

## Sustainable Fashion for the Masses: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

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### Abstract

In a constantly evolving and innovating society, globalization has affected the daily lives of people. Climate activists have been creating awareness of the human-made climate crisis and how it will create a huge negative impact on future generations. There has been a strong attitudinal inclination of consumers towards sustainable products. However, a decline in the purchase behavior of consumers for the same has been observed, cost being the main reason for the same. Looking into the increasing trend of consumers towards mindful shopping due to the rise in inflation post pandemic, many industries have shifted to producing low cost and low-quality unsustainable products for the masses. The apparel and fashion industry are one of the greatest polluters leading to many ecological and environmental problems. Fast fashion apparel industry produces apparels of low quality from unsustainable raw materials. Though sustainable fashion has been successful among high-income consumers it is a farfetched dream for the masses. In order to make sustainable fashion affordable among masses, companies need to innovate their manufacturing processes and marketing strategies. This research paper involves qualitative research with in-depth interviews of fast fashion companies focused on understanding and analyzing the challenges faced by them in making a sustainable and affordable fashion apparel for the masses. The analysis has been done through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings will help the companies re-innovate and re-strategize their manufacturing processes and marketing strategies to design and promote sustainable and affordable fashion for the masses. This will help them generate revenues for their companies with the added differentiation of contributing to the cause of sustainability in the long run.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Fashion, Fast-Fashion, pollution, throwaway culture, carbon emission, sustainability

### Introduction

Over the years the fashion industry has faced some significant changes. People have now started investing in low-cost products with flexibility in design, quality and market speed. Earlier retailers used to study the

consumer needs, take their time, understand the consumers and then develop clothes but in recent times retailers are just responding to the trends set on fashion shows and runways (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). The fashion industry is one of the biggest contributors to greenhouse emission and climate change (Ray & Nayak, 2023) and fast fashion plays a prominent role in pollution contributing to 10% of the total global carbon emissions (Ray & Nayak, 2023). The three main causes of the industry's pollution impacts are dyeing and finishing (36%), fibre production (15%) and yarn preparation (28%) (Maiti R. , 2023). Whereas sustainable fashion is uplifting the deteriorated condition of the environment as natural fabrics like wool, cotton, silk, etc. are used for production of clothes instead of artificially generated yarns which are harmful to the environment. Recycled clothes are a huge part of sustainable fashion which has been proven beneficial for the environment.

Some brands like Finisterre, Patagonia, Pact clothing, Everlane, Able, etc. are trying to go sustainable by providing natural products that are environment friendly and can be used for a longer period of time, However, they are serving very niche market, as per the data as of 2022 the estimated market value of sustainable fashion industry is US\$ 11.2 Million and it will take CAGR( Compound Annual Growth Rate) of 9.3% to reach US\$ 27.2 Million by the end of 2033 (Fact, 2023) whereas the estimated market value of fast fashion industry as of 2022 is US\$ 93.66 Billion and it will take the CAGR of 7.70% to reach US\$ 167.5 Billion (P, 2023). The biggest gap in the fashion industry is though sustainable fashion is the emerging trend yet consumers keep on buying harmful, fast fashion clothes (Cherradi & Tetik, 2020). Moreover, Generation-Z is comfortable with the idea of sustainable fashion but the Bloomer Generation is still unaware about sustainable fashion because all they need is low-cost goods with the latest design, this is one of the reasons which is fuelling the demand of fast fashion brands (Palomo.I, 2023). Since everybody is so bend over fast fashion, the question arises why fast fashion brands are not going sustainable or launching a line of sustainable clothing (Kumar. S, 2023). This research paper tries to address the gap. This research involves qualitative research with in-depth interviews of fast fashion companies focused on understanding and

analyzing the challenges faced by them in making a sustainable and affordable fashion apparel for the masses. The analysis has been done through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings will help the companies re-innovate and re-strategize their manufacturing processes and marketing strategies to design and promote sustainable and affordable fashion for the masses. This will help them generate revenues for their companies with the added differentiation of contributing to the cause of sustainability in the long run.

### **Research Questions**

What are drivers for companies to launch sustainable fashion brands?

What are the challenges faced by companies in launching sustainable fashion brands?

What are the issues that companies face while shifting from fast fashion to sustainable fashion brands?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Fashion Industry and Fast Fashion**

Fashion industry is multibillion dollar enterprise of producing and selling clothes which has scattered its arms and legs all over the world, making it a prominent part of our world. Before 1970's fashion industry was distinguished between two terms: fashion industry and apparel industry. High end clothing used to come under fashion industry and ordinary clothes or mass fashion used to come under apparel industry. But this line has been blurred in recent times. Now fashion is a statement for style or styles of accessories and clothing carried by various people. With the change in definition, the meaning of fashion has evolved overtime, there has been more innovation and inclusivity in fashion industry than ever (Venkatasamy.N, 2015). There may be some differences amongst designer wear and mass fashion but fashion is more than that, it is image, design, manufacturing, marketing, distribution, most importantly it is everything. The term 'Fashion Industries' is used for thousands of industries and services under it which are employing millions of people. Some of the key sectors of fashion industry are textile design and production, fashion design and manufacturing, fashion retailing, marketing and

merchandising, etc. (Steele & S, 2023). But there are two more key components of fashion industry that are fast fashion and sustainable fashion. These two components have become an important topic of discussion in recent time as consumers and world is becoming more aware and considerate about world issues.

Britain's history plays a very important role in emergence of apparel industry. In the late 17th century, the introduction of readymade clothes took place because the impact of industrial revolution created consumer class who demanded readymade clothes as it was affordable and available. There was a big role of slop shop stores and urbanization that influenced British consumers and they didn't feel the need to make their own clothes anymore. South Americans boosted this culture as they capitalized the cotton crops through slavery and exported that cotton to Britain which helped British industry's make clothes with newer technology. Since the supply of cotton increased, it became cheaper and lower economic class people were able to afford it. The fashion industry was earlier for elite class only but the connected history of Britain and America led to greater apparel differentiation and different types of consumers (Linden, 2016). From the late 1990's to mid-2000's, the fast fashion was at its peak. Consumers were less willing to buy high end designer brands rather preferred cheaper brands like ZARA, H&M, Charlotte Russe, etc. America was plagued with overconsumption of fast fashion and these brands took advantage of it as they produced trendy clothes straight from the runway at cheaper rates and of lower quality. Since the material was of cheap quality it didn't stand with time, leading to continuous dumping which resulted in increase of pollution (Enly, 2020). Fashion industry has greatly impacted our world, people are unaware what clothes they are wearing, what material is used in production of those clothes. It is true that most of the textiles are produced from natural materials like cotton, jute, silk and wool. But other artificial materials are also used to produce garments like nylon, polyester and glass. These materials are harmful for the environment as they have short life and takes hundreds of years to decompose which is affecting land, water, air. Rivers and lakes are drying up, landfills are filled with polluted materials causing landslides and deforestation,

these garments are main cause of carbon emissions (Miller, 2020).

### **Comparative analysis of Fast Fashion and Sustainable Fashion**

There is a solution to all these problems and that is sustainable fashion. Sustainable fashion is far better option than fast fashion. Fast fashion is recognized by its quick turnover trendy, inexpensive clothes and on contrary sustainable fashion is environmentally conscious, ethical, provides longevity and quality. Fast fashion has various negative impacts, firstly the environmental impact, the throwaway culture has increased in the manner that nearly 92 million tons of garments are discarded annually, which end up in landfills and release various pollutants along with carbon emission and water pollution. Not only environmental issues but ethical issues are also faced by the world. Like human rights violation, poor working conditions, people are not even paid minimum wages, they are exploited in every which way possible. People fail to understand the relation between fast fashion and child labor but companies are trying to reduce their cost of production and they are adopting every possible way, which also includes child labor (Baruta, 2021), more than 250 million children are working under fast fashion industry, in difficult working environment giving up basic rights like education, freedom and have become slave to this industry. (Matter., 2023). Fast fashion is exploiting every ounce of living beings, making them vulnerable and slave of this vicious cycle. Conversely sustainable fashion is trying to uplift the world and break this vicious cycle. Sustainable fashion is using more natural materials for the garments, clean manufacturing, 3 Rs reduce, reuse and recycle. These sustainable practices are cleaning the dirt of fast fashion industry. Unlike fast fashion industries, sustainable fashion is ethical in terms of consideration towards people and planet, giving out fair wages and compensating people well enough. Sustainable fashion is building up the livelihood and making this world a better place to live in (Matter S. o., 2023).

### **Ethical and Sustainable Fashion**

Instead of mass- production with common colour and sizes, sustainable fashion focus on developing clothes as per

personal preferences that means as per own size, colour and fabric collection. (Fashion, 2021). It is important because it helps in waste minimization, more circular fashion, more focus on local markets and artisans so this is one of the best practices that should be followed by brands and consumers more actively. (Poratelli, 2022). Sustainable fashion helps in reducing pollution by using sustainable materials, eco-friendly production practices and reducing carbon emission. High Quality and Timeless Design- this type of fashion is not influenced by the current trends in the market and therefore will never go out of style (Matter S. , 2023). It is best suitable because it does not go out of style season to season and uses best quality products to make it more sustainable. They are often characterized by the term simplicity, quality craftsmanship and timeless beauty. Making it acceptable by every generation. (Rajasthan, 2023). Fair and Ethical- This practice involves implementing fair labour standards and protocols to ensure that labour receives fair wages and have a safe working condition. It also means not employing child labour and not violating any child labour laws. It also ensures fair prices for good offered by producers and environment is protected during process of production. (More, 2023). Repair, Redesign, and Upcycle- It is a form of practice where you redesign your old clothes and give them completely new look and stature (Consumer, 2019). Sustainable fashion prominently encourages people to upcycle their old garments to give them a fresh look, repair clothes which can still be worn, and redesign from existing silhouette, this prevents wastage of clothes. Rent, Lease, and Swap- promoting the option of renting, leasing and swapping boosts the idea of circular fashion, which helps in fulfilling the temporary needs of the consumers and preventing overconsumption. Secondhand and Vintage- Clinching onto second hand and vintage clothing gives another life to existing clothes, preventing new production and finally promoting circular fashion. Consumers are fascinated by this trend as it refreshes their wardrobe but also is affordable and valuable because of the vintage factor (Bakshi, 2023).

### **How to achieve sustainable fashion?**

Sustainable fashion means more than simple fad but it is a

price paid by the production in the form of social, natural and economic terms. (Henninger, 2016). Consider a situation where brand is following all ethical practices like fair wage system, good working condition, transparent process but uses plastic or other artificial materials for production of their garments. Then that brand would not be considered sustainable because it is not following sustainable practices holistically. Therefore, complete understanding of sustainability is important to make a difference (Emeritus, 2023). The issue of green washing: Green washing basically means false marketing, where brands showcase a false image of their brand and products claiming that their process, production and product are environment friendly and assure these claims by proving deceptive certificates to fool the public (Emeritus, 2023). So, there is need for complete transparency of the brand's objectives and actions and consumers should be well aware about the brand they are dealing with to avoid such fraudulent claims and actions (Kolk, 2023).

### **Consumer perception towards sustainable fashion**

Consumer's perception and willingness to buy sustainable fashion plays a very important role in intention and buying behaviour of the consumer which was also confirmed in the studies conducted in a few Asian countries including India (Chaudhary, 2018). Koszweska found that attitudes of customer greatly determine the future of sustainable fashion whether they are willing to invest in such textile, if they are influenced by the idea of sustainability and green consumption (Koszweska, 2021), (Tryphena & Aram, 2023). In developed countries, consumers still have a fair idea about sustainable fashion and are aware about the impact of industrial new technology and production and how it is affecting the world (Niinimaki, 2010). Consumers are aware about the ethical approaches of companies and importance of sustainable fashion but are still not taking steps towards it because they prefer their convenience over green practices (Wang, 2010). (Matsapola, 2021) The question arises even after so much awareness why people are unwilling to invest in sustainable fashion? This is very concerning for the brands, consumers and society as a whole.

## Research Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature and involves in-depth interviews of to understand the issues and challenges faced by retailers in applying sustainability practices in fashion apparel. Inductive approach was used to collect data. Inductive approach involves exploring a phenomenon, identifying themes and patterns and create a conceptual framework (Saunders et al, 2016). The research involved an exploratory study of the issues and challenges faced by fashion companies in launching sustainable and affordable fashion apparel for the masses. Therefore, exploratory research design is best suited for this type of study. The best suited method for analysis of such type of research is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Purposive sampling was chosen and 15 company managers

in fast fashion apparel industry were chosen for interviews. The criteria for choosing the respondent under study was that the respondent had 5 to 15 years of experience in fashion industry. The age group of the respondents were from 35 to 50 years. There was an almost equal proportion of males and females in the sample selected for study. The respondents were aware of the concept of sustainable fashion however they were briefed about the concept before the start of the interview. Each interview was of 45 min to 60 min duration. The analysis through IPA requires prior permission of respondents. The permission of the respondents was taken before conducting their interviews. The authors used Braun and Clarke Thematic Analysis for analysis of transcripts.

### The respondent profile is as follows:

Respondent	Age (in years)	Experience (in years)	Gender
1	36	12	Male
2	40	07	Male
3	47	11	Female
4	49	10	Female
5	50	15	Male
6	36	06	Female
7	32	05	Female
8	41	08	Male
9	40	10	Male
10	38	07	Female
11	37	05	Female
12	50	13	Male
13	43	08	Female
14	41	14	Male
15	45	15	Female

## Data Analysis

The authors analysed the themes in context with the existing literature and the research questions in the research under study. The major themes that emerged are:

### Drivers for sustainable fashion apparel

The respondents who had an experience of 5 to 15 years in the fashion apparel industry expressed different views on what motivates them to opt for sustainability practices in fashion apparel. "Fast fashion is in trend nowadays. However, sustainable fashion can also have innovative

designs based on consumer preferences and tastes. As an industry, we really contribute a lot to carbon footprint. Its high time we realize the importance of environment protection and contribute to the cause." (Respondent 10)

"Sustainable practices in fashion apparel are the need of the hour. Companies need to incorporate them in their processes. As an ethical company, it is our duty to contribute to the protection of the environment. Even our consumers like sustainable fashion wear....." (Respondent 2)

"Launching sustainable items is a good idea and requires

innovative thinking and change in business processes. Therefore, companies need to change the ways they design their fashion apparel..." (Respondent 13)

The managers knew the importance of sustainability in fashion apparel industry. They believed that incorporating sustainable business practices in their organizations will increase the good will of the company. Past research also states that companies feel inclined towards sustainability and they are aware that fashion industry contributes a lot to carbon footprint (Gazzola, Pavione, Pezzetti, & Grechi, 2020).

### **Challenges in adoption of sustainable fashion**

Consumers liked sustainable items but did not end up buying it. They were aware of the concept of sustainability and liked items that reduced the carbon footprint. However, being high priced, the consumers did not buy them.

"Sustainable brands are obviously going to be high priced. However, consumers do not want to buy high priced items. So, then from where do we cover our costs and earn profits..." (Respondent 8)

"I see many consumers coming to my store and liking sustainable clothing but when it comes to buying clothes, they end up buying fast fashion wear. They are trendy and cheap". (Respondent 4)

"If we lower the price of sustainable fashion brands and make it trendy, I think consumers will buy. But, for that we need to upgrade our processes and upskill our employees. That is a huge investment...." (Respondent 7) The analysis indicates that there is very little demand for sustainable fashion wear mainly due to lack of style and high price. However, companies are not ready for a huge investment especially in order to make a low-priced sustainable brand for the masses. Research also indicates that consumers do not buy high-priced sustainable fashion brands (Blas Riesgo, Lavanga, & Codina, 2023).

### **Issues in shifting from fast fashion to sustainable fashion for the masses**

Companies perceive a lot of issues to be addressed before shifting from fast fashion to sustainable fashion for the masses.

"Being in the industry for 10 years, I know the differences between fast fashion and sustainable fashion. Though sustainable fashion is beneficial in the long run, however, companies prefer fast fashion owing to its growing demand among consumers...." (Respondent 3)

"We found consumers liking sustainable fashion but end up buying fast fashion brands more. Consumers are price sensitive and prefer brands that offer new styles and designs..." Respondent 9)

"We tried introducing a segment of sustainable fashion brands. It failed badly. Consumers are not adapted to the habit of recycling and reuse in fashion apparel..." Respondent 6)

The managers were aware of the differences between sustainable fashion and fast fashion. Fast fashion is low priced and trendy as per the preferences and tastes of the consumers. Past research also states that sustainable fashion is the need of the hour (Blas Riesgo, Lavanga, & Codina, 2023), however consumers do not prefer buying sustainable fashion brands (Diddi, Yan, Bloodhart, Bajtelmsmit, & McShane).

### **Conclusions and Suggestions**

The research led to the conclusion that sustainable fashion is beneficial to all stakeholders including the consumers, company and the society at large. However, companies are sceptical in launching sustainable fashion brands. There are many challenges faced by companies in adopting sustainable fashion. Being consumer driven, they are motivated to design fast fashion brands. Fast Fashion apparel brands are cheaper, having better styles and patterns as compared to sustainable fashion apparel brands. Companies need to change their manufacturing processes to make sustainable brands affordable for masses. They need to train their employees also in designing sustainable brands and promoting these brands among consumers. Companies need to create a demand for the recyclable sustainable brands and motivate consumers to adapt to recycling of apparel and that can be done through effective marketing campaigns. Government should provide subsidies to companies indulging in sustainability.

## Implications

### Managerial Implications

The research is important for companies to incorporate sustainable business practices in the long run. The findings can guide companies to launch sustainable fashion apparel brands in the market for the masses. The research will be helpful to the fashion industry to shift towards sustainability. The research can also be an eye opener for government and other stakeholders involved as regulatory bodies to design policies to support sustainability in fashion apparel industry.

### Social Implications

The research will benefit the society at large as a shift to sustainability by fashion apparel companies will lead to reduction in carbon footprint. The drift towards sustainable business practices by companies will protect the environment and help in attainment of sustainable development goals (SDGs). Attainment of sustainable development goals will lead to an environment that is sustainable and beneficial for the society at large and the people residing in it.

### Limitations of research

The study involves in-depth-analysis of a small sample which might not represent the whole population at large. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling therefore probabilities of bias might be there in the responses received.

### Future scope of research

Further research could be done to understand the perception of consumers towards sustainable fashion apparel brands. The cases of a few companies who have successfully launched sustainable fashion apparel brands could be analysed to find the factors responsible for the success of environment friendly brand.

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