

IS SUSTAINABILITY IN FASHION INDUSTRY REALLY SUSTAINABLE? A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

In a world marked by a series of climatic and behavioural challenges, the fashion industry contributes significantly through the production and the consumption process to the damage done to the environment.

In order to protect the planet, several international organizations have focused their efforts on implementing initiatives to make the fashion industry a sustainable industry.

Thus, the redefinition of the business model is based on the transformation of the operating process of the companies, through the production mode, but also of the consumer behaviour through the perception on the concept of sustainability.

The involvement of green marketing through its strategies to promote the principles of circularity, is the premise based on which this paper analyses by creating a questionnaire for consumers to identify behaviour and tendency to buy clothing made from processes and materials environmentally friendly. The emergence of vegan textile companies is also a trend in the fashion industry, which through its mode of operation, brings a positive contribution to the planet.

Because any solution can have negative effects, there are conceptions according to which the more sustainable a product is, the less qualitative it is and, in the end, without real benefits on the environment. We may ask “What is the amount of required water for clothing production?” and “What are the required costs to produce environmentally friendly clothing?”

To identify a real correlation between the fashion industry, sustainability and consumer behaviour, the paper aims to study the production process, waste of resources and consumer perception in a circular economy based on consumption to be able to clarify if “Is sustainability in fashion industry really sustainable?”

Keywords: *circular economy, sustainability, fashion industry, green trends, green marketing*

JEL Classification: D10, L67, Q01,

Introduction

Sustainability in fashion industry represents, at this moment, a niche market, in which consumers and companies are in a relationship of interdependence based on the circular economy. The importance of this industry is highlighted by the competitiveness present in the market, being rather a global business worth 1.5 trillion

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US dollars and is estimated to reach about 2 trillion US dollars by 2026 (Global apparel market - statistics & facts, 2022).

The importance of sustainability in fashion industry in a circular economy starts from the observation of an increasingly accelerated degree of environmental degradation, related to the limitation of natural resources and, respectively, the establishment of ethical manufacturing processes. In this sense, in order to minimize the negative effects on the environment caused by the fast fashion industry, the circular economy has started to make a significant mark on the activity of companies with this field of activity.

For the creation or remodelling of businesses for a sustainable purpose for a healthier, more natural and more responsible world, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations in "the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all" in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Do you know all 17 SDGs?, 2015), contribute to the creation of an organizational mechanism based on the marketing strategy in line with the principles of the circular economy.

The importance of sustainability in fashion industry in a circular economy

What means sustainability in fashion? A concept that integrates the components of environment, society, and economy in the system of promoting the circular economy, by integrating the principles of sustainability in one of the largest global industries, marking a transition from fast to slow and incorporating aspects of responsibility, both for companies, as well as for consumers, define the fashion perspective for the future. In modern terms, the companies should adapt their image of fashion to the global market trend given by the luxury companies, and also to take into account the expectation of the consumers who mostly choose fashion items according to their values and their personal style (Gazzola, Pavione, Pezzett, & Grechi, 2020).

Following the results of studies identified in the literature on the implications of staff in direct contact with the fashion industry, respectively fashion designers, can be classified challenges of internal and external nature of the organization to incorporate sustainability in the processes specific to the fashion industry. The internal challenges are the lack of knowledge about sustainable design, the costs involved in the design process and the need to maintain superior quality using recyclable, organic or vegan materials, depending on the context, and external challenges relate to general issues such as insufficient demand. on the market, an influential factor in this respect being the relatively higher price paid for such an article and also the need to implement a vision oriented towards sustainability, both among companies and consumers (Hur & Cassidy, 2019).

In order to delimit the slow fashion industry from the sustainable one, we notice an accentuated shade of the green economy trend, which promotes business models with a high degree of responsibility towards the environment, consumers, and themselves. Starting from the existing results at this moment in the market regarding fast fashion industry, we can consider a series of premises that structure the research topic of the paper:

1. The clothing and textile industry is the second largest polluter in the world behind oil;
2. 99% of thrown away clothing can be reused or recycled;

3. 85% of the plastic pollution in the ocean is due to microfibres from synthetic clothing;

4. Nearly 70 million barrels of oil are used each year to make the world's polyester fibre, which is the most commonly used fibre in clothing. It takes more than 200 years to decompose;

5. There are roughly 40 million garment workers in the world today. They are some of the lowest paid workers in the world and roughly 85% of all garment workers are women.

Given these premises, we can observe a circular relationship between economy-environment-society components, which by the nature of its construction, highlights a sustainable business model, oriented to market needs and expectations, in accordance with current environmental issues and global natural needs.

Promoting the Circular Fibre Initiative (Roberta De Angelis & Giancarlo Ianulardo, 2020), created by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, is a starting point for raising awareness of the effects of harsh textiles on the environment. This sustainable initiative incorporates a new activity system based on the production-consumption relationship, thus promoting the transition from the traditional manufacturing system to renewable energy sources.

Green marketing – an iconic concept to promote sustainable fashion industry

The role of marketing in the fashion industry has become vital in recent years, especially in the middle class, as luxury brands adopt a different strategy, which refers to the fact that luxury companies do not want to attract new customers or any category of customers, he preferred to stay niche. As environmental and societal issues are the current challenges of the 21st century, the aim is to implement more and more practices to reduce the consumption of natural resources, selective recycling, and reuse at a higher capacity, especially in the fashion industry, one of the the largest and most profitable globally at the moment.

In order to understand the mechanism by which marketing promotes green trends, we must consider the implications of a sustainable strategy specific to green marketing, in order to make a positive contribution to society and the environment. Through its frequently used practices, of awareness through the message and the visuals transmitted, the marketing strategy aims not only to bring qualitative but also quantitative results. The basic activities practiced by green marketing among companies inclined towards sustainability or which have already made a name for themselves, becoming green brands, are represented by the production of eco-friendly products, their promotion, providing economic support to non-profit organizations that support objectives for sustainable development and involvement in any sector meant to protect the environment. In order to improve the image of a sustainable brand, it is necessary to promote the degree of social responsibility of the company and its involvement in environmental movements. In the case of clothing companies, there has been a growing trend lately for the production of eco-friendly clothing, including materials such as: organic or biodegradable cotton, clothes with high bamboo content, recycled materials and those that involve consumption reduced water (Sung, H.W. & Kim, E.K., 2010).

The vision of a circular economy in which we use resources in moderation and recycle with responsibility, inspires both businesses and consumers and outlines a new

concept, known as green marketing (Polonsky, 1994). In this way, the effects of green marketing generate results that involve the consumption of eco-friendly products and propose the adoption of a responsible consumption culture. Exploring the effects of promoting sustainability through marketing campaigns with an impact on the environment and the involvement of marketing communication in this regard, therefore, outlines a global persuasion generated by the circular economy. From the research carried out, specialists in this field state that green marketing produces a series of positive effects on consumer behaviour. Perception of green campaigns has a significant influence on consumers' green consciousness and indirect impact on consumers' green behaviour (Lee, Choi, Youn, & Lee, 2012).

Being an iconic concept in promoting the sustainable fashion industry, green marketing supports the circular economy's approach to directing the flow of the fashion industry in the future, resizing the horizon of the vision on the concept of sustainability, and positively influencing consumer behaviour through the ethical and sustainable activity of companies. The Green Marketing Era aims at long-term sustainable perspectives that are increasingly being debated on the global political and economic scene, bringing added value through the principles of circularity adapted to any industry. In the context of the sustainable fashion industry, the role of green marketing highlights not only the processes necessary to implement the classic marketing mix, but reinterprets them, creating a green marketing mix, a definition of activities carried out with respect for working conditions and environment, finding a balance between the company's objectives and environmental challenges (Sagapova, Buchtele, & Dušek, 2022).

The fast fashion industry today's concept it translates in general terms as an opportunity to satisfy several generations at the same time. In this sense, the need for a diversification regarding the marketing strategy oriented towards the target market was identified. Also, to emphasize the effects of fast fashion, we emphasize that 20% of the global pollution of industrial water comes from the treatment and colouring of textiles (the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), & the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), 2014).

Numerous fast fashion facts are present through the marketing strategy aimed at promoting sustainability among fashion consumers, encouraging a type of responsible behaviour towards the environment through economic, social, and ethical implications.

- **Water** – it is known that it takes 2700 litres of water to make just one t-shirt. Thinking about this aspect of wasting one of the most important natural resources from this planet, the importance of reorienting ourselves as consumers towards choosing low-water items, products eco-friendly manufactured and easy-to-recycle materials, or products made from recycled materials to minimize the consumption of resources among companies, is emphasized.

- **Textiles** – an estimated 400 billion square of textiles are produced annually, of which 60 billion square meters are left on the cutting room floor. In this way, another problem related to sustainability is identified: the existing stocks of fashion products. Overproduction of articles in the fashion industry is a result of fast fashion, which does not harm the environment only through manufacturing or recycling processes, but also through industrial quantities of articles resulting from excess

manufacturing. It is also assumed that the problem of overproduction may be even greater, causing the most damage to the environment.

- **Waste** – three out four garments will end up in landfills or be incinerated, which, once again, harms the environment compared to manufacturing processes. As waste has become a global issue and a general topic of sustainability, slow fashion is a solution for the future for both companies and consumers. The concept of slow fashion has emerged as a result of existing challenges and is an attribute promoted by the circular economy through its long-term activities.

- **Consumption** – to put it into perspective, we currently consume more than 400% the amount of clothes we consumed two decades ago (Fashion's Problem With Overproduction, n.d.). Also, Americans buy twice as many items of clothing as they did twenty years ago. Considering these aspects, it is obvious that we are responsible for overproduction, given the supply-demand relationship. In order to promote the concept of environmental responsibility, the circular economy brings to the fore the quality of processes, materials, and reuse prospects, as a global solution to reduce the negative effects on the planet.

In a contemporary approach, the circular economy is a global solution for the proper use of resources, both by companies and consumers (Mostaghel & Chirumalla, 2021), thus highlighting, in the case of the fashion industry, a series of trends based on sustainability, promoting concepts of green marketing strategy for a more responsible, more ethical, and more natural future.

The involvement of the circular economy with the help of marketing strategy in the fashion industry, creates a new opportunity for companies to enter a niche market, activating a social component of responsibilities that ultimately determines both the direction of consumer buying behaviour and perception of the context of sustainability. Sustainability education thus becomes a key component that requires more and more attention at both the microeconomic and macroeconomic levels, with both quantitative and qualitative effects. In the fashion industry, actions such as reusing old-fashioned items in various ways by creating something new, recycling materials properly, are positive aspects that have a favourable impact on the environment over time. Both consumer and corporate initiatives can have a visible impact on the global stage, as long as they are assumed and represent a part of social responsibility. At the same time, reducing the consumption of natural resources by selecting green brands that manufacture in a sustainable way, using organic materials and opting for the digitalization of the business, are choices that are part of consumer behaviour influenced by the perception of the concept of sustainability.

In the slow fashion industry, green marketing is everything. From the strategy of communication, promotion, development, and differentiation to the processes of involvement with the theme of social responsibility, the implications of this type of marketing combine the ecological part, with the concept of green and the notion of sustainability in a process specific to the circular economy. It can be seen that lately, the number of green businesses in the fashion industry has increased considerably simultaneously with the number of buyers opting for eco-friendly items. Thus, it is noted that consumers are increasingly willing to pay a higher price for a green product, classifying it as superior quality. In order to reduce environmental degradation, pollution, and waste, and to prevent these issues, the circular economy supports

sustainable actions in the fashion industry, opting for an environmental context based on ethics, responsibility, and initiative. Therefore, because the fashion industry is changing at a dynamic pace, it needs to be reformed as a design, being attentive both to market trends and to the needs of the environment, having an impact both on consumer behavior and on the processes related to the marketing mix of companies.

Consumer behaviour and green trends in fashion

Starting from the idea of quality to the detriment of quantity, 3 essential factors can be noticed in the implementation of a sustainable model for the fashion industry of the future: reducing the level of pollution on the environment, promoting ethical manufacturing, and ceasing the production of animal-derived materials. In order to contribute to the materialization of these initiatives, the implications such as consumer behavior and social responsibility are key points in the approach of sustainable actions. For the most part, consumer behavior is influenced by the digital side, which, in line with green marketing strategies, builds the basis for a conceptual analysis of the degree of quality present in the sustainability factor.

As much, we wonder how sustainable it is to buy online or is that enough? Based on studies, we can say that we are eco-friendly consumers when we are responsible both in terms of product manufacturing processes, materials involved in processes, and how to buy the finished product. From the point of view of companies, the attention of these details that position one brand in front of another, giving it a considerable competitive advantage based on promoting a sustainable behavior, means a marketing strategy with future prospects. The economic implications, such as rent costs, sales agent salaries, cleanliness, in accordance with the principles of sustainability, those of reducing consumption and improving the environment, are solid reasons for companies to adhere to digitization and inclination of consumer buying behaviour in this sustainable, quick, and friendly direction. Since the fashion industry is increasingly interconnected with the digital world, competitiveness in this sector is growing day by day, with companies moving from the classic concept of commerce to e-commerce.

Digitalisation of the economy implies digitalisation of the companies. Thus, the concept of online shopping is gaining momentum and is becoming more and more appreciated on the global stage. there is also an upward trend regarding many brands which choose to be present in the online environment, some of them not even physically existing.

In line with the digital marketing strategy, the green marketing strategy supports the development of the fashion industry in the direction of sustainable trends. Given the definition according to which green marketing incorporates a broad range of activities, including product modification, changes to the production process, packaging changes, as well as modifying advertising (Polonsky, 1994), we can notice the fast pace of changing trends, increasingly adapted to a sustainable world.

Most of the time, the green or eco friendly products are perceived as quality products and implicitly, having a higher price. By adopting a responsible attitude towards the environment, this decision influences a quality-oriented consumption behaviour, ultimately having global repercussions.

Integration of companies in current trends through the components of understanding the market and adapting to market requirements.

We have, first of all, companies that, through unethical manufacturing processes, overproduction, non-degradable materials and materials-derived materials, harm the environment, and, secondly, ordinary consumers, who through their irresponsible behaviour, do not encourage the behaviour of companies towards a redirection of values.

Sustainability education is a relatively new field, which is gradually being implemented, and aims to materialize perspectives through results related to consumer behaviour seen through green consciousness and green behaviour. People are increasingly interested in learning more about sustainability. Searches for "sustainable fashion" have increased by 46% in the last 5 years - according to Google Trends. In this sense, a new category of consumers has emerged, also called key consumers or environmentalists, who through their actions, support the activity of sustainable companies and refuse to buy from those who are not involved in the green sector.

According to the specialized literature, consumers with environmental awareness can be defined as ecologists being able to understand their involvement in reducing environmental pollution and having a sense of responsibility towards future generations in the use of resources (Bukhari, 2011). It is also noticeable that in recent years, consumer behaviour is increasingly directed towards environmental sustainability, a component that combines the circularity of trends with business innovation. Thus, the level of involvement in the sphere of circularity of the fashion design companies is directly proportional to the market trends and the degree of their awareness and recognition by the category of responsible consumers towards the environment.

Methodology

Design of the research

This paper is scientifically structured on discussion topics that address the concept of sustainability in the fashion industry, being consulted 15 articles in the literature and specialized websites. In order to quantify the conclusions, exploratory research was carried out, combined with the results of a research already carried out on the basis of a questionnaire, of a quantitative nature, meant to interpret a series of data with a defining aspect, specific to the established premises.

Approach of the research

In order to identify the needs and beliefs of consumers regarding sustainable fashion items and to learn more about this topic, the international online fashion company, GLAMI, which is also a fashion search engine founded in 2013, conducted a relevant market study through its results (Sustainability, 2019). In order to obtain relevant results, 10 participating countries were selected for this study: Hungary, Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, and Spain.

Interpretation of research results

The results of the research relate the consumer's expectation translated in buying behaviour as a response to the trends in fashion implemented by companies, by setting a particular attention to sustainability through application of circular economy principles and marketing strategy. By highlighting the results, their interpretation is also marked, in order to outline an analytical perspective on the behaviour of the fashion consumer in the sustainable era.

1). Almost 50% of respondents said that the trend of sustainability affects them to some extent when buying clothes – currently, the sustainability trend is perceived as a fashion in most cases, so the research shows that consumers often buy based on the perception formed in accordance with market trends. Although there is a need for education on sustainability at both company and consumer level, the circular economy brings to the fashion industry the concept of slow fashion or sustainable fashion, which is becoming increasingly associated with the responsibility which we adopt to understand the long-term effects of consumption, but also of manufacturing processes. The process of education for sustainability is thus a circular process with repercussions on the environment.

2). 50% of respondents consider that they have a more sustainable behavior because they buy products of better quality – sustainable products are perceived as superior quality products, which is why half of the respondents consider that they have a responsible behavior towards the environment. But in order to really help fight waste and the negative effects of the planet, we need to understand why we buy an item of clothing that has been made with less water, to the detriment of one that involves a large amount of natural resources. For example, numerous studies show that to make a T-shirt, you need 2700 liters of water, the amount of water that a person consumes in about 3 years. If this information reached more consumers, the quality would be more perceived in terms of protecting nature's resources.

3). 47% of respondents say they have bought a sustainable product in the last year (People who have bought sustainable products in the last year do not know which brands are really sustainable) – most of the time, as reflected in this study, even if consumers tend to adopt a sustainable buying behavior, they do not really know the green brands or those involved in achieving the 17 goals for sustainable development, but only associate the price and quality with sustainability. The low level of awareness about sustainable fashion brands is the biggest obstacle in the buying process. Although extremely profitable, the fashion industry is gradually becoming a fast, a slow one, which is a good thing, considering how to promote them with the help of the green marketing strategy.

4). Consumers are willing to pay more for recycled / biodegradable packaging than for recycled materials – The packaging industry is one that has grown rapidly in recent years, being introduced in terms of bags, the plastic being replaced by biodegradable. Thus, instead of the classic plastic packaging, we now find recyclable and / or biodegradable packaging. This initiative therefore leads to a decision to buy consumers, more inclined from their answers, to pay more for these packages. In order to reduce the amount of materials included in the manufacture of packaging, companies have resorted to sustainable solutions that encourage both the reuse of packaging by introducing reusable and returnable packaging and the purchase of sustainable ones, by increasing the usage of recycled content in packaging.

5). 72% of respondents attach importance to environmentally friendly materials when choosing clothing – according to this survey, other important criteria in selecting the answer are: the country of origin of the product and the organic production process. By the explanations found on the green labels of the clothing items, the buyer is more willing to buy that product made with fewer natural resources. In this context, consumer education on the sustainability of fashion in a circular economy, becomes

aware through the green marketing mix, identified by price, product, promotion, and placement. These components, by reinterpreting them in the growth rate of green trends on the market, are a factor influencing the growth process of the fashion industry in the direction of sustainability and also contribute to consumer perception in choosing environmentally friendly clothing.

6). More than half of respondents believe that the production process for sustainable products should not affect the environment – Although more than half of those surveyed believe that the clothing production process should not affect the environment, the fashion industry is currently 2nd ranked in the world as the most polluting after oil industry. In addition to the fact that a lot of water is consumed for the production of clothing, their coloring also significantly pollutes the environment. Another alarming factor is given by the huge stocks of clothes that remain on the factory floor, thus having to do with the phenomenon of overproduction, which produces a series of wastes. Globally, in order to combat the negative effects of overproduction, sustainable recycling, reusing, and consumption reduction initiatives are encouraged, thus emphasizing the purchase of sustainable items, their reuse for another purpose or their reconditioning, these initiatives being part of the concept of sustainable fashion.

7). 26% of respondents almost always check if the product is made of natural materials, and 23% do so frequently – Currently, the number of people who really check the origin of materials, their type, and properties, is low, most buyers paying attention only to the main label of the product, how to promote and most importantly, the appearance. For fashion enthusiasts, aesthetics is the most important, that's why most sustainable brands encourage sustainable premium concepts that attract the consumer, not only in appearance, but also in quality and circularity. The newest fashion collections, and especially the premium ones, are now created at sustainability standards, which will increasingly value slow fashion and discourage the consumption of fast fashion globally.

8). 89% of respondents are interested in finding out more about the pros and cons of materials – Although it is not fully understood at its full level, the concept of sustainability in fashion takes shape both through packaging, label, clothing design and promotion. In this sense, consumer behavior shows changes adapted to the trends of the circular economy, which, through its efforts to combat the negative effects on the environment, tries to understand the advantages of responsible consumption, brand sustainability, becoming aware of production and consumption processes. In support of this initiative, green brands promote both online and physically, the concept of sustainable fashion, being actively involved in achieving the goals for sustainable development. The large number of respondents in the survey who stated that they want to know more about the pros and cons of the materials used to make the clothes they buy, emphasizes the growing trend of social responsibility, in line with education on sustainability, in an era marked by circularity, digitalization and innovation.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper presents a conceptual analysis supported by quantitative data, of the fashion industry viewed from a sustainable perspective with an emphasis on consumer behavior. The question, “Is sustainability in fashion industry

really sustainable?” represents, in fact, a confirmation of the visibly improved contribution in the field of fashion of the responsibility towards the environment from the perspective of the buying behaviour.

In a contemporary perspective, sustainability and sustainable production and consumption is no longer a luxury or a choice, but a necessity (R. Ciornea, 2020). Future trends in fashion sustainability are thus accentuated by the marketing strategy of brands that, through their actions and activities, support the development of the global circular economy, balancing the positive effects of sustainable fashion with the repercussions of fast fashion on the environment.

In correlation with the green trends highlighted by the circularity era, the fashion industry brings to the consumer's attention, the way clothes are produced, the existence of huge stocks and the reuse practices, relevant aspects to form a more educated society, a more prosperous economy, and a healthier environment.

To understand the workings of the fast fashion industry, the circular economy is presented through green marketing thinking, which is an impact factor that accelerates the transition to sustainability. In this sense, consumer behaviour is a delicate element of analysis, this aspect being supported in this paper by interpreting statistical data from a study that reflects the purchasing trend and the degree of perception of sustainable fashion. Even if it is essential to understand the effects and consequences on the environment from the purchase decision, globally it is necessary for fashion companies to support this approach, producing sustainably through the minimal use of natural resources, without harming the environment and adopting the circularity principles.

Nowadays, the model of a sustainable company in society is seen as a green brand perspective, which through its efforts to protect the environment, does not aim at first making a profit in the shortest possible time and for any purpose. Thus, the degree of responsibility becomes a defining element in core values, both among companies and fashion consumers. We wonder, then, whether an article of clothing deserves a sacrifice on the part of nature, and whether our role in society is not to educate future generations through our choices. In this case, the trend is the main factor that sets the tone in a field such as fashion industry, representing an actual and innovative action, new in a certain form, which through consumer behaviour will be multiplied, becoming a trend.

Green trends in the fashion industry are therefore key to shaping sustainable consumer behaviour, in line with the green marketing mix of companies concerned with a healthy environment, a responsible society and a circular economy with maximum long-term effects. Educating future generations who are consumers and passionate about fashion, is done in present by carefully analysing the consumption trend, understanding current global challenges and micro and macroeconomic accountability for a sustainable in fashion industry.

By conducting a conceptual analysis on consumer behaviour in terms of the level of perception of sustainable fashion, a circular relationship between the environment, the economy and society was highlighted, with effects on quality of life. The current challenges in the fashion industry are the result of an honourable supply at the expense of demand, so manufacturers choose to manufacture large quantities of clothing in a short period of time, with both harmful effects on the environment and on a global consumption mentality.

In order to combat the negative effects of the fashion industry on the environment, the first visible initiatives have started to appear among the brands that choose to turn green, in accordance with the behaviour of consumers attentive to market trends. Therefore, based on our behaviour and the choices we make when choosing an item of clothing, we can decide whether sustainability in the fashion industry is really sustainable.

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