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Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

Today the majority of people in the world are wearing clothes. Most people believe their clothes are just their clothes, not realizing these clothes went through the whole fashion supply chain. Fashion is more than just runway shows and photo-shoots. The fashion industry is a “multibillion-dollar global enterprise” (Major) that starts with designing and ends with selling. Everyone who shops for clothes and wears clothes is part of the fashion industry.

The fashion industry has significantly expanded over the last couple of decades. It is a well known fact that a wide variety of companies, stores and luxurious brands have been created during this expansion. Lesser known is the fact that a new growing trend towards sustainability in the fashion industry has emerged.

This trend must become a revolution. According to the Business of Fashion’s website Second to Oil, Fashion and Textiles is the most polluting industry in the world. It takes 20,000 liters of water to produce a single T-shirt and pair of jeans. According to Earth Pledge, a non-profit organization committed to promoting and supporting sustainable development, “at least 8,000 chemicals are used to turn raw materials into textiles and 25% of the world’s pesticides are used to grow non-organic cotton”. This causes irreversible damage to people and the environment, and still two thirds of a garment’s carbon footprint will occur after it is purchased.”

The goal of sustainable fashion is to create an industry where every product is produced with the environment in mind. The fashion industry has dramatically improved sustainability over the last several decades but has a long way to go. Major companies and designers have made sustainability a top priority resulting in the development of new ideas, fabrics and machines making the industry more sustainable.

The Fashion industry often changes to meet the needs of the world. Improvements within the industry with technology have helped designers create new products that benefit the environment. Similar to the production of a garment, sustainable fashion starts at designing and ends with the customer. Producing sustainable fashion products means considering the environment from start to finish. A garments production begins with “designer attends fabric show” and ends with “order ready for shipment”, according to Lucy Siegle in her book To Die For.

The fashion supply chain is much larger than just designers and stores; it includes many other roles including farmers, weavers, dyers, cutters, sewers, packagers, etc. who are all involved in the process. First designers have to choose what textile they are using; a textile is a type of cloth or woven fabric. A fiber is the building block of a textile and there are two categories of fibers, natural and manmade.

Natural fibers consist of cellulosic or plant fibers, and protein fibers or animal fibers. Natural Fibers are better for the environment because the environment produces them and they usually decompose quicker. Examples of natural fibers are cotton, flax, linen, wool, and silk.

Manmade fibers are cellulosic or regenerated and synthetic. Examples of manmade fibers are rayon, acetate, lyocell, bamboo, polyester, nylon, spandex, and acrylic.

Designers and companies are choosing natural fibers over manmade fibers more and more because they know the benefits it has for the environment. J.Preston from the Encyclopeadia Britannica states that man-made fibers are “fibers whose chemical composition, structure, and properties are significantly modified during the manufacturing process”. A polymer is “a class of compounds characterized by long, chainlike molecules of great size and molecular weight” (Preston). A natural fiber does contain polymers but they are “biologically produced compounds” (Preston). Synthetic fibers are a part of the man-made fibers group and “are made of polymers that do not occur naturally but instead are produced entirely in the chemical plant or laboratory, almost always from by-products of petroleum or natural gas” (Preston).

The level of sustainability is not automatically defined by if the fiber is natural or manmade. There are many factors when considering the sustainability of a material. The renewability and source of a fiber, the process of how a fiber is turned into a textile, the working conditions of the people producing the materials and the material’s total carbon footprint. Carbon footprint is the amount of carbon dioxide and other carbon compounds emitted due to the consumption of fossil fuels.

Cotton has become the most utilized fiber in the fashion industry. Cotton is used by almost everyone, every day. Although all cotton has a large carbon footprint for its cultivation and production, organic cotton is considered a more sustainable choice of fabric, as it’s completely free of destructive toxic pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Designers and retailers have been using cotton over other fibers because of its beneficial qualities. The company Cotton states on their website that “Cotton breathes better than oil-based synthetic fabrics, it’s easier to wash and care for, strong, tough, soft, and is more absorbent”. Due to cotton’s qualities it is allowed to go through multiple wears before washing. Not washing clothes as often conserves energy, water, and it benefits the clothes.

According to the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), cotton supports 250 million people’s livelihoods. The BCI “is a non-for-profit organization stewarding the global standards for Better Cotton, and bringing together cotton’s complex, supply chain, from the farmers to the retailers”. The BCI started in 2005 and in 2009 they established as an independent organization, and “published the first Better Cotton global standards known and the Better Cotton Production Principles and Criteria”. BCI is bringing farmers together with retailers such as Adidas, Burberry, H&M, Tommy Hilfiger, American Eagle Outfitters, and Nike. This is supporting the development of more sustainable products.

S.S.D. Cotton Ginners and Oil Mills and Nagina Group located in Pakistan said that “better cotton is important to our business”, because it “provides us with good buyers”. They also stated “The Better Cotton Initiative aims to make global cotton production better for the people who produce it, better for the environment it grows in and better for the sector’s future”.

Major companies with brand names such as H&M and Nike have dedicated themselves to sustainable fashion. In addition, smaller companies like Cotton, and Rent the Runway are also contributing to sustainable fashion.

H&M is working towards a more sustainable fashion industry. Cotton is H&M’s most used material. The companies’ website states the goal of H&M and their cotton is “for all cotton in our range to come from more sustainable sources by 2020”. H&M currently uses recycled wool, organic leather, organic linen, organic hemp, organic silk, FSC natural rubber, recycled polyester and recycled plastic in its products. They put green tags on all garments in their stores that were produced with the environment in mind. H&M became the first fashion company to launch a global garment initiative. Customers can hand in any clothes they no longer want. The returned clothes are used to reduce waste and give old products a new life. H&M’s goal is to “eventually close the loop on textiles so nothing ever goes to waste”. Not only does H&M want to help their company and their customers, they want to help all of the fashion industry and the environment. H&M states “We want to make conscious choices in fashion desirable and easily accessible for as many people as possible. The right choice should be an easy and attractive one. Piece by piece this will reduce the impacts that fashion has on the planet”.

Nike on the other hand, has used technology to transform the way they produce their sneakers. Nike hit a breakthrough in 2012 with their footwear products by using Nike FlyKnit. Nike states on its’ website that Nike FLyknit “enables designers to precisely micro engineer every stitch to create a featherweight, formfitting and virtually seamless upper while reducing manufacturing waste and the amount of materials used”. Flyknit has helped them reduce their waste by almost two million pounds. Nike uses recycled polyester from plastic bottles in their high-performance apparel and footwear. The bottles are reclaimed and melted to produce a new fabric, this ‘”reduces the energy consumption by 30%”. ColorDry is a new way to dye fabric without out using water. Recycled CO2 is used instead of water to infuse fabric with color. Nike Grind is the term used for the recycle material from Nike’s athletic shoes that are then used in high-performance surfaces like courts and tracks. Nike stated on its’ website that the company’s long-term vision goal “is to create finished products with zero waste, as well as “closing the loop” on materials use- that is, using only materials that can be fully recycled into new products”.

Cotton the company known for their slogan “the fabric of our lives”. Cotton created Blue Jeans Go Green. Blue Jeans Go Green is a denim recycling foundation that collects denim across the country and “upcycles it into UltraTouch denim insulation providing a portion to communities in need each year”. Thus far Cotton has collected over 1,000,000 pieces of denim. They reduced the weight of denim on landfills by 600 plus tons. They created more than ‘two million square feet of UltraTouch Denim Insulation”. The goal of Blue Jeans Go Green is to keep textiles out of landfills. UltraTouch is made from 80% post-consumer recycled denim.

Changing the way, we shop the company Rent a Runway provides two options for their customers to get what they want, when they want. The first option is called a Few Days which allows you to “rent items for 4 or 8 days, choose your delivery date, get a free backup size and return everything for free”. They were so successful with the first option that they challenged themselves to create a new way to shop and developed the second option. The second option is Subscribe to Fashion in which you “select 3 items, keep each piece as long as you want, and exchange anytime”. Both options enable customers to rent a new outfit rather than buy it. Rent the Runway is saving money and reducing waste on behalf of themselves and their customers. If more companies develop systems like Rent the Runway the fashion industry will continue to rise in innovation and sustainability.

With all the improvements on sustainability in the fashion industry you would be shocked to know that it’s not working. Sustainability is making a positive impact on the planet but much more still needs to be done. Two of the largest challenges to fashion sustainability is Fast-fashion and the fact that sustainable clothes usually cost more to make.

Fast-fashion is how most people shop today; they buy now, buy more, and buy cheaper. Many people buy clothes for the short term, even for one occasion. They don’t care how long the garment will last because they will replace it with another garment. Fast fashion hurts the designers and companies that make higher quality garments as well as the environment. Customers buying more frequently means more products have to be made, and made faster. Not all the environmental precautions can be taken into consideration when clothes need to be made fast. Companies producing clothes fast and cheap hurt the environment by using fibers that were sprayed with pesticides and other harmful substances. More clothes means more waste and more unsold clothes piled up in landfills. Major companies like H&M and Forever21 are involved in fast fashion. H&M has chosen to clean up its’ act and produce for the customers and the environment.

Fast Fashion needs to change for the sake of the environment. Instead of throwing our clothes away we should be recycling them, re-wearing them, and even making new clothes out of them. A loop of recycled pieces can be created through the supply chain. Instead of throwing away our clothes we should give them back to the company and have them recycle and reuse them for new products. Eventually, recycling our clothing will lead to much less waste.

In addition to the challenge of fast fashion another challenge of sustainable fashion is the fact that sustainable clothes cost more to make because 50% - 70% of a garment costs is made up of the textile. Too many people would rather pay less today than save the environment of tomorrow. The industry must create ways for sustainable clothes to be made more economical.

It is of critical importance for the good of tomorrow’s environment and industry that the fashion industry overcome the challenges of making fashion more sustainable. The growing industry trend towards sustainability must rise into a revolution. The fashion industry is too large and creates too much pollution for sweeping change not to occur now. Yes, some companies are changing for the better and organizations promoting sustainable fashion are increasing but not enough is being done quickly enough. The industry as a whole must immediately start to consider the environment from start to finish, from design to sale, including the sustainability of a material, the renewability of a source of a fiber, the process of how a fiber is turned into a textile, the working conditions of the people producing the materials and the material carbon footprint. I look forward to being part of the Fashion Sustainability Revolution.

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