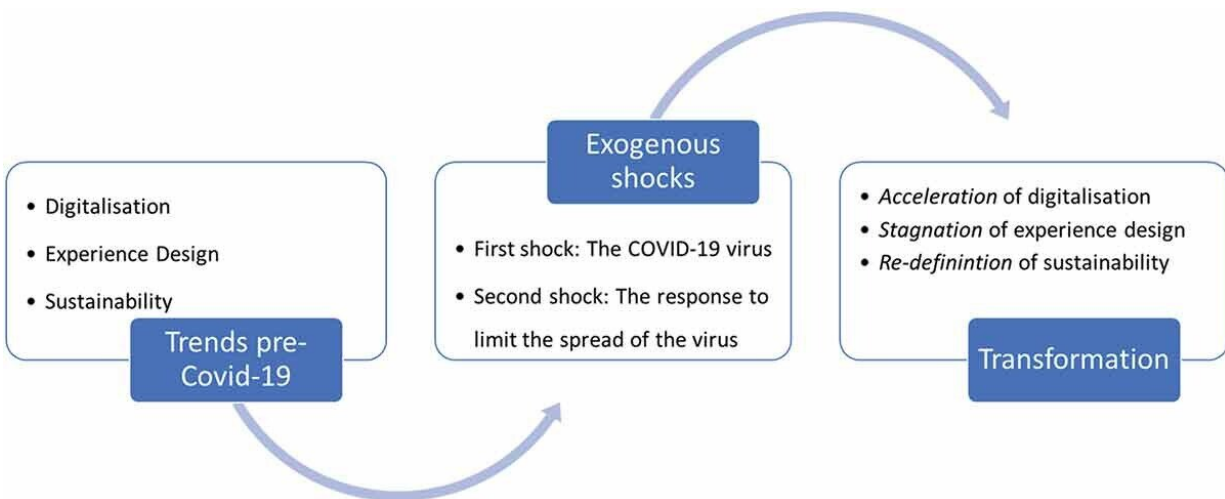


# How the pandemic has changed the Swedish fashion industry

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An illustration of the transformation of the market and the trends ongoing in retail. Credit: *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* (2022). DOI: 10.1080/09593969.2022.2158119

The COVID-19 pandemic has had clear consequences for the Swedish fashion industry. Digitalization has accelerated, while efforts to attract customers to physical stores have stagnated. A development that will continue, according to researcher Gabriella Wulff.

New research at the interdisciplinary Gothenburg Research Institute at the University of Gothenburg shows that the outbreak of the COVID-19 has affected the way we do our shopping for clothes.

The study, based on fieldwork in the form of interviews and observations, reveals that the [fashion industry](#) has changed in various ways since the [pandemic](#) broke out in Sweden in early 2020.

"The pandemic has radically shaken up the industry and previous ways of working are no longer viable. It not only had an impact on the market, but also backwards in the production chain, as it became difficult to plan what to produce and when," says consumer researcher Gabriella Wulff.

## 'Sales figures plummeted'

The study shows that the change in the [clothing industry](#) took place in two stages during the pandemic. First, there was the shock that hit society at the beginning of the pandemic, when people became more cautious about how they moved in public places.

The second stage came when society responded to the pandemic with various measures to reduce the spread of infection. The Public Health Agency, together with the government, issued recommendations and restrictions on working from home, avoiding crowds, and singled out shopping centers as specific areas to avoid. It was then that the fashion industry was hit hardest.

"This was the period when the big setback came and [sales figures](#) plummeted," says Gabriella Wulff.

## Digitalization has accelerated

Even before the pandemic, the digitalization was evident in the fashion industry. However, with the spread of the disease and government restrictions making it harder to move freely, this trend accelerated.

On the one hand, e-commerce of clothes and shoes increased, and on the other hand, the fashion industry is now focusing more on reaching customers online in different ways.

The focus has also shifted from creating good-looking websites, to a more functional focus, to enable products to be brought out that way rather than through the physical store.

"One phenomenon that grew during this period was Live Video Shopping, where companies make broadcasts online, on social media and on their websites. This allowed companies to continue to work on building relationships with customers, at a time when it was otherwise difficult to find contact points," says Gabriella Wulff.

The pandemic also stagnated fashion companies' efforts to create unique in-store experiences. The physical store was previously seen as central to creating a connection with the customer, with companies trying to attract customers to the store in a variety of ways, including events, pop-up shops, customer nights and sales, but the pandemic meant that companies were forced to find other ways to reach out to customers.

"Those who continued to try to attract people to the store were met with a lot of skepticism on [social media](#), where those companies were questioned in the comment fields about their willingness to contribute to the spread of the disease in society," says Gabriella Wulff.

## **Social sustainability**

The pandemic also redefined the concept of sustainability in the clothing industry. Social sustainability in the clothing industry used to be mainly about production and the working conditions of those working in the [supply chain](#), but since the pandemic, the concept has expanded to include customers and staff.

"Suddenly, there was a new focus on safety in stores, both for employees, but perhaps most importantly for the [customer](#). The consequences of the changes that took place during the pandemic will be felt for a long time to come," says Gabriella Wulff.

She sees signs that e-commerce will remain strong, even if some sales have found their way back to the [physical store](#).

"It also became clear to many retailers how vulnerable commerce is and what demands our current society places on flexibility and the ability to adapt. These are lessons that can also help in addressing other challenges in the future."

**More information:** Gabriella Wulff, Changes in market organisation due to exogenous shocks—the case of the transformation of the Swedish fashion industry caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/09593969.2022.2158119](#)

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