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Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

Can consumers influence sustainability through their choices in the fashion industry

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Abstract

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The fashion industry is rapidly developing global market with significant economic, social and environmental aspects. The growth of fast fashion has accelerated consumer consumption and production cycles, causing pollution, increased waste production, and unethical labor practices. This thesis is investigating the concept of sustainability within the fashion industry and whether consumers can influence sustainable manufacturing and products through their purchasing choices. Referencing on academic literature, industry reports, and research papers, the thesis examines the theoretical themes including circular economy, ethical consumption, greenwashing, and the growing demand for transparency in the industry. The study shows that while consumer choices can contribute to shaping market trends and encouraging companies for change, their influence is limited by barriers, such as price, lack of knowledge, and the attitude-behavior gap. Increasing consumer demand for sustainable products has already made fashion companies to develop more environmentally friendly materials, improve working conditions, and implement actions for recycling. The findings suggest that as fast fashion remains dominant, a moderate change towards sustainability is ongoing, driven by both consumer awareness and regulatory pressure. In the end, consumer have the potential to influence sustainability, but change requires continuous actions, greater transparency, and long-term commitment from consumers and fashion companies.

Keywords: Sustainability, Fast Fashion, Consumer Behavior, Ethical Consumption

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1 Introduction

The fashion industry is a rapidly growing global network that designs, produces, and sells clothing and other accessories. This industry affects people worldwide and employs millions of people. The fashion industry, including the fast-fashion industry, faces multiple issues related to the environment, society, and the economy. The fast-fashion industry, which has developed over the past few decades, has created numerous sustainability issues whose consequences should, in theory, affect the decisions consumers make. Since the beginning of human civilisation, fashion has been part of the culture as an individual expression. The fashion industry has been part of people's lives for centuries, as clothes have continued to play a significant and multifaceted role in identity, and styles and trends are related to culture and time. Fast fashion is an emerging phenomenon in the history of fashion and has changed the way people perceive clothing. This phenomenon's critical impact calls for an analysis of the current state of the industry, its relationship to sustainability and its consequences, and how this situation can affect consumers' decision-making, if at all. The topic is significant because consumers' decisions and actions today can have a substantial impact on the future.

The goal of this thesis is to answer the following questions:

1. What is sustainability in the fashion industry?
2. Can consumers influence the fashion industry's sustainability strategies through their choices?

This thesis aims to answer the research questions and determine whether customers are changing their behaviour. The focus is on how fast fashion companies and consumers are linked and how they affect each other. The objective is to explore possible answers to the research questions based on different sources.

It is necessary to understand what has changed through the centuries and how customers' needs have developed. This paper will examine the history of the fashion industry, the advent of fast fashion, the emergence of sustainable fashion, and organisations' responsibility in response to the consequences of fast fashion. In addition, the paper will explore the mutual relationship between companies' responsibility in consumer decision-making and how customer demand affects companies. Understanding the past, current issues, and how current processes are developing is key to determining whether change is occurring. This research utilises a theoretical framework to analyse various sources, including academic books, journal articles, and reports from different organisations.

This study is limited by the fact that fast fashion is a rising trend among consumers, and the resources are limited. In today's environment it is difficult to predict what the trends in fashion are indicating, is the industry going towards more sustainable because of the decisions of the consumer vary. An alternative methodology could have gained insights by interviewing, for example, employees, researchers or consumers.

The following chapters address the theoretical framework, which is based on the conceptualisations of sustainability in business, consumer behaviour, and corporate and market sector. The literature review will address the history of the fashion industry, the arrival of fast fashion in the 21st century, the rise of sustainable fashion as a response, and consumer behaviour. The analysis will address the key findings in the literature, followed by a discussion and a conclusion.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Concept of sustainability in business

Sustainability is the ability and support for processes to reduce the use of natural and physical resources. The goal is that these resources remain

available in the future. Sustainability is generally divided into three different core areas: economic, environmental, and social. Multiple governments and companies have agreed to achieve specific sustainable goals, such as reducing ecological footprints and protecting natural resources. (Mollenkamp, 2025.)

Sustainability is related to the circular economy, a model for production and consumption designed to eliminate waste by keeping products in use for as long as possible through reuse, repair, and recycling. This way, the product's life cycle is extended. When businesses can utilise materials from products that have reached the end of their lifespan, the value created is greater. (European Parliament, 2023.)

Multiple companies are using the triple bottom line, TBL, to measure their responsibilities. This suggests that companies should not just measure financial profit but also social and environmental impact —people, planet, and profit. The meaning of this is to encourage businesses to balance economic prosperity with ecological and social equity to generate more sustainable processes. This type of framework is essential because it provides a more complete picture of the business impact beyond financial status, helping businesses build a better brand. It allows businesses to integrate sustainability into their strategies by ensuring that, while the company makes a profit, it does not cause long-term damage to the environment and people. Socially responsible businesses are following ESG (environmental, social, and governance) criteria when developing their triple bottom line plans. These are used to determine whether the business promotes social values, such as gender equality and human rights. The ESG criteria, as well as the triple bottom line, ensure that business impact is not only about profits but also about social and environmental aspects. (Knight, 2023.)

In the fashion industry, the circular economy is a system in which clothing and accessories are designed for long-lasting durability, reuse, and recycling. The main idea is that these do not become waste but remain in the loop of usage. This involves clothing rentals, resale platforms, repair services, and the use of recycled materials. The goal is to create value for materials that can be used

multiple times. The triple bottom line is a sustainability framework used to measure the circular economy initiatives. It highlights that while the circular economy may seem environmentally and economically beneficial, the social impact must be considered. (Sunitha and Gnanadhas, 2014.)

2.2 Consumer behaviour and ethical consumption

Consumer behaviour is the study of how individuals or groups decide, purchase, use, and dispose of goods or services to satisfy their wants and needs (Bhat, n.d.). This is influenced by multiple factors. The psychological theory of planned behaviour forecasts consumer behaviour based on intentions and postulates that these are shaped by three key factors: attitude, social pressure, and perceived behavioural control. These factors collectively influence behavioural intentions. The stronger the intention, the more likely the individual is to perform that behaviour. (Lihua, 2022.)

The inconsistency between what consumers say they believe or feel and what they actually do is called the attitude-behaviour gap. This happens when consumers state their intentions, such as buying sustainable products, but their actual choices do not align with those intentions. This is due to various barriers, such as price, convenience, and a lack of choice and knowledge. In sustainability, the phenomenon occurs when consumers express intentions and attitudes towards sustainable products but fail to utilise them consistently. The consumer can say one thing but act the other. (Ethical Trading Initiative, 2016.)

Sustainable consumption implies utilising products and services in a way that meets current needs and wants without compromising the future generation's possibilities. It minimises the usage of natural resources and toxic materials and reduces waste and pollution. Choosing more durable products will extend their life. Also, consumers can use products longer by repairing them when possible and taking better care of them. Prioritising needs over wants and recycling after usage are key practices in sustainable consumption. (Finnish Environment Institute, 2023.)

Consumption of sustainable fashion products is driven by ethical responsibility and environmental awareness, while barriers include limited consumer knowledge, higher prices, and difficulty accessing and identifying sustainable fashion products. Other challenges include the consumer's connection to fast fashion, scepticism towards brand claims, and a lack of stylish, attractive, sustainable fashion products (Riesgo et al., 2023).

2.3 Corporate and market dynamics

A company's marketing and branding shape consumer perception. These create a brand's identity, image, and emotional connection through customer experience and visual elements. These will influence what consumers believe about the products and affect their purchasing decisions. (Chapman, 2023.) Marketing provides key elements that set the business apart from its competitors, influencing what consumers think and feel about products through advertising, branding, and promotions, which ultimately affect the buying decision. Attracting consumers with credibility and emotions can associate positive experiences and influence the buying behaviour. A strong brand builds trust and loyalty, making consumers more familiar with the brand and forming an emotional bond with the business. Businesses can also utilise marketing to create a sense of limited availability or urgency to secure the product, which prompts consumers to make quicker buying decisions. (Westford, 2016.)

Marketing can be used to spread false information to influence consumers' thoughts. Greenwashing is a deceptive practice that involves making false or exaggerated claims about businesses' environmental responsibilities. These include consumer deception, erosion of trust, damage to the reputation, and negative environmental impact. Greenwashing is affecting consumers' thoughts and trust in making responsible choices, adding mistrust and scepticism. This will harm truly sustainable companies. Products that are greenwashed can cause more pollution and consume more materials than consumers know. False information is slowing the actual need for solutions and distorting consumers' buying behaviour. (Rieche, 2024.)

3 Literature review

3.1 Sustainability

Sustainability is one of the most widely discussed topics in the fashion industry right now. Companies are making more sustainable decisions, and consumers are trying to purchase and use more sustainable goods, since this can differentiate them from competitors in a positive way. Different government parties are discussing how to develop sustainability rules and regulations, as well as when the right time is to implement the changes. It is essential to understand the bigger picture and analyse the whole network. (Krantz and Jonker, 2025.)

Sustainability can be divided into three different segments: economic, social and environmental. All three of these aspects need to be achieved for a fully sustainable future. The fundamental idea behind sustainability is to sustain, protect, and enhance natural resources without forgetting their impact on humankind. Sustainability can be defined as ensuring the present standard of living and economic growth without harming nature, animals, or the population. (United Nations, n.d.)

The economic aspect of sustainability supports the financial well-being of the population. It ensures economic development, population growth, and well-being, but imposes limitations on how it is done. Economic sustainability must take into account population growth and consumption. The ideal goal of financial sustainability is to support long-term growth without overusing resources, harming nature, or impacting the well-being of the present and future population. (IMD, n.d.)

The social dimension of sustainability is the capacity to maintain the well-being of the population, providing processes and systems to support it, and guaranteeing that the population can now and in the future create and maintain a high quality of life. It highlights equality, human rights, justice, and fairness

across all aspects of community services, including education and health care. (ADEC ESG, n.d.)

Establishing that natural resources can be used to provide a proper standard of living, present and future, is the core of the environmental segment. The environment should provide the resources and support that humankind needs. This segment focuses on multiple aspects, such as reducing fossil fuel consumption, controlling emissions and pollution, using renewable energy, and recycling. (Southern New Hampshire University, 2024.)

3.2 History of the fashion industry

The fashion industry is a combination of designing, manufacturing, marketing and selling of clothing and accessories. This industry is driven by culture, emerging trends, and, mainly, consumer needs and wants. (Steele and Major, 2025.) Before the 1800s, clothes were made from readily available materials, such as leather or wool. During the 1800s, clothes were made by hand. The primary intent of clothing was to keep humans warm. In the 18th century, the Industrial Revolution increased the cycle of fashion. New machines for making fabrics and clothes were introduced to the market. Due to the Industrial Revolution, factories were able to modify their processes and produce clothing more efficiently. Ready-made clothing was introduced. (Souza, 2024.)

Most of the clothes were handmade in the early 19th century. During this time, women made clothes for their own families or had custom-made clothes made by tailors. The ready-made clothing industry grew from the 1860s to the 1880s. The increasing mechanisation in the manufacturing processes mainly caused this. This was influenced by the urbanisation and the large number of immigrants that arrived in the United States of America. The growth of the clothing industry in the 20th century indicates its importance to the economy at the time and to the one we have now. (THE/STUDIO, 2025.)

Low-cost clothing attracted the younger generation and boosted clothing sales due to their need to follow new trends in the 1960s. This generation rejected the

traditional clothing of previous generations as fashion trends became more prevalent and significant. Fashion companies had to change their design and production processes to keep up with trends. The increasing demand for more affordable clothes and accessories drove the companies to open large factories. The clothing industry started to expand in the 1970s. (Idacavage, 2016.)

3.3 21st Century and Fast Fashion

The fashion industry has a massive value chain, from raw material suppliers to stores selling finished products. The fashion industry is also one of the most critical factors in the global markets. (Steele and Major, 2025.) Low-cost clothing products and online shopping gained popularity in the early 2000s. Fast-fashion companies that lead the market today include H&M, Primark, and Shein. These companies mass-produce trendy clothes featuring designs from top fashion houses, such as Chanel or Prada. Their business strategy is to give consumers the option to purchase more affordable clothes that are similar to high-priced fashion brands. This means consumers can buy trendy clothing at a lower price and receive it almost immediately after the product is realised, due to its lower costs compared to high fashion. No one can say that the current trends are only for the elite who can see the clothes on a runway. (Idacavage, 2016.)

In the 20th century, synthetic fabrics were introduced. Synthetic fibres and globalisation helped the industry begin producing a large number of products in low-cost countries, which led to the rise of fast fashion. For the sector that emphasises moving faster, it might be time for consumers to slow down and think before making a buying decision. (THE/STUDIO, 2025.)

Fast fashion is the production of clothes quickly and as inexpensively as possible. Fast fashion produces clothes, accessories and other goods rapidly and in large quantities. The product designs typically come from luxury brands. Fast-fashion companies see current runway trends and copy them. The companies turn trends into mass-produced, cheap products available to a larger

audience, following market trends. Consumers can purchase clothing more frequently due to its lower price. Fast fashion's goals are to produce cheap, trendy goods to meet customer demand and maximise profit. (MarketingCharts, 2025.)

Fast fashion is a relatively new concept that has changed the way consumers make purchasing decisions. For consumers, fast fashion is cheap, trendy clothing that can be changed and disposed of regularly whenever their wardrobes need an update or new designs hit the market. The standard for luxury brands was to change the collections four times a year. The collections were made for the four changing seasons: summer, autumn, winter, and spring. Fast-fashion companies update their collections or introduce new products weekly. (Bick, Halsey, & Ekenga, 2018.)

Fast fashion was a driving force for the growth of a multi-trillion-dollar industry. Launching new collections or products that mimic the look of luxury brands changes the way consumers buy. The goal is to encourage consumers to buy new clothes or accessories more frequently, since trends change next week and the products they buy will be out of fashion. Due to rapidly changing trends, clothes and accessories are available in stores or on online platforms for only a limited time. Consumers can dress like celebrities and influencers for less money. (Chan, 2020.)

For the fashion industry, the fast is more than just the speed. It refers to an economic tool used to increase profits and production. The companies are not designing products that last a lifetime and are more focused on profit than on long-lasting quality or the quality of the materials used. They use cheaper fabrics or other materials that allow the clothes or accessories to be priced lower for consumers, depending on their income level. Due to the rapidly changing trends, consumers are less likely to have regrets about making the purchase and disposing of the clothes after usage. (Fletcher, 2010.)

On different social media platforms, individuals can share their outfits and lifestyles publicly. Wearing the same outfit multiple times is more easily judged on the platforms. London sustainability business Hubbub conducted a survey in 2017, which showed that 18-25-year-old participants felt pressure about how they dressed when they went out, especially to wear different clothes every time. A 2019 survey by Barnardo's charity found that United Kingdom consumers are spending around 2.7 billion pounds on summer clothes. According to the survey, the clothes were used only once. (Geiger, 2017.)

Looking at the fast-fashion industry, it faces multiple problems. The industry is known for unfair labour practices, vast amounts of waste, and the use of child labour. In recent years, consumers have become more aware of problems in the industry and are increasingly demanding change from companies. Due to these demands, many fast fashion companies are changing their processes. The change will occur gradually by adding more environmentally friendly collections and clothing. (Hasanspahic, 2016.)

3.3.1 Online shopping

Fashion companies have produced platforms for consumers to buy goods from the internet. This allows businesses to have multiple products available without having large stores. Consumers can browse items, select what they want to buy, and complete the order without leaving their house. (Sunitha and Gnanadhas, 2014.) Online shopping allows consumers to shop anytime they want, since online platforms are always open, unlike retail stores with set opening hours. The selection of clothing is wider, and it is easier to compare different products and prices across various stores. Consumers can easily have options from several other retailers and pick which they desire most. While having multiple advantages, online shopping has defects. Shipping and returning the product may add cost but also have a significant impact on the environment. The products are shipped fast from one country to another. Buying without seeing or feeling the product may result in frustration due to the fact that it may not fit or feel the way the consumer thought. (Citi, 2025.)

3.4 Sustainable fashion as a reaction to fast fashion

Defining sustainable fashion is creating and consuming clothing in a way that reduces environmental and social impacts. Reducing waste and ensuring fair working conditions throughout the whole value chain. The goal of sustainable fashion is to be ethically produced. (TLD Apparel, 2025.) Sustainable fashion has been gaining popularity. It was first developed to be a solution towards the negative environmental impact the fashion industry is causing. Nowadays, sustainability has developed into a trend. As sustainable fashion is increasingly becoming more popular, it is changing the whole fashion industry. It has been an emerging trend because consumers have better knowledge and understanding about the impact of the fashion industry on the environment, and consumers make more informed decisions when it comes to fashion (Jung, 2016)

Sustainable fashion is a massive part of the slow fashion movement. This has emerged recently due to consumers' reactions to the fast-fashion cycle and unsustainable companies. Its goals are to achieve fairer working conditions, more sustainable businesses, the use of ecological materials, and traceability and certifications to support the company's business model. Sustainable fashion is supporting more ethical behaviour, decreasing the amount of fashion products and buying quality products over quantity (Jung, 2016).

Businesses are encouraged —and some might even say pressured —to think more sustainably in many ways, from design to production. This can also make the clothing more environmentally sustainable. The design process plays a huge role, since it is more complicated to execute slowly than in fast fashion. The products designed have to be more precisely examined for quality and styled to be appropriate and long-lasting for consumers to use. Sustainable fashion is decreasing the environmental impact since consumers are buying fewer products. This is actively reducing the amount of clothing waste fast fashion has created (Jung, 2016).

Manufacturing clothes from recycled materials, such as organic cotton, hemp or lyocell, has multiple positive impacts. This positive impact is due to the combination of reduced water use in production and reduced pesticide use. Biodegradable fibres are helpful in the industry, as they are less dependent on oil. Sustainable fashion encourages shortening the supply chain and using more local raw materials and producers. The shorter the supply chain is, the greater the benefits are. A smaller supply chain and more localised production affect the need for goods to be transported between countries, and this makes the companies' carbon footprints smaller (Jung, 2016).

Fast fashion continues to dominate the industry, while the number of companies and brands adopting more sustainable fashion trends is increasing. Fashion companies are trying to contribute towards more sustainable consumption patterns. This is done by modifying the production, distribution, marketing and strategies towards more sustainable aspects. Bigger corporations are participating more towards a sustainable future by starting different kinds of recycling programs, enhancing their supply chains, and offering separate, somewhat more expensive, sustainable clothing lines. The strategic focus is shifting toward creating more high-quality, sustainable clothes with long-lasting designs and durability. The design state of the clothes has a significant influence towards how sustainable the clothes are. Evolving techniques will eliminate waste from the first steps of the manufacturing phase (Chan, 2020).

Sustainable fashion is affected by complex issues that require attention. One of them is the pricing, and the fact is that companies that produce sustainable clothes are more expensive compared to companies that make fast fashion. This is caused by the use of long-lasting and high-quality materials, as well as local production and manufacturing; due to these reasons, not every consumer can afford the products. It can be concluded to be the most significant disadvantage of sustainable fashion. Sustainable clothing companies are not capable of competing in the same sector as fast fashion companies, since the price competition is high. (Chan, 2020).

Greenwashing is a significant barrier in the industry due to the fact that fast fashion companies are trying to brand themselves as more sustainable than they actually are. Consumers are becoming more aware of the environmental aspects, and due to this, the companies are labelling their products as sustainable. The fashion companies that are focusing on sustainability are diminished by fast fashion companies' greenwashing, making them appear more sustainable than it is.(Chan, 2020).

3.4.1 Recycled clothes

In the fashion industry, recycled clothes can be divided into two categories. The first category is recycled clothes that can be bought from second-hand shops, and the second is the usage of old clothes to make entirely new clothes.

The market for second-hand clothes and the number of companies selling them are increasing. The consumers are more interested in buying and reselling their products from different second-hand shops. There is a potential that the second-hand market could be larger than the fast fashion market in the future. This trend is embracing sustainability and affordability for the consumer. This will reduce waste from clothing usage and increase the circular economy of used goods. It offers unique styling with vintage or one-of-a-kind clothing pieces that differentiate the consumer from the main mass-produced clothes (Shah, 2025).

Recycled clothes can also mean the making of new clothes out of old ones. This can be done by breaking the clothes back down to raw materials to produce new clothing products. It helps to reduce waste and decrease the usage of raw materials (Welle, 2025).

The recycling process has three main steps: collection, processing and creation. Firstly, the used clothes are collected from consumers or companies and are sorted by different standards, such as material. Then the clothes will go through the processing phase, where the clothes are shredded and made back into yarn, which can make new fabric. With synthetic fibres, the process takes

more time and needs chemical components to create a new usable fabric. Then these made fabrics are used by different companies to produce new clothes (Welle, 2025).

3.4.2 Material usage

Different types of materials which are used in the fashion industry are divided mainly into three categories: natural, synthetic, and semi-synthetic fibres. Natural fibres consist of animal or plant-based materials, such as cotton, silk and wool. Synthetic fibres are created out of chemical processes, such as polyester and nylon. Semi-synthetic fibres are natural materials that go through a chemical process, such as viscose and lyocell. Other materials are also being used, such as fur, hemp and down. The material which is chosen to produce the end product will impact its sustainability, usability properties, and how long-lasting the product is (GoClimate, 2025a). Sustainable materials are increasingly utilised to change the fashion industry. The usage of these fabrics and textiles is developed to remove the need to use pesticides in the clothing industry. The goal is to eliminate toxic dyes, processing chemicals, and the amount of water waste from the clothes (GoClimate, 2025a).

Cotton and polyester are the two fibre types that make up around 80% of the world's fibre manufacturing. Both fibres have sustainability concerns. The clothing production processes use different chemicals in different stages during the cultivation or making of the manmade fabrics. The chemicals are used during the fabrics production and dyeing process, but also to make the materials stain-, water-, or wrinkle resistant. A significant amount of clothing sold is produced by using cotton. In the fashion industry, cotton is mainly known as the most natural fibre. Cotton plantations need enormous amounts of water and pesticides, which results in decreasing soil fertility, loss in biodiversity, polluted waters and health issues to the workers due to pesticides used. Polyester is made out of organic chemicals, particulate matter, acid gases, and petroleum oil. All of these are releasing toxins to the environment. Synthetic fibres, such as nylon, acrylic, and polyester, require less water and land to be

produced, and are more durable to usage. All of these fibers are relying on oil as a raw material and are energy intensive. None of the fibers are biodegradable and are creating micro-fibers of plastics while being used. The synthetic fibers have a considerably greater environmental footprint due to the energy consumption they need when manufacturing (GoClimate, 2025b).

Due to cotton's harmful side effects, such as pesticides and environmental footprint, it is crucial that consumer understands the difference between organic and non-organic cotton and choose the former. Organic cotton has to be grown according to the organic agriculture standards. According to the organic agriculture standards, the use of genetically modified organisms and harmful chemicals is prohibited. The non-organic cotton affects public health, soil quality, and the health of ecosystems. Organic cotton could have the potential to rise as the trend of the future, but consumers must demand it in the market more. At the moment, the organic cotton consumption is around 1% of the cotton consumption (TDL Apparel, 2025).

One of the most sustainable natural materials in the fashion industry is hemp. Hemp is durable when used in fabrics. It is a dense plant that does not require a lot of water or land to grow, and pesticides are rarely used. Fur and down are used primarily for warmth, insulation and luxury features. Nowadays, fur is used less, due to its controversial features (Textile Exchange, n.d.).

3.4.3 Mass production

Mass production in the fashion industry includes manufacturing large amounts of clothes. Normally, these are standardised clothes that are easy to manufacture with the help of assembly lines and automation. This will reduce the cost of manufacturing, add speed to the manufacturing, and the companies can provide more easily to the customer demand in the market. Mass production makes the clothes and accessories more affordable to consumers. This easily creates even more of the overconsumption and waste amounts (Audaces, 2025).

Fashion industry is changing quickly due to consumer trends changing. This affects to the fact that companies need to reach the changing demand as quickly as possible. Many fashion companies have transferred their manufacturing processes to other countries where the manufacturing can be done cheaper, and the factories can run more flexible. This outsourcing is enabling the mass production of clothes and accessories, which is the representation of fast fashion (Audaces, 2025).

It has been said that the production of clothes and accessories is over 100 billion pieces per year. Due to this, it can be said that the amount of clothes manufactured will not decrease in the future, due to the increasing demand for clothes every year (Audaces, 2025).

3.4.4 Corporate responsibility

In the recent years, fashion industry has been going through a change where companies are becoming more sustainable. The environmental and sustainable responsibility is a trend that have made companies to make improvements to their supply chain. The fast fashion companies are required to share their social and environmental responsibilities, not only for their company and its economy but also for all the stakeholders. The corporate social responsibility report, also known as CSR report, impact report, or sustainability report, are published to consumers, which shows that the companies are concern of the environmental aspects and the working conditions. The CSR report has become a trend globally in the industry, especially in developed countries. Consumers are more aware of how the products are produced, but the pricing and quality are still aspects that affect the purchasing decision. Consumers care and want to know that if they make the purchase decision the products, they buy are environmentally friendly and the workers who make the products are treated correctly (Clark, 2008).

Manufacturing companies breaks their suppliers into tiers to help clarify the process of production. The suppliers are divided into three different classes. Tier 1 is the partners that are directly in contact with your company. Tier 1 suppliers

are usually a significant expenditure sector. Tier 2 suppliers source the necessary materials for tier 1 suppliers. Tier 3 suppliers are typically working with raw materials and are furthest away of the final product (Yestadt, 2022). After identifying and understanding the whole supply chain, the company is capable to build more transparent, reliable, and flexible business structure. This structure can be used in any relevant purchasing the companies is doing. Understanding the supplier's sustainability and social responsibility will help the company to eliminate the unsustainable suppliers. Traceability and transparency are important for the consumers to build a trust towards the company (Luo, 2018).

Companies in the fashion industry are being more engaged to publish their CSR reports and sustainable activities through different social media platforms. This way the companies can reach more consumers. When the consumers know that the company is being responsible in their processes, this will increase the consumer engagement to purchase the goods from that specific company. The increased knowledge of consumers has impacted the companies by pressuring them to develop and modify their manufacturing process and business activities. The companies are re-evaluating the impacts they have towards the environment (Gilliland, 2017).

Since CSR reports have become more well-known, the companies need to utilise the information better. Advertising and sharing the necessary information are playing a key role. Companies have to demonstrate what they are doing differently and how the work they are doing is impacting the environment. Since everything, positive and negative, can be shared and the range of audience is growing, communication should be done transparently. Especially when we are talking about sustainability, transparency is important for the customers and other stakeholders. Consumers are demanding and expecting more transparency from companies. Due to this demand, companies in the field of fashion are sharing more information about the origin of the products, the process of production, the carbon footprint, and the suppliers they are using. Since the supply chain is becoming more transparent, it has an effect to improve the workers' rights (Watson, Yan, 2013).

3.4.5 Working conditions

The fashion industry is employing tens of millions of workers globally, and most of them are young women. The industry has been abusing the workers' rights for a long time. The workers have been working long hours with low wages and poor working conditions. Child labour has been used by the companies. Adding to all of this, health standards, job security and discrimination are big issues. The workers who are manufacturing the clothes have a big part in the sustainability factor. It is not enough to protect the environment, but also the people who are manufacturing the goods (Ready Wear Clothing, 2010).

Companies have outsourced their production to lower-income countries, such as China and Bangladesh. This has lowered the cost of manufacturing, which makes it possible for organisations to sell the product for consumers on a lower price. These countries where the manufacturing happens have lenient governmental legislation and regulation towards workers. This is affecting the compensation and working conditions. The minimum wage of the workers is significantly below the living wage. The industry employees make around 12-18 cents per hour in China, while compared to the minimum wage of Germany, which is 12,82 euros per hour (Fashion Revolution, 2015).

The lack of regulations results in high working hours and poor conditions. The workers are working around 10 to 14 hours per day, seven days a week. During some seasons, the workers are required to work around 18 hours a day to fulfil the orders. Due to this, the workers may suffer injuries during workdays, but those go untreated. This may affect the workers' capability to keep up with the amount of clothes needed to produce. Overtime is forced and not always paid. If the worker refuses to work overtime, they might get punished or even fired (Ready Wear Clothing, 2010).

The clothing factories are built at a low cost, and most of the structures are not designed for that use. The machines used at the process are heavy and may result in building collapses. These buildings rarely have ventilation, and the

working environment is heavily contaminated with chemicals and fibre dust. Some factories that are in use, do not have emergency exits, or the workers are locked inside the factory during the day. This is done to prevent stealing, but it may result in deaths or injuries (Jung, & Jin, 2014).

In 2013, The Rana Plaza collapsed, which showed the problems the fashion industry has. The Rana Plaza was a clothing factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The factory had over 3000 workers inside when it collapsed. Around 1100 were killed and 2000 were injured. The factory was manufacturing clothes for multiple major fashion retailers, such as Zara, Mango, and Primark. After the accident, the world started to question what the real cost of fast fashion is. This made the clothing companies provide better working conditions to the employees (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2013).

In the fashion industry, child labour is common, since the work does not require a lot of skills. Around 100 million children are used to work globally. In India, child labour has generated around 20% of the nation's GDP, Gross Domestic Product, between the years 1997 and 2007. Girls are used more often as employees. Although, child labour is a concern, the children are impacted in other ways. Weak maternity protection or support for the mothers, absence of childcare and poor living conditions for the workers, are impacting the children in these countries (Unicef, 2020).

3.5 Consumer behaviour

The fashion industry is dependant on consumer behaviour. The customer's wants and needs are leading the production of new clothes. Consumers are known to buy more clothes than they might actually need. Consumers are encouraged to buy new clothing regularly; due to the rapidly changing trends that fast fashion has created. Fast fashion companies produce changing trends on clothes with low prices, which has created a cycle of demand (Confino, Muminova, 2011).

There are difficulties to understand the consumer behaviour. Consumers are more likely spending money on new products. For the companies it is

complicated to predict the customer needs and wants. Consumers choice is led by different wants. Excessive consumption of new clothing or accessories is rather a norm. Need for the clothing is not the driving force when making the purchasing decision. Fast fashion companies are making the overconsumption possible. The fast fashion companies have shown that the consumer have the opportunity to buy multiple pieces of clothing over one piece with the same amount of money. It could be argued that they consumer will choose to buy multiple low costing clothing (Singh, 2017).

Innovations in technology has changed the way consumers can buy clothes. As well as, made showing the new clothing pieces to others easier. Social media can be used by the companies to advertise the clothes, as well as consumers to see what celebrities or influencers are wearing. Consumers are being influenced by society's norms and popular trends. Individuals want to fit into the society and not feel like they do not belong. Consumer behaviour and buying patterns are not only influenced by the fast fashion companies, but also the pressure that social media has created (Gulati, 2017).

The fashion industry is powered by the consumers choice. Individual consumer choice makes a difference, although it may feel like it does not. Choosing more sustainable or ethical products is not done, due to this thinking pattern. Choices the consumers make tend to have effect towards more sustainable environment. It is thought that the environment changes, pollution or waste are not affecting the consumers directly, although the consumers know that the choices they make impacts the society and environment. Changing the consumers' buying behaviour is challenging, due to the fact that it is thought that individuals' actions are not changing the issues. Consumers have the opportunity to change the fast fashion companies to make their products in more sustainable way. The individual's actions always have consequences, and the change in the buying pattern will improve the global market (Confino, Muminova, 2011).

4 Analysis

Looking at the situation in the fashion industry, it is pretty problematic. The industry produces large amounts of waste and pollution, yet the business continues to grow with the help of consumers. Sustainable fashion, or a sustainable value chain, is not easy to achieve. Sustainability as a topic elicits many opinions and creates opportunities for diverse perspectives. The choices individuals make actually can make a difference. The impact of our choices is massive for the future, since the effects on the environment are already evident today.

Fast-developing technology and global awareness have changed buying behaviour. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the fashion industry needed to evolve. Online shopping became a trend, and many consumers began buying their clothes online. Fashion companies created online shopping platforms for consumers. This made buying clothes easier. Online shopping is causing other issues due to transportation and packing. Many companies are using recycled cardboard in their online ordering boxes, but plastic bags are also used. Mainly, the clothes are packed individually into plastic bags, and this plastic is neither recycled nor recyclable. Due to the harsh weather conditions in Finland, the cardboard boxes might get wet or damaged during shipment. The plastic wrapping or bag will protect the clothes or other ordered items. Online shopping companies offer free shipping and free returns. This means that the consumer will buy more than they need, try them on, and ship them back to the company if they do not like them. The footprint from this is enormous, but it is not stated anywhere. Understanding the effects of every choice we make will change the way we view production and consumption. Changing minor details will greatly affect the result.

When looking at the fashion industry, the current stage has its problems and different aspects. Fast fashion companies have to make the necessary changes, but consumers should demand it with their actions. The situation is getting better with more sustainable options, but it does not mean that the work

is done. Consumers' buying behaviour or economic situation is hard to change, but the fast fashion companies can do things better. Companies can choose to make sustainable choices for their advantage on the market, by making more wise decisions, sharing information transparently, and changing the brand and trends. The consumer can help and demand change, but in the end the fast-fashion companies are the ones responsible for creating change.

In climate change, the key driving force is pollution, which is at the moment and in the future causing environmental problems, such as greenhouse gases, that are negatively affecting the environment. There will be areas that are uninhabitable. We can already see the results in places where people are suffering from polluted water and air, especially the people who live nearby or work in the factories that produce the clothes. Since factories use so many chemicals, pollution is causing various health concerns in the area. Adding to the health problems the workers at the clothing factories have, they are victims of exploitation. This includes working in factories that are not safe to work at and could collapse at any moment, children working at the factories without the chance of education, wages that are so low that the workers do not have a proper living standard, and long working hours without rest or any free time. These are the issues that should be talked about more.

These problems are not entirely solved by changing actions, restrictions, or laws against fast-fashion companies. The change has to come from the entire economic model, which is a more complex and challenging process than the supply chains of fast fashion companies. Fast fashion companies and the people have created an illusion that fashion should be fast changing, cheap and available for everyone, everywhere and every time. Since these have become a norm in society, it is hard to change the perception.

Creating a base for sustainability, big corporations, the circulation of money, and endless consuming do not have a significant effect on it. Although there are problems and different aspects to the situation, it does not mean that the fast fashion companies should not make any changes. Full sustainability is hard to

achieve, but any positive change towards more sustainable procedures is better than nothing. Consumer behaviour is challenging to change, but changing the products and increasing awareness of the issues can help consumers understand their actions. Fast fashion companies can shape how the industry operates and how sustainable it is, but consumer choice will always be the driving force of the economy.

5 Conclusion

This thesis examined sustainability in the fashion industry and explored whether consumers can influence sustainability through their purchasing choices. The findings show that sustainability in the fashion industry is a complex concept including economic, environmental and social aspects. The fashion industry is facing significant issues, including environmental pollution, poor working conditions, overconsumption, and the popularity of fast fashion, which prioritises rapid production and low costs over sustainable responsibility.

The literature analysis shows that sustainable fashion is gaining greater awareness, but fast fashion continues to dominate the market due to its low costs and accessibility. Consumers are becoming more aware of the sustainability issues, but there is still a gap between their intentions and actual behaviour when purchasing goods. Barriers such as limited availability, lack of knowledge, and higher prices slow down the usage of sustainable choices.

Despite the challenges, consumers can still influence the industry. Individual choices, when aggregated across the whole market, can shift demand toward more environmentally friendly and ethically produced goods. However, the consumers are not the only ones responsible for the change; companies should commit to responsible production, fair working conditions, and transparency.

The thesis identifies the need for raising awareness and adding knowledge for consumers to act differently. Full sustainability in the fashion industry is an impossible goal, but the development of more responsible business practices is

valuable. This thesis suggests that future research could focus more on consumer and employee data, the technical innovations, and strategies that companies can utilise to make sustainable fashion more affordable and accessible.

In summary, consumers and fashion companies are crucial to developing and improving sustainability in the fashion industry. If the consumers and companies act together and make more aware choices, it is possible to create a sustainable future for fashion.

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