

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY: HOW DOES THE YOUTH FEEL

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Abstract: *The 21st century is characterized by an ever-growing concern over environmental problems, which is present through all human life and activities. This results in “louder” and stronger demands from environmentally aware consumers for environmentally friendly and “green” products. Therefore, it is no wonder that the fashion industry had to abide to these demands, answering them with new concepts of sustainable or so-called “slow fashion”, which as its result lowers the negative impact of fashion on the environment. Other than concepts of sustainable fashion, in this paper we showed the results of a research based on the case study of sustainability of the international fashion company H&M, and the youth's opinion and attitudes on the company's sustainability practices and the sustainability of the fashion industry as well. An analysis of the results was carried out using the SPSS 22 software package.*

Keywords: sustainability, fashion industry, sustainable fashion, slow fashion, youth, H&M

1. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry has gone through a lot of changes, with the most significant ones in the last 20 years, when the borders of the industry started shifting (Djelic & Ainamo, 1999). Since then, the changes in the dynamic of the fashion industry, such as the fading of the mass production, increased number of fashion seasons, as well as modified structural characteristics of the supply chain, drove the sellers to strive to reduce their costs and achieve the flexibility of design, quality, delivery and speed of entering the market (Doyle, Moore, & Morgan, 2006).

Today's fashion market is highly competitive and the constant need for new products caused the inevitable step by the manufacturers – increased number of seasons, i.e. higher frequency of coming out with new and “fresh” products. This implies a shorter life cycle and bigger sales profit (Sydney, 2008). In addition, the desire for variety and instant gratification of needs, with the knowledge of prices and the market by customers, has led customers to prefer brands such as Zara and H&M (National Post, 2009). Several studies have observed the various aspects of the relationship buyer-producer through “fast fashion”, aspects such as the design of the garment in relation to the fast response of the manufacturers (Forza & Vinelli, 1996), the role of the supplier in the rapidly changing industry (Doyle, Moore, & Morgan, 2006), consumer behaviour (Bruce, & Daly, 2006) and financial performance (Hayes & Jones, 2006). However, it seems that there is discord in the literature concerning the concept of “fast fashion” among studies of this type of fashion, because only a few focused on the aspects that concern consumers and what actually steers those changes in the fashion industry (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006).

Innovations that occur at the intersection of the fashion and technology industries are amazing and transformative. In many cases, the fashion industry today resembles nothing like the one of a decade ago, and will change more in the next decade. One of rising trends in the fashion industry is certainly the rise of sustainable fashion. The fashion industry realizes we cannot continue this trend of polluting the planet, and has slowly started the road towards more sustainable fashion which includes a total rethink of how many clothes we really need in our closets, more recycling and reduction of the use of pollutants.

2. SUSTAINABILITY AND FASHION INDUSTRY

“Second to oil, fashion and textiles is the most polluting industry in the world. Every stage in a garment's life threatens our planet and its resources. It can take more than 20,000 liters of water to produce 1kg of cotton, equivalent to a single t-shirt and pair of jeans. Up to 8,000 different chemicals are used to turn raw materials into clothes, including a range of dyeing and finishing processes.” (BOF, 2016)

On the other hand, “over the past decade, sustainability and ethical conduct have begun to matter in fashion (Emberley, 1998; Moisander & Personen, 2002); companies have realized that affordable and trend-sensitive fashion, while typically highly profitable, also raises ethical issues” (Aspers & Skov, 2006; Joy, Sherry Jr, Venkatesh, Wang & Chan, 2012). Sustainability represents a primary issue of the 21st century and is often in relation to corporate social responsibility (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007).

When it comes to sustainability, it should be noted that there is no single accepted definition, although this term is usually associated with the following three interpretations:

- Sustainability refers to those activities that can last endlessly without causing damage to the environment (Fletcher, 2008).
- Sustainability presents not doing to others what we do not want done to us (Partridge, 2011).
- Sustainability presents satisfying the needs of present generations without comprising the future generations’ abilities to satisfy their needs (WCED, 1987).

None the less, the most comprehensive definition was the one by (2007): “Sustainability is about much more than our relationship with the environment; it’s about our relationship with ourselves, our communities, and our institutions.”

We can conclude that sustainable fashion, supports living harmoniously with nature, employs trained artisans in safe and humane working conditions (Partridge, 2011). Also, sustainable fashion “demands a new way of thinking, which involves slowing down fashion cycles, understanding why and how a garment is made, seeking workable solutions in an era of urgency and crisis and redefine our scholarly approach to issues related to dress, body, and culture” (Root, 2009).

Considering all the above, it can be concluded that “fast fashion” is by no means sustainable since it is distinguished by cheap materials that have a harmful impact on the environment, as well as very short life cycle of its products, which quickly leads to the stage of waste if not recycled. Therefore, many authors are calling sustainable fashion – “slow fashion” (Clark, 2009; Fletcher, 2008; Patel & Davidson, 2003; Patel & Tebelius, 1987; Tran, 2008), as a logical name that is the opposite of fast fashion, bearing in mind that “slow fashion” is characterized by sustainable production and consumption, eco design, waste management, recycling and reusing, connected with quality, environmental awareness and balance, as well as something durable and made from recycled or organic materials (Holt, 2009). The issues of “slow fashion” are making garments that last longer in such material and style with the philosophy: less, but of the best. That is how “slow fashion” perfectly coincides with the concept of sustainable consumption.

3. THE RESEARCH

In order to provide a highlight of sustainability in the fashion industry, which became the main problem of this industry in the previous couple of years, partly thanks to Andrew Morgan’s documentary “The True Cost” and the launch of the H&M Conscious program and the recycling program, the poster will feature the case study of the company H&M. The showed case study is dealing with the practices of sustainability of this company, as well is its contribution to the Sustainability Report 2014 (H&M, 2016a; H&M, 2016b).

3.1. Methodology

In order to provide an overview of how much the younger generation exactly is familiar with the sustainability of fashion, and whether it is important to them, the authors of the paper surveyed their colleagues from the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Serbia on their attitudes on the sustainability of the fashion industry. An analysis of the results was carried out using the SPSS 22 software package. This research featured 321 participants (out of which 206 participants were female and 115 were male).

3.2. Results

Turning fashion into a more sustainable industry “remains an uphill battle, with plenty of technological, systematic, and business struggles to overcome” (Vogue, 2016). At Glasgow Caledonian University, New York, Simon Collins, former dean of the Fashion School at Parson’s New School for Design, and Julie Gilhart, respected freelance fashion consultant, discussed some of these issues in their second “Fashion Garage” event conversation, giving free advice to young designers, with the focus of the most recent one being on making the production more environmentally friendly:

1. The product should always come first.
2. Use social media to your benefit.
3. Accept that consumer shopping habits won't change.
4. Focus on materials.
5. Vote with your wallet.

Having in mind all of this, the sustainable organization of H&M and their road to sustainability is commendable, and is characterized by (H&M, 2016b):

- *Conscious materials for a more sustainable fashion future* – the use of organic natural and recycled materials.
- *Cotton* – organic and recycled cotton. The company H&M is one of the leading users of organic cotton in the world.
- *Water* – promotion of responsible use of water along the product's lifecycle, from how cotton farmers water their crops, to how customers wash their clothes. The World Economic Forum states the water crisis as the risk with the biggest global impact. The H&M's partnership with WWF is ground-breaking – the water stewardship strategy goes far beyond the factory lines.
- *A fair living wage to garment workers* – responsible partners, working conditions, commitments, protecting childhood.
- *Animal welfare* – improving of the animal welfare in the supply chain, from involvement to education and training of suppliers and farmers.
- *Less use of planet's resources.*
- *Garment collecting* - changing the way of make, use and dispose of clothes. Of the thousands of tonnes of textiles that people throw away every year, as much as 95% could be re-worn or recycled.
- *Business concept* - fashion and quality at the best price in a sustainable way.

In order to evaluate the familiarity of the participants with the sustainability practices and actions, after a set of general questions, the following questions the participants marked on a rating scale from 1 to 5, based on the truthfulness of the statement, and we calculated the percentage of them that answered positively to these questions either with a 4 (I agree) or a 5 (I absolutely agree). The results based on the answers given by participants to our eight questions are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1: The results on the poll, featuring the questions on sustainability of the fashion industry

Question	Participants with positive attitudes toward sustainability in the fashion industry [%]
1. "When I buy clothes, I think of the way it was manufactured"	33.4
2. "If I knew that the workers that made the garment were treated poorly, it would make me rethink of buying the product"	96.7
3. "I believe that the fashion industry pollutes the environment"	86.4
4. "If I knew that the company was environmentally friendly, I would feel better about buying the product even if it was more expensive"	64.5
5. "I own clothes labelled as environmentally friendly"	46.7
6. "I know that H&M is environmentally friendly"	89.8
7. "I have participated in the H&M recycling program"	24.3
8. "I believe that the sustainability of the fashion industry is important"	93.4

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Having in mind that 2 billions of poisonous pesticides are used each year for farming the cotton meant for the textile industry – more than for any other agriculture crop and the fact that textile industry uses more water than any other branch of industry (except agriculture), and the amount of pesticides that get released into the

air during the production of the cotton necessary for the textile industry each year represents 16 percent of the total global amount of insecticides, for these reasons, we can see the importance of good sustainable practices of the company and brand H&M i.e. Hennes&Mauritz, which showed that you can have both a profitable business and a sustainable one with these following “green consequences”:

- Better for the Earth.
- Better for people.
- Better for animals.
- Lasts longer.
- Easier and cheaper.
- Organic.

The results gained from our research show that even though at the first moment, the unaware youth does not think of the consequences and the background of the items they shop for (only 33.4 percent of the younger generation thinks about the way a garment was manufactured), as soon as the implications of their actions are brought to their attention, it is easy to change their mind (96.7 percent claims that if they knew that the workers were treated poorly it would make them rethink the purchase).

In addition, the participants showed that sustainability and environmentally friendly aspect of the manufacturing process does play a role in their shopping, as long as the price is still in their price range (64.5 percent of the participants said that if they knew that the product is environmentally friendly they would buy it even if it was more expensive).

Also, from our research, we can clearly see that the marketing campaign and the advertisement of a sustainable organization and its sustainability actions is very important, and that a good example of a this is precisely the one followed by H&M, because 89.8 percent of the participants of this research said that they are aware of the fact that this company is environmentally friendly.

However, our research has showed that this campaign still has to be worked on further because only a small number of students surveyed (24.3 percent) has actually participated in the H&M recycling program, while only 46.7 percent of the students owns environmentally friendly clothes.

Lastly one of the main goals of this research was to show that the younger buyers do care about sustainability of the fashion industry, and in that we have succeeded – 93.4 percent of the participants agree.

Fashion itself, shoes, dresses, suits and skirts, may seem irrelevant when compared to the real problems mankind is facing everyday in the 21st century such as: climate change, nuclear catastrophes, wars, poverty, and lack of drinkable water, disease and hunger. But when we take in concern the fact that the fashion industry around the world employs millions of people (from the fashion company workers, to models, photographers, journalists and retail store clerks), and that fashion is an unavoidable part of our everyday lives, ignoring the social and environmental impact of this industry would be very negligible on our part.

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