

SUSTAINABILITY

Footwear takes steps towards circularity: Fashionbi

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Bottega Veneta's Puddle boots are made with biodegradable rubber. Image credit: Bottega Veneta

By NORA HOWE

As the fashion industry continues in its journey towards sustainability, footwear brands are increasingly acknowledging their environment footprint, integrating new circular models into design, material sourcing and production.

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The circular economic model has grown in popularity, as it ensures a closed-loop cycle for a product, reducing the need for new resources and making the best of consumer waste. According to a [new report from Fashionbi](#), footwear brands should take a holistic approach to the circular economy as more affluent consumers adopt a more sustainable approach to shopping.

"A circular economy is important for any industry and especially for fashion taking into consideration the harmful effect that it has," said Yana Bushmeleva, chief operating officer at [Fashionbi](#), Milan.

"During the past few years we heard about various initiatives regarding the sustainable apparel collections, but not that many case studies on the footwear sector," she said. "A shoe is a more complex product compared to a T-shirt and thus requires a higher investment when it comes to the circular principles of design, production and recycling."

"Moreover, the customer awareness about sustainable footwear brands is lower compared to the clothes brands."

Sustainable footwear

With [23.5 billion pairs of shoes](#) produced annually, footwear represents about [20 percent](#) of the apparel industry's impact on the environment.

According to sustainable footwear company [Greensole](#), manufacturing a pair of shoes involves a total of assembling up to 65 discrete parts in 360 steps. This generates 30 pounds of emissions, which is equivalent to leaving a 100-watt bulb burning for a week.

As sustainability continues to drive consumer purchase choices, well-made products are no longer good enough.

A third of global consumers, from Gen Z to baby boomers, would abandon their favorite brand if it did not align with

their personal values, according to the IBM Institute for Business Value and the National Retail Federation.

These conscious consumers care about the entire circular economy and rely on evidence that brands and retailers are recycling textiles, fabrics and plastics.



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

Brands have started ensuring that they have instituted a circular model, which considers all aspects of a business according to several pillars: sustainability, equality and diversity, transparency, circular design, circular use and circular recovery.

The biggest names in the athletic footwear sector, like mass-market brands Nike, Reebok, Adidas and Puma are trailblazing their way into sustainability. However, luxury brands are not far behind.

Italian fashion label Gucci introduced its first sustainable footwear collection in 2012 with shoes made of bioplastic. In 2020, the brand launched Gucci Off The Grid, a full-fledged sustainable collection including footwear ([see story](#)).

The collection is made from naturally sourced materials and is a part of Gucci's Circular Lines Initiative, and was delivered with an FSC-certified recycled gift box, shipped flat and recycled nylon flannel dust bag.

Italy's Bottega Veneta revealed its new sustainable shoe in its fall/winter 2020 runway show. The shoes are unisex and are made of 100 percent biodegradable materials.

The chunky shoes resemble clogs and are made from all plant-based materials like sugarcane and coffee, which makes it easy to biodegrade quickly. Under the right conditions, the shoe can start decomposing after a year underground.

Footwear 3D printing is set to grow into a \$6.3 billion revenue opportunity over the next 10 years, according to the latest report from [SmarTech Publishing](#).

3D printing has the potential to minimize design limitations, maximize customization in production and pave the way towards zero-waste fashion. This technology is now booming because many athletic and performance footwear brands have invested heavily in this technology and set a path for others to follow.

Brands are using this technology to print midsoles and insoles and finishing parts of the footwear.

For instance, Adidas produced over 100,000 pairs of shoes with plastic midsoles made via 3D technology, and Nike used the technology for printing football cleats.



Nike Flyprint was the first 3D printed textile upper in performance footwear. Image credit: Nike

Shoe packaging is also an important aspect of the footwear industry, and is something that must be considered when taking a holistic approach towards sustainability. According to the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#), packaging accounts for about 30 percent of America's trash by volume, or around 78 million tons per year.

Resale on the rise

According to the 2019 Annual Resale Report from [GlobalData](#), Gen Z has the highest growth rate for reverse commerce, with people under 40 leading the pack in collecting secondhand handbags, jewelry, clothing and shoes.

Nearly half, 49 percent, of the U.S. recommerce industry is made up of accessories, clothing and shoes. Apart from a booming market, recommerce comes with a lot of added benefits like sustainability, circularity, conscious consumption, recycling and money-saving.

Resale platform Vestiaire Collective has a carefully curated collection of luxury brands where every piece has been authenticated to ensure that the purchases are 100 percent genuine.

In addition to supplying quality secondhand goods, Vestiaire Collective is sustainable and moving towards circular fashion, and has caught the eye of notable fashion players like Kering ([see story](#)) and Alexander McQueen ([see story](#)).

Similarly, resale platform ThredUp recently partnered with online luxury retailer Farfetch to launch a donation service in the United States. Consumers in the U.S. can now donate clothes they no longer wear to earn Farfetch credit and raise money for charity.

When a donated item sells on ThredUp, sellers donate at least 50 percent of the sale to their choice of a group of selected charities, and receive any remaining payout as a Farfetch shopping credit ([see story](#)).

"As of now, there are two loud cases on sustainable luxury footwear products: Bottega Veneta and Gucci," Ms. Bushmeleva said. "However, there are a lot of niche brands that use natural and synthetic materials for a circular product design which can inspire big players to consider the alternative production processes and conquer the attention of the clients."

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