



Review Article

## Consumer Perceptions on Sustainable Fashion and Strategy for Competitiveness

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### Abstract

Sustainable development is becoming known in the world over yet to popularize in textiles/clothing industries. There is enough and more work to be done in the field of sustainable development in textile/clothing industries. Energy and water conservation, carbon footprint reduction, fair trading etc. are some of the sustainable development areas textile/clothing industries can work. These matters must be brought to the notice of the public and make them aware the importance of the sustainable development. Whilst making consumers aware about the availability of sustainable fashion it is equally important that these products are made at competitive price. The competitiveness being the main concern among the industrialists, producing sustainable fashion at competitive price can be a daunting task. Therefore, this paper will briefly examine the consumer perception, competitiveness of sustainable fashion.

### Keywords

Sustainable fashion; Non-renewable; Competitiveness; Process improvement

### Introduction

The sustainable development is a very fancy term these days in the clothing industry. Its interpretation is difficult to fathom. Fair amount of ambiguity exists in this term. However, let us first understand what sustainable development means to us. Brundtland Report of the world commission on environment and development defines as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". In other words, what it means is a long-term strategy which include economy, social and environment resources.

Sustainable fashion should provide economic advantage to enterprises whilst providing ecological and social benefits to society in general. It should create multiple and shared values for different stakeholders [1]. Most companies are yet to improve the ecological and social performance thus improve sustainability performance.

Sustainable development is referred to the three pillars, such as economy, environment and social. Each of these pillars will have a value. And all the values together will lead to a goal which certainly is difficult to achieve in practice. The starting stage, perhaps, would be the awareness of ethical responsibility [2].

The world population has been growing and the climate change has become a threat to the society and this has caused to increase in carbon emissions [3]. Carbon emission means, the amount of greenhouse gases produced to support human activities and it is normally expressed in equivalent tons of carbon dioxide. If the fuel consumption is high, then carbon dioxide emission is high. This measure is also known as carbon foot print. As greenhouse gases, which includes CO<sub>2</sub>, in the atmosphere then shall increase the atmospheric temperature. This is known as global warming or climate change. A slight average temperature rise is good enough to cause a dramatic transformation of our planet. Weather patterns can change thus severe storms, floods, drought and wildfire can cause disasters to human life.

People are facing social sustainability challenges with global warming. There seems to be low level of trust in societies thus no effort to address the ecological challenges [4]. The textile industry which includes the clothing manufacturing has been one of the environmentally destructive industries in the world [5]. The clothing industry world over responds quickly to the consumer demand at competitive price, which is known as fast fashion and this cause high production and high consumption thus makes the industry extremely destructive [6]. As a result, more, greenhouse gases are produced. The textile industry use massive amounts of energy to produce textiles and also the chemicals used during the manufacturing of fabrics end up as toxins polluting the atmosphere, soil and water.

Fashion is an area of the economy that requires sustainability. The European Environmental Agency has ranked clothing, textiles and footwear fourth in the list of industries by impact on the environment [7]. The main reason for this position is "rise of fast fashion" due to increased production in textiles and clothing. These productions cause high energy consumption and attempts must be made to reduce emission of carbon to the atmosphere. It has been mentioned that only 20% of clothing is recycled or reused and large amounts of fashion products ends as waste in landfills or is incinerated [7]. It has been estimated that in the UK alone nearly 350,000 tons of clothing ends up as landfill each year.

As being said, "the current trend in the clothing industry is based on fast cycle of fashion trends". This means produce new consumer products that has shortened lifecycle and companies want to replenish their products at an increase pace [8]. The life cycle of consumer products dropped by 50%. However, the supply side of the clothing industry is aiming at low price and effective manufacturing for new value creation but sustainability is not in the framework. This is a concern. People must realize to address the sustainable development. If not future generations will face enormous ecological and social problems emanating from carbon foot print. It is interesting to note that Berchicci et al. [9] have said that successful green products must not have the environmental attributes but also should have fulfill market requirements. They have said that consumers' environmental concerns should be translated heavily into the product design. That means there is concern about ecological, social and economic activities. Tischner et al. [10] have identified four methods to the development of sustainability design, that is repair, refine, redesign and rethink. They say that new solutions must offer value through sustainability and reduce the environmental impact of products and consumption

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in total. They think 'repair' approach is to existing products and refine approach is to increase the eco-efficiency of existing products. The redesign approach is to use new technologies and materials to reduce the environmental impact of products whilst rethink is to offer breakthrough for new lifestyles, the ways of living and doing things and to fulfill consumer needs in a sustainable manner.

One of the major environmental problems caused by the clothing industry is with dyeing and finishing processes, garment washing, water and chemical consumption, solid waste arising from clothing manufacturing, the disposal of garments at the end of their life cycle and direct CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [11]. Some factories discharge lot of wastewater and sometimes they are difficult to clean. Therefore, controlling water pollution cannot achieve a win-win situation [12]. Sometimes the mills increase the freshwater consumptions and discharges large amount of wastewater. This makes it difficult to ensure to reduce water consumption. The method of using genetic algorithm for optimizing production and this helps to minimize the water consumption and reduce the wastewater discharge. We need to change to new ways of doing things, thus safeguarding of individual resources. For example, holistic environmental protection and people should lead to a consensus – oriented common responsibility.

There is some interest to bring in sustainability to drive clothing industry to an ethically responsible and producing no greenhouse gases, pollution and a perfect sustainability. The most disturbing stories emanating from human right issues, forced child labour, low wages, excessive work time etc. are seriously moving out thus creating a true paradigm shift towards environmentally friendly business [13].

The triple bottom line concept introduced by John Elkington in 1994, which is now known as profits, people and planets is a universal method for building economic, social and environmental resources while fostering sustainable livelihoods [13].

Clothing manufacturing and consumption creates pollutants. Manufacturing process emits harmful items such as pesticides, heavy metals, and chemicals to the atmosphere, water and soil. People absorb some of these and the rest is released to the natural environment [13]. The release of these pollutants to the environment alters the biological, chemical and physical processes. The amounts of waste released to the natural environment is so large it cannot self-regulate and maintain equilibrium effectively. Therefore, there is often imbalance in the natural ecosystems [14].

## Sustainable Fashion

Let us understand sustainable fashion. It is a clothing product which is manufactured according to fair trade practices where there is no sweatshop labour condition and does not pollute the environment and garments are produced in an ethical production system [15]. Fair trade practices are less popular within the clothing industry but more particularly among developing countries. Fair trade products are from developing countries thus an opportunity to improve their industry. Fair trade is a social agenda where their goal is to help produces in developing countries and making their employees a better living. A study was carried out in Sri Lanka by the present author (unpublished) to understand the working conditions and practices in the clothing industry. It was revealed that 30% of the small and medium factories surveyed was not to the accepted standard of good working condition. Their standard of living was poor, i.e. they lack welfare facilities, a good living wage for everyone, good atmospheric working condition, waste control, savings etc. The companies must

be able to meet the basic employee requirements. Before considering sustainability, factories must comply with factory labour regulations. Leaders in factories must pay emphasis on employees. The workers and people at large must be educated about sustainable fashion. Sustainable fashion concept is more comprehensive and advanced in scope. Those concerned have raised quires regarding Sustainable fashion. It has been reported that people have asked, is it ethically manufactured? Does it use organic or natural raw material? Does it last long? [15].

Some of the customers are beginning to demand sustainable fashion products. In response to it the clothing manufacturers are changing into more environmentally friendly products. For example, Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions, water-based product manufacturing, energy consumption etc. are being gradually reduced. Today, eco fashions or sustainable fashions is not merely a short- term trend but one could realize it for many seasons [16]. In these products, there are aspects of environment friendly raw materials and socially accountable production processes. In today's context these can be considered as unconventional processes. Therefore, sustainable fashion can be expensive than conventional clothing products but will it be possible to maintain such good practices?

At this juncture, it is necessary to examine the viability of sustainable fashion. A recent survey carried out among young working employees in Western division of Colombo, Sri Lanka, reveals that there is no significant interest on sustainable fashions. Further, it showed that people are concerned about cost of product rather than its suitability and environment impact that it creates for future generations to come. When probe into why such concerns coming in to decision making process, it may be due to lack of knowledge about sustainable fashion and not being able to pay higher price for such merchandise. This is true not only to a developing country but also to developed nations because this sustainable fashion is still being experimented in the market. It is the author's opinion that it has been long enough in the market but it seems that sustainable fashion yet to be known among the young people.

Despite being non-supportive to sustainability it is interesting to note that in Italy 42 textile/clothing companies have detoxified and made sustainable innovative business models and this could lead to fashion industry to move toward sustainability [17]. It should be mentioned that the price of a sustainable or socially conscious and eco-friendly fashion should not be more than the average market price and should be affordable. Kozlowski et al. [18] said that fashion brands has a small collection of sustainable collections such as organic outfits but research is yet to show what a sustainable fashion brand entails and how its progress could be measured. Therefore, sustainability let that be in fashion or otherwise has been discussed at length but still most of us not aware of its future.

## Consumer Perception

Shen et al. [15] describes that US consumers pay attention to price than ethical behavior in the market place. Further, it is being said that American consumers pay respect and interest to ethical purchasing but they are not willing to compromise on their essential attributes thus make them resistant to change [19]. Broman et al. [4] has mentioned that although young adults think green they do not act in a sustainable manner in the market place. Hence, it should be urged youngsters to optimize the textile chain ecologically and to develop a consciousness for the textiles and clothing industry [20].

Like all clothing, socially conscious and eco-friendly fashion purchase decision must be understood by the clothing companies to effectively market such special products. Research suggests that clothing companies should provide an interesting and enjoyable retail atmosphere to attract young working employees who are inclined toward environmentally friendly clothing products [21]. Also, there is evidence that consumers are not very keen to purchase sustainable fashion because they provide very little choices, they have aesthetic and functional disadvantages, consumers lack information about the product and consumers are not sure about the real benefit to the environment [22]. Some research findings explain that environmentally prudent consumptions respond favorably to green brands [23] but consumers' environmental knowledge and consciousness regarding green clothing products are yet to receive a positive response [24]. As such, without a thorough understanding of consumers thinking and perceptions on sustainable fashion it is difficult to believe gaining a competitive advantage for clothing companies [21]. Most consumers are price oriented and looking for value for money. Today's market is so competitive thus difficult to believe that consumers would embrace sustainable fashion so easily.

## Sustainable Fashion Retail

It is necessary to know where are the markets most likely to consider sustainable fashion products. Research reveals that some consumers are motivated to purchase more environmentally preferable goods made of green raw materials [13]. The clothing companies also must try to inform consumers more effectively about their products and create additional visibility through targeted media campaigns [13].

Sustainable retailing in the fashion industry exhibits a huge gap between developed and developing markets. There is not enough research carried out on sustainability in the retail sector. Therefore, future research to focus on sustainable fashion retailing in developing and emerging markets.

Sustainable development is still not familiar with the masses and therefore, the consumer finds it difficult to fathom its usefulness could be the reason for not seen sustainable fashion in the retail shop shelves. Goods must be displayed freely in the shop for the consumer to get attracted. There is a need to induce some incentive to make consumer buy sustainable fashion. Retailers must make a concerted effort to promote sustainable fashion if we are to realize the benefits of sustainable development. Perhaps, an incentive scheme for retailers for displaying and encouraging to buy sustainable fashion by the government may be useful. Retail organizations' Association will need to drive sustainable fashion and make it popularize among consumers.

## Competitive Strategy

Today clothing business in the world over is very competitive. One reason is there are so many players in the market place thus offering the merchandise at competitive price. Therefore, sustainable fashion needs to establish a different image if it were to remain in the market effectively. The consumers should know the importance/contribution/value of sustainable fashion. People should be educated about the difficulty in getting the sustainable fashion status to a garment. In this way, the consumer will know s/he going to buy a garment which is made with special care. The vital information regarding sustainability must be available with the garment so that consumer can quickly

learn about sustainable fashion. Whilst building a very convincing brand image to the sustainable fashion, efforts must be taken to keep the manufacturing costs at competitive level. Towards this, the government can offer a rebate to manufacturers for sustainable fashion so that its price can be in par with the conventional garments.

Also, where ever possible re-cycle products must be used. Most packing material can be re-cycle material. A concerted effort need to be taken to reduce waste in the process. Environmentally friendly material must be negotiated at competitive price. Also, environmentally friendly products can be a good marketing strategy [25]. Process improvement techniques need to be applied continuously to keep the product at competitive price.

Another interesting way to meet innovative sustainability would be to increase the life span of the garment so that it would not be thrown into the bin too early. There is a new strategy to increase the longevity of a garment. In other words, to increase its durability and ease of repair [26]. How it works is as follows, Eileen Fisher is a UK based eco-fashion brand and encourages customers to bring back their lightly worn Eileen Fisher garments to be cleaned, refashioned and sold again under its 'Green Eileen' program [7]. This Eco-Cycle program will prolong the life of the garment. If the same garment can be redesigned and use, it becomes a living fashion garment, designed to have an extended use.

## Conclusion

In the contemporary times the clothing products are being sold at very competitive price hence manufacturing clothing products are not an easy task. This situation may have come in to being at least due to the demand of consumers who are looking for value for money. This is not to say people are asking for low cost clothing but for quality products with lot of features at competitive price. Add insult to injury, the manufacturers and customers are also continuously raising the standard to sustain the market share. Therefore, clothing manufacturing has become survival of the fittest. The consumer gets the better part of this exercise. In this circumstance, sustainable fashion can find it difficult to penetrate in to this competitive world market. The biggest challenge for sustainable fashion would be to get the right attractive price for their merchandise. At the same time needs to focus on consumer awareness on sustainable fashion if we are to get this on board. The consumers must be able to measure the value of sustainable fashion so that they will know each item they buy the contribution made to the society at large. A worldwide campaign may be required to popularize among consumers to progress to a worthwhile cause.

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