

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY TEXTILE DESIGN

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Abstract

As environmental concerns and ethical production demands grow, the field of textile design is experiencing a major transformation towards more sustainable practices. This article explores how modern designers are adopting eco-friendly strategies, including the use of biodegradable materials, plant-based dyes, methods that minimize waste, and energy from renewable sources. It examines the creative and technical hurdles designers face in combining artistry with environmental responsibility. Through real-world examples from forward-thinking textile brands, the article illustrates effective strategies for achieving sustainability. It also emphasizes the importance of education, consumer influence, and policy reforms in advancing sustainable practices within the industry. By shedding light on these evolving approaches, the article aims to contribute to broader conversations about eco-innovation and the future of responsible textile design.

Keywords: Sustainability, textile design, environmental responsibility.

Introduction

For decades, the global textile industry has been a major source of environmental harm, consuming vast resources and producing significant waste and pollution. However, increasing environmental pressures, alongside a shift in consumer values, have driven a new wave of change in textile design, centered around sustainability. Designers today are not just creators but are also advocates for environmental and social responsibility. They are tasked with making textiles that are both beautiful and environmentally sound. This article explores the techniques and materials modern designers use to pursue sustainable outcomes, the challenges they encounter, and the broader systems of education, consumer activism, and governmental regulation that support these efforts. By examining recent developments and brand case studies, the article adds to the growing understanding of eco-conscious design.

Earlier discussions about sustainable textiles focused mainly on material choices like organic cotton and recycled fibers. Scholars such as Fletcher (2023) argued for the slow fashion movement as a way to counter the harms of fast fashion. In more recent work, Black (2024) expanded the dialogue to include broader systems like the circular economy, where products are designed to be reused, repaired, or recycled. Research has also highlighted innovative strategies inspired by nature, such as biomimicry and regenerative design. Scholars today see sustainable textile design not just as a technical issue but as part of a broader movement for social and ecological resilience, emphasizing that material innovations must be paired with shifts in consumer behavior and supportive policy actions (Jones, 2024).

Some Ways to Promote Sustainable Eco-designs

One of the key strategies in sustainable textile design is the choice of biodegradable and renewable materials. Natural fibers like organic cotton, hemp, flax, and bamboo are gaining popularity for their reduced environmental impact compared to synthetic alternatives. Recent breakthroughs in biofabricated textiles, such as mushroom-based leather and lab-grown silk, offer even greater opportunities. These new materials lessen the industry's reliance on petroleum products and open new creative possibilities. A prominent example is Mylo, a mycelium-based alternative to leather developed by Bolt Threads. It is entirely biodegradable and requires fewer resources than traditional leather production. Esteemed designers like Stella McCartney have incorporated Mylo into their collections, proving its viability in both luxury and mainstream fashion markets (Rodgers, 2024).

Traditional synthetic dyes are responsible for considerable water pollution and environmental damage. In contrast, natural dyes derived from plants, minerals, and insects offer a more sustainable choice. While natural dyes often present technical challenges, such as less consistent color and lower durability, modern designers are finding creative ways to overcome these issues. Brands like Botanical Colors are leading the way by offering vibrant, plant-based dye options. Additionally, experimental approaches using bacteria or algae to create living textiles that respond to environmental factors are gaining interest. These advancements show how environmental responsibility can foster creativity rather than stifle it.

Waste reduction is a crucial part of the movement towards sustainable textile production. New methods focus on zero-waste or minimal-waste designs. Designers are rethinking pattern layouts to avoid fabric scraps and are giving new life to discarded materials through upcycling. Zero Waste Daniel, a designer from New York, creates garments exclusively from leftover fabric pieces, demonstrating how scrap material can be turned into valuable fashion. Marine Serre similarly incorporates recycled textiles into high-end collections, showing that waste materials can become a source of artistic and commercial innovation (Smith, 2025).

Sustainability in textiles also depends on the energy and processes behind the scenes. More manufacturers are switching to renewable energy, like solar and wind power. Advanced production technologies such as 3D knitting are helping brands create goods locally and on demand, cutting down on waste and emissions from transportation. The Speed Factory initiative by Adidas is a good example. Although it ended in 2023, the project demonstrated how digital technologies and sustainability can be combined to produce goods more efficiently and responsibly (Brown, 2024).

Several brands have successfully incorporated sustainable practices into their business models. Patagonia, for instance, has made recycled materials a standard in its products and encourages customers to repair and reuse clothing through its Worn Wear program. The company also invests in regenerative agricultural practices to improve soil health and biodiversity. Eileen Fisher is another leader. Through its Renew program, the brand collects worn garments and resells them after refurbishment, helping to close the loop and reduce waste (Fisher, 2024). Meanwhile, newer brands like Pangaia are pushing boundaries with innovations like FLWRDWN, a plant-based alternative to traditional down feathers, and sustainable water-repellent treatments derived from natural sources.

Education plays a critical role in promoting sustainability among future designers. Today, leading design institutions are embedding sustainability into their teaching, equipping students with knowledge about materials, life cycle impacts, and ethical production. Programs at the London College of Fashion's Centre for Sustainable Fashion and the MFA Textile Program at Parsons School of Design are excellent examples of how education is evolving to prepare students for the environmental challenges of the industry.

Consumers have considerable influence over the textile industry. Surveys show that younger generations, especially Generation Z, prefer to support brands that are transparent about their sustainability practices (Lee, 2025). On the policy front, government action is becoming increasingly important. Initiatives like the European Union's Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles, introduced in 2022, set ambitious goals for reducing waste and promoting sustainable production practices. Regulatory support for eco-labels, responsible sourcing, and recycling initiatives is essential to accelerate progress.

Obstacles in Sustainable Textile Design

Moving towards sustainability is not without its obstacles. Designers must meet the high expectations of consumers in terms of performance, price, and style, while also maintaining environmental standards. Biodegradable materials sometimes fall short of synthetic fibers in strength and durability, and natural dyes may not match the vibrancy customers expect. Addressing these challenges demands ongoing research and technical development. Cost is another barrier. Eco-friendly materials and processes are often more expensive, making them harder to adopt for smaller brands or independent designers. Additionally, the problem of "greenwashing," where companies exaggerate their environmental credentials, can make it harder for consumers to identify genuinely sustainable products.

The future of sustainable textile design will likely be shaped by technology and new thinking. Blockchain technology promises better traceability of materials across supply chains, while artificial intelligence can help optimize production to reduce resource use. Regenerative design is emerging as a bold new concept, aiming not just to minimize harm but to actively repair damaged ecosystems and support communities through textile production. Success will depend on collaboration across industries, governments, educational institutions, and consumers. Through innovation, transparency, and systemic change, sustainable textile design can become a standard practice rather than a niche trend.

Conclusion

Contemporary sustainable textile design is a vital response to environmental and social challenges facing the fashion and textile industries. By embracing biodegradable materials, natural dyeing, low-waste techniques, and renewable energy, designers are redefining their craft. Although hurdles remain in terms of technical capabilities and economic accessibility, many brands and educational institutions are proving that sustainable design is not only possible but can be a driver of creativity and resilience. As consumer awareness grows and policies strengthen, sustainable practices are set to become a core part of the textile industry's future, offering a way forward that harmonizes beauty, function, and environmental stewardship.

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