

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

How will China's ban on single-use plastics affect fashion?

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*Will China's announcement that it is banning single-use plastic prove instrumental in removing single-use plastic from the global fashion industry?
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One fifth of the current global production of plastic more than 300 million tons is produced in China. In fact, it is the largest producer of plastic products, accounting for roughly 30 percent of worldwide manufacturing, according to Greenpeace.

Mainland China is also heavily reliant on coal to produce plastics, and has been investing in incineration as a way to manage plastic waste domestically and internationally, both of which pose significant threats to the climate.

However, the country recently announced that it is banning single-use plastic. This decision could prove instrumental in removing single-use plastic from the fashion industry globally.

The move has been greeted positively as insiders consider the implications for luxury fashion, which has to varying degrees already been addressing the climate crisis.

Orsola de Castro, founder and global creative director of Fashion Revolution, a nonprofit global movement calling for more transparency in the supply chain, was upbeat about the announcement and its ramifications.

"We often think of producing countries as being stuck into the old," Ms. de Castro said, "but some of the most exciting and forward thinking innovation comes from those countries that are directly involved with mass production."

Likewise, across the pond, Burak Cakmak, dean of fashion at Parsons School of Design in New York, was equally positive. He explained why the Chinese response is so notable: "If the negative impact is at a certain scale, the Chinese government is not afraid to take control, even if it impacts business. This is ultimately putting the good of society ahead of the individual companies. A rare case around the world."

Indeed, this is particularly insightful in light of the government's swift and decisive response to the coronavirus.

The unseen plastic

While plastic packaging is one of the main offenders and there has been a major shift away from this in luxury retailing, much of the single-use plastic in fashion is "hidden away," according to Christina Dean, chair of environmental NGO Redress and cofounder of social brand The R Collective.

However, this makes it no less problematic.

"A lot of the time, most of the plastic packing the consumer never sees it, it's from a B2B level, and companies are trying to find better packaging," Ms. Dean said. "But ultimately the lowest hanging fruit is not even visible to the consumer. Almost every fabric is wrapped in plastic."

Andrew Keith, president of Hong Kong retailer Lane Crawford, agrees and has been steering real change in this area since 2018: "This is not something the customer sees, but there is an enormous amount of plastic packaging being shipped every season."

Consequently, since April 2018, Lane Crawford has collected and recycled more than 388.8 tons of waste material which would have gone to landfill through its platform that recycles transit packaging.

"Stella McCartney and Brooks Brothers have all signed up so far with more coming onboard next year," Mr. Keith said. "And we also plan to pilot other programs in the coming months to accept plastic packaging from consumers."

Individual brand efforts have also been shaping change in China.

Ms. Dean's Hong Kong-based The R Collective creates sustainable luxury fashion using luxury brands' waste materials. It moved to more ethical packaging a couple of months ago, in part, to "pre-empt the increasing banning of plastic packaging," she said.

Partnerships with Avery Dennison, and Hong Kong-based Hydroplast both leaders in packaging means it now has water soluble, no-plastic packaging that is dissolvable in warm water. It is fully drinkable after the process.

Implications for ecommerce

In a country where anything is deliverable, Statista recorded that roughly 1.67 million packages were sent in September 2019.

Interestingly, during the coronavirus outbreak many drones are finding additional uses and delivering spoken messages to citizens to remind them to wear masks.

Orders sold online through the likes of Alibaba, JD.com and other Chinese ecommerce outlets often arrive wrapped in multiple layers of disposable plastic in some cases to counter vendors' fears that customers will reject soiled deliveries.

In terms of how far ecommerce platforms go to implement the ban, it may depend on how exactly they want to position themselves.

But that too might also be top down: Terence Ng, retail analyst at Tofugear, a company offering supply chain solutions, thinks the government could introduce levies to ecommerce companies, given they use so much plastic.

"I could foresee a little increase in pricing or a percentage going towards sustainable initiatives," Mr. Ng said. "There may well be a pledge that consumers need to make for example, if they don't return items within a certain time or maybe they pledge they won't return anything?"

Mr. Ng bases this prediction on the government's recent and effective clampdown on counterfeiting and Daigou as a stepping stone to indicate how a more stringent approach to sustainability might be applied. It will, no doubt, depend on further governmental policies and consumer reaction.

As a logistics leader, Christina Fontana, Alibaba Group's head of luxury and fashion for Europe, said that Chinese consumers are becoming very environmentally conscious.

"Because of the powerful ecosystem we have built, we have the ability to innovate to promote a more sustainable environment and healthier world," Ms. Fontana said.

Alibaba's logistics arm, Cainiao, has pioneered the use of algorithms to minimize packaging by optimizing both package size and material use.

L'Oral, for one, teamed up with Cainiao to decrease the use of plastic materials for all its brands on the platforms, and has switched to Forest Stewardship Council-certified sustainable paper, zipper paper cartons and paper

adhesives.

Kevin Jiang, president of international business at JD Fashion and Lifestyle, explains that while the ban will not necessarily affect the company's co-operations, JD has taken efforts to reduce the reliance on single-use plastic and other waste in supply chains for a number of years now.

"We see great opportunities for reusable packaging, particularly for online ordering," Mr. Jiang said. "We hope to see the luxury sector take the lead on this."

JD's Green Steam initiative has reduced JD Logistics' use of disposable packaging by 27,000 tons.

"We are happy to see more and more luxury brands reducing the unnecessary use of plastics and also more generally pay attention to sustainable fashion," Mr. Jiang said.

How the plastic ban will affect brand supply chains

While luxury companies are making strides to address the plastic in packaging from reducing and eliminating, as well as degrees of reusing, recycling or composting this ban might well result in a knock-on effect that forces brands to look at the use of other plastics elsewhere in the supply chain.

And although fast fashion is the major culprit for plastic use in fashion, many luxury products feature plastics, too.

In fact, the separation of plastic in the supply chain lies at the very core of many R&D departments worldwide.

Gucci, for one, has already started using regenerated nylon yarn and switching from virgin plastic: in 2015, it began to replace virgin plastic in heels with a recycled option and in 2018 it produced 40,000 pairs of shoes with Thermoplastic Polyurethane soles, which contains 50 percent bio-plastic content.

Stella McCartney is working to phase out virgin nylon in clothing this year and polyester by 2025.

According to business network Common Objective, switching from virgin polyester to recycled material made by mechanically or chemically breaking down plastic drinks bottles can reduce the carbon footprint of polyester by 40 percent.

Prada's iconic nylon handbag got a makeover last year when the brand launched a line made from recycled ocean plastic. By 2021, the entire company aims to use nylon that has only been recycled.

Lorenzo Bertelli, head of marketing and communication at Prada Group, told *The Business of Fashion* at the time that the move was inspired by global "market demand." How this will resonate with Chinese consumers has yet to be seen, as the company's allure on the mainland has been turbulent recently.

While these efforts are commendable, there is even more to be done in the supply chain before addressing the physical separation of virgin plastics from clothing.

Christina Dixon, senior ocean campaigner from the Environmental Investigation Agency, highlights pre-production pellet loss.

As a result of poor handling and transportation, pellets the raw material used to make virtually all plastic products are routinely spilt and lost to the environment at every stage of the plastic supply chain.

"This is a key area where brands and manufacturers can play a role behind the scenes, leveraging their influence on producers to ensure compliance with best practices in raw plastic material handling is part of international sourcing policies," Ms. Dixon said.

And while many companies can hold suppliers to account, the possibility for real change could in fact be much more realistic when it comes from the government down.

Moreover, the single-use plastic ban could well be an opportunity to implement extended producer responsibility measures to encourage more circular design of products and decrease reliance on virgin plastics, which would, in fact, have a broader impact on international supply chains.

To meet this challenge, Ms. Dixon suggests where China could focus: "We would like to see it focus on innovation in reduction, redesign, reuse and refill systems rather than plastic substitution with other materials, which is a potential risk of a shift towards environmentally friendly alternatives, especially as these alternatives often have comparable environmental consequences and are false solutions to the pollution problem."

Consumer reactions

When it comes to what consumers think about the ban, The R Collective's Ms. Dean, for one, is quite clear about what it will imply.

"What this will do in the eyes of the consumer is say that plastic is bad," she said. "They won't want to see their luxury item in or near plastic. Finally the carrot and the stick are coming down on plastic packaging."

Consumer reaction has been positive so far.

Comments online range from "This should have been banned earlier" to "I feel bad about using plastic bags" to "Please hurry up, the environmental pollution is severe."

One concerned netizen said it was great news, stating she has been using her own cloth bag in an effort to "reduce plastic waste every shop for the last two years."

One self-titled, "green advocate" who works in marketing in Beijing says if her purchase comes wrapped in plastic she complains to the brand in question. However, it would not stop her from purchasing the brand, which proves there is still work that can be done to put real pressure on brands.

Indeed, JD's Mr. Jiang says that demand for plastic-free is coming from some of its youngest consumers.

"We have found that most of our young customers are willing to pay more to buy sustainable fashion products, so we expect the sustainable products we bring to the platform like Prada's recycled nylon bags to do well with our customers," Mr. Jiang said.

As the world awaits the full ramifications of the coronavirus, our reliance on mainland China is increasingly obvious.

Our collective future will be dictated by how much further the country is prepared to go in the war on plastics and given the enforcement of this ban as opposed to previous failed attempts we can be optimistic.

Where exactly this new impetus is coming from consumer reaction or other does not matter, but given the country's control of supply chains, the domino effect for luxury could result in dramatic change.

We are already seeing how decisive reaction and containment to offset the coronavirus is having a notable impact on global fashion weeks, sales and shares.

PARSON'S MR. CAKMAK concludes by highlighting that Kering was the first luxury group to launch there as a hub of sustainability innovation the K generation.

"It's one of these rare countries, when it comes from the top it triggers down very quickly and people will take ownership of it," Mr. Cakmak said. "It's an indication of the growing trend and could act as a prompt to take on other aspects."

As an industry, we can hope that China will continue to react to this other crisis.

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