectively and reliably achieve carbon negativity.

Kering versus LVMH

Kering:

- The sustainability leader in luxury fashion.
- Owner of brands Gucci, Saint Laurent, Bottega Veneta, Balenciaga, Alexander McQueen, and more.
- The Business of Fashion Sustainability Index from 2021 gives Kering a 49/100 sustainability score.

LVMH:

- Near the bottom of the pack in terms of sustainability in luxury.
- Received a 30/100 by Business of Fashion.
- Bigger than Kering and owns fashion brands such as Fendi, Christian Dior, Stella McCartney, Loewe, Givenchy, and more across perfumes, wines, jewelry, and makeup.

When it comes to luxury retailers, Kering and LVMH are the two biggest competitors. LVMH is more profitable and successful economically, but Kering leads the way in environmental and social sustainability. The difference between the two fashion groups can be transferred to other fashion categories like affordable brands and athletic brands. In the future, LVMH will be expected to keep up with Kering on sustainability, or its lead on profits may be at risk.

Materials

Natural Fabric versus Synthetic Fabric

Natural Fabric:

- Made from fibers that can be grown on a farm.
- Cotton is the most popular example in fashion. Other types of natural fabric include hemp, linen, leather, and fur.
- While animal skins in fashion are controversial, they are technically a natural material and will biodegrade.

Synthetic Fabric:

- Man made plastic fibers from fossil fuels.
- Linked to microplastics in the ocean and atmosphere.

As scientists become more concerned about the impact of microplastics on human health, synthetics are getting a bad reputation. But, natural fabrics are not perfect either. Cotton, fur, and leather have been linked to deforestation, excessive water consumption, and unethical human and animal abuses. The debate is a bit more evened when recycled synthetic fabric is compared to organic and ethically produced natural fabric, but each material has its pros and cons. Finding the most sustainable material depends on what brands are making and what sustainability problems they are trying to address.

Real Fur versus Faux Fur

Real Fur:

- A natural material that comes typically comes from small furry mammals such as foxes, minks, sables, or rabbits.
- Seen by many as an unethical form of fashion.

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- Animals are usually bred in inhumane and unsanitary conditions and killed in cruel ways, such as being skinned alive.

Faux Fur:

- The more ethical version of real fur and is made to look and even feel like the authentic version.
- Not necessarily better for the environment as faux fur is often made from synthetics like polyester.

The argument over real versus fake often comes down to care for animals and biodegradability, but there is more to it than that. Real fur may be biodegradable, but it also uses a ton of toxic chemicals to process and dye the material, which can have horrendous consequences for our planet beyond just more waste in the landfill. Faux fur, on the other hand, may be more ethical, but with polyester coming from fossil fuels and the fossil fuel industry being linked to species loss, closer examination reveals faux fur is not quite as virtuous as previously thought. Since both options seem like the wrong choice, fashion brands have begun looking at innovative solutions like a “fur” jacket made from shredded denim. Some consumers have stopped buying into the fur look altogether, which may seem like the best choice for now.

Real Leather versus Plant-Based Leather

Real Leather:

- Comes from animals, most likely cows or calfs.
- A natural, biodegradable material, but processed with chemical treatments and tannings to prolong the lifespan and create the perfect color.

Plant-Based Leather:

- An innovative plant-based alternative to animal leather and plastic leather.
- Mushroom/mycelium leathers are the most popular type, but cactus, pineapple, and palm leather are also in various stages of development.
- Still a fad and not yet scaled to replace real or synthetic leather.

Much like faux fur, a fake synthetic version of real leather is popular in fashion — particularly fast fashion. But, unlike with fur, a sustainable third option to leather exists. Plant-based leather, or vegetable leather, has been in the works since the early 2010s and started making its debut to consumers in 2019. At the moment, only small, limited-time collections exist with plant-based leather, but designers like Stella McCartney are trying to prove that the material is viable and scalable enough to be the primary leather type.

Organic Cotton versus Conventional Cotton

Organic Cotton:

- Cotton that is grown without genetic modification or harmful chemicals or pesticides.
- Typically more expensive than conventional cotton since it requires more manual labor and certifications.
- There is a widely spread myth that organic cotton uses more water than conventional cotton or other natural fibers. This is not entirely true. It really depends on the farming practices used, with some cotton producers choosing to use collected rainwater and others using less environmentally friendly processes.

Conventional Cotton:

- Viewed as more damaging to the environment and people.
- Much like organic food has gained a reputation as being the healthy alternative, organic cotton is considered more healthy for our bodies than conventional cotton, possibly grown with toxic chemicals.

Not all cotton is the same. Some are mass-produced with toxic chemicals and little regard for the condition of the soil. Some are grown using manual labor, rainwater, and careful consideration for the state of the environment. Even organic cotton can be grown in different manners. It all depends on the farm where the crop is grown. Brands and consumers should do more thorough research to ensure that they are getting the material they want instead of relying on basic certifications and misleading generalizations.

Regenerative Agriculture versus Modern Agriculture

Regenerative Agriculture:

- Implementing cover crops, crop rotation, rotational livestock grazing, or other practices to increase soil nutrients and improve microbial health.
- Healthy soil is a natural carbon sink, meaning it absorbs carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, reducing the threat of global warming.

Modern Agriculture:

- Modern agriculture is much more industrialized with more chemicals and machinery.
- Monocrop farming and non-rotational grazing are also more common.
- Modern agriculture practices focus more on taking nutrients out of the soil than maintaining naturally healthy soil for future use.

Regenerative agriculture is actually a reversal of agriculture practices. Crop rotation/grazing rotation and cover crops date back to the Roman Empire, when chemically fertilizers or growth agents were not available. Regenerative agriculture closely aligns with organic farming, but not all organic farms use regenerative practices. Using regenerative agriculture to produce natural materials like cotton or leather has been identified as a key way to sequester carbon and lower fashion-related emissions. However, a scientific study from March 2021 suggests that the previous hypothesis may not be correct. Luckily environmental scientists are exploring this topic more as plants and soil are viewed as a necessity to slowing global warming.

Innovative Fabric versus Cellulosic Fabric

Innovative Fabric:

- Fabrics are made with innovative or new principles.
- Examples include plant-based leather and biomaterials.

Cellulosic Fabric:

- Fibers are made with regenerated or pure cellulose that can come from wood, bark, or leaves.
- Examples include rayon such as viscose and modal.
- It is marketed as environmentally friendly because it is plant-based, but in reality, it is linked to deforestation and uses toxic processing chemicals.

Cellulosic fabrics were once considered the innovative material in fashion, but like everything in the sustainability field, it is no longer the best option on the market. New materials are constantly being created to be even better for people and planet, and innovative fabrics will continue to replace inadequate options.

Waste

Landfill versus Incinerator

Landfill:

- A place for waste to collect and breakdown.
- Releases methane and toxic chemicals from waste, though in newer landfills methane is supposed to be collected and used for natural gas.
- Methane quickens global warming, and the chemicals from waste can leach through plastic barriers in the landfill and penetrate groundwater and soil.

Incinerator:

- The burning of waste.
- Linked to a host of environmental and human health problems, including global warming, smog, cancer, and respiratory problems.

There is no good way to dispose of municipal solid waste (trash). Landfills and incinerators both have negative impacts on the environment, human, and ecosystem health. That is why there is a movement to go zero-waste, also known as the circularity push. Being circular means keeping physical products in rotation among consumers rather than linearly producing new products and then disposing of them. Circularity initiatives in fashion include reselling, renting, reworking, and repairing. Finally, when products are no longer durable enough to stay in rotation — a purse that is stained or a shirt that is falling apart beyond repair — materials are recycled to be made into new products. When circularity is done in full there is no textile or other municipal solid waste to go to the landfill or incinerator.

Less Consumption versus Circular Consumption

Less Consumption:

- Consuming less across the board, whether it is new items or old items.
- Movements like No Spend November closely align with the mindset of less material consumption.
- Saves money and is better for the environment.

Circular Consumption:

- Consuming used/recycled items rather than new items.
- In fashion, circular consumption includes buying secondhand, upcycled, or recycled items or renting instead of buying.

Sustainability does not just include better solutions for people and the planet but also economic stability. While doable for short-term periods or for certain items like clothing, less consumption is not possible long-term. Circular consumption is a concept that can benefit the earth while maintaining economies and jobs.

Circularity versus Recycling

Circularity:

- Keeping materials in play rather than sending them to the landfill or incinerator.
- When discussing circularity in the fashion industry, it means “reselling, recycling, reworking, repairing, or renting” clothes and accessories.
- It’s important to recognize circularity consists of more than just recycling.

Recycling:

- A process in the circular system.
- “[C]onverting discarded materials or products into new items by regenerating materials for a new use.” -Sustainable Fashion Glossary
- It is still a new process in the fashion industry and needs to be scaled up to meet demand.

While investment in recycling is important, brands and consumers should be considering other processes in circularity as well. Rental and resale platforms are popular right now because they are cheap and easy to implement. Repairing and reworking also have a place in fashion, appealing to consumers who want to extend the life of their favorite garments. Fashion needs to become circular as soon as possible, and that means not relying too heavily on the scaling of recycling technology alone, instead using it as the last step in a cycle.

Chemical Recycling versus Mechanical Recycling

Chemical Recycling:

- Chemically breaking down textiles into their chemical building blocks then rebuilding them into new fibers with the same durability and performance as virgin fibers.
- Still too technical and expensive to be viable on a large scale, but with innovations from start-ups and investments from brands, chemical recycling is becoming more feasible.

Mechanical Recycling:

- The shredding or breakdown of textiles to be used as insulation or stuffing.
- Downcycling textiles rather than turning them into raw materials to be used again.
- Not an efficient circularity process as all mechanically recycled fibers have to be mixed with virgin fibers to give a textile durability.

Recycling should always be the last option in the circularity chain, but that doesn’t mean that it should be forgotten or underdeveloped. There will always be a group of clothing that is no longer durable enough to be reworn or reworked, and there will be textiles that are stained or molded; recycling is necessary to take care of these clothes. Recycling may be the last step, but it still needs to exist if full circularity is to be achieved.

Microplastics versus Visible Plastics

Microplastics:

- Tiny plastic particles that are less than 5mm in length, according to NOAA and the European Chemical Agency.
- Can come from larger pieces of plastic that have broken down or from plastic-based materials that have shed (E.g. polyester clothing that sheds plastic fibers during machine washing).

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- Nearly impossible to clean up, though new technology is in development to solve the microplastic crisis.

Visible Plastics:

- Larger pieces of plastic that can be seen by the naked eye.
- Theoretically, visible plastics are easier to remove from the environment.
- It is important to clean these plastics as quickly as possible before they break down to microplastics and contaminate our atmosphere and oceans.

Microplastics are an environmental catastrophe, one that the fashion industry is contributing to. To reduce microplastic spread, natural materials such as cotton, linen, and wool should be used instead of alternatives like polyester. Even recycled polyester can still release microplastics during wear and washing. However, it is not as easy as switching every synthetic textile for a natural one. There is a limited amount of land and water to grow fibers like cotton, and fashion brands have developed a reliance on cheap polyester. A solution to the microplastic crisis involves a slow down of clothing production, regulation over material sourcing, and innovative technology to catch plastic fibers. None of which are easy to achieve.

Thrift versus Resale

Thrift:

- The process of sorting through secondhand items to find good deals and unique items.
- Charity shopping or the online store ThredUp are both examples of thrift shopping.
- Thrifting has grown in popularity amongst younger consumers. It now allows many people to make money through thrift-flipping — buying clothes from thrift stores, then repairing them and reselling them for a higher price.

Resale:

- The more expensive and curated form of secondhand shopping.
- Resale is gaining popularity amongst brands — particularly luxury brands — that are hoping to make some extra money and win sustainability points by reselling products from previous collections.

The secondhand market can be divided up into thrift and resale sectors. Resale is a relatively new concept and caters to consumers that want to be more environmentally friendly or buy unique items. Thrifting has been around for decades and appeals more to consumers looking to save money or find something unique. As secondhand shopping gains more attention and praise, thrift shopping remains a loaded matter. Many consumers believe that thrift stores are primarily for people with less means, and it is wrong or looked down on to shop at a thrift store if you can afford to buy new clothes.

25 Answers to 25 Questions

General

1. What is CSR/Triple Bottom Line?

- CSR, Corporate Social Responsibility, is business-speak for “being ethical”. The four types of CSR are philanthropy, environment conservation, diversity and labor practices, and volunteerism. On the other hand, Triple Bottom Line is more specific, focusing on people, planet, and profit. It is also known as the Three P’s. The difference between CSR and Triple Bottom Line can be compared to the difference between “sustainability” and “ethics” where ethics/CSR are more general than sustainability/Triple Bottom Line.

2. What does the term “trend” mean in fashion?

- “Trend” in fashion refers to the newest clothes and the newest way to produce/sell clothes. The term typically has a negative connotation because it is associated with only being around for a short period instead of longevity, but another way to view it is that the next “trend” will be even better than what already exists. For example, circularity is the latest trend in sustainable fashion, while a few years ago, organic cotton was the “trend” brands were embracing. Trends can be good or bad depending on the context, but it is not inherently a negative term.

3. Should we approach sustainable fashion with optimism or skepticism?

- Arguments for optimism:
 - Better for our mental health
 - Yields better solutions to difficult problems
- Arguments for skepticism:
 - Questions what companies put out and forces real changes instead of false marketing
- There is plenty of well-deserved skepticism surrounding sustainable fashion, but it may actually be more beneficial to be optimistic. Optimism can encourage out-of-the-box thinking and yield innovative ideas that might not exist in a world where everything is deemed impossible. According to a study by the National Institute of Health, optimism is also better for our mental and physical health. Optimism may be an important tool in studying difficult topics like the climate crisis and human rights issues without harming our well-being.
- Suggested watch: Christiana Figueres: The inside story of the Paris Climate Agreement (TED2016)

4. How to be environmentally conscious if you can’t afford sustainable clothing?

- Luckily the best option for the environment doesn’t include shopping at all. Wearing the clothes that you already own and repairing or repurposing what needs to be improved has the smallest impact on the environment. Secondhand shopping would be the next best option and finally buying new sustainable items.

5. Is fashion supposed to be political?

- Fashion may seem like an industry full of fantasy, but it is truly closely tied to reality. Vivienne Westwood once said, "Fashion is a mirror of the world." As the world grapples with political and social issues, fashion mirrors those issues in its business practices and designs. That is a concept that more brands are coming to terms with as they wade into political issues include environmental and social sustainability.

6. How accurate are clothing labels?

- Less accurate than you would hope. Despite legislation regulating what has to be shared with consumers — like fabric composition — many labels are misleading. In 2019 the Netherlands commissioned Circle Economy and Fibersort — a technology that uses near-infrared light to determine fabric composition — to test the accuracy of clothing labels. They found that from 10,000 clothes tested, 41% had labels that misled consumers. Inaccurate clothing labels are not always created on purpose by brands looking to deceive. Due to complex supply chain systems, sometimes brands simply don't know exactly what is in their finished garments. Inaccurate clothing labels are most commonly found on clothes made from a mix of fibers, such as polyester and cotton. Labels don't just inform consumers what they are buying; tags with material compositions are also used to assist in clothing recycling. Getting these labels right is vital for the future of fashion circularity and consumer trust.

7. Is luxury fashion as bad for the environment as fast fashion?

- As the sustainable fashion movement spreads, a myth has formed that those unreasonably expensive dresses and bags from internationally recognized brands like Gucci, Prada, and Louis Vuitton are just as harmful to the planet as cheap fast fashion. While it's true that a higher price tag does not necessarily mean a garment is more sustainable, luxury fashion as a whole is not as damaging as fast fashion. Luxury fashion is rare and slow, whereas fast fashion depends on rapid and continuous sales. Luxury fashion also has a higher profit margin meaning there is more money to invest in sustainability compared with fast fashion's meager profit margins. Proof can be seen in the advancement of sustainability initiatives among luxury brands during the pandemic, while fast fashion brands put sustainability on the back burner to focus on sales during an economic slump. Like with all comparisons, each brand can differ inside their category resulting in some fast fashion brands being better than luxury brands, or vice versa.

8. Is it okay to buy from an unsustainable brand going out of business?

- There are many reasons why brands close down, and a troubled economy is at the top of that list. Right now, more retailers will be filing for bankruptcy, and stores will be closing down, and being tempted to buy from them is natural, even if they are not sustainable. In the end, though, it is up to each consumer to choose which brand to shop from and which products to buy. If you are considering buying from an unsustainable brand, look for durable products made with natural materials, and don't buy anything that you won't wear multiple times.

Initiatives

9. Does it really matter where your clothes are made?

- The short answer is no. As long as the supply chain can be tracked and managed, it doesn't matter if your clothes were made in Bangladesh or the U.S.; sustainable practices can be implemented anywhere. Besides, apparel production is a significant employer for women in developing countries. The fashion industry doesn't want to take those jobs away; instead, we want to make them better and safer.

10. Why is fashion suddenly focusing on biodiversity?

- Biodiversity has always been a critical environmental issue, but as more research comes out about the link between the fashion industry and ecosystem health, brands will spend more time and energy addressing the issue. Fashion impacts biodiversity through material sourcing and end-of-life disposal, primarily, but shipping and wear can be challenges as well. For more on this topic, read Deep Dive: Fashion's Job to Preserve Biodiversity.

11. Will electric delivery trucks make online shopping more environmentally friendly?

- Yes. And it is coming sooner than you might think. Delivery services like Amazon and FedEx have invested in or are investing in electric and low-carbon vehicles. Within the next decade or two, home delivery will be lower emission, making it more environmentally sustainable than in-store shopping. However, challenges like plastic waste will remain issues with online e-commerce unless addressed separately.

12. What is the Higg Index, and why is it so important in sustainable fashion?

- In 2009, two retail giants, Walmart and Patagonia, created the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC). The SAC was meant to develop a universal approach to measure sustainability performance. A few years after the SAC was launched, the organization created a tool that executed the coalition's goal. The Higg Index provides brands and retailers with a way to measure each aspect of their business, from material sourcing to production and beyond, and determine how sustainable their practices are. While the tool was praised at first, it has since steadily received less praise and more criticism. The main critique is that the Higg Index, and by extension the SAC, are outdated. But, the SAC is bringing in new thinkers and updating regulations to keep up with the changing sustainability field. If successful, the Higg Index could be the key to standardized regulation the fashion industry needs.

13. What is supply chain digitization?

- As retailers and brands now know, an efficient and reliable supply chain is the building block for a successful company. For decades the fashion industry has paid less and less attention to production and pushed supply chain operations behind a curtain. Fashion can't keep doing that anymore. Supply chain digitization means using technology to make every part of the supply chain ecosystem more modern. Fashion is one of the biggest consumer-facing industries negatively impacted by the events of this year. Catastrophes such as a global pandemic, climate change, and human rights violations are not going away anytime soon, so brands need to be

prepared to make major changes, like digitizing their supply chains, to handle future challenges better.

14. What are the easiest circularity initiatives, and what are the most difficult to implement?

- The easy circularity initiatives to implement are training designers to create more circular and long-lasting products and allowing rental services for consumers who want to wear an item once or twice. On the other end, the most challenging circularity initiative to implement is a successful take-back program. The collection of used garments is the most difficult because it is out of the control of brands and entirely up to consumers and their desire to engage with sustainability.

Materials

15. Is there such a thing as “the most environmentally friendly fabric”?

- The farming practices and the chemical processes used to make fabrics vary widely depending on where fabrics are sourced, who is producing them, and regulatory oversight. That is pretty much the only common factor between each sustainable material; fabrics can be as environmentally friendly as the manufacturer wants them to be. As a result, no one type of fabric can be considered more sustainable than others. Natural fabrics, recycled synthetics, and rayon all have their ups and downs. Still, brands can choose the best option for each category by researching their material suppliers and being transparent with their supply chain.

16. What is deadstock fabric?

- Whatever material is “leftover” from other orders. This extra fabric can also be referred to as “available fabric”, and many designers and consumers have come to believe that if it were not bought up, it would end up in a landfill instead. The truth is “available fabric” will not go to the landfill. It will be sold in smaller batches or for discounted prices until it is gone. Perfectly good fabric won’t just be trashed because then suppliers would lose money. Of course, real deadstock — scrap, stained, or damaged fabric — would be landfilled if not used. When you see a brand claim that they are using “sustainable deadstock” check to see if they mean real deadstock or leftover/available fabric.

17. What is sustainable cashmere?

- Before cashmere became commonplace in everyday and fast fashion brands, it used to be an exclusive material. Now that demand for cashmere has grown, the environment is suffering. Overfarming of livestock for the material has led to land degradation and an unsustainable industry that is increasingly unsafe and not profitable. To sidestep some of the negative impacts of cashmere farming some sustainable brands are embracing recycled cashmere to keep old fibers in use. However, recycled fibers can lose durability over time, making it less soft and luxurious feeling than virgin cashmere. Another solution to stop overproduction would be to increase the price, making it less common in fast fashion. Unfortunately, that does not seem like a feasible option.

18. What is sustainable nylon?

- Nylon is a type of synthetic material, so it is inherently bad for the environment. But, much like polyester, nylon can be recycled. ECONYL is a start-up that focuses on creating regenerated nylon yarn that can be recycled indefinitely and uses landfilled plastic at the first step. ECONYL partnered with another synthetic fiber company, Aquafil, to create Prada's Re-Nylon products. Other brands that use recycled nylon include Swedish Stockings and Stella McCartney.

19. Can latex become sustainable?

- There are two ways to produce latex: naturally or synthetically, and thanks to the rise of synthetic latex, the material has gotten a bad reputation amongst conscious fashionistas. Imitation latex is made with styrene and butadiene, both of which have origins in petroleum. Like other synthetic materials, latex does not break down after it has been disposed of. On the other hand, natural latex is biodegradable and significantly more environmentally friendly than its artificial counterpart. Natural latex comes from the tree known as *Hevea brasiliensis*, or "rubber tree" for those without a scientific dictionary. Unfortunately, as designers embrace the latex look in their collections, the demand for the material increases beyond nature's capacity.

20. Is leather causing the burning of the Amazon rainforest?

- Climate change has caused flames to spread more rapidly, but scientists and foreign governments conclude that the main reason for the increasing fires is forest clearing by slash and burn and using that land for agriculture — cattle ranching specifically. A report submitted to the XII World Forestry Congress in 2003 states that 80% of deforested land in the Amazon is covered by pastures. The cattle raised on this land are used for food or fashion. As a result of 2019's blazes, many fashion brands were forced to confront that the leather they use may have come from Brazil and be directly linked to the burning of the Amazon rainforest. Leather that comes from cows grown in Brazil can be tanned and processed in Italy and then have an "Italian leather" label on it. This limited information regarding material sourcing caused nonprofit organization, Fashion Revolution, to release an open letter calling for brands to do more research into their leather and share that research with consumers. Unfortunately, not much has changed so far.

21. What are PFAS, and how is it responsible for damaging the environment and human health?

- PFAS are also called Per- or polyfluoroalkyls or more commonly known as "forever chemicals". They are used as a nonstick or water-resistant agent. In fashion, PFAS appear in leather and outerwear production. Rain jackets, in particular, have a hard time eliminating them from production. PFAS have been shown to have adverse effects on reproductive, developmental, and immunological systems in both animals and humans. The nickname "forever chemicals" was coined because PFAS persist for hundreds or thousands of years with no natural process capable of breaking them down. Stopping the continued use of them is vital for human and ecosystem health.

Waste

22. What happens to clothes that don't sell at thrift stores like ThredUp or Goodwill?

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- Sold in the main store
 - For Goodwill, this means being sold in the retail stores or at a Goodwill outlet. At ThredUp, clothes are sold through their online marketplace.
 - Sold in a random box
 - All clothes that cannot be sold back to consumers get collected and sold in bulk. Goodwill holds auctions, and ThredUp sells Rescue Boxes. These bulk clothing packages are usually a better price per item, but buyers don't know exactly what's in the package they are buying.
 - Sent to a textile recycler
 - What happens to these clothes depends on what recycler gets them. Sometimes unsold clothes are cut up to be used as industrial rags or home insulation. Sometimes unsold clothes are sent to overseas secondhand markets. And, finally, sometimes unsold clothes are returned to the U.S. secondhand market to try to be sold all over again.
 - Goes to the landfill
 - Yes, unfortunately, some clothes have to be landfilled. Anything that is wet, moldy, or otherwise hazardous cannot be sold or recycled. The good news is that the number of clothes sent to the landfill directly from donation shops is low. Remember that companies like Goodwill and ThredUp need to sell clothes to make money and keep their businesses going. They do not want to throw clothes out if they can be sold instead.

23. How do consumers recycle textiles?

- Sometimes some textiles can't be reworn or upcycled. Clothes that are stained or unsanitary to pass along to another person should be recycled instead of donated or thrown away. Recycling centers can be accessed through drop-off boxes or independent projects. Do a Google search to find the best recycling program for your area and specific items. If you don't know if your item should be sold through the secondhand market or recycled, you can send it to a charity shop or online thrift store like ThredUp, and they will sort it and recycle what needs to be.

24. How are DTC brands more environmentally friendly than traditional retail?

- Direct to Consumer (DTC) brands sell directly from brand to customer without a third-party wholesaler or retailer. Today most clothing sales happen through the DTC route. That makes it cheaper for consumers and gives brands a better profit margin; it is also more environmentally friendly. Similar to how online shopping has the potential to be cleaner than in-store shopping, DTC brands can implement sustainability initiatives without depending on consumers or wholesale parties to engage with them.

25. How does brand hype hurt sustainability?

- Overconsumption, possibly the most significant issue standing in the way of a sustainable fashion industry, is a direct consequence of a hyped-up brand. It may not seem like it at first glance; if there is a limited supply, then the brand should be selling less than the typical leaders of overconsumption — fast fashion brands. But, hype leads to consumers feeling obliged to buy a product they don't need so they will fit in. Brand hype may be good for sales, but it is terrible for the environment, and reducing its prevalence in fashion will help reduce overconsumption.

The Green and Blue Journal

About:

An independent website reporting on sustainable fashion.

The Green and Blue Journal was officially launched in January 2020. It originally started as an email newsletter, but has since evolved into a subscription-supported website. All the articles published by The Green and Blue Journal are fact-checked, and any personal commentary is clearly marked as such. Contributors in the form of journalists, CEOs, and designers provide additional insights via interviews and guest writing. The Green and Blue Journal is a space for all consumers to continue learning about the fashion industry's impact on people and the planet. Whether you are just becoming familiar with terms like "sustainability" or you are an industry expert, this is the place for you to find something new and interesting to read every week.

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