

## FASHION'S ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT AND THE ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AND MARKETING: AN OVERVIEW

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**Abstract:** *Fashion is one of the largest global industries, with a significant cultural impact, allowing individuals to convey their emotions and personality traits. However, due to consumerism, inefficient production methods, and unsustainable materials, fashion has become one of the most polluting sectors, harming both the environment and society. The rapid increase in these negative effects has created an urgent need for more sustainable practices in the production and post-production of garments. Companies must now adopt sustainable business models that transform how clothes are designed, produced, sold and consumed. Sustainability is no longer optional; it is a necessity. Consumers, alongside companies, must also shift their behaviors toward responsible consumption. Currently, consumer education is the biggest challenge, as they must be encouraged to make wiser, eco-friendly choices. This can be achieved through targeted marketing strategies that emphasize green practices, positioning sustainability as the new norm in fashion. Ultimately, this paper aims to explore how transforming the fashion industry's current model can allow individuals to enjoy fashion's beauty without compromising the natural environment.*

**Key words:** *fashion industry; sustainable fashion; green marketing.*

### JEL: M31 Marketing

#### 1. Introduction

Fashion can be seen as an art, which gives individuals the opportunity to express their feelings and personality traits (Barnard, 2020). This allows each person, regardless of the category they belong to, to reflect their deepest feelings and present themselves in one way or another to society.

Also, fashion is essential to contemporary cultural identity and can ensure satisfaction of our needs: pleasure, new experiences, identity and status through clothes (Fletcher, 2008). The prevailing experience of buying and consuming fashion items is focused on a cycle of self-justification, thus becoming both dominant and credible (Fletcher, 2008). Clothes can be perceived as historical documents because once imbued with personal histories and identities, they contain a depth of personal narrative that can easily be lost in history (Hall, 2017). This industry consists of two parts: the status and identity that connect fashion individuals through a cultural and emotional approach, and the production process and natural resources that present the practical part of the system (Pucci et al., 2022).

Today, fashion is at the forefront of economies around the world on a micro and macro scale, from a multitude of craft producers in the developing world to industrial fashion manufacturers and retailers (Gwilt & Rissanen, 2011). As of 2024, the global fashion industry is valued at 2.4 trillion USD and it contributes to the global economy with around 2 trillion USD (Worldmetrics.org, 2024). Even though the fashion industry has an important role in global economic development, unfortunately,

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due to consumerism, production methods and materials used, it has become one of the most polluting in the world. At the moment, the fashion industry is, after fossil fuels and agriculture, the third most polluting sector in the world (Climate Trade, 2023), releasing significant amounts of toxic chemicals, which harm the natural environment and gradually decrease the quality of life for each of us. Given these challenges, there is an immediate need for a different approach, which means the whole industry should encapsulate sustainable practices into daily activity. This paper aims to explore the environmental impact of the fashion industry and how sustainable practices, and marketing strategies should be integrated in order to address these issues.

## **2. The Hidden Costs of Fashion**

The fashion industry is responsible for a large amount of carbon emissions, water and soil pollution. Globally, it is estimated that textile production accounts for 20% of clean water pollution, as a result of the dyeing and finishing processes, and as a result of washing synthetic clothes are obtained 35% of the primary microplastics released into the environment (European Parliament, 2023). In addition, the fashion industry is estimated to be responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions (more than maritime transport and international flights combined). Statista (2023a) estimates that in 2021, the fashion industry emitted approximately 897 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and this amount is expected to increase to nearly 1.3 billion metric tons by 2030, if no action is taken. Also, the production process in the fashion industry uses large amounts of water, in 2015 a total of 79 billion cubic meters were used, GFA and BCG estimate that it will reach 118 billion cubic meters by 2030, representing an increase by +50% (Global Fashion Agenda & The Boston Consulting Group, 2017). Most of the global water consumption used in clothing production is associated with cotton cultivation and wet treatment processes such as bleaching, dyeing, printing, finishing (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

Another element that this industry has a negative influence on is the labor force, because globally a large proportion of workers experience harsh working conditions and low wages. An example that outlines the injustice faced by workers in the fashion industry is the disaster in India, namely the Rana Plaza collapse that occurred in Bangladesh in 2012, where around 1135 people were killed and 2500 injured, most of them being women (Chowdhury, 2017). This disaster comes as a result of the fact that, although the building's structural failure had been noticed before the collapse, the building's owner forced the workers to continue the production for 31 Western multinational corporations. After this incident, overall worker safety improved and nearly 250 brands and retailers worldwide joined either the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh or the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Barrett et al., 2018). Out of a total of 69 million people representing the labor force in India, approximately 4 million workers are in the garment sector (International Labor Organization, 2023), the size of this segment highlighting the fact that many workers are subjected to unsafe working conditions on a daily basis and benefit from low wages. In 2018, it was estimated that 60.5% of garment workers in India are women, a concrete example of the fact that within one of the world's largest industrial segments, gender inequality is rife.

Over time, clothing production has moved to low-wage countries, mainly in Asia (European Parliament, 2020), because there is a high demand for low-priced fast-fashion garments and companies need to maintain reduced production costs. Victims of these precarious working conditions

work long hours and earn wages that barely allow them to live. Decent work has become a priority for the United Nations, the International Labor Organization and other international organisations, with the EU also supporting decent work through international trade agreements.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development formulated by the United Nations, to which several countries from around the world have joined in September 2015 (United Nations, 2023), includes 17 sustainable development goals. Among them, objectives 1, 5, 8, 10 and 17 refer to the eradication of poverty, gender equality and a positive working environment, principles on which all companies must be based when formulating their labor policies.

Since the final cost of fashion items depends a lot on labor costs, companies will keep these costs low in order to obtain final products marketed at low prices, accessible to all categories of consumers. Increased consumer demand, low costs and rapid changes within the fashion industry have resulted in the production of ever-increasing quantities of clothing. From 2000 to 2015, the production of clothes doubled, reaching 100 billion clothes annually, and the average number of wears decreased by 36% (Ellen MacArthur, 2017). This is due to a growing middle class and per capita sales in mature economies.

### **3. Sustainable Development of the Fashion Industry**

#### **3.1. A Brief Introduction**

Because the fashion industry is in a continuous process of change at high speed, thus causing devastating damage to the environment, much of these negative effects can be reduced with the help of sustainable fashion and the circular economy. The concept of sustainable development was first introduced in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) entitled "Our Common Future" and was defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The definitions around which the concept of sustainability revolves include 3 dimensions: environmental quality, social justice and economic prosperity (Elkington, 1997) or environment, people and economy, also called the "triple bottom line". The interest in sustainability has grown over the past decades because of the awareness of environmental issues. Currently, the sustainable fashion industry is worth over USD 6.5 billion, estimated to reach USD 10.1 billion by 2025 and USD 15 billion by 2030, with an annual growth rate of 8.3%, potentially reaching 9.7% per year by 2030 (TheRoundUp, 2023). The growth of this segment in recent years is largely driven by shoppers from younger generations, for example Millennials and Generation Z, who account for 68% of sustainable sales in the United States in 2022 (Statista, 2023b).

#### **3.2. Sustainable Fashion: A Path Forward**

Sustainable fashion is part of the slow fashion movement, developed in the last decades and used together with the terms eco-, green-, ecological-fashion (Henninger et al., 2016). Slow fashion, however, focuses entirely on the connection between human needs, responsibility and awareness. Slow fashion represents a different world view, promoting the variety of production and celebrating the cultural significance of fashion. The term slow fashion was introduced in 2007 by Fletcher to denote the transition in the production and consumption of fashion pieces, from quantity to quality and from volume to value (Fletcher, 2007). Slow fashion also includes design, production, consumption and the idea of living better, and designers, buyers, retailers and consumers are

increasingly aware of the impact of products on communities, workers and the natural environment (Fletcher, 2007). The main concern of the slow fashion segment is extending the life of clothes, which also allows reducing the consumption of natural resources and energy waste. Slow fashion encourages people to buy less frequently, higher quality clothes that last.

To create durable clothing, we must address the root issue of the fashion industry: it's predominantly linear business model. And to contribute to the United Nations (2023) Sustainable Development Goals and improve the quality of the natural environment, we must adopt a circular business model. Ellen MacArthur (2017) states that transforming the fashion industry requires systemic changes, outlining four key steps to improve economic, environmental and societal outcomes: (1) phasing out harmful substances and microfibers that pollute oceans; (2) redesigning, selling, and using clothing to extend product lifespans; (3) enhancing recycling through improvements in design, collection and reprocessing; (4) maximizing resource efficiency and shifting to renewable energy.

The last 30 years have seen a considerable increase in awareness of environmental issues. A recent study conducted in the United States of America shows that 66% of those interviewed are concerned about global warming (Leiserowitz et al., 2023). Another study conducted between November 2023 and January 2022 shows that, globally, 90% of Gen Z and Millennials are making efforts to reduce their impact on the environment (Deloitte, 2022). Also, according to the results obtained from a national survey conducted in the USA, it is observed that 69% of millennials expressed their interest in the environment, while a large part of them show a lack of personal involvement in activities related to responsible behavior (Naderi & Van Steenburg, 2018). Due to the awareness of the effects that the fashion industry has on the environment, several companies have adopted sustainable initiatives, changing their production model to reduce their ecological footprint. Patagonia (2024) is known as a sustainable pioneer, this being shown by the fact that from 1985, the company has donated over 89 million USD to environmental groups, as part of the initiative 1% for the Planet.

Besides the changes that need to be made in the production process, the biggest challenge to achieving a sustainable fashion industry is the consumer. Fashion consumers feel the need to buy clothes constantly, and low prices, trendy models and an engaging shopping experience increase the frequency of purchase (Gwilt & Rissanen, 2011). Consumers must be educated and guided towards responsible and sustainable consumption. Through the right and carefully formulated marketing strategies, companies can get consumers to buy timeless and environmentally friendly pieces.

#### **4. Green Marketing: Transforming Fashion**

As mentioned before, developing sustainable products is crucial to reducing the environmental impact of the fashion industry. In this process, marketing plays a very important role, as it is essential in the development of new products, starting from the concept and design stage. Furthermore, if the product remains only at the development stage, without being spread to the market and bought, the efforts to improve the quality of the environment would be in vain. Rex and Baumann (2007) say that in this process marketing has an essential role, being called the interface between consumption and production, and the acceptance of products by the general public can be achieved through communication and educating consumers about the characteristics of sustainable products and the benefits they bring.

Since the 1970s, many scientists have promoted the use of consumer persuasion and understanding as marketing tools, to increase the adoption of sustainable consumption (Olson, 2022). However, their efforts have not had the expected effect, because per capita resource use and greenhouse gas emissions have seen only a small decline in most developed countries (Olson, 2022).

#### 4.1. The Evolution of Green Marketing

Green promotion refers to marketing products that are environmentally friendly, with the goal of influencing consumers to choose sustainable options (Elmanadily & El-Deeb, 2022). Green marketing gained momentum in the late 1980s, early 1990s, following its introduction by the American Marketing Association (AMA) as early as 1975, during the first workshop on "Green Marketing". A year later, Hennion & Kinnear (1976) published the first book on "Ecological Marketing", marking the beginning of the “First Age” of green marketing, defining it as "concerned with all marketing activities that have served to help cause environmental problems and that may serve to provide a remedy for environmental problems." This phase primarily addressed specific environmental problems, such as air pollution and resource depletion, and promoted “end-of-pipe” improvements-targeting pollution reduction at the end of the production process.

Polansky (1994) explained the concept of green marketing to include "all activities designed to generate and facilitate any exchange intended to satisfy human needs or wants, such that the satisfaction of these needs and wants occurs, with minimal detrimental impact on the natural environment". As environmental issues became more prominent in the late 1980s, the “Second Age” of green marketing, also known as the Environmental stage, emerged. This era shifted the focus from pollution control to “clean technology,” allowing companies to use environmental concerns as a competitive advantage. Peattie (2001) emphasized that during this period, green marketing was increasingly seen as a “win-win” solution for both economic and environmental benefits.

At the same time, sustainability concerns broadened to encompass a wider range of issues, ecosystem destruction, climate change and poverty (Peattie, 2001). Fuller (1999) defined Green Marketing as "the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the development, pricing, promotion, and distribution of products in a manner that satisfies three criteria: (1) customer needs are met, (2) organizational goals are attained, and (3) the process is compatible with ecosystems.” During this period, new markets for green products and services began to emerge across various industries (Peattie, 2001). Although the logic of "Win-Win" strategies was attractive, in practice, companies developing green products found it quite difficult to maintain competitive advantage (Peattie, 2001). The challenge lay in producing environmentally friendly products that were both technically and cost competitive. Several factors contributed to this difficulty, including:

- “The Green Product Controversy” – it remains difficult to determine which products are truly the most ecological. In some cases, product substitution may solve one environmental issue, but create unforeseen harms in the other areas due to factors not considered during the design process;
- “The Corporate Green Wall” – many companies achieved initial success by implementing projects that saved energy or reduced waste disposal costs. However, when these companies attempted to go further and scale sustainable practices, they encountered resistance from entrenched business practices, corporate culture, and existing strategies.

▪ “The Green Consumer Mystery” – relates to the discrepancy between the level of concern expressed towards the environment and the degree of change in consumer buying behaviour. Marketers explained that this is due to consumers' "social over-reporting" of environmental concerns. These challenges gave rise to the Third Age of Green Marketing, known as the "Sustainable Age", which began in the early 2000s. This period saw a shift towards greater normalization of eco-sustainability in business practices. The earlier “backlash described by Crane (2000) as the widespread reluctance that hindered the full adoption of ecological products, began to fade. As a result, eco-friendly practices became more common, representing a key focus for the future.

#### 4.2. Characteristics of Failed vs. Successful Marketing

King (1985), in his article "Has marketing failed or was it never really tried?", argued that marketing failures, particularly in the 1980s, were due to “false marketing” – efforts that did not adhere to core marketing principles and philosophy. Several factors he identified, which also impacted green marketing, include:

- "Thrust marketing": King criticized this sales-based approach, where companies used environmental claims as promotional tools without genuinely considering the environmental impact of their products.
- "Marketing department marketing": this refers to a lack of integration between marketing and other departments. In green marketing, this issue arose when companies limited their environmental initiatives to specific departments, like production or marketing, rather than taking a holistic approach.
- "Accountant's marketing" refers to the focus on short-term profitability, rather than long-term brand building. In green marketing, this was seen in companies reducing packaging or energy use but not investing in more sustainable product development.
- "Formula marketing": King used this term to describe reliance on tried-and-tested methods over innovation. In many cases, companies made only minor adjustments, such as reducing packaging, without fundamentally transforming production processes.

Peattie and Crane (2005) emphasized that many factors hampering general marketing, also impeded the development of green marketing, leading to its slowed progress. They identified several failed manifestations of green marketing, including:

- “Green spinning”- companies used PR campaigns to improve their environmental image without making real ecological improvements to their products.
- “Green selling” – following 1990s studies showing environmental concern among consumers, companies modified promotional campaigns to highlight the “green” aspects of existing product, often without any meaningful contributions to sustainability.
- “Green harvesting” – short-term cost-cutting measures, such as reducing packaging and energy consumption, were adopted by some businesses without any strategic green investments, making long-term sustainability less appealing.
- “Enviropreneur marketing” – many companies producing green products failed to succeed because they didn't conduct research specific to their products or adequately educate consumers on the benefits, resulting in low acceptance.

- “Compliance marketing” – businesses made minor environmental adjustments solely to meet regulatory standards, promoting these efforts without pursuing sustainability initiatives.

In contrast, Peattie and Crane (2005) outlined four characteristics of “real marketing” that also apply to green marketing: a foundation in market research, a long-term perspective, use of all company resources, and focus on innovation. Lee (2008) further noted that growing environmental concerns, regulations, and technological advancements have fostered green business progress. However, challenges like “Greenwashing”, defined as “a superficial display of concern for the environment” (Collins English Dictionary), persist. Grant (2007) also pointed out the issue of “greenophobia”, where consumers perceive green products as costly, inefficient, inconvenient, presenting no other benefits than the one of “virtue” and are intended for “weird” people.

## **5. Sustainability Strategies for Business Success**

As sustainability becomes a fundamental business requirement, companies must recognize that it is no longer optional but essential (Charter et al., 2002). The concept of sustainability refers to meeting the needs of future generations, and marketing strategies must be formulated so that consumer needs are met after maintaining ecology, public interests, and profitability (Kumar et al., 2012). However, achieving this balance is challenging because marketing often drives increased consumption, while sustainability encourages resource conservation.

Kumar et al. (2012) also emphasize the difficulty in aligning sustainable principles with marketing strategies, which traditionally focus on boosting sales and production. They argue for finding a middle ground where companies can thrive financially without causing harm to society or the environment. This involves a shift toward sustainable marketing, including better product design, promotion, and distribution based on environmental criteria.

Prothero et al. (2010) note that sustainability has become trendy, often termed “the new black,” as more consumers become aware of the environment impacts of their purchases. Wymer and Polonsky (2015) highlighted that it does not matter how we achieve a sustainable environment, but rather the fact that we achieve it, the end results being what matter. Also, according to these authors, marketing alone does not have the ability to solve all environmental problems, consumers and governments playing an important role in this endeavour. Government interventions, manifested through social marketing or legislation, are tools that facilitate the achievement of a sustainable environment.

Charter et al. (2002) differentiate between “greener” marketing, which focuses on minimizing environmental damage, and “sustainable” marketing, with a focus on the “triple bottom line”, which incorporated broader goals like creating products that meet both consumer and stakeholder needs without harming natural systems. Sustainable marketing goes beyond environmental issues, addressing human wellbeing through long-term solutions.

For companies to stand out, they must appear in the consumer's mind as more sustainable, and a different positioning from competitors can be based on functional attributes and emotional benefits (Hartmann et al., 2005). A positioning strategy based on the functional attributes of the products includes the environmental advantages of the products compared to those of the competition (Peattie, 1995). As a strategic alternative, companies can turn to emotional positioning, based on three emotional benefits offered by the brand and discussed by Hartmann et al., (2005) in their work, as following: a feeling of well-being (“warm glow”) that is associated with altruistic actions, the

possibility of self-expression (in society) through the consumption of sustainable brands and the benefits obtained from the sensations and feelings experienced as a result of contact with nature. Hartmann et al. (2005) identified the fact that in green marketing, both functional and emotional positioning have a positive effect on attitudes towards the brand, but most benefits are obtained through strategies that combine these two elements.

## **6. Conclusions**

From those previously listed regarding the sustainable marketing mix, we conclude that companies need to utilize a comprehensive set of tools to create sustainable products, launch them successfully, create sustainable communication campaigns and care about the environmental and social well-being throughout the entire products' lifecycle. The most important component, in addition to the changes that must be made at each stage, from creation to the product's market exit, remains the consumer, who must be educated and incentivized to understand the gravity of existing issues and the personal role one can play in improving the quality of the natural environment. In addition to the contribution of sustainable marketing to the overall well-being of society and to the natural environment, companies must also consider their role within the financial dimension of the firm and the obtained competitive advantage.

To get consumers to stop buying clothes on impulse, which eventually end up in the landfill after just a few wears, marketers must convince them of the consequences of their actions. And because in the era of consumerism people began to satisfy their non-material needs by consuming material things, losing their identity through the pile of clothes bought unconsciously, they must be faced with the process of rediscovering themselves through actions that involve personalization, the importance of sustainable behavior and the role of sustainable actions on one's own life and personal perception.

Since low price is currently one of the main attributes perceived by consumers and which dictates unhealthy consumption behaviour, companies need to launch marketing campaigns that demonstrate how each additional unit spent can contribute to the socio-ecological well-being of the environment and to the fulfilment of each individual. The leap that every participant in the industry must make, from designers to users, should be based on transitioning from quantity to quality, and consumers must understand that the value of clothing comes from its usage rather than its purchase, and the longer and more carefully an item is worn, the greater its value, regardless of its cost. Designers also need to become much more aware of their role in transforming consumption habits and therefore need to shift their focus from the pieces they create to those who will wear them. To meet consumers' needs, they need to create clothing that fits their customers, providing them with an extraordinary experience that will encourage them to continue the same kind of purchase behaviour, a sustainable one. Starting with a sustainable product that has been designed to be produced and used in a conscious and healthy way, sustainable companies must communicate their entire sustainable approach, addressing all elements of the marketing mix and ensuring that these elements have been approached from a beneficial socio-ecological perspective.

We all need to embrace sustainable consumption and become more responsible with resources, whether we're talking about the raw materials used to build a textile piece, or the clothes we own, which we should learn to manage properly throughout the entire product lifecycle.

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