



Discussing sustainability in the fashion industry

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Introduction

What is meant by sustainability in the fashion industry? Sustainability in the fashion industry means ensuring the well-being of the community, its consumers, and the environment. Therefore, sustainable fashion ideally means leaving the environment unharmed in the creation, usage, and disposal of its products. The fashion industry's boundaries are global and therefore its vast supply chain other than being complex is often opaque. Because of this, there are very few brands who know where their factors of production come from within the supply chain, and even fewer attempt to reduce their carbon footprint. The lack of transparency in the global supply chain of the industry implies an estimate of its carbon impact of about 10% of the overall global carbon emissions. Fast fashion has made clothing garments cheap and thus, available to everyone, and immense production and consumption. Therefore, the life cycle of many garments comes with environmental costs such as water pollution from untreated dyes and microplastics.

The fashion industry generates 20% of all wastewater and 10% of all greenhouse gasses annually which is higher than all maritime shipping and international flights combined. This is because the products used to produce garments, such as acrylic, nylon, and polyester textiles, in order to make them affordable, durable, and lightweight, shed tiny microplastic waste when washing, polluting the water supply for animals and fish. Add to this the harm that wasteful consumption habits cause to the environment. According to the United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, "the equivalent of one garbage truck load of textiles is landfilled or burned every second." 85% of textiles are effectively wasted rather than being repurposed or upcycled (turned into new items or garments) in methods that could promote sustainability in the fashion sector.

Definition of Key Terms

Carbon footprint

A measure of the amount of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere because of a particular individual or community.

Core country

This is a country that is important in the core of worldwide economic systems, often industrialized and capitalist ("Definitions for core"). This country often holds many brands' headquarters.

Landfilled

An area of land designated specifically for the burying of rubbish in order to dispose of it. This technique is particularly utilized to fill in and restore excavated pits.

Life cycle

The life cycle of garments includes their products from raw resource extraction to dyeing and manufacturing, shipping, selling, and disposal.

Supply chain

A system of supplying resources that covers all the steps from manufacturing to delivering goods, services, or products.

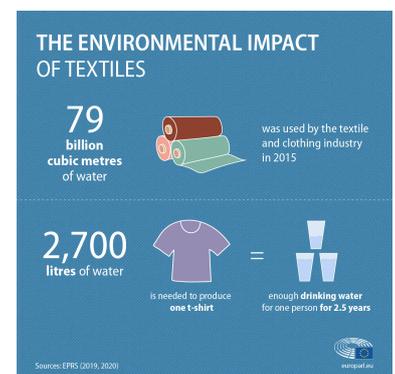
Sustainability

The practice of avoiding depletion of resources found on earth in order to preserve these resources for future generations, and avoid an ecological imbalance.

General Overview

Most discouragingly, rising environmental concerns increased transparency, and NGO tenacity has coincided with growing environmental devastation. It's not like "sustainable" isn't a concern for the industry of fashion. The current zeitgeist may be seen in the promises made by quick fashion companies like Primark, which sells \$3.50 T-shirts, to "make more sustainable clothes affordable for all." However, a

Figure 1: The impact of textiles, EU



number of standard business practices are failing to produce the desired results.

Transparency

By 2004, all fashion companies started presenting their environmental, social, and governance performance more intensely. However, with the increased production of garments and materials, it is hard to understand what companies are truly reaching their margin for progress and which aren't doing what they say they are. In fact, most reports do not quantify the full carbon emissions of fashion brands and remain unseen by external parties.

Recycling

Recycling is oversold in the sense that even though it would be a good solution to limit carbon emissions from the fashion industry, it is not as easy as it sounds to do. The variability of the supply leads to the inability to plan design at scale. Furthermore, there are limits to recycling such as technology, limited infrastructure, low-quality fiber resulting from recycling (as recycling ruins the quality of fibers), and high costs. Due to these reasons, less than 1% of garments are recycled. Recycling, other than limiting carbon emissions to a short extent, actually increases consumption since recycling bins in magazines encourage people to throw away their clothes guilt-free. However, most of these clothes end up in landfills in poor countries. Furthermore, some studies have shown that the environmental cost of creating and disposing of clothes is almost the same as transforming them into a new pair.

Bio-based materials

The "next-gen materials business" is another response to the expanding environmental impact of the fashion industry. Innovators are currently fermenting and producing bio-based alternatives to conventional synthetics made from fossil fuels and materials sourced from cattle (such as leather) (e.g., polyester). Some of these new bio-based fabrics can be designed to include performance benefits in addition to biodegradability and other attributes. Sadly, these innovations are hindered by high beginning costs (compared to well-established alternatives that benefit from scale economies), high capital requirements (to fund new production sites), opposition to change, and the absence of externality pricing (that allow fossil fuel-derived alternatives to be priced to exclude their true social costs).

Resale and Rental

The thrift industry has always been fairly common. In fact, sales at conventional thrift and donation stores are two times the online thrift market. However, both online and in physical shops,

most stores reject most of the used garments proposed to them which is likely to increase even more as people present cheap, low-quality clothes from the rising fast fashion industries. With resale efforts, carbon emissions can only be limited by 0.01%. On the other hand, the rental industry of garments pioneered only to a limited extent and is rather new. Founded over the last decades with more than \$500 million, the rental industry expanded to accessories, kids' apparel, and physical retail. Rental only reduces carbon emissions by 3%. It is not yet clear if these industries can be beneficial as, for example, the rental industry remains unprofitable.

Environmental impact

The prevalence of polyester in the apparel industry has a variety of negative repercussions on the environment. One is that it takes a lot of energy to create polyester. Three times as much carbon dioxide than cotton was released into the atmosphere in 2015 from the production of polyester for apparel. Additionally, after each wash and use, synthetic materials like polyester shed microscopic particles of plastic. These tiny pieces of plastic, known as microplastics, harm animals that consume them by preventing them from growing and reproducing. They also damage waterways, oceans, and land. According to Australian scientists, the ocean floor contains around 12.55 million tons of microplastics and macroplastics. The amount of clothing and footwear trash produced annually by Americans increased dramatically from over 1.4 million tons in 1960 to over 13 million tons in 2018, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Only 13% of that apparel was recycled into new garments or used for other purposes, leaving over 70% of it in landfills. Given that donated clothing frequently ends up in landfills, whether in the United States or in nations like Ghana and Chile, such numbers may be underestimated.

Timeline of Key Events

The timeline below covers the most important innovations in the fashion industry as well as political events which hold importance in discussing sustainable fashion (Dawson-Elli) ("A Brief")(Thanhauser).

Date	Event
1920s	Consumer culture is introduced to the western world
1970	The hippie movement first introduces sustainable fashion
1980's	Mass production rises in industrialized countries
1989	The World Fair Trade Organization is created by 70 countries

1991	The first criticism of poor working conditions is given to Nike
2002	The Global Organic Textile Standard is formed
2007	The term “slow fashion” is coined by Kate Fletcher
1st of October 2009	200 countries form the “Sustainable Apparel Coalition
2011	The UN forms the “Alliance for sustainable fashion”
July 2011	Greenpeace starts a campaign to eliminate hazardous chemicals and discharges
2012	The “Materials Sustainability Index” is created
2017	The Copenhagen Fashion Summit is held

Major Parties Involved

France

One could call France a “fashion powerhouse”, as it holds many luxury brands such as Chanel, Dior, Louis Vuitton, and Givenchy (Joiner). Despite this, France is still considered one of the most sustainable countries in the functioning of their fashion industry (Joiner). As many large fashion companies reside in France, the government has put an emphasis on the importance of sustainability, especially for international companies (Joiner). The French government banned the disposal and burning of unused clothing items, a great step forward for sustainable fashion which has inspired countries such as Ireland and Poland (Joiner). France has also increased prices for non-recyclable plastics and fabrics, hoping to put an end to single-use plastic in products (Joiner). While many international luxury brands are not following the regulations set by the French government, there have been over 200 smaller brands setting the example of following French regulations. All of this change is especially evident due to the willingness of French consumers to buy sustainable clothing.

United States of America (USA)

Many developed countries, specifically the USA holding 45,000 large international companies, are the residing place for international companies, making it of utmost importance for these countries to have regulations regarding fashion sustainability (“Fashion sustainability”). With sustainable fashion being a more discussed topic in the modern day, the USA has been pushed to implement regulations on what can go into clothing and how it should be produced; however, many of these regulations have not had a great effect, as consumers continue to buy from brands who are not fully following regulations (Joiner). Some states in the USA have adopted the Garment Worker

Protection Act, which ensures that garment workers are paid fairly ("Fashion sustainability"). Many bills are still in discussion regarding sustainable fashion in the USA such as the FABRIC Act ("Fashion sustainability"). Despite these regulations, many brands continue with unsustainable clothing practices, and therefore it is important that the USA is pushed to create stricter regulations regarding the sustainability of fashion, and methods of ensuring these regulations are met (Joiner).

United Kingdom (UK)

As a core country, the UK, like the USA, holds many international large-scale brands. Due to this, and the UN Sustainability Goal of Combating Climate Change, the UK has tried to take action on sustainability in the fashion industry on multiple accounts in the past, such as in 2010 when it created a detailed sustainable clothing action plan ("Sustainable clothing"). These attempts at sustainability in the fashion industry have been quite successful, with many brands stepping towards sustainable textiles, and material recycling (Fortune). Major retailers have made steps towards reducing their ecological footprints under the UK's regulations, a large step forward in terms of sustainability of communication with the government with large brands. The UK has been leading the way for sustainable fashion with new technologies aimed at creating new materials for clothing, and material recycling (Fortune).

Switzerland

Switzerland is the most sustainable country in the world, not only when it comes to fashion, but also in regard to food, waste management, transportation, and agriculture (Joiner). As an independent country, much of the fashion industry is nationwide, with many inhabitants shopping from nationally produced clothing, rather than larger international companies, which are oftentimes much less sustainable (Joiner). Switzerland has created the national objective of sustainability and its development, under the Swiss Confederation, with the focus being on fair trade and organic products ("Understanding of Sustainability"). Switzerland not only takes the lead for sustainable textile production but is paving the way for the development of new sustainable alternatives to the fabrics in the fashion industry ("The fashion").

China

As one of the largest production companies of clothing, making up for 32% of clothing imported to the EU and USA, China holds an important role when discussing sustainable fashion, as the regulations and rules set for it, will mostly impact them and other clothing producers such as Bangladesh, Turkey, and India ("Where do our clothes"). In total, China has about 44,000 textile production companies, whose annual revenue is about 303.2 billion USD (Ma). The clothing industry,

as well as other production industries, are the driving forces of China's economy (Ma). Due to this, however, there is often a focus on production rate over the production process, causing ethical and environmental concerns. When discussing the issue of sustainability of fashion, it is important to keep in mind that many developing countries' economies depend on clothing production, such as China.

Possible Solutions

The most pressing issue in sustainable fashion is the manufacturing processes of clothing and the materials used for them. The UN should address both of these issues, keeping in mind the different standpoints of less economically developed countries as well as more economically developed countries. Many member nations already have their own regulations on the topic at hand, some of which could be adapted to all or most member nations, making these regulations international.

There are many possibilities for different regulations that countries could agree on for the issue of sustainable fashion, which could also help in solving the issue. These regulations can be discussed and adjusted to fit the nation's needs and to ensure that all nations are in agreement with them so that they keep to the regulation. An example of such a regulation could be implemented worldwide garment labels for clothing which would describe what can be done with pieces of clothing and how the clothing can be recycled (Simon). Another regulation could be implemented to minimize the amount of clothing that a large-scale company can make per month, to ensure that less clothing is being thrown away or burnt (Kiko). There could be regulations made to minimize the amount of clothing that nations can import, and minimize carbon emissions. When discussing these regulations it is crucial that they apply to all nations involved in the fashion industry as many brands that originate from developed countries, often has production in less developed countries, without regulations on clothing.

While there is an issue with regulations that are not being put in place or enforced, there is also the question of the consumers of a country. The fashion industry adjusts what it makes to what the consumers want, so targeting the consumers directly would be a good way to tackle the issue of sustainability. Many consumers favor "fast fashion" over keeping their garments for longer periods, so helping shift consumers from cheap short-term throw-away garments to more long-term garments would help solve the issue at hand (Kiko). This can be done through media, promotion, or

regulations. Another way of helping combat “fast fashion” would be to bring more awareness to 2nd hand clothing, and clothing donation (Kiko). Reinforcing the idea of buying only as much clothing as you need to consumers would also be beneficial.

Other general policies or programs that could be put into place are fabric recycling, focusing on making it more available all over the world, as well as pushing more brands to start implementing it. Investing in developing new manufacturing processes and materials could also help in preventing environmental strain by minimizing the amount of water and hazardous chemicals that are used throughout the manufacturing process of clothing.

While this does not directly have to do with the topic of sustainability in the fashion industry, delegates can also think about the ethical concerns that clothing manufacturing brings with it such as child labor, low wages, and dangerous working environments when discussing the topic at hand.

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