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## **Should celebrity-founded fashion and beauty brands be held to a higher standard when it comes to sustainability?**

In March, non-profit Remake published its annual Fashion Accountability Report, which measures the performance of 52 fashion brands and retailers with an annual revenue of over \$100 million with regards to traceability, wages and well-being, commercial practices, raw materials, environmental justice, and governance. The two celebrity brands included on the list scored low: out of a possible 150 points, Rihanna's Savage X Fenty scored four and Kim Kardashian's Skims scored zero, on par with ultra-fast fashion players Temu, Missguided and Fashion Nova.

Experts say this is a problem, as celebrity brands by nature have huge profiles and audiences. These brands often explode in success and grow quickly, both in revenue and production volumes. And while lack of transparency is an issue across the industry, consumers may not realise that their favourite celebrity brand operates in a similar way to ultra-fast fashion players.

"If you are a mega multinational corporation selling more than \$100 million worth of stock a year, you need to be held to the same account as the Sheins and Boohoos of the world," says fair fashion campaigner Venetia La Manna. "We're not going to be able to change the industry unless the entire industry is held to account. I don't think we should let [celebrity brands] off the hook because we have [their founders] on a pedestal."

Remake's senior advocacy manager Alexa Roccanova agrees: "These are image-based companies whose main priority is capitalising on trends and sales growth, but it's also important to recognise that they are fast fashion companies."

The accountability report found that both Savage X Fenty and Skims had not publicly disclosed basic details that have become industry standard, Roccanova explains. "When it comes to these celebrity brands, they're really not even doing the bare minimum," she says. "It's not clear where garments are being produced — both companies' websites merely note them as 'imported' — and if we can't track where products are coming from then we can't hold companies accountable [if there are issues]."

When contacted by *Vogue Business*, Savage X Fenty pointed to a new [CSR page](#), which went live on the brand's website on 1 April (after the Remake report was published). The webpage says the brand is carbon neutral, certified by The CarbonNeutral Protocol, and offsets by supporting global schemes such as a reforestation project in Guatemala. It also names three of its suppliers (including MAS Intimates, which has a positive Higg Index score of 85.22 per cent) and links to its ethical sourcing code and human rights policy pages. The company did not provide any further comments.

Skims replied via email: "At Skims, we are committed to the highest ethical standards and legal compliance in all aspects of our business and product supply chain. We only work with suppliers and vendors who we believe in and share our commitment to sustainability, accountability and

transparency.” The company did not share any further details on its suppliers, raw materials use, water use, chemical use, energy use or production volumes.

## **The responsibility of influence**

More celebrities are setting up brands every year. Just this week, Rita Ora launched a haircare brand, joining the likes of Kylie Jenner, Khloe Kardashian, Angelina Jolie, Miranda Kerr, Hailey Bieber, Selena Gomez, Halsey, Gwyneth Paltrow, Harry Styles, Millie Bobby Brown and more who have all launched fashion and beauty brands. Some recognise that they need to take a proactive approach to sustainability — even more so than other brands.

“We are fortunate to hold significant influence and have a platform to build awareness and drive positive change. With this influence comes a responsibility to prioritise sustainability, ethical practices and transparency in [our] brand operations,” says Kerr, the former Victoria’s Secret Angel who founded skincare brand Kora Organics in 2009. “By advocating for change and leading by example, celebrities can use their influence to create a more sustainable and ethical future for the industry and inspire others to follow suit.”

Kora Organics, which claims to be toxin-free, cruelty-free and organic, has had a dedicated team to process its certifications since day one. The certification process means getting granular about ingredients, manufacturing and packaging, which has made a huge impact on its sustainability progress, says Kerr. For example, organic farming practices eliminate synthetic pesticides and nitrogen pollution. The brand has been working on improving other sustainability credentials too, becoming carbon neutral in 2021 and introducing some recycled and biodegradable packaging (which will be rolled out to all products by 2025).

Beauty tends to have better traceability than fashion, experts suggest. “Beauty brands need to know more [about their raw ingredients and production] for regulations that aren’t necessarily sustainability related, they’re related to safety,” says Jocelyn Wilkinson, partner and associate director at management consultancy Boston Consulting Group (BCG).

## **How brands can do better**

With regulations and legislation piling up, traceability is quickly rising on fashion’s agenda. BCG has been studying over 35 of the newest regulations coming in globally, during which they found that traceability is the most important practice brands can do that will enable them to understand the status of their compliance, the real impact of their products and allow them to deliver any “sensible” sustainability programmes. “Traceability is the backbone of the whole thing,” says Wilkinson.

Around two-thirds of the impact of any fashion brand is in the supply chain, and the vast majority of that is in raw materials, Wilkinson adds. Poor traceability doesn’t just lead to poor sustainability: it can also open up financial security risks, quality risks, IP risks and more. To better understand the business case, Wilkinson urges brands to make the case for investment into traceability by equating the value at risk from regulation to a percentage of EBIT. Brands can also ask their investors what their ESG (environmental, social and governance) criteria is, she suggests.

New brands are particularly well placed to build traceability from the start. “Newer brands don’t have a lot of heritage in terms of systems and supply chains, so if they start thinking from the beginning

how they want to deal with transparency and social and environmental responsibility in their supply chain it's a lot easier to do that from the get-go," says Anja Sadock, head of marketing at traceability platform Trustrace.

Many celebrity brands are still relatively new, and growing fast. That means they're likely still building out a network of suppliers, so there's still an opportunity to foster a transparent and collaborative relationship. "You can say to suppliers, 'we really want to work with you but [traceability] is really important to us, so we want to ensure we can work together to share data around how things are being produced so we can ensure we're sourcing in a fair manner'," says Sadock. "Our customers find it's fairly easy to get new suppliers to subscribe to a code of conduct because they want that business, but it can be slightly more difficult in an already-established relationship to add one more thing they need to do without paying extra for it."

Sadock suggests all brands beginning a traceability journey start by understanding their "why" — whether it's compliance or sustainability or something else. That will help them to shape their objectives and understand the best way to measure progress. Then, they can start working with a traceability platform to gather and analyse data using a traceability programme to understand what's really going on in your supply chain, and start reporting that too. Brands beginning their traceability journey should also be prepared for the fact that they'll probably find something unsavoury that they'll need to do something about, Sadock warns.

Roccanova says some of the basics she looks for when evaluating a brand's transparency include disclosing a supplier list, where they source materials from, labour rights conditions, wage data, environmental impacts including greenhouse gas emissions, water and chemical use. "There's no silver bullet solution for any of these topics," she says. Real progress will come from long-term engagement.

As legislation mounts, prioritising sustainability is essential to building a brand that will last, advocates agree. "Celebrities are of a moment," says Roccanova. "If they want to have longevity they're going to have to engage in these sustainability issues."