



Here's Why Sza's Plastic-Free Line Could Change the Sustainable Fashion Game

By Jake Hall, VICE News, Aug. 20, 2018

"[Expletive] plastic. Y'all ready to save the oceans or nah?" A few days ago, favourite singer of everyone with two ears and a heart, SZA, shared this caption alongside a series of Instagram stories. In the pictures were sweatshirts emblazoned with slogans like 'Puck Plastic' and 'Sustainability Gang', all of which seemed to hint that the star is ready to delve into the fashion industry. Other reports have claimed she's about to launch a plastic-free streetwear line (the slogans adorned Champion pieces) and that the profits will be donated entirely to charity. A new account -- @ctrlfishingco -- tagged in the posts hasn't yet shared any content, but all the signs indicate that SZA is gearing up to change the sustainable fashion game.

We already know that this needs to happen. Fashion is the world's second dirtiest industry; it pumps chemical dyes into rivers, burns mountains of unsold 'deadstock' and contributes in no small part to the plastic pollution epidemic currently ravaging the world's oceans. Industry experts may be regularly discussing these issues, but they still rarely make headline news -- until, of course, SZA came along.

"It's great to see that celebrities are willing to put their name to the cause," says Debbie Moorhouse, co-founder of the International Society for Sustainable Fashion, a non-profit which seeks to raise awareness of the obstacles blocking a sustainable fashion industry. "It really makes a difference, as people are already following their style, plus their endorsement commands media attention and viral traffic -- [they make] these stories more accessible to people."

Moorhouse points out that SZA isn't the first star to release a range of 'ethical' products. Pharrell's G-Star collaborations and Will.i.am's Ekocycle lifestyle range are just two other examples; while, elsewhere, Kanye West has praised and worked with Katharine Hamnett, a political designer whose dedication to protecting the environment is well-documented. These collaborations are important not only because they create conversation, but also because high-profile names undeniably drive sales: "Remember how quickly the Yeezy sneakers sold out? That's what sustainable fashion needs to make it mainstream."

Although there are exceptions, the sustainable fashion movement has been criticised in the past for its inaccessibility. Brands tend to posit themselves as a luxury alternative to cheap, disposable 'fast fashion', explaining that clothing naturally costs more when its fabrics are responsibly sourced and its supply chain non-exploitative. But, as NGO Fashion Revolution highlighted with a handy illustration in its #001 fanzine, making these changes isn't as expensive as we're often led to believe -- it would, according to their calculations, reportedly only cost an extra €1.57 to ensure a €29 tee was sustainably made.



Photo: Instagram



As Walmart recently discovered, trying to sell low-cost clothing at a slightly higher price is no easy feat. The Fashion Law followed its attempts to make sustainability affordable, penning an in-depth exploration which ultimately revealed that customers were either reluctant or simply couldn't afford to pay more. Instead, they shifted their focus towards suppliers and were met with positive reactions. The problem with this model is that supply chains can be long, disparate and lacking in transparency -- the fallout from 2013's Rana Plaza disaster is exemplary of this fact, as some brands claimed to not even know their clothes were being made in the factory. Ultimately, Walmart's findings revealed that "customers may prefer sustainable practices, yet be unable to pay the premium, even when it's very little."

There is, at least, a little nugget of positivity in these statement -- people are starting to actually care. According to Susan Harris, Technical Director of NGO Anthesis Group and sustainable fashion expert, this attitude is especially common within today's generation. "Increasingly, consumers expect more of clothing brands and retailers," she states via email. "They want transparency about what their clothes are made of, and by whom. This is particularly true for millennial consumers, who look for innovations that support their values, and that help them make purchases they can feel good about."

Harris describes plastic pollution in particular as a "hot topic", citing Blue Planet's arresting depiction of the problem as another catalyst for furthering the conversation. Other articles seem to suggest that increased media coverage is leaving its mark on millennials, with Eco-Sphere even going so far as to call us 'a driving force for corporate sustainability.' Essentially, we won't buy from brands we don't trust.

That's where artists like SZA come in. Her debut album *Ctrl* was overwhelmingly praised for its relatability: from body issues to break-ups, SZA sang about real issues but shook them off and curved [expletive] men along the way. The album's genius lay in its perfect fusion of vulnerability and swagger; relatable, but also aspirational. If influencer marketing has taught us anything, it's that this connection and this sense of trust matters.

Rhian Jones, founder of vegan fashion brand Love My Apparel, agrees that SZA's enormous following makes a difference -- but she can't change the industry alone. "Is one brand enough to turn heads and sway buying habits? We need to move away from brands like this being the novelty, and implement them as a staple on the high street." In her eyes, small shifts can lead to a wider difference: "This could mean introducing eco-friendly products and lines into existing brands or creating smaller, influencer-led alternatives online. I think Instagram will play an important part in making an impact."

Education is also crucial -- we need to understand the problem before we can tackle it. Jones explains that events aiming to educate already exist in the UK and beyond, but that the effort to fully comprehend the issues needs to be collaborative between brand and consumer: "Brands need to choose more conscious manufacturers and not support child labour or animal products, and consumers need to buy from sustainable brands."

As it stands, we're at least actively interested in doing so. More of us are engaging with important debates around the social and environmental consequences of the fashion industry -- millennials in particular -- but we clearly need some extra incentive to spend more and buy ethically. SZA's Insta-



gram-worthy ‘Puck Flastic’ sweatshirts in partnership with Champion, bring a fresh new perspective to a conversation which has been criticised for its exclusivity.

Star ‘advocates’ like Gwyneth Paltrow and Jessica Alba arguably haven’t helped to dispel this myth. Both have built multi-million pound businesses which aim to address social anxieties around sustainability and wellness by offering expensive, ‘ethical’ products. Paltrow’s GOOP came under fire in a recent New York Times profile, which revealed the company had never used a fact-checker to back up its claims. Although less clickbait in nature than Paltrow’s GOOP, Alba’s Honest offers up products such as ‘premium infant baby formula’ which cost more than \$30. How helpful can these brands really be when they’re aimed at a select, privileged few?

Whether or not SZA can offer up an accessible alternative remains to be seen, but Ctrl Fishing Co looks set to team ‘gram-worthy designs with an all-star name. Her statement has already made headlines, indicating that she has the power to bring issues like ocean pollution -- which, let’s be honest, aren’t the sexiest -- into the spotlight. Millennials might be engaging with these problems, but it’s clear that some of us need an extra push to step up and invest in sustainable fashion. SZA could well be the spokesperson we need.