

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Luxury labels failing to address use of 'dirty' materials, despite sustainability claims

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Oscar-winning actor and activist Jane Fonda starred in Gucci's campaign for Off The Grid, the Kering-owned label's first line of sustainably made merchandise. Image courtesy of Gucci

By ELLEN KELLEHER

Although more luxury fashion brands are brandishing claims about sustainability and transparency, many are falling short when it comes to transitioning to responsible materials, particularly viscose.

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According to a new [report](#), the majority of fashion brands and retailers have made few or no commitments to moving away from so-called dirty viscose despite a growing number of viscose manufacturers committing to better processes. The production of viscose a manmade, wood-pulp-based fiber contributes to water pollution and other environmental issues.

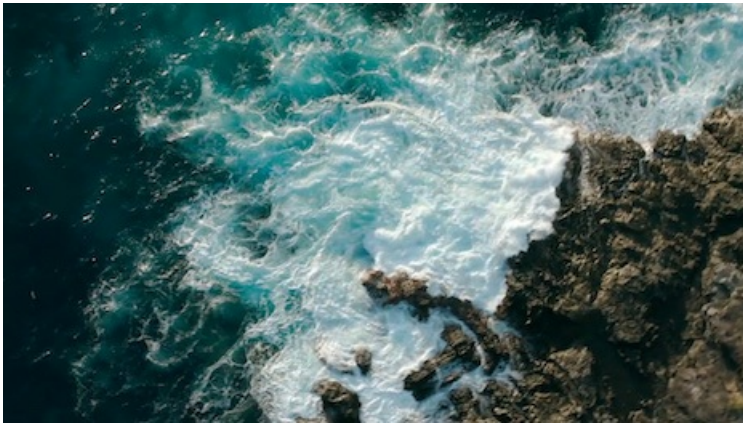
"While some retailers are starting to make good progress, the vast majority of brands are yet to translate their sustainability promises into concrete commitments and actions," said Urska Trunk, campaign manager at the [Changing Markets Foundation](#), London. "The bulk of the fashion brands are still dragging their feet on the problem of stamping out dirty viscose."

The report was compiled the Changing Markets Foundation, [Clean Clothes Campaign](#), [Ethical Consumer](#), [Fashion Revolution](#) and [WeMove.EU](#). It evaluates 100 fashion brands and retailers on their commitment to responsible production and transparency when it comes to viscose production and sourcing.

Trailing in transparency

Sixty-one brands engaged with researchers, up from 59 in 2019. The responses were reviewed along with research into their viscose policies and supply chain disclosures.

Three-quarters of companies surveyed, or 75 out of 100, have made little to no public commitments to reduce their use of dirty viscose or invest in more sustainable sourcing. This included luxury labels Carolina Herrera, Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, Miu Miu and Versace, which received failing, or "red zone," scores for neglecting to address their use of viscose.



Twenty percent of water pollution globally is caused by textile processing, per the World Bank. Image credit: Kering

Armani also failed to engage with researchers and its Web site shows no evidence of action taken to clean up its viscose supply chain, even after the Italian brand sent a letter to the fashion industry to publicize its "redefinition of priorities" in light of the pandemic.

The highest-performing luxury players include Saint Laurent and Gucci, as well as their parent company Kering. The French luxury conglomerate has set out a group-wide viscose fiber-manufacturing policy and said its suppliers are expected to provide cellulosic fibers made from a closed-loop chemical management system.

Joining Kering, Gucci and Saint Laurent in the "could do better" category are Stella McCartney and Valentino. For instance, the latter lacks a firm commitment to sourcing viscose responsibly and lists no viscose suppliers on its Web site.

Other high-end retailers and luxury brands evaluated included Burberry, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Nordstrom and Selfridges.

The 14 highest-rated companies, deemed "frontrunners," have publicly pledged to improve their viscose manufacturing by 2023 to 2025 and have committed to publishing their viscose suppliers. These companies include Esprit, George at Asda, H&M, Marks & Spencer, Puma and Reformation.

"Almost all signatory brands disclose some information about their viscose suppliers," Ms. Trunk said. "Among the most transparent are ASOS, C&A, Esprit, M&S, Reformation and Tesco, which have published extensive lists of their viscose manufacturers on their corporate Web sites, including the names and, in some cases, full addresses of factories."

There was also a divide between U.S. and European brands, as 90 percent of U.S. companies landed among the poor performers for showing a lack of engagement and action to stamp out dirty viscose.



Stella McCartney is known for its sustainable philosophy but is less transparent about its use of viscose. Image credit: Stella McCartney

The organizations behind the report encourage brands, retailers and producers to move towards a closed-loop manufacturing system, where emission controls and chemical recovery rates fall in line with the European Union's best practices.

Some of the biggest viscose manufacturers have already been persuaded to improve their manufacturing. According to 2019 figures, viscose had a market share of about 5 percent of the total fiber production volume, trailing polyester and cotton as the third-most used fiber.

If used properly, viscose has the potential to be the sustainable fiber of the future as it is wood-based. However, viscose is largely produced through a process that is detrimental to people and the environment.

The manufacturing of viscose relies on a number of toxic chemicals which manufacturers in Asia are dumping in local lakes and rivers, killing fish and harming the health of people living nearby.

Evaluating sustainable materials

A growing number of fashion brands are focusing on sustainability as social and environmental awareness accelerates during the global pandemic. As the report shows, however, brands rarely address viscose and instead focus on the use of other materials.

For instance, Selfridges is currently phasing out materials such as crocodile, alligator, lizard and python, and plans to only sell agricultural leather in the future. This is part of the retailer's broader sustainability push, as it seeks to offer eco-friendly products that align with consumers' ethical values ([see story](#)).

In 2019, Prada introduced Re-Nylon, a handbag line made out of regenerated materials. By the end of 2021, the brand plans to take all Prada virgin nylon and recycle it as Econyl yarn, which can be reprocessed indefinitely without losing quality ([see story](#)).

Other luxury brands are experimenting with environmentally-friendly capsule collections, including Armani, Bally and Hugo Boss ([see story](#)).

Whether such efforts represent a significant advance on the sustainability front remains up for debate.

"Some luxury brands made significant public statements about sustainability in the media this year, following the COVID-19 pandemic," Ms. Trunk said. "However, their complete lack of engagement, commitments and even transparency clearly shows they are only paying lip service to this issue."