

**Headline:** How the eyewear industry is making it easier to own a wardrobe of glasses

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"I love your shoes!" says the sales associate at Bailey Nelson as I step into the sunlit open-plan store on Toronto's Queen Street West. Shelves filled with eyeglasses line the walls, Instagram-worthy displays punctuated with succulents sit in the centre, and at the back a colourful graphic mural cries out for a selfie.

It's far from the dark, dated and advertisement-filled optometrist's offices I have visited for my eyewear since I was nine – the kind operated by men in their 50s who couldn't care less about customers' footwear choices – and that's deliberate.

"Around 2010, we were looking at what was happening in fashion – like at Zara, H&M and Uniqlo – which were challenging the department-store model," says Nick Perry, co-founder of the Australian eyewear brand that began as a market stall on Bondi Beach in Sydney. "We thought, 'Why can't we take that incredible retail experience and apply it to what has been seen as a grudge purchase?'" he says. The company adopted a "vertical business model," designing their frames in-house, manufacturing them in Asia and selling them on their website and in their stores.

Bailey Nelson is just one of the many emerging brands recognizing that our interest in eyewear is not only about seeing clearly but also about looking good. Whether you wear glasses out of necessity, for fashionability or both, it's possible to own as many pairs of spectacles as you do socks. This shift in consumption is challenging the industry's major players like Italy-based Luxottica, which owns brands like Ray-Ban and Oakley as well as a slew of retail stores including Sunglass Hut and Pearle Vision. With more affordable pricing and nimble design timelines, the Bailey Nelsons of the world are making it much easier to accumulate a wardrobe of glasses.

After previously licensing the brand in Canada, Bailey Nelson opened five stores itself in 2017 – one in Calgary and three in Vancouver, in addition to the Toronto Queen Street location. Its Canadian competitors include Warby Parker, See Eyewear, Ollie Quinn, Illesteva and Mujosh. Positioning stores like these in lively shopping neighbourhoods and malls encourages consumers to see buying glasses in a similar light to buying shoes. "Traditionally, you would come in every two years and be stung for \$500," says Perry. Much of the brand's inventory is

\$175 with basic lenses, although stronger prescriptions cost more. "We price very reasonably because this should be seen as a fashion purchase, like sunglasses."

As it expands, Bailey Nelson is stocking chic chains for eyeglasses and hopes to capitalize on the popularity of performance wear by offering customers a sport line called BN Active, launching in April. Each pair of sport glasses features rubber nose pads and arm tips to prevent slipping, and can be fitted with optical lenses or with Zeiss-branded polarized sunglass lenses, which reduce glare.

Other Canadian companies are focusing more on an aesthetically pleasing retail experience,

too, such as Montreal-based BonLook. The eyewear brand began online in 2011 selling frames designed in Montreal and made in Asia, and started opening brick-and-mortar locations two years ago, including a location at the Toronto Eaton Centre last fall. Stores feature mirrored walls, wooden accents and no cash counters. "We built an in-house app and all our employees have iPads so the entire interaction – taking your prescription and paying – happens through the app," says CEO and co-founder Sophie Boulanger. The company is on track to reach 50 locations by 2020.

In recent years, the prominence of spectacles on the catwalks of designers like Anna Sui and Gucci have helped take eyewear from geeky to glam. Now, customers can afford to try out such fashion-forward looks because they are not spending \$500 on one pair of glasses. "Eyewear is truly becoming a fashion accessory because, without giving up on quality, we have managed to make the product more affordable, so customers can take more risks and have a choice," says Boulanger. She reports that 10 per cent of her clients own more than four or five pairs, which start at \$125 including basic prescription lenses.

Following a quick-to-market schedule, BonLook's merchandise arrives each month, rather than seasonally, to regularly entice customers. "We do about 10 collections a year to create novelty and the idea of an eyewear wardrobe," says Boulanger, who collaborates with notable Canadians on collections, including a line with ice dancer Tessa Virtue this past January.

Other smaller eyewear brands that design and produce their own frames are claiming their share of fashion customers by emphasizing sustainability. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his family were recently spotted wearing sunglasses from Prince Edward Island-based Fellow Earthlings, one of many boutique Canadian brands in the marketplace.

Husband-and-wife team Christopher and Sydney Seggie made frames in their basement until 2014 before expanding to a warehouse space overlooking the ocean in Guernsey Cove. Their RE: FE collection, which launches in April, uses leftover pieces of colourful acetate chopped up and pressed into new patterns. "A large factory would discard the waste. The fact that we can be highly sustainable and reuse scrap material is even better," says Sydney Seggie.

Last year, Fellow Earthlings was chosen to participate in Uncrate Canada, Holt Renfrew's annual project that focuses on socially responsible fashion. The brand has also garnered the attention of Anna Sui, for whom they have created eyewear samples for 10 seasons. "We managed to make the frames for her shows because we were a completely in-house company and able to work faster," Sydney Seggie says. This quick-to-market process evolved into private-label production for the likes of New York designer Kerin Rose Gold, whose sunglasses are worn by Lady Gaga and Katy Perry.

Social media has made it easier to show who is making the products, which is important to today's increasingly conscious consumer and allows niche brands wider reach. "I try to post the people and the place, because there are consumers who feel better knowing they are contributing to something like this rather than a big multinational company," Seggie says.

"I think in the next five to seven years we will see a complete shift in the industry and the market will open up a lot," Boulanger says. "In the end, the Canadian customer will benefit, because they have been underserved for many years."