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Not Easy Being Green: Londoners Look at Fashion's Impact on Planet

Positive Luxury, the BBC, the U.K. parliament and others have been scrutinizing fashion's impact on the environment.

By [Natalie Theodosi](#)
with contributions from [Samantha Conti](#)
on October 11, 2018



📷 Reducing the environmental impact of clothing is a key objective of the European Action Plan.
Vanni Bassetti/WWD/REX/Shutterstock

LONDON — It's mid-October and the leaves are taking an autumnal turn, yet London has never looked so green. This week, sustainability champions have been emerging en masse to argue, discuss, reveal and state their respective cases about what fashion is — and isn't doing — for the environment.

“Sustainability will be non-negotiable for Generation Z,” said Daniella Vega, director of sustainability at Selfridges, adding that momentum is building around environmental protection

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and that new generations won't tolerate waste.

On Thursday, she hosted a panel discussion at Café Royal on behalf of Positive Luxury, [the London-based organization that vets and promotes the most sustainable luxury lifestyle businesses](#) and awards a Butterfly Mark to companies that do the most for their workers and for the environment.

Vega's panel included Sarah Rotheram, chief executive officer of Miller Harris; Mark Ferguson, partner and co-chief investment officer of Generation Investment Management, which promotes "sustainable capitalism" and helps businesses reduce their environmental footprint; Pierre-Alexandre Bapst, chief sustainability officer at Hermès, and Janice Lao, director of sustainability at Peninsula Group in Hong Kong.

Rotheram said Miller Harris has been taking strategic steps to reduce waste: There are plans to wrap Christmas products in 100 percent silk scarves, while the company has also committed to using recycled and recyclable packaging, ditching palm oil and offering hard soaps rather than gel ones, eliminating the need for bottles.

Bapst said Hermès has been working on improving its cutting ratios, with 50 percent of waste "avoided" over the past three years. The French company has also been focusing on nurturing its artisans and fostering a sense of community among employees.

Sustainability and capitalism can coexist, said Ferguson, but it's not an easy relationship — at least not now. "We need to tackle the challenges of sustainability — and then work out how to pay for them. There are costs involved."

Other speakers included [Stephen Webster](#), who talked about helping customers recycle their old jewelry and creating The Last Straw, a reusable sterling silver straw, with 10 percent of each sale going to the Plastic Oceans Foundation.

Aurélie Picaud, timepieces director at Faberge, talked about satisfying the consumer's desire for transparency — and education — by taking them through the process of building a



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watch, while Arizona Muse discussed some of the changes aimed at protecting models' welfare, and the challenges of creating a sustainable clothing brand from scratch.

Desirée Bollier, chair and global chief merchant of [Value Retail](#), argued that there are two major forces at work right now — a push from Millennials for transparency and environmental responsibility and a pull from emerging markets and a whole new generation of fashion-hungry consumers. She said the challenge for every company is how to be sustainable while still making a profit.

Earlier in the week, the BBC aired a multipart documentary by local TV presenter Stacey Dooley, called “Fashion’s Dirty Secrets.” Dooley reinforces key facts, such as the excessive amount of water needed to make a single pair of jeans or a cotton T-shirt, as well as the lack of support from big retailers and governmental organizations ranging from Primark and Asos to the Department for Environmental and Rural Affairs in the U.K. All of them declined her requests for comment.

European Action Plan, a European Union-funded group that wants to reduce the environmental impact of clothing, has also just released a report saying that British consumers are buying an average of 59 pounds of clothing each a year.

According to the study, the average British consumer can fill a large suitcase with the amount of clothes he or she buys every year. British households are also said to discard hundreds of thousands of tons of clothing every year, the majority of which ends in landfill. One in 10 consumers throws away clothes after having taken as few as three pictures of themselves wearing the same outfit.

Germans came second in terms of their shopping habits, buying an average of 37 pounds of clothing a year, while Italians are among the more mindful shoppers on the list, buying up to 32 pounds of clothes a year, according to European Action Plan.

The escalation of the issue has led the U.K. parliament’s Environmental Audit Committee to invite some of the country’s biggest retailers, including Marks & Spencer, Primark, Next and



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is facing a blistering pace of technology, complex economic backdrop, and shifting mores, priorities, and lifestyles. WWD’s CEO summit on Oct. 30 and 31, will be the place for some of the sharpest minds in business who will address how these forces affect the consumer. Speakers this year include Arnault, Virgil Abloh, Gabriela Hearst, and Lousteing. Tap the link in our bio to find out more. #wwdceosummit

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Sports Direct, to talk about the steps they are taking to improve the environmental and social impact of their businesses. The hearings are set to take place in November.

“The way we design, produce and discard our clothes has a huge impact on our planet. Fashion and footwear retailers have a responsibility to minimize their environmental footprint and make sure the workers in their supply chains are paid a living wage,” said the committee’s chair Mary Creagh.

Digital fashion publication Who What Wear U.K. published an article where deputy editor Emma Spedding questioned whether people need to start paying less attention to trends — the site’s raison d’être — in order to consume in a sustainable manner. She also said social media is playing a positive role in the sustainability argument.

“Social media is often acting as the most important platform for new, independent labels to emerge as well as being a place where sustainable fashion movements, communities and activism can thrive,” she said.

“[Emma Watson](#) set up her @the_press_tour Instagram handle to introduce her millions of followers to new ethical brands and to explain the steps she takes to make her own wardrobe more sustainable. Arizona Muse and Rebecca Corbin-Murray are using their social media accounts to flag problems within the industry, whether that’s unnecessary plastic used in packaging or the problem with a designer fashion house creating what is essentially a luxe version of a plastic shopping bag,” she wrote.



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