

May 5, 2050

THROWBACK THURSDAY EDITION

TIME

30

YEARS
LATER

REMEMBERING COVID-19

An outbreak that temporarily paused our world, accelerated the textile industry into what is it today

Mackenzie Hemmingway | Lawson Benfield | Bailie Smith

Editor's Note

From a disruptive virus to unforeseeable innovations, this issue recalls the key changes in our textile industry that emerged from a pandemic that shocked the world. What we call normal today was far from ordinary then.



THIS EDITION

If you've been around for awhile you know every Thursday at TIME Magazine has been dedicated to remembering our history. The Good, the bad, and even the ugliest of times have been highlighted to acknowledge our past, applaud our present, and look forward to our future. Other signature 'Throwback Thursday' issues included remembering events such as the September 11th terrorist attacks, the 2016 election, and the Columbine high school shooting. This week our issue is dedicated to the widespread Coronavirus Pandemic that was first introduced to our world in 2019. However, this respiratory disease did not fully culminate until Spring of 2020 in the United States. Spread from person to person through respiratory droplets, citizens around the world were advised to remain six feet from one another to try to slow the rapid spread of the virus. Things such as weddings, graduations, and funerals were canceled, pushed back, or limited in scope. Making this disease not only frightening, but somber through its ability to strip its victims of their time with family and friends during their last few days of life. Although as dismal as these times were, times such as these have been known to surface great bouts of innovation and growth. It was difficult to see the immense strides that were going to ensue from times like these characterized by high unemployment, food shortages, and strict lockdowns. But as well know now, we can attribute a lot to this pandemic and the response the world took to verify the next global tragedy wouldn't be as disastrous as this. One industry in particular drastically changed to counter the effects of this time. The textile emmerged more technically engaged, sustainably inclined, and innovated factory.



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TEXTILE CHANGES

The Outbreak Theory

Outbreaks of the bubonic plague, cholera, and smallpox, were all followed by advancements in society. What advances or regressions can we accredit to the Coronavirus?

A Hopeful Future

A look at how the COVID-19 pandemic revitalized the sustainability movement

In the midst of the turmoil of the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020 was the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. People around the world took the day to reflect on the state of the planet and the ever-looming climate crisis. The UN Chief at the time, Antonio Guterres, released a statement on Earth Day urging governments around the world to utilize their responses to the pandemic to take action against the climate crisis and reshape the future of our planet. In response, the European Council introduced the Roadmap to Recovery, which gave guidance on a comprehensive recovery plan that prioritizes what it calls the “Green transition” and digital transformation. Many countries even outside of the EU used this Roadmap to Recovery as a launching point to revitalize their strides against the climate crisis in their economic recovery plans.

Since 2020 we have seen a decrease in global GHG emissions and a stabilization in global warming due to increased government action after the Coronavirus outbreak, as well as a focus on digitization in the private sector. More businesses are utilizing the online space and AI/ML technology to reduce their carbon footprints, leading us all towards a more sustainable and hopeful future for our planet.

THE FALL OF BRICK-AND-MORTAR

COVID-19 caused retail businesses to close their doors in the months of state-mandated quarantine. With brick-and-mortar stores shutting down and demand falling, many businesses took this time to restructure their futures in the wake of the virus. Making a name in the digital space while still maintaining the customer experience became a top priority in 2020. In the years after, brands saw a fall in sales at their brick-and-mortar stores and many moved to a completely digital model. The reduction in brick-and-mortar stores lessened many brands’ environmental impact. Learn more about the digitization of retail in the next article.



WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION

With mandated stay-at-home orders, many companies were forced to move to remote work. After implementing new video-conferencing softwares and tools to work from home, many companies have now given their employees the option to work remotely from their homes instead of commuting to the office.

QUICK MATH

In 2017, the average working American commuted 15 miles to work one way, totaling 150 miles in a five-day work week. Given a 50 week work year, that is a total of 7500 commuter miles per person per year. According to the EPA, the average passenger vehicle emitted 404 grams of CO₂ per mile in 2017. This means that the average commuting American emitted 3,030,000 grams, or 3.34 metric tons, of CO₂ per year!

Countless studies have shown that working from home increases productivity and job satisfaction, and now many Americans choose to work remotely when they are given the option. This has significantly decreased many families' carbon footprints as well as commuter GHG emissions.

BUYING AMERICAN

The outbreak caused a surge of patriotism in the USA, similar to the years after WWII and 9/11. As part of the economic recovery plan, Congress applied tax breaks and economic relief to small business owners across America. This led to a decrease in outsourcing for raw materials and production in the private sector. Retail brands began buying raw material from American farmers and keeping production within our borders. This not only fueled our economy but also decreased GHG emissions from transportation outside of the country.

In The Beginning...

Delving deeper into what shopping was pre-pandemic and the stark surroundings now



THE DIFFERENCE

Today, windows are aesthetically dressed to appeal to the wandering eye, showcasing their designs through virtual mannequins and well placed accessories. Inside the small storeroom, retailers host a virtual viewing platform to aid in clothing shopping. The mirrors that line the walls dress onlookers in their newest lines. This virtual reality models the consumer in their chosen apparel instantly as they stop in view of the unseen camera. Lacking in store inventory, retailers handle few in-store samples for customers who still need to confront all senses before committing to the sale.

Point-of-sale systems merge with the mirrors to implement self-checkout, eliminating the need for inessential staff. Due to the absence of expensive inventory and wages, companies have found more available funds for investment in direct shipping to customers with low lag times between the supply chain.

Flashback thirty years ago to what customers would call "hands-on shopping", where shopping was not merely the exchange of money for highly valued items, it was an experience. However, shopping

soon came to a sudden halt as the coronavirus swept the world and changed buying habits for decades to come. The coping mechanism many still rely on, retail therapy, existed differently as the "stay at home orders" burdened individuals. Changing consumer shopping needs and locations, E-Commerce sales soared, increasing "30% up from March 2020" (Rattner). Correctly foreshadowing our current lives, BMO's Siegel noted, "the pandemic is likely to stoke other existing trends, we've been seeing retail move toward online interaction, toward e-commerce and away from brick and mortar."

A society completely reliant on person-to-person transactions, made these assumptions seem outlandish but not out of scope when the coronavirus threatened the viability of these practices. Focusing specifically on retail sales, the Coronavirus not only challenged the sale of these goods but their advertising efforts as well. Ringing in its 30 year anniversary of being fully digital, the Shanghai Fashion Week boasted this accomplishment which can be traced back to COVID-19 and its impacts. This was noted as the world's first fully digital fashion showcase with over "150 catwalk events will now be live streamed to a global audience with many designers selling items online from current collections"(Clarke).

These forced accelerations seen throughout the textile industry don't stop at consumer sales. Many implications became instilled through this time from the lack of contact, shortage of supplies, and fluctuating markets.

In November 2019, store traffic fell 11.4% year over year, according to consultant Retail Next.

Supply Chain Rewind

A look at how the COVID-19 pandemic revitalized the sustainability movement

Improving factories to not only be more sustainable while increasing productivity has been under a constant microscope. While factories started as these behemoth buildings that would release toxins straight into the air or chemicals that would run directly into the water sources around. The biggest change to factories and supply chains was in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As we approach the 30 year anniversary of the stay at home orders we are taking a look at how these changes shaped our factories and supply chains today. A traditional factory required a production line with many human hands that had to physically touch the product being manufactured. During the pandemic the exposure was accelerated through close contact made businesses reevaluate their product and supply chain. This led to many factories today that are completely automated and only allow top management into the building due to this reason. The few factories that are not completely automated have employees that control robots remotely and the same goes if a robot needs replacing or fixing. but has stuck with us even 30 years later. While we have not had any more epidemics the threat is still a concern.

Businesses that have these practices implemented would still be able to operate. In 2020 our supply chains were very global due to outsourcing and keeping costs as low as possible. While consumer costs is still a factor of production today the cost benefit of having something locally made versus across the ocean has shifted. Companies have shifted to an emphasis on locally made materials over products from different countries. This shift has led to completely automated shipping and trucking. The loading, unloading and driving of the truck was shifted to robots due to this pandemic. This was one of the biggest changes we saw. There was an emphasis on electric and self driving cars but not to the extent we see today. COVID-19 didn't start autonomous driving but it did accelerate its practices and implementation. Once the products are loaded off the truck they end up at warehouses that are again, completely automated and no human interaction is required. These regional warehouses help distribute deliveries to home with "no contact delivery". This phrase actually came about from the idea of limiting the spread of COVID-19 but has stuck with us even 30 years later.



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