

What's in your Color?



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Fiber has a paper trail. Color has a feeling, unknown pricing, and timelines that end with "Best Can Do." But the real question is simpler: what is in the color?

A question or three to ask, mostly to see what happens in the room: who has the final say, who knows the dye, did you get what you wanted?

We are not talking about the reference. We are talking about the newly made color for "you." It has a brand name, a business number, a quality tolerance, and, if the season went well, a nice story of connection that led to strong financials. I mean, what is actually in it. Which dyes, which chemicals help the dyes, how much stuck to the cloth and how much went down the drain, and who has the awareness and does that conversation continue at every milestone?

There is usually a pause. Then somebody says the supplier said it was the best they could do, and we signed off on it. A multitude of people in

the business touch and influence color. It highlights the subjectivity and often the degree of difficulty in effectively strategizing on color in the 360.

Fiber is in the passport. Color gets an honorable mention?

Over the last few years, the industry has gotten rather good at demanding where fiber comes from. Certificates, transaction records, a trail you can sometimes follow from field to mill. It isn't perfect, but it exists, and people argue about it, which matters.

Color is handled differently. The creative gets heaps of attention, then the business, because "color sells", but the science happens at the mill (best would be at the choice of color standard), then gets simplified into a test report later.

Realistically, it also affects the care label more than people often discuss.

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The reality: a dip comes back, a glance at the window, and hopefully a CMC ΔE value says it's close enough to the standard, and everyone moves on. It is a lovely system for answering one question: can the mill create the color? But it leaves so many other questions unanswered.

As we move toward more sustainability regulation, the bigger question is what is actually in the color. How does it affect color choice, the time to achieve it, and potentially cost? Is there a way to streamline color choice and dye traceability for SMEs, or is it only for global giants?

The global questions are changing; are they effective?

Since late September, the EU has been applying new rules on environmental claims in consumer marketing. The short version is that vague words like "eco" and "sustainable" now need real proof behind them. That matters because the same pressure is reaching color claims.

A separate, tougher proposal on green claims has stalled, which some might take as permission to relax. I'm not sure that's the right

read. National authorities already enforce the rules, and a national authority doesn't need a new law to ask what you meant by "cleaner color".

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The question is, what is being measured? What does it achieve? And whether a business needs to get credit for the measurement if it doesn't achieve anything different? Does it gain consumer trust to say "cleaner color" or "dye colors made to measure"? A best-for-planet dye process means formulating and producing each color for each bulk run.

The textile passport is further down the road. The registry has opened, but what a textile passport must actually contain isn't expected to be settled until the second half of 2027. So there is a stretch of time to get ready. Whether it helps anything is a separate question.

What would a good answer even look like?

I wonder about what isn't being talked about, and I think "what's in the color" splits into several questions that people keep answering with a single certification.

Did the dyehouse get included in the selection conversation? Is it only the regulatory checklist- what chemicals are physically in the

building? And what left the building on the day someone sampled the water? Does only the manufacturer communicate directly with the dyehouse? Is the finished garment safe to wear? Is there a strategy to stay unaware, viable deniability, or is there enough trust to open the door to the conversation?

A garment can pass beautifully while the river downstream is left in the unknown box. That isn't a knock on the certifications. It's just answering a different question from the one on the hangtag.

A few things I'd like to know

How many SME or one-country-only-level brands could, today, open the chemical records for one specific lot of one specific color? Not in theory. Actually get the information in 48 hours with any degree of clarity.

When a dyehouse is squeezed on price, which of its costs gets squeezed first? And does anybody upstream ever ask? In reality, what gets negotiated is a garment style or individual fabrics; it's uncommon to negotiate at the color level.

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If a blend needs two dye systems, one for each fiber, which of them does the claim describe? Both? The seemingly nicer one?

And if you recycle dyed cloth into new fiber, whose job is it to know what the color was made of? The recycler, the brand, or the dyehouse that closed in 2019?

Who keeps track of all the chemistry that bonded with the fibers at a molecular level and now gets added to the new recycled fiber/fabric?

I don't have tidy answers. I would love to see more teams build in awareness and strategy around color in early-stage trend conversations. There are a number of commercial tools that make joining the creative with the scientific easier, but there are still gaps in back-end cost clarity.

The first step is always the hardest, ideally better before a regulator makes it for you. Bring treats. It goes better.



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