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Traceability Is the Next Important Fashion Trend



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

APR 25, 2023

[clothing manufacturing](#), [fashion industry](#)



The fashion and textile industry is a poster child for unsustainable practices. Fast fashion is a big part of the problem. However clothing manufacturing has significant environmental impacts at each step in the supply chain. Those supply chains are shockingly opaque – many brands have no idea how or where their clothes are made. As the industry starts to receive more scrutiny from consumers who care about [sustainable fashion](#), traceability is becoming a new fashion trend.

Fast Fashion

We throw away [40 million tons](#) of textiles every year – many of them never worn. Each year 39,000 tons of unsold clothes from Europe and the United States end up in [Chilean landfills](#). Meanwhile, [roughly a quarter](#) of the clothes that are sold

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are never worn before eventually being discarded. In ^{CLOSE} duals can make a difference in how wasteful the fashion industry is by [quitting fast fashion](#). But to build a truly [sustainable wardrobe](#), we need to support sustainable brands that avoid sweatshop labor; that use organically grown [natural fibers](#) instead of petroleum-based [synthetics](#); that are eliminating [toxic dyes and heavy metals](#) from their production processes; and that are cutting [carbon emissions](#) from their factories and transportation. But as the saying goes, what gets measured gets done.

Transparency

In a recent edition of the Earth911 podcast, Fordham University's [Frank Zambrelli](#) [talked](#) about the changes necessary to make the fashion industry more sustainable. They included improvements across every step of the fashion supply chain, such as industry-wide adoption of transparent emissions reduction goals. In fact, transparency is a theme in any conversation about sustainable fashion.

According to the [Fashion Transparency Index](#), in 2022, only 48% of brands published their first-tier manufacturers, and only nine of the 250 brands studied achieved a 90% transparency score. In some cases, that may be because brands lack the information themselves. Brands cannot be transparent about supply chains they don't – or can't – track. Textile supply chains are notoriously complex and almost completely opaque, even to participants in the process. Companies cannot make sure human rights are respected, working conditions are safe, and the environment is protected without knowing where their products come from.



If companies don't know where their products come from and how they are made, they can't protect the environment or worker rights and safety.

Traceability

For most clothes, the only clue to their origin we have is a label that says "Made in." But the [Made In label is almost useless](#). It only relates to the final assembly of the product. And polluting sweatshops exist even in countries like the [United States](#) and [England](#) that have supposedly high standards for environmental practices and working conditions. Before brands can provide [transparency in](#)

[fashion labeling](#), they need to be able to trace the path their products have traveled. [Traceability means](#) knowing where and how every single part of a garment was made, from “farm to finish line,” identifying every step, or tier, in the supply chain. The [fashion industry tiers](#) are:

- Tier 1: Factory manufacturing (Cut-and-Sew)
- Tier 2: Processing facilities (Fabric Dyeing and Finishing)
- Tier 3: Processing facilities (Textile Spinners and Processors)
- Tier 4: Raw material suppliers (Farms and Synthetic Material Factories)

Tracking a complex product (think of the number of materials in a sneaker) to tier four can be a huge task, and for many fast fashion companies, is probably impossible. A company like Shein has up to [600,000 products](#) to trace.

Many companies reveal some tracing information – especially first tier – with no mention of earlier suppliers whose environmental impacts are much greater. This can be a very effective form of [greenwashing](#).

New tools like smart tags, [TrusTrace](#), and the [Open Apparel Registry](#) are making traceability easier for companies. And developments like the 2022 introduction of the Fashion Sustainability and Social Accountability Act in New York are alerting businesses that the [regulatory environment is shifting](#) towards greater traceability and transparency.

Traceable Fashion Brands

A few brands are getting ahead of the curve on traceability and transparency. The Swedish company [Asket](#) performs farm to factory tracing with full transparency to the consumer. They eliminate supply chain steps by selling direct to the consumer and extend product lifecycles through repair and resale programs.

[PAKA](#) offers fully traceable, handmade alpaca wool products sourced from free-roaming alpacas. They use the shearing technique called [Inca Esquila](#) (which primarily improves wool quality but is also somewhat [more humane](#) than traditional methods). The wool is then prepared and woven by dozens of Quechua women who sign each sweater they make.

Denim brand [Amendi](#) is 100% transparent, as well as traceable. Customers can use the SKU number for their purchased items to trace its production path.

Surprisingly, there are even some mainstream brands – like [Ugg](#), [Timberland](#), and [Eileen Fisher](#) – that are transparent and traceable all the way to tier four. Traceable is not always the same as sustainable. But it is an important step in the right direction.

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