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# Three Ways Luxury Fashion Can Be Sustainable



By Frederic Godart , INSEAD

**Fashion moves fast, but sustainability is in. The luxury fashion industry is well placed to meet the trend but it must challenge its tightly-held arrangement with customers.**

Luxury fashion is a contradiction in terms and confusion reigns among those who have ever tried to ponder its meaning. Whereas “luxury” is often considered timeless, “fashion” is, by definition, ephemeral. When the consumer buys a luxury product like a watch or necklace, it is often worn for years to come - even for the course of a lifetime, and beyond it can be passed on to future generations. However, a fashion product is only ever used for a season and a “luxury fashion” product changes even faster than the rest of the fashion industry. A Chanel dress cannot be seen again once the season is over, and is certainly not worn for the course of a lifetime.

Designers race to create the next hit and consumers eagerly await the items, with both having little regard for the sustainability of materials or the lifecycle of the products flying off the shelves as fast as they can be put on. But this fast and furious industry may be running out of steam as it faces ethical and environmental concerns.

Can luxury fashion be sustainable? I argue that it can, although changing the status quo is going to present serious challenges. But it must, if it is to remain in vogue and pacify its detractors.

In **“Is sustainable luxury fashion possible?”**, a book chapter, I co-authored with Sorah Seong in [Sustainable Luxury](#), we describe three scenarios that could potentially be combined to make luxury fashion more sustainable, while upholding what fashion means to both fashion houses and their customers. The first involves institutional change by introducing a “slow fashion” mindset; the second requires a change in the processes, for example using materials that have a lower impact on the environment; the third scenario sees the state or the industry itself playing a role through regulation.

### **Slow down the seasons**

As the fashion seasons are increasing in number with pre-seasons finding their way into the fashion calendar besides the traditional Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter collections, the issue of cyclicity becomes even more challenging. In this scenario, ensuring a more efficient management of scarce resources translates into reducing the need to change designs as often. Besides reducing the number of collections per year, designers could be encouraged to focus their creative energy on stylish designs with lasting appeal and consumers to keep their clothes for a longer period of time.

The challenge to this proposed change is the fact that designers’ livelihoods depend on their creative talents and their creativity may be compromised if they are expected to produce more classic, timeless pieces. For this to work, the reduction in seasonality would have to be accepted at an institutional level so that all designers were behind the movement and anyone who didn’t back this drive for sustainability would be considered “not in vogue” or “so last season”. As consumers use luxury fashion to affirm their status and values (the first principle of fashion I define in my book [Unveiling Fashion](#)), their loyalty to designers behind the sustainability drive would demonstrate they are fashionable in terms of their eco-friendly purchases. If, however, the idea of doing away with the seasons and quashing the designs on the catwalk seems problematic, perhaps the alternative idea of innovating with materials would wash more easily.

### **Going green**

Our second scenario proposes an alternative solution where rather than reducing the quantity, changes could be made to the process of design production, such as by using more sustainable materials, as well as reducing waste in the production process and increasing the number of recycled items.

Here the seasonal fashion cycles remain, but producers and luxury fashion groups can have an influence on how environmentally-friendly and ethical their brands are across their entire business model. Stella McCartney is leading the way in putting sustainable practices at the heart of running her business, The Kering Group, too, is working towards achieving an impressive set of sustainability targets across its Luxury and Sport & Lifestyle brands by 2016. Vivienne Westwood is another designer showing great interest in adopting sustainable practices and although the tipping point has yet to be reached where producers are driving innovative fashion, the appetite is growing.

Consumers need to complement the effort and to be willing to pay higher prices for more sustainable clothes, but this will only happen if producers communicate with them about what measures they're taking to use greener materials. Customers care about sustainability, but only if it is explained to them and they are encouraged to see the difference in the environmental impact of the clothes they are wearing. The underlying message needs to be that "sustainability adds value" in order to break away from the current mindset where unsustainable practices are acceptable in the eyes of some producers and consumers. Depending on the rate of change in this mindset, the final scenario of upgrading the luxury fashion industry through regulation could be introduced to a greater or lesser degree.

## **Regulations, regulations**

In this final scenario, regulation – formal (state-driven, top down), or informal (by the profession itself) – would have the effect of ensuring that designers use materials that are sustainable. These would have to be industry-wide regulations and would therefore affect both low-end and high-end segments which would lead inevitably to price increases across the board. The success of the HiGG Index, created by the [Sustainable Apparel Coalition](#), which allows global apparel and footwear companies to measure their environmental impact, is testament to self-regulation.

The challenge, however, for the regulation scenario is not only that fashion houses will have to convince customers to pay more for better quality products, but also that regulation may be resisted or simply ignored.

Endorsement of sustainable fashion by today's celebrities could be a way to overcome this and for customers to accept future price increases.

With all of the above scenarios, how likely is the shift to "greener" labels? While many challenges remain, not least changing the mindset of producers and luxury fashion consumers, the fact remains that sustainability is good for business. The tipping point has yet to be reached but there are encouraging signs that more and more actors in the industry are looking to put a green label on their designs. One thing's for sure - they'll wear that hat well.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/three-ways-luxury-fashion-can-be-sustainable>

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#### **About the author(s)**

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