

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

Sustainable fashion? There's no such thing

The industry's marketing may be ultra-green but the reality is very different

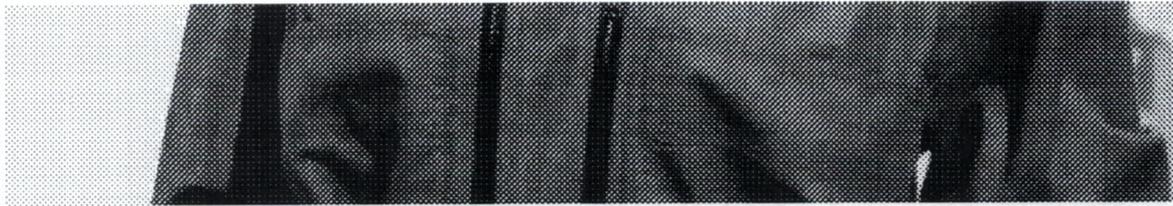
Lauren Indvik NOVEMBER 13 2020

The breathless email was all too familiar. It was from Levi's, the company I buy most of my denim from, telling me about a new product: its "most sustainable jeans ever". Made of "high quality recycled denim" and hemp, these jeans were "positive impact" and "negative waste", the copywriters pledged.

There are some phrases so well-worn, we become numb to their meaning. For me, "sustainable fashion" is one of those phrases. It is a term now so ubiquitous in PR and marketing, so liberally applied to any brand that uses organic cotton or manufactures its goods locally, that its fundamental definition has become obscured.

I am not alone. "I barely even know what the word 'sustainable' means any more," said the designer Stella McCartney, who has been speaking out against the industry's record on the environment and human rights since the 1990s, as she unveiled her spring/summer 2021 collection last month. "The majority of people who say they're doing a sustainable thing, if you ask one question, it will pretty much fall down at the first hurdle . . . It's a bit tiring to see people's overuse of these terms and really not have any substance to back it up."





Fashion designer Stella McCartney has been critical of the fashion industry's record on the environment © Getty Images

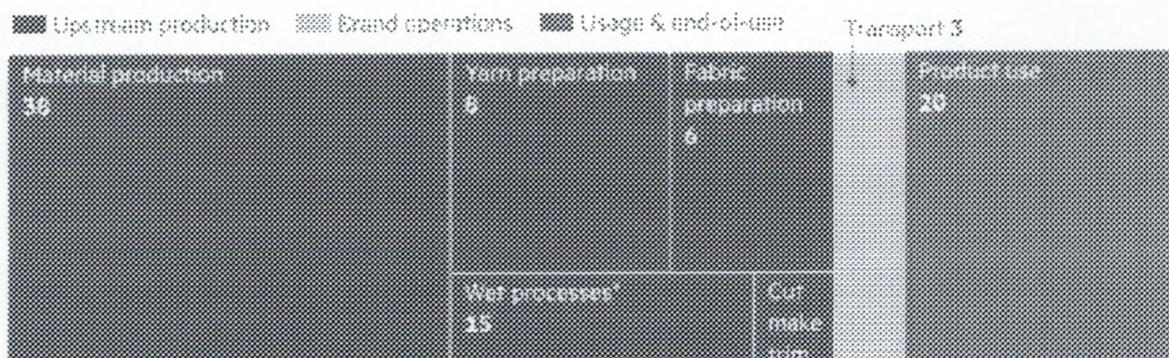
During the past four years, the number of clothes and accessories described as “sustainable” has quadrupled among online retailers in the US and UK, according to Edited, a London-based retail analytics company. Corresponding terms such as “vegan”, “conscious” and “eco” have also seen their usage multiply, the company said.

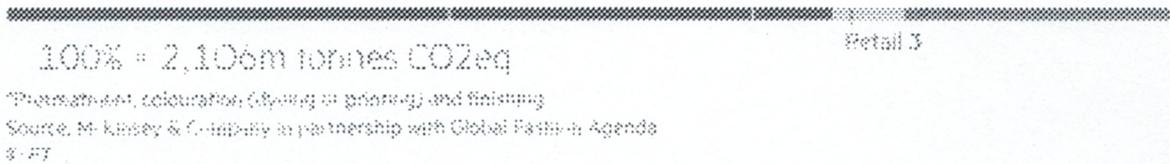
Where there is progress, brands are quick to shout about it. Organic and recycled fibres, once a rarity, can now be found in designer collections and in H&M. Yarn spun from recycled ocean plastic has become a major ingredient in everything from Adidas track pants to Prada nylon backpacks. High-end labels such as Balenciaga and Burberry now tout not only the luxuriousness of their materials, but also whether they meet certain environmental certifications. More importantly, companies over the past decade have begun to quantify the impact across their full supply chain and take strides to reduce it.

But there's a problem. Not only is fashion *not* sustainable, it is becoming less so every moment. A report published by the Global Fashion Agenda in Copenhagen and the Boston Consulting Group last year revealed that the apparel and footwear industries' progress on everything from carbon reduction to ensuring living wages for workers was 30 per cent slower in 2019 than the year before. The sector is also growing so rapidly that its impact on the planet is actually worsening. The volume of apparel and footwear being produced is forecast to increase by 81 per cent to 102m tons by 2030, according to the report.

The carbon cost of clothing

% of greenhouse gas emissions in clothing and footwear lifespan, 2018





It isn't just fast fashion at fault. Even Gucci parent Kering, which has one of the most advanced and transparent environmental policies in the luxury sector, has struggled to reduce its footprint because its brands are growing so quickly.

And yet the good news keeps coming: in a deluge of emails promising products that are “carbon neutral”, “negative waste” or even “positive impact” — as if the making of a new garment could actually be a good thing for the planet. No wonder many of us are confused.

“There is this vast array of icons and language and terminology, all of which feed a dynamic where customers don't question a purchase, it reinforces a purchase,” says Alex Weller, European marketing director at Patagonia, a US outdoor clothing company whose public mission is “to save our home planet”. The company donates 1 per cent of gross sales to environmental projects and doesn't use the word “sustainable” to describe itself or any of its products.

“It's a bunch of coded language so that we think, yeah I'm comfortable with that, I can buy that,” Weller continues. “Versus trying to help the customer make a smart decision.”

As recently as a decade ago, few fashion brands wanted to be described as “sustainable”. When Yael Aflalo launched Reformation, a Los Angeles-based label known for its flirty, floral-print dresses, in 2009, she didn't talk about how many of her garments were made from upcycled vintage or deadstock fabrics because her publicist told her it was “not going to resonate with fashion consumers”, she told me

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Alex Weller of Patagonia

will inevitably encounter masses of false and contradictory data, as I did while reporting this story. Twenty-plus-page reports from world-leading consultancies are full of dubious statistics about fashion's share of carbon emissions and water pollution. And whether materials such as organic cotton or recycled nylon are truly better for the environment than their non-organic and non-recycled counterparts is still hotly debated within the scientific community.

"We've gotten to a place where citizens know sustainability is something they should care about, but they are not informed enough to know what it means to be sustainable," says Maxine Bédard, founder of New York-based New Standard Institute, a research and advocacy group focused on the relationship between fashion and climate change.

Unlike food labels such as "organic" or "free range", which are regulated by western governments and can result in fines or even imprisonment when misappropriated, "sustainable" is not a regulated term, leaving brands free to attach it "to literally almost anything", says Bédard.

She would know; she used to apply the label to her own apparel brand, Zady. Founded in 2014 as an ecommerce site that championed small batch, organic, and transparently made clothing and lifestyle goods, it soon launched its own label, which was celebrated for being among the first to trace the organic cotton of its T-shirts or the wool of its jumpers from farm to finish — and then make that information



Maxine Bédat, founder of the New Standard Institute, an advocacy group focused on the relationship between fashion and climate change © Getty Images

It wasn't easy. "I remember thinking, huh, how do you Google search this?" Bédat recalls of building the supply chain for Zady. "I thought, if we could find a ranch that is doing things the right way, and see who they send their product to, that would be a start. But even once we found our rancher in Oregon, at the beginning she didn't want to connect us with the people she worked with.

"It very much became this investigation of what all the steps were, who was doing the steps in the supply chain in the right way, and what did it mean to do things in the right way."



It wasn't always so complicated. Apparel and footwear brands used to manufacture their own goods; they owned their factories, and some spun their own

there's no realistic way of getting it now,"

Jonathan Anderson, creative director of LVMH-owned Loewe and JW Anderson, and a longtime collaborator with Uniqlo, tells me. He began implementing "massive product changes" across the labels four-and-a-half years ago — making clothing out of recycled plastic bottles, finding less toxic ways of galvanising hardware, working on denims with Uniqlo that require 80 per cent less water — but has kept relatively quiet about them.

"There's a lot of people who love to use a moment like this, a PR moment, to say we're doing this [sustainable] collection," he says. "That's not sustainable. That's just going with the public zeitgeist."

"It's a 10-year strategy to do right," he adds. "And your whole team has to want to do it."

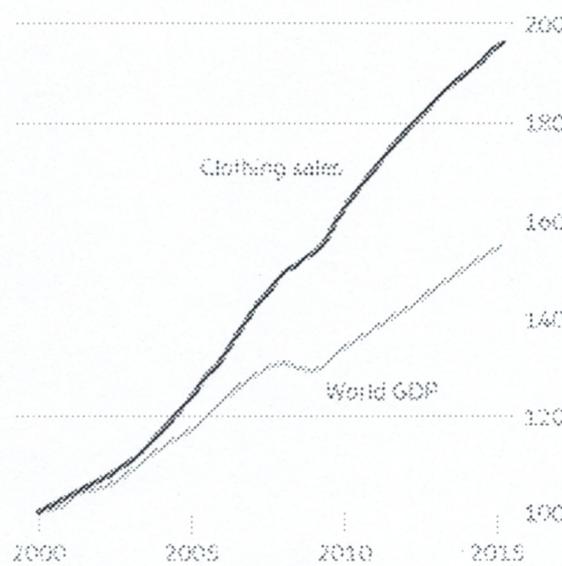
Climate Capital



In 2018, Bédard shut down Zady. Last year she founded the New Standard Institute as a resource centre for brands, journalists and citizens to educate themselves about fashion's environmental and social costs, and

As global fashion sales rise, we are getting less use out of our clothes

Clothing sales vs World GDP
Rebased (2000=100)



Average number of times a garment is worn before it ceases to be used



Source: Ellen MacArthur Foundation
© FT

But it has also put more price pressure on mass-market brands that are thinking harder

about the bottom line.

“When I’ve spoken with brands that are positioned with lower-priced products, I haven’t heard them push back and say that they don’t want to be more sustainable,” says Brian Ehrig, a retail and sustainability specialist at US consulting firm Kearney. “I’ve heard them push back and say it’s going to make my product more expensive. Right now, with the global recession we’re in, trying to get consumers to pay more for a garment or a pair of shoes seems very unlikely.”

In August, luxury department store group Selfridges expanded a labelling system as part of its Project Earth initiative that highlights products that are organic, forest-friendly or vegan. Under the hood, these products are rigorously vetted for certifications and accreditations, Daniella Vega, group sustainability director of Selfridges, says. The retailer has also given brands targets to ensure that the nine most environmentally impactful materials used in their products come from “certified, sustainable sources” by 2025, she adds. Luxury retailers Net-a-Porter and MatchesFashion have introduced similar labels.