

CASE STUDY 11 Jan 21

GABRIELA HEARST: STRIVING FOR TRANSPARENT LUXURY

The small luxury brand has been praised for its exquisite knitwear and sustainability-focused approach. As people demand more transparency from their favorite luxury brands, Gabriela Hearst's approach shows how businesses can better integrate ethical creation into their products.

Location [United States](#)

Featured Experts

[Michelle Gabriel](#)

Michelle Gabriel is a sustainability strategist and adjunct professor of sustainable fashion business strategy at Glasgow Caledonian New York College. Her focus is on creating a more viable, healthy, and opportunity-rich future for the planet, people, and communities through the lens of human and environmental sustainability.

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[Sarah LaBrecque](#)

Sarah LaBrecque is a freelance journalist and editor based in Hertfordshire, UK. She spent 6.5 years at The Guardian on the sustainable business desk and later was a commissioning editor at Guardian Labs. She writes mainly on sustainability and parenting, and has a particular interest in sustainable fashion.

Highlights & Data

- Gabriela Hearst, a small luxury fashion brand, stands out for its efforts in working to provide greater supply-chain transparency
- There's a growing demand for transparency in the fashion industry and consumers expect brands to empower their artisans
- To appeal to values-driven, tech-forward shoppers, some luxury designers are baking IoT supply-chain credentials into their garments
- **83%** of people globally feel it's important for brands to create environmentally friendly products ([Accenture, 2019](#))
- **75%** of Europeans think fashion brands should do more to improve the lives of their female garment workers ([Fashion Revolution, 2021](#))
- **21%** of American adults say they've spent money with a brand because of its political or social stance ([PRWeek & Morning Consult, 2020](#))

On Gabriela Hearst's website, a promotional video focuses on [telling the story](#) of where the wool used in the brand's collection comes from. The video is all dreamy footage of Hearst and her family on their ranch in Uruguay, rounding up free-roaming sheep on horseback, and aerial shots of her galloping across the verdant landscape. Hearst can also be seen flipping through old family photos with her children or chatting with the ranch foreman. It's beautifully shot, though you would be forgiven if you thought it was somewhat contrived – time and time again, buyers have found fashion to be far from wholesome.

Indeed, such videos speak to the understanding among luxury brands that communicating sustainable production processes is as key as having them in the first place. For the discerning luxury consumer, there's no room for greenwashing. In fact, it's a truth that Hearst is passionately committed to upholding. "We have to go back to how we used to do things before polyester invaded our lives," says the designer, reflecting on her eponymous brand's AW20 collection – made from upcycled fabrics as a means of combating waste in the fashion industry. [1] Gabriela Hearst – the brand and the woman – is committed to the principle. "A luxury designer needs to know what's in the mill, where it came from, and who made what; you need to know how things are built. That's luxury," she says. [2]

Although every luxury designer can strive for better transparency, Hearst's approach goes some way to illustrating what a best-in-class example of sustainable luxury looks like. With a timeline on its website, the brand lays out its various commitments – from its partnership with Manos del Uruguay, a 50-year-old non-profit women's cooperative that creates knitwear for the label, to plastic-free and compostable packaging. The brand's [goal by 2022?](#) To eliminate virgin plastics from production. While the luxury fashion sector is known for keeping its trade secrets close, Hearst provides a more open approach to her practices, vision, and ethos – and offers the aspirational lifestyle to go with it. [3]

Luxury shoppers are seeking out values-driven offerings

Gabriela Hearst (2020) ©

Context

With 21% of American adults saying they've spent money with a brand because of its political or social stance, there's a clear appetite for brands with a value-set at the heart of their approach. [4] Within the luxury and fashion space, this has often manifested in green or sustainable promises – but in 2021, buyers expect commitments to be honored with consistent and meaningful action. As Tara Donaldson, editor at *WWD*, [explains in Canvas8's Expert Outlook](#) : “People don't need a luxury ball gown or seven pairs of luxury high heels right now so they're re-evaluating what luxury means when it comes to clothing. Is it luxurious to just look nice or is there also luxury in supporting brands that consider the environment or that consider social impact?”

That social impact isn't only about environmental concerns, but also about the wellbeing and fair treatment of garment workers, which has been in the international spotlight, following the cancellation of orders due to the pandemic. [5] With a study by Accenture finding that 83% of people globally feel it's either important or extremely important for brands to create environmentally friendly products, this focus on transparency within the supply chain will continue to shape consumer purchasing habits long after the pandemic. [6] According to Michelle Gabriel, adjunct professor of sustainable fashion business strategy at Glasgow Caledonian New York College, it should be more manageable for smaller brands to have oversight of their full supply chain, including the people who spin the yarn and stitch the garments, although traceability is not without its challenges. “It's impossible to tackle supply chain transparency when you're a PVH. When you're VF Corp, how do you even begin? You're working in thousands of factories globally.” [7]

Because of Gabriela Hearst's size, the brand already has an advantage in this regard. But it's still not easy. “Even for myself, who is passionate about the subject, it was hard to gather info,” says Hearst. [3] For inspiration, fashion could look to the food sector. Major brands – [Nestlé](#), for example – are turning to blockchain as a means of communicating transparency to customers, showing their supply chain structures. [Walmart](#), too, is using blockchain to communicate the origins of its Angus beef.

Brands that support artisans are winning luxury fans

Gabriela Hearst (2020) ©

Insights and opportunities

Hand-picked and small combats the excess of luxury

Consider the implications of growth. If it will cost you the supply chain and labor transparency you've carefully built up for your brand, is it worth it? Hearst has been working with **EON**, an IoT platform that creates digital identities for products, to enable greater traceability throughout the supply chain. Each garment in the SS20 collection included a tag with a **QR code that holds information** about materials used, country of origin, production processes, and certifications – similar to designer **Thebe Magugu's garment microchips**. Hearst has also been quoted on her intention to stay small, saying that she decided not to wholesale her bags because it would mean increasing the number of natural resources used. "We've been very mindful about strategically growing and not overexposing and over-distributing," she says. [8] **Telfar** has adopted a similar model, embracing sustainable scale through a pre-order model rather than oversaturating the market – and maintaining covetability in the process.

Traditional practices hold modern cachet

Hearst has not always sourced wool from her family's ranch but an investment in the fiber and practices she was already intimately acquainted with seems to be paying dividends. "This is not a five-star review," says Gabriel, "[but] she bore components of her supply chain out of what she already knew. And so I think those are exercises in conscientiousness." [7] To transform her wool into garments, Hearst works with **Manos del Uruguay**, a non-profit group of cooperatives that provides employment for local female artisans. The organization is part of the World Fair Trade Organisation and each of the 12 cooperatives is located in a small Uruguayan village. This move appeals to the 75% of Europeans who think fashion brands should do more to improve the lives of their female garment workers. [9] As well as working with this network of 600 female artisans, her SS20 collection is made from upcycled and recycled materials, and she produced the first carbon-neutral runway show in 2019. [2]

Make production a core part of the story

Hearst is not afraid to talk to the media about her sustainability and transparency intentions, and this lends her credibility and accountability. Her family's **17,000-acre sheep and cattle ranch** provides merino wool for her collections, of which knitwear is a significant part. "She is able to go there and literally knows the people shearing the sheep in some instances," says Gabriel. "[This gives her] some transparency in an operational capacity." [7] The direct connection with suppliers enables Hearst's brand vision to be rooted in a clear moral code. Similarly, British designer

Bethany Williams has built a celebrated brand with a consistent social justice message at its heart.

Sources

1. *Vogue* (February 2020)
2. *Harper's Bazaar* (September 2019)
3. *Vogue Business* (February 2020)
4. *PRWeek* (January 2020)
5. *Vogue Business* (April 2020)
6. *Business Wire* (June 2019)
7. Interview with Michelle Gabriel conducted by the author
8. *Vogue* (April 2020)
9. *Fashion Revolution* (January 2021)

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