



# The fashion supply chain needs a reset for sustainability



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Published  
09 February 2021

Reading time  
3 min read



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In a recent article, the New York Times focused on the [fashion industry's negative impact on the environment and the potential of recycling](#). Above all, as per this article, the poor sustainability of the fashion industry traces back to massive overproduction. The production of fashion has doubled over the past 15 years, and [people wear their garments 36% less time](#) according to a 2017 report from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. As a result, garments often end in the landfill.

**In order to improve the environmental footprint, innovation can help.** Start-ups around the world are developing technologies to recycle garments into new fabrics. And other technologies tend to find alternatives to materials derived from animals (e.g. leather).

While this article rightly points to the poor sustainability of the fashion industry and the potential for a more circular economy through innovation, the way to go is still very long and this article provides only a limited view on the key issues.

## Going beyond recycling

The core issue of recycling is not only about sorting the material and finding the right technology to recycle them. **It is also about making them resistant enough once recycled, and at an affordable price.** The end of the article mentioned quality and cost as a reference to this. However, we need to keep in mind that this may be the core issue and actually one of the focuses of innovative technologies for recycling. For example, [Worn Again](#), a British start-up is developing technologies to actually recycle different materials, among which cotton, and make them resistant enough to be re-manufactured into new garments instead of virgin material. Kering and H&M have joined forces to invest in this technology since 2015. In most cases, and despite research advances, recycled materials are usually more expensive than virgin materials and several materials are not recyclable at all. This is why [less than 1% of the materials in clothing are actually recycled into new garments](#).

The other central dimension to the circular economy in fashion is an efficient reverse supply chain to collect and sort garments. Before an efficient supply chain is in place, recycling cannot go to scale.

These are great innovations that definitely make a difference. However, they won't be enough to solve the major issue of overproduction, in general, and particularly in the fashion industry.

## Solving overproduction in the fashion industry

To more deeply solve the overproduction issue, **we need primarily to address overconsumption and consumers' habits.** This includes educating consumers and encouraging them to buy less and keep their garments longer. This will also require major evolutions in the mindset and habits of designers and fashion players: being less inclined to introduce new trends every month and rather designing garments that can last decades. This also means being proud to design timeless clothing pieces. While some brands such as Zady or [Everlane](#) were created with such an aim, very few actually succeed in becoming references.

Finally, the fashion industry generates waste at all levels of the supply chain: when supplying raw materials, when transforming them into fabric, when manufacturing garments, when delivering them to stores or to customers. **Such waste results from production and supply inefficiencies and difficulties to anticipate future trends, and what consumers will buy.** These inefficiencies have become all the more critical as fashion supply chains have been extensively fragmented, generating longer and

longer lead times. At the end of every season, brands and retailers have to discount tons of garments. Despite these sales, a lot of them cannot find their buyers. With the major disruption in the fashion supply chains due to Covid-19, these issues have only further intensified.

Therefore, reducing the environmental impact of fashion also means better matching supply with demand. Technology should be applied to this challenge and specifically the development of industry 4.0, including artificial intelligence and manufacturing on demand.

**Overall, the whole fashion supply chain should be reset if we want to seriously address the sustainability and overproduction issue.**



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