

Sustainability in Today's Fashion Manufacturers

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Abstract

Businesses continue to recognize the need for sustainability in their operations. Over the years, the fashion industry has been accused of not taking responsibility to ensure sustainability. Fashion manufacturers have been associated with a wide range of sustainability issues that include the rapid consumption of depleting natural resources, pollution, and ineffective waste management. In a bid to address these issues, the fashion industry is continuing to involve various efforts to ensure sustainability. Notably, while sustainability leads to many benefits such as conserving the environment, producing high quality products, attracting customers, and encouraging innovations, it also involves various cons. The cons include increasing the price of products due to an increase in the cost of production, disruption of activities in the industry, and heightening the rate of laying off employees. Clearly, the pros of sustainability outweigh the cons, and fashion manufacturers have been adopting various initiatives and alternatives to reap the benefits of sustainability. The initiatives and alternatives include recycling old clothes, educating customers to have effective behaviors of using products, shifting to sustainable materials, designing products for longevity, and reducing dependence on nonrenewable energy sources

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Introduction

There exists a wide range of environmental issues. There is a concern that, if negative ecological impacts like climate change persist, the future of humanity will be threatened. Notably, environmental issues have a detrimental effect on humans and their surroundings. They are associated with negative aspects like diseases, adverse weather conditions, a reduction in food production, and an overall loss of biodiversity. In a bid to address such negative elements and to secure the future of humanity, there have been continued efforts to improve the environment. Considering that business sectors, such as those involved in producing goods, are the most involved in contributing to environmental issues, there has been an emphasis on ensuring that they are keen on sustainability (Joy & Peña, 2017). Organizations are expected to ensure that their activities do not have negative environmental impacts and that they work towards suppressing climate change.

The fashion industry is arguably among the major industries in the world. It is thereby expected to align its activities with the expectations of conserving and improving the environment. This paper intends to analyze sustainability in today's fashion manufacturers. In particular, the focus is on the sustainability issues surrounding the fashion industry, the advantages, and disadvantages of working towards sustainability, as well as the solutions to sustainability issues. Particular attention will be directed to the new alternatives and initiatives that companies in the fashion industry are taking to ensure sustainability. Over the years, the

industry has not been keen on ensuring sustainability considering the many issues surrounding it like rapid consumption of depleting natural resources and pollution, and ineffective waste management. However, in the recent past, the industry involves a wide range of efforts such as energy use reduction, recycling old clothes, educating customers, shifting to sustainable materials, and designing for longevity to ensure sustainability.

Issues of Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

In the past, the fashion industry, in comparison to other sectors, has been observed to take limited responsibility for its activities that lead to sustainability-related concerns, especially in the context of climate change. One of the most prominent sustainability concerns pertains to the rapid consumption of depleting natural resources. Notably, the materials that the industry utilizes to make its products depend heavily on natural resources. For instance, the cotton used in making various products in the fashion industry requires massive consumption of water. It is estimated that producing one kilogram of cotton requires more than 20,000 liters of water (Wu & Li, 2019). The kilogram of the material is only equivalent to a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Considering the many cotton products produced per year, it is notable that the industry utilizes a considerable amount of water. There is a concern that there is a limited amount of clean water in the world. With the massive consumption of water by the fashion industry, the issue of water scarcity will persist.

The fashion industry also depends on nonrenewable natural resources such as coal and natural gas to produce energy for powering its manufacturing facilities. The industry requires a considerable amount of energy to produce its products (Kozlowski, Bardecki, & Searcy, 2012). Consequently, it depletes the materials that it utilizes to generate power like coal and natural gas

at an alarming rate. The fact that the materials are not replenished upon usage highlights a concern that the industry leads to a negative impact on the environment and that it is not keen on sustainability.

The fashion industry is also involved in many forms of pollution. Notably, it generates a considerable percentage of greenhouse gases in its production, manufacturing, and transportation processes. Greenhouse gases are the primary causes of climate change as they lead to global warming. Data indicates that the amount of greenhouse gases that the industry produces is more than what maritime, shipping, and international aviation collectively emit. Its life cycle is estimated to have produced 3.3 tons of carbon dioxide, which is equivalent to that of 28 EU countries (Wu & Li, 2019). It is projected that, without effective intervention, the industry will account for a quarter of carbon dioxide emissions in the world. Response is thereby crucial.

The activities in the industry also lead to pollution of water. Notably, the production of the materials used to make its products use many chemicals such as fertilizer and pesticides that pollute water. For instance, runoff from farms that produce cotton contains a relatively high amount of the harmful chemicals that affect marine life. The dyes used in the garment factories also pollute water when effluents get into rivers and oceans. The countries where most companies in the fashion industry produce their garments have poor policies regarding waste management (Sakamoto, Ahmed, Begum, & Huq, 2019). Consequently, they are not keen on treating their effluent before releasing it to water bodies. The effluent is usually toxic as it contains substances, like mercury, arsenic, and lead. Upon reaching water bodies, the substance harm aquatic life and the health of people who live near the water bodies. The harmful effects of polluted water also spread across the world when the substances reach the sea.

The laundry process also contributes to water pollution from the industry. Notably, the pollution is through the shedding of polyester fibers. A single domestic laundry machine is responsible for releasing about 700,000 fibers, as it is unable to filter the material. When the fibers accumulate in water bodies, they adversely affect marine ecosystems. The issue is exacerbated by the fact that the fashion industry has continued increasing the use of polyester fibers, from 8.3 million tons in 2000 to 21.3 million tons in 2016 (Wu & Li, 2019). Consequently, the issue of water pollution has been worsening.

The fashion industry is also involved in soil pollution. Prominently, the chemicals used in producing raw materials for the industry, such as cotton, degrade the soil. They reduce the fertility of the soil, thereby decreasing its productivity. The high demand for materials like wool from sheep and fleece from cashmere goats has contributed to overgrazing, which leads to soil degradation. Soil is crucial for food production. There is a likelihood to have food scarcity due to reduced production of the commodity following soil degradation as a result of the activities in the fashion industry.

The fashion industry has also not been keen on managing its waste effectively due to ineffective business models. Its model that influences people to buy new clothes and throw away other garments, not because they are worn out, but due to becoming out of fashion, leads to a considerable disposal problem (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2019). The garments that are thrown away negatively affect the environment. For instance, the fibers in the clothes are not biodegradable and thereby degrade the soil in the land they are disposed of. Such an issue in the fashion industry portrays that there is a need for the industry to be keen on sustainability.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Adopting Sustainability

The fashion industry has to be keen on the impact of sustainability. Notably, sustainability involves both pros and cons that may influence the functioning of the sector. One of the significant sustainability pros pertains to the conservation and protection of the environment (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, & Chan, 2012). As noted in the section above, ignoring sustainability can lead to detrimental impacts on the environment and people in society. Sustainability, which focuses on reducing the adverse effects that the industry has on the environment, can help address the detrimental impacts. The fashion industry ensuring sustainability in its activities will make it appealing to its clients. In particular, it will improve the reputation of the sector from being among the leading cause of climate change.

Another advantage associated with sustainability relates to the production of high quality products. Sustainability necessitates the careful creation of garments, among other goods made in the fashion industry. Consequently, the resultant goods are of high quality. The quality clothes will arguably be attractive to customers, who will be willing to pay a higher price to attain them. Clearly, the fashion industry will benefit not only from attracting customers but also from gaining a higher profit from the products that they will manufacture sustainably. The high revenue will immensely help in advancing the industry.

The fashion industry being keen on sustainability will also help to align its activities with the needs of the people in the society. Notably, people are more aware of the need to conserve the environment. Thereby, they target to be associated with organizations and industries that are considerate of preserving and protecting the environment. Consumers are also likely to avoid the industries that destroy the environment (Yang, Song, & Tong, 2017). When the fashion industry

implements efforts to conserve the environment, people will be pleased and purchase their products. As a result, the industry will earn more revenue.

Sustainability will also help the industry to be more innovative, thereby propelling it towards advancement. It is worth noting that sustainability is not an easy process. It requires careful decisions and approaches to ensure the realization of objectives and goals of protecting the environment and at the same time, make profits. Companies in the fashion industry will strive to come up with the most effective strategy to achieve sustainability and have a competitive edge over rivals. This process will prompt them to be innovative. Besides helping individual companies to make higher profits, the entire industry will also benefit from utilizing the ideas to conserve and protect the environment.

The fashion industry should also observe the cons associated with sustainability. One of the cons of sustainability pertains to an increase in the prices of products (Chan & Wong, 2012). Notably, sustainability includes an increase in the cost of producing and manufacturing products. The alternatives to the unsustainable raw materials and processes are usually more expensive. Also, sustainability requires the implementation of processes, which means that the industry will have to spend a lot of money to achieve its sustainable goals. The additional costs are usually transferred to consumers by increasing the cost of products. Selling garments at a higher price will likely deter customers from purchasing them. Consequently, this will slow down the growth of the fashion industry.

Sustainability will also disrupt the activities of the fashion industry. Notably, implementation of the various strategies to suppress the adverse effects its operations have on the environment, it will have to reconsider its methods of producing and acquiring its raw material,

production processes, and disposal of its waste. Adopting such practices and processes will disrupt how the industry functions. As a result, it will spend more, probably reduce its rate of producing its goods, and make lower profits. Overall, it will affect the industry's growth rate

Moving towards sustainability is also likely to increase the rate of turnover and strain international relations. Considering that the industry will reduce production to concentrate on making its processes sustainable, it may require less labor force. Consequently, it will be forced to lay off most of its workers, an aspect that will have a negative impact on the welfare of society. Retail outlets are also likely to struggle in purchasing products from manufacturing companies at a high cost and selling them at a high price to customers. Some of them will have to close down, thereby increasing the rate of unemployment and discouraging entrepreneurship. Also notable, to be sustainable, companies may have to stop their operations in developing countries, which have ineffective policies to conserve the environment (Scamans, 2016). Such a move is likely to affect the relationship between the developing countries and the home countries of the companies.

Clearly, the pros outweigh the cons of sustainability. The fashion industry will benefit more from becoming sustainable. The disadvantages may appear to slow the growth of the sector significantly, but the effect will only be in the short-term. Once the situation stabilizes, it will benefit in the long-run. Also, any chance to ensure sustainability should be prioritized over other benefits that destroy the environment, as it will ensure the survival of the industry even in the future.

Solutions: New Alternatives and Initiatives Adopted by Companies to Ensure Sustainable

In response to the criticism of being reluctant to ensure sustainability and the realization of the need to reduce climate change, companies in the fashion industry include various strategies to address the issue.

One of the initiatives adopted by the industry relates to recycling its waste. Companies are keen on reducing their waste to improve the environment. Notably, companies are coming up with systems to address the issue of increasing waste in the environment because of their products being thrown away in large amounts. The most prominent system pertains to Garment-to Garment (G2G), which involves collecting disposed garments and converting them to new clothes (Wu & Li, 2019). It is adopted by companies such as HKRITA, H&M, and Novatex. Some companies are also recycling other wastes in society, apart from disposed of garments, to reduce pollution in the environment. For example, REPREEVE converts discarded plastic wastes such as bottles into useful polyester textile fibers. In addition to conserving the environment, useful polyester fiber saves energy by reducing consumption by 45%, decreases water consumption by 20%, and leads to a reduction in greenhouse gas emission by 30% (Wu & Li, 2019). The recycling efforts are contributing immensely to cleaning the environment, thereby ensuring sustainability in the fashion industry.

Companies in the fashion industry also include the initiative of educating customers on improved means of ensuring sustainability. Notably, Customers' behaviors of purchasing products of the fashion industry play a significant role in polluting the environment. For instance, in a bid to wear fashionable clothes, they tend to dispose of their old clothes that are not worn out. Consequently, such behavior leads to an increase in waste in the environment. Organizations have programs that encourage people to stick to quality clothes and that there is no problem in

wearing clothes several times. Changes in the customers' behaviors will likely make the industry realize its sustainability goals and objectives. Some fashionable companies also provide consumers with services such as IFIXIT, where they learn to repair torn garments rather than purchasing others (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2019). The target of such services is to reduce the demand for newer clothes, which will translate to reduced demand for large amounts of natural resources and energy, as well as lowering the level of pollution by the fashion industry.

Organizations are also keen on reducing and using non-renewable sources of energy to reduce overdependence on natural resources. For instance, NIKE, a prominent company in the fashion industry, is planning to power its production processes with 100% renewable energy by 2025 (Lewis & Burnell, 2019). The use of non-renewable sources of energy leads to loss of biodiversity and increases pollution. With many companies moving towards utilizing total renewable energy, the industry will likely become sustainable.

A considerable number of organizations in the fashion industry are also designing their products for longevity. One of the identified issues in the sector pertained to consumers discarding a lot of clothes after going out of fashion. In response, companies are shifting from producing garments that are only fashionable for a few weeks and months to making products that can last for longer. Such a move targets to encourage people to love their clothes and look after them instead of purchasing others. According to the companies, such as WRAP, producing garments that can last for approximately three months can help to reduce carbon emissions, water consumption, and waste by 3% (de Beeck, 2018). Brands like Adidas and Nike also involve strategies of producing footwear with customer inputs to ensure that consumers will hold

on to their products for longer. Such strategies are after discouraging customers from demanding more products within a short time, thereby avoiding practices that can degrade the environment.

Prominent companies in the fashion industry are also adopting circular economic principles to ensure sustainability. As observed earlier, the industry has been utilizing the linear business model, which targets to maximize profits by luring people to purchase their clothes. In the model, organizations are only interested in manufacturing and selling clothes and are disinterested in what happens after their products get old. Companies are abandoning such a model for circular economic strategies. The circular economic strategies involve following up on the entire process of manufacturing selling and receiving clothes after they are used by customers. In particular, major retailers like Marks & Spencer and Zara have points for collecting old clothes (de Beeck, 2018). Such strategies will increase recycling rates and increasing the chances of attaining sustainability.

The fashion industry is also shifting to sustainable materials. In the recent past, sustainable fashion has become common in the market. Sustainable fashion is made out of materials that do not adversely affect the environment. As observed earlier, companies have been overly dependent on cotton, which demands high amounts of water in the production process, consequently reducing the precious natural resource significantly. As an alternative to cotton, companies are shifting towards using materials like lyocell. Lyocell is made from wood pulp and is far more environmentally friendly than cotton. In particular, the material is less-resource dependent, has a longer lifecycle, and is more recyclable. A growing number of organizations in the industry like Patagonia and Banana Republic have widely used lyocell in making their

products (de Beeck, 2018). Such alternatives will play a significant role in making the fashion industry sustainable.

In conclusion, it is notable that the fashion industry is starting to be keen on sustainability. Over the years, it has been accused of being reluctant to include strategies to curb its activities that have a detrimental impact on the environment. The fashion industry had been associated with sustainability issues like the rapid consumption of depleting natural resources, pollution, and ineffective waste management. In response to the criticism and the continued realization of the importance of protecting the environment, companies in the industry have started to be keen on sustainability. However, while sustainability involves many pros like conserving the environment, producing high quality products, attracting customers, and encouraging innovations, it also involves various cons. The cons include increasing the price of products due to an increase in the cost of production, disruption of activities in the industry-leading to a slower growth rate, and heightening employee turnover as well as straining international relations. Notably, the benefits outweigh the cons, and the industry has tended to work towards realizing sustainability. Companies in the industry have adopted new initiatives and alternatives to ensure sustainability. The initiatives and alternatives include recycling old clothes, educating customers to have effective behaviors of using products, shifting to sustainable materials, designing products for longevity, and reducing dependence on nonrenewable energy sources.

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