

ENTERPRISE-FASHION

Attn: Local editors

Fast fashion companies struggle to keep up with sustainable fashion brands

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WASHINGTON – An average of 2,700 gallons of water are used to produce one cotton t-shirt. This is equivalent to the amount of drinking water that one human consumes in two and a half years.

Because of the amount of resources and water that it takes to manufacture clothing, the fashion industry is a huge contributor to climate change. But as people will always need clothes, the fashion industry is able to survive by creating new trends each season and pressuring consumers into buying whatever is in style.

Currently, as the effects of climate change are becoming more apparent, sustainable fashion is a trend.

Sustainable companies are gaining popularity and reaching more customers, forcing fashion corporations that make inexpensive and unethical clothes, commonly known as fast fashion companies, to struggle to keep up. Because of this, many fast fashion companies are going out of style.

“There’s a big controversy about fast fashion which, in my view, tends to reinforce the very worst aspects of the industry. Cheap, high volume, high turnover,” said David Bartlett, a professor at American University who teaches classes on global sustainability.

The rise of sustainable fashion companies is causing fast fashion brands to fight for their own reputations and reevaluate their old practices. For example, Bartlett has been working with H&M, an international fashion brand known in the past for its cheap clothing, in order to help lower their carbon footprint and introduce more sustainability measures.

Other fast fashion brands, on the other hand, are failing. Earlier this year, Forever 21, which at one point had close to 800 stores open worldwide, filed for bankruptcy.

The rise of sustainable fashion is raising the question of whether companies are really producing clothes that are sustainable or ethical, or if they’re just marketing them as that, a practice commonly known as greenwashing. This happens because there is no way to certify these claims and it helps them sell their products.

“They can pick and choose one tiny element that they’re going to blow up into being way more important than it really is or use it to mask other aspects of their process that are really bad for the environment,” said Megan Zanella-Litke, the director of sustainability programs at American University.

Many sustainable fashion brands focus on being very transparent about its sustainability. For example, Reformation, a sustainable fashion company, sends out a yearly sustainability report that calculates just how much water that it saved each year.

However, companies that are just starting to sell sustainable lines have not done it very openly. According to Zanella-Litke, fast-fashion brands such as H&M and Zara are marking some items as sustainable but giving no evidence and selling them for very low prices, making those versed in sustainability skeptical.

As fast fashion is known for overproducing cheap materials, one of the main concerns when it comes to sustainable fashion companies is using better materials.

Unfortunately, according to Zanella-Litke, some companies think that they are using better materials, but in reality, end up still doing damage to the environment. For example, Everlane, a company founded in 2010 in California, launched a new line of jackets and fleeces last winter made with recycled plastic bottles.

“Clothes made of recycled plastic, you think you’re doing a good thing, but then every time you wash it, micro plastics are coming off in the wash and ending up in the ocean,” Zanella-Litke said.

Although it is difficult to find completely sustainable materials, Everlane still works to be transparent in other aspects. According to Fatima Diallo, Everlane salesperson and brand ambassador, Everlane’s website includes breakdowns of the cost of all of its items and shows exactly how much they have marked up each item.

According to Diallo, the company keeps prices low by using small mark-ups and being honest with customers about how much each item really cost to produce.

This is one of the main downsides to sustainable fashion apparel. Because the clothes tend to be higher quality material, it allows companies to place higher mark-ups on each item, as people are willing to pay more for them.

“We had this sale and everything on sale was over 50 percent off. So, you were buying shirts for \$12 and jeans for \$30, so it made a lot of people think, why are we paying \$120 for these items originally?” explained Isabelle Jennings Pickering, a former Madewell retail employee.

Unfortunately, not only does this cause exorbitant prices, but it also makes sustainable fashion unattainable for some people, which forces people to continue to put more money into fast fashion, which then continues to support the problematic industry.

“I try to shop sustainably as much as I can, but it’s not as accessible. It’s very expensive and I feel like it’s hard to tell at a consumer standpoint what is really sustainable and what isn’t,” said Abigail Candelora, a customer at Reformation in Georgetown.

Although many sustainable companies are expensive, many are working to develop ways to allow customers to buy less and recycle more.

According to Jennings Pickering, Madewell has introduced a system that allows customers to bring any pair of Madewell jeans that rips back for a free repair, and also allows customers to bring old jeans to recycle for store credit.

This is a similar business model to other companies, such as Patagonia, who are beginning to push customers to bring old clothes in for repair instead of purchasing new clothes. This teaches customers to buy less unnecessary clothing, and instead work with what they have while saving valuable resources.

While the sustainable fashion industry is not yet perfectly sustainable or reliable, many consider it to still be a better alternative than shopping at other fashion retailers.

“Progress is better than nothing. Whether these brands may not be perfect, I think the big thing to focus on is that it’s a step in the right direction,” said Allie Gardner, who works on the board of the DC Sustainable Fashion Collective, an organization that advocates for sustainable fashion in the Washington area.