



FIGHTING FAST FASHION

From the catwalk to our high street and ecommerce baskets – fast fashion reflects the industry's increasing number of fashion collections, rapid turnarounds and often reduced prices. *Quality World* explores the negative effects of fast fashion and meets the fashion brands that are leading by example, ensuring sustainability is at the heart of their business.

Words: Natasha Spencer-Jolliffe

Since its inception in the 1980s, the term ‘fast fashion’ has been used to describe a “new accelerated business model”, according to The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee’s report, *Fixing Fashion: clothing consumption and sustainability* (2019). The fast fashion phenomenon, epitomised by rapid trends, quicker turnaround of new styles, increased number of collections offered per year, and often, lower prices, has seen new fashion items emerge to meet customer demand. The report cites the fast fashion business model is “driving overconsumption, the production of clothes so cheap they are being treated disposably, and [leading to] excessive waste”. The document also states how some fashion retailers are “chasing the cheap needle” by producing garments and accessories in countries that have weak environmental protection, pay below the minimum wage to workers, and provide little trade union representation.

The increase in production has also had a significant impact on the environment. In a 2019 blog post, *By the Numbers: The Economic, Social and Environmental Impacts of Fast Fashion*, the World Resources Institute (WRI) states that the amount of clothing consumers waste is enough to fill 1.5 Empire State buildings every day – a total of 82,782,000,000 kilograms. Furthermore, *A new textile economy: Redesigning fashion’s future* (2017) report from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and Circular Forces Initiative, reveals that the textile industry is one of the most polluting; producing 1.2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) per year – more than the international aviation and maritime shipping industries.

Chana Baram, Senior Retail Analyst at Mintel, a market research company in London, UK, says: “It’s no longer enough for clothing to be priced well or reference the latest trends. Fashion brands and retailers also have to think about working towards a goal of providing more sustainable options.” Sustainability is at the forefront of fighting fast fashion, with consumers becoming more ethically aware when buying clothes — and reducing, recycling and reusing them. In January this year, Mintel found that 68 per cent of 16-24 year olds are trying to make more ethical fashion purchases compared to the last 12 months. It also found that transparency in sustainable fashion is sought after, with 67 per cent agreeing that fashion retailers should let customers know when items are not made sustainably.

International standards such as ISO 20400:2017 for Sustainable procurement, ISO 14001:2015 – Environmental management systems, and ISO 9001:2015 – Quality management systems, are also becoming more prevalent in the fashion industry in this fight, with more companies using the standards to help safeguard the quality and the production of their clothes and accessories.

Following these findings, *Quality World (QW)* speaks with some of the retail brands that are tackling fast fashion by adopting socially and environmentally sustainable practices.

Pure Sportswear

Dutch start-up Pure Sportswear produces sportswear made from recycled polyethylene terephthalate (PETT) bottles to contribute towards a green environment. The recycled plastic bottles used are found in oceans – collected by NGOs, and donated by companies and organisations that no longer use them. The retailer’s environmental-first approach resulted in the organisation securing first place as the most sustainable sports apparel brand at the World Finance Sustainability Awards 2019. Pure Sportswear won this award for its commitment to the environmental, social and governance (ESG) policies it had put in place, putting sustainability at the core of its operations.

Avoiding the cheap needle

One of Pure Sportswear’s main priorities is making sure it doesn’t chase the cheap needle. Duvan Couvée, the brand’s Co-founder and CEO, stresses that sustainability reaches underlying factors, including: “fair wages, no child and forced labour, safe working conditions and no toxic substances”. As a result, the brand only works with companies that also work to high industry standards and best practices in countries that can guarantee the environmental and economical protection of their workers.

To ensure standards are maintained throughout production processes, adopting the right quality management systems is imperative. The brand requires all its third-party partners to work to the highest quality standards to ensure its sustainable production methods and considerations are maintained.

Environment-first fashion

Rather than retrofitting its garments to adapt to sustainable methods, Couvée says the company “started with the view that we wanted to do it the right way”. For the Dutch retailer, setting out this philosophy from the beginning was vital so consumers knew they were shopping responsibly.

Pure Sportswear’s biggest challenge in delivering quality products is finding suppliers that align with their values and ways of working, which is based on trust and confidence. It may take up to a year before Pure Sportswear is “really convinced” that a supplier is right for them, Couvée explains. However, he says that “asking the right questions and asking for proof of the answers”, provides Pure Sportswear with clarity on whether a supplier is a good fit for their business or not.

The retailer tracks success and identifies areas of improvement for its production and quality processes, by having an open dialogue with suppliers, keeping an eye on trends and the latest developments. Customers also send feedback – mainly on the shape, colour and quality of Pure Sportswear’s



products – which helps the company understand what consumers are looking for.

Sustainable steps

Highlighting the importance of a good producer relationship and full transparency of raw material sourcing and processing, Couvée warns that if you “don’t have this information at your disposal and you can’t confirm the claims you make, there is no way you can sell products and say you are fully sustainable and responsible”. Speaking of the brand’s focus on plastic, he adds: “We give a plastic bottle a second life instead of having it roaming around or being stored somewhere meaningless.”

Recycling plastic bottles for use in sportswear is beneficial for several reasons. Couvée elaborates: “It means the brand does not have to make new plastic, but we have more than enough raw material to produce our clothing [and it] limits our CO₂ emissions and ensures a minimal carbon footprint”.

He explains that while bamboo, organic cotton, eucalyptus, wood pulper and hemp are popular with consumers, in sportswear, “these fabrics are more likely to tear and are therefore not suitable for sportswear, but suitable as activewear”. As a result, it makes sense for the brand to continue to focus on sportswear because the material [plastic bottles] is already there and therefore no longer needs to be produced new, unlike other potential fashion products that use different materials.

The Dutch company is also encouraging customers and other retailers to divert their unwanted garments from landfill and incinerators. To support this, Pure Sportswear is busy setting up a programme that enables customers to bring in their pre-loved clothing in return for credit towards their next purchase with the brand. The organisation can then recycle the clothing back to the raw material granulate to make other garments.

Although Pure Sportswear have not yet certified to ISO 20400:2017 Sustainable procurement (guidance on how businesses can incorporate sustainability into their buying decision-making processes), Couvée highlights that it is currently working with the ISO standard and will certainly add this to its portfolio in the future. ■



Photo: Andi Sapey

Charl Knitwear

Charl Knitwear Founder Frankie Davies’ dedication to ethically sourced and crafted knitwear emanates from her knowledge that there is a kinder side to fashion. Launched last year, the cornerstone of the British brand’s collection and its overall ethos is its commitment to creating sustainable and traceable knitwear. The natural fibres used in Charl Knitwear pieces are a selection of certified British wool, undyed or naturally dyed cashmere and undyed baby Alpaca.

Tracking sustainability

As a premium brand, Davies (pictured above) expresses that quality is “paramount” to Charl Knitwear’s business strategy and success. “Each piece in the collection has been made by the best small-scale knitwear manufacturers,” Davies outlines, and is personally selected by Davies herself.

Davis learned about quality assurance from her former colleagues, Owen and Adrian Johnson, at British luxury fashion house Burberry, where she once worked as a knitwear consultant, and is using the knowledge she gained for her own brand. “I work in direct collaboration with my quality control colleagues in the factories to ensure the quality is of the highest standard, and I check over the pre-production and top samples of every size and colour before [they are] shipped,” Davies says.

“I strongly believe that the customer wants to be informed and understand the processes involved,” she continues. “If consumers are paying for a premium ecological and sustainable product, they want to know the story behind it”. Davies hopes that through sharing Charl Knitwear’s design and manufacturing story, more brands will choose to make more sustainable and traceable choices too.

There are a number of processes the brand adopts to vet ►

the companies it works with. For the raw materials, Davies uses the British Wool certified accreditation as a benchmark to measure quality, as the accreditation shows that the “material can be traced from where the fleeces come from to where the final product has been made”, she explains.

Consumer-first processes

As a relatively new brand, Charl Knitwear has focused on anticipating consumer needs and “setting the standard in sustainability and traceability”, Davies notes. The company guarantees sustainable and transparent supply chains and ethical production of goods through only using manufacturers and suppliers that it knows well and trusts. As a result, Charl Knitwear is able to ensure the careful sourcing and ethical manufacturing of its garments through these relationships, along with what Davies describes as “absolute honesty and transparency” on the processes and materials used.

From Davies’ close-knit relationship with her family-run Italian manufacturing company, which consists of a group of factories, to her manufacturers in London, of whom she has worked with for over 15 years – Davies selected these companies based on their highest quality and craftsmanship standards, as well as their “open dialogue”. She regularly visits the factories in London, UK, and Perugia, Italy, to check production processes. Sharing ethical values and transparency, Davies and her suppliers exchange opinions on best practice and it is through this direct dialogue that she says Charl Knitwear “learns the most” and in turn, encourages the brand “to constantly improve”.

Trading during Covid-19

Speaking about the impact of Covid-19 on business, Davies tells QW: “Luckily for me, I received my limited edition production run by mid-February, so I have all of my products safely in-house.” As the brand’s collection is knitwear, most pieces are more suited to the colder weather, and so the retailer is still gearing up to sell and publicise the collection from late summer onwards.

Davies elaborates: “I had planned to do various pop-up events during the autumn, but I have decided to scale back and, so far, I only have one premium pop-up event booked. I am planning to focus more on direct website sales and online selling platforms,” she says.

Due to the challenges with Covid-19, Charl Knitwear has been focusing its attention on social media by posting more holistic posts on running, gardening and Norfolk literature. Davies is also in discussions with some of her collaborators about running a competition on social media, where individuals can win products.

While Charl Knitwear is not currently developing any new styles with its factories as previously planned, the brand is working with them on other consultancies. “[The factories are] operating at a greatly reduced capacity but because they are small organisations, they are managing to get products through the system very slowly through strict social distancing measures and working on alternate days,” Davies says. “My Italian factory is hoping that they can gradually go back to work when the yarn mills are due to re-open for service.”

Charl Knitwear has re-released some loungewear pieces that it had leftover from its previous collection. Davies reveals: “Loungewear sales have been reported to be rocketing and I think at this point in the crisis people are looking to cheer themselves up during this time with a bit of online shopping — I am certainly beginning to look at fashion products again, but with a far more selective buying criteria in mind.”

Quality assurance

Since Charl Knitwear’s inception, Davies has prioritised the importance of researching and communicating with sustainable suppliers. She sources yarns from suppliers more specialised in sustainable fibres and spends time asking them about yarns that they don’t typically show at trade fairs.

For the production of her cashmere products, Davies contacted Laxtons mill in Baildon, West Yorkshire, which she had previously worked with. The mill, which makes 100 per cent traceable products, offers a strong, sustainable product for the British wool in the brand’s collection – which forms two-thirds of the garments. Davies points out that to “get the optimum end product”, she continues to work with her factories to gain the “softest finish on the wool through washing and milling processes”.

As the mill already offers the “finest Italian spun cashmere”, Davies says to “add the traceable label to this really took the yarn to a new level”. It really is the finest cashmere on the market,” she enthuses.

Knowledge is power

The “great bonus” of working with a British wool product, Davies comments, is that the “British Wool Board offers a certification and can actually trace the yarn back to the fleece it came from, which offers true traceability as well as a meaningful story”.

To help build trust and assurance with customers regarding the quality of her knitwear collection, Davies has also got images of the animals on the organic farm to show to customers to prove its origin.

Sharing her insights on the biggest challenges brands face in becoming and remaining sustainable, Davies provided her four core pieces of advice:

1. Carefully source your materials and try to go directly to mills.
2. Create good working relationships with suppliers.
3. Maintain personal contact with your supply chain – go and visit them regularly.
4. Don’t compromise on price – sustainable and traceable products cost more because of that. But the customer needs to be informed of these factors as they add value and longevity to the end product. ■

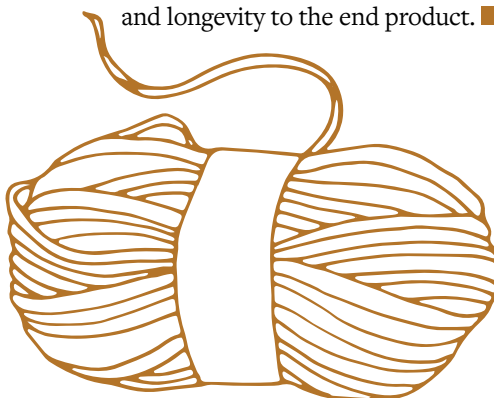




Photo: ARMEDANGELS

ARMEDANGELS

Martin Höfeler (pictured above), CEO and Founder of ARMEDANGELS in Cologne, Germany, launched the organic apparel label with the philosophy: ‘fair fashion not fast fashion’. Advocating the belief that “fairness is never out of fashion”, the brand creates timeless designs that shun chasing the latest trends. Its mission to combine fair working conditions and sustainable, high-quality materials with beautiful designs, has led the German fashion label to “change the way of quality thinking”, says Kerstin Janßen, Manager of Sourcing, Supplier Relationship and Quality Control at ARMEDANGELS. Describing this change as the brand’s biggest achievement, Janßen outlines: “We believe that quality is not about controlling, it’s about choosing the right partners for the respective products and working together to achieve customer satisfaction.”

Social responsibilities in sustainable and ethical fashion

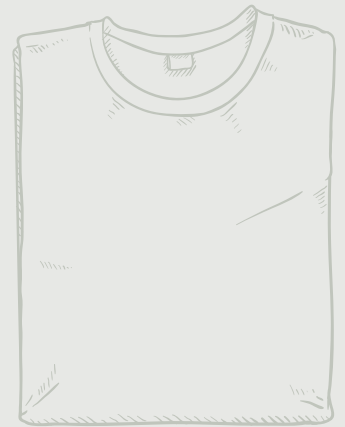
When it comes to sustainability and ARMEDANGELS’ goals, “it’s go big or go home”, emphasises Lavinia Muth, Armed Angels’ Manager of Corporate Responsibility. Sharing why the brand is focusing on aiming high, Muth outlines that it’s down to the business “aspiring not only to preserve the planet, but to hand it over to the next generation better than it is today in the framework of our business activities”.

To achieve these goals, ARMEDANGELS is committed to five core actions:

1. Be willing to break the rules.
2. Do matter core actions, which relates to using 100 per cent alternative and regenerative materials, certified factories, clean processes, cost transparency and fair prices, and products without compromise.
3. Use business as an enabler.
4. Fight together.
5. Be true!

The German fashion label only uses alternative and regenerative materials. These include cotton from controlled organic cultivation or recycled organic cotton; virgin wool from controlled organic animal husbandry; regenerated fibres from Lenzing (Lenzing, Ecovero, Tencel, Lyocell, Tencel Modal); recycled synthetic fibres (rPET), and GMO-free linen or hemp.

Driven by their promise that “only high-quality goods reach the consumer”, the brand works with the Fairtrade, Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) working group and the Fair Wear Foundation. In collaboration with its partners and colleagues, Janßen states that ARMEDANGELS’ “sourcing practices include social and ecological parameters”, during all stages of production. As a further back-up, the brand chose three voluntary standard and system-based tools: Fairtrade, GOTS, and the Fair Wear Foundation. Explaining why they selected these organisations to collaborate with on its mission to end fast fashion, Janßen outlines the qualities and values of each:



1. Fairtrade

Fairtrade’s main goal is to address the imbalance in global trade by supporting small scale farmers and workers worldwide. A transparent system that allows the backtracking of cotton to its exact source is key. The Fairtrade standards set the framework for the workers’ and farmers’ social, ecological, and economic development. It dictates the payment of a stable Fairtrade minimum price on the raw material and an additional premium for community projects. Janßen reveals: “The chief operating officer and the corporate responsibility manager travelled to India in 2017 in order to meet the organic and Fairtrade cotton farmers of our supply chain to evaluate the systematics implemented at site.” She adds: “We continuously check and verify our partnerships to make sure that they are still efficient and striving for sustainable development.”

2. The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS)

GOTS counts as one of the strictest certifications for certified organically produced and processed natural fibres. It defines requirements that safeguard ecological and ►

socially responsible textiles production – from the cultivation of the raw material to the finished product. “All our partner factories are GOTS certified, regardless of whether the product will later be approved and labelled as GOTS or not (as this depends on the material mix),” Janßen says. It also enables ARMEDANGELS to ensure ecological and social requirements are followed in the production of non-GOTS styles.

3. Fair Wear Foundation

The Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) is an international multi-stakeholder initiative with the primary goal to improve working conditions in textile factories. A strict Code of Labour Practice regulates the prohibition of child labour, the right to collective bargaining, safe and healthy working conditions, the implementation of living wages and environmentally-conscious production. Different mechanisms are used to ensure compliance with the Code of Labour Practices, including auditing and training, as well as a complaint hotline for workers, among others.

4. Quality infrastructure

The quality management process at ARMEDANGELS starts with sourcing the right partners. Organisational structures, environmental and ethical conditions, and quality processes are key considerations when making these selections. “Quality is vital part of our strategy,” Janßen explains. “The whole product and supply chain strategy is based on quality, ecological and social compliance – and products without compromise. Our whole quality process is based on customer feedback.” To maximise feedback, the brand has implemented a quality circle – to ensure there is a continuous improvement process within the brand’s team.

It also gathers comments at the end of the quality management process to support effective continuous improvement processes, and provides its suppliers with feedback every season to help develop and enhance their service capabilities. “Our supply chains are almost 100 per cent traceable from the raw material to the finished product,” says Muth. “We pay fair prices and have 100 per cent cost transparency in our products.” Outlining a model that “nobody else can do for products in the industry”, Muth says that the brand’s labour production costs are passed on to each of its products, providing ARMEDANGELS with a lever to increase wages for the company’s workers. ■

Strengthening sustainability and quality

For clothing and textile companies, multifaceted action is needed to overcome the “main reason why the clothing industry is so polluting – and that is profit”, Duvan Couvée, Co-founder and CEO of Pure Sportwear, explains. When companies realise the more problems they cause by imposing “pressure to produce as low as possible, when we start paying fair wages and are willing to pay a fair amount for our clothes”, it is only then when brands will “finally take responsibility” for their products without fear of losing out to competitors, Couvée says. Governments also play a “major role in fining companies that do not want to adapt”, he adds.

“There is a need to raise awareness on issues of traceability and sustainability in the fashion industry”, Frankie Davies, Founder of Charl Knitwear, asserts. Therefore, “don’t compromise on your sustainability and traceability goals – if we don’t create the demand, then suppliers won’t offer it to us!”, she says. Equally, if “we don’t raise awareness to the consumer about the issues of lack of traceability and sustainability within the fashion industry, then they won’t know to choose the more sustainable and ethically sourced options”.

Lavinia Muth, Manager of Corporate Responsibility at Armed Angels, says textile and fashion retail industries who are keen to improve their sustainable fashion, should “aim high” detailing that the “most sustainable way to work is through a long-term partnership”. More importantly, they should “slow down the rapid pace of cheap clothing production and instead, design and produce more durable, sustainable items,” she concludes.

