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19 A Sustainable Business Model for the Fashion Sector

Abstract: The fashion industry is among the most polluting in the world. Hence, fashion products lead to major global challenges, and new trends have arisen to address such challenges. Among these approaches are sustainable fashion business models devised by various companies worldwide. To shed light on the subject, this chapter briefly reviews the history of the sustainable fashion industry. Then, it discusses different types of sustainable fashion and suggests a classification. Subsequently, sustainable business models for fashion are discussed based on some facts and figures from multiple cases. Finally, the chapter concludes with some remarks on this area and provides directions for future research.

Keywords: sustainability, business model, fashion, sustainable fashion, fashion industry

Introduction

Although there is not one universally accepted definition of sustainable fashion, the concept has been proposed as a response to consumerism and pollution (Henninger et al., 2016). Sustainability includes taking employees into account as well as the environment. There is no consensus as to how many sustainable actions a company must engage in before calling itself sustainable.

In contrast to bi-annual collections of the past, Claxton & Kent (2020) note that nowadays, some firms present more than ten collections per year. Textile recycling accounts for only approximately 15% of total production each year; as much as 85% might end up in landfills (Nodoushani et al., 2016). When consumers throw away clothing, it is not only a waste of money and resources, but materials can take considerable time to decompose in a landfill (Gupta et al., 2020; Salamzadeh et al., 2021). An environmental issue is that textiles produce methane gas and leak toxic chemicals into groundwater and soil during decomposition. Many people do not realise this (Dabas & Whang, 2022).

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Sustainable fashion attempts to minimise harm to our environment and is sometimes entangled with green materials. Clothing and textiles can be bulk collected, packaged and reprocessed into raw materials to produce new apparel or non-apparel products (Hassan et al., 2022).

Some fashion houses are using artificial leather, opening new doors to the fashion industry (Dana et al., 2022). This move is towards a cleaner and greener future. In fact, sustainable fashion aims at creative designs in harmony with professional values and high quality (Grazzini et al., 2021). Many recent movements are accelerating this trend. For instance, actress Emma Watson recently put sustainable fashion in the spotlight. She made headlines when she wore a Calvin Klein dress to the Met Gala. This dress was made from recycled bottles. Watson pointed out that the fashion industry is the second largest pollutant of fresh water on the planet. She also mentioned that plastic is a huge pollutant in our world (Shrivastava et al., 2021).

A Brief History of Sustainable Fashion

It is not obvious when exactly the sustainable fashion movement was initiated, but this movement has been associated with environmental activism for more than 30 years. Nevertheless, the intermittent fashion crisis is a problem in today's modern world (Kabir, 2022). During the first half of the twentieth century, clothing was much more valuable and expensive. In that period, people used to repair and wear their old clothes rather than buy new ones (McKeown & Shearer, 2019). There were also tailor shops, where made-to-measure garments were made, and fashion cycles moved much more slowly. As technological advancements and globalisation accelerated during the second half of the twentieth century, the demand for mass production of fashionable clothes rose exponentially. Thus, clothing manufacturers filled their pockets with money, and people were satisfied with their passion for buying clothes (Testa et al., 2021). In the meantime, no research was conducted on the consequences of this kind of clothes production on the earth. Even the United Nations did not use the word “sustainable” until 1987.

Yet, microplastics had polluted the sea, and humankind was already destroying the environment (Khandual & Pradhan, 2019). A few pioneers, including Esprit and Patagonia, began considering the environment during the 1990s (Kim et al., 2020; Woodside & Fine, 2019).

Later, important issues, such as the scandal of the Nike fashion warehouse in 1991 (De Brito et al., 2008) and the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh in 2013, drew the attention of many people around the world to the problems that the fashion industry brought with it (Firdaus & Rahmanillah, 2022). Since it is the nature of the fashion industry to constantly change and update, this industry continues to damage the environment more than other industries, such as the food, health and beauty industries (Khan, 2019). But fortunately, the mindset of many consumers has changed to a pref-

erence for more sustainable products. It is time for fashion industry brands to change their behaviours and move towards protecting the environment. Also, governments should consider the fashion industry as one of the harmful factors in their discussions about climate change (Lohmeyer et al., 2022).

Sustainable fashion is a movement and process in which clothes are designed and produced in an environmentally friendly manner (Cooke et al., 2022). In this approach, not only fabric and clothing production is considered, but social, cultural, environmental and financial systems are also taken into account. In fact, sustainable fashion is exactly the opposite of intermittent (fast) fashion (Hammer & Plugor, 2019). In this fashion, instead of encouraging people to buy more clothes from retailers and brands, they lead people to buy higher quality and more durable clothes. Additionally, unlike seasonal fashion, sustainable fashion often motivates customers to use the clothes they buy for a longer period to greatly reduce the destructive effects of the fashion industry on the environment (West et al., 2021). Proponents of sustainable fashion believe that the fashion industry can operate differently than it is doing now and seek to create more moral values and wealth for society and, ultimately, the world economy instead of individual profiteering (Toghraee et al., 2022).

Towards Sustainability

Several actions can decrease impact on the environment, including (see Figure 19.1):

- (i) **Sustainable materials:** one way to make fashion products sustainable is to use environmentally friendly materials to make these products. Synthetic fabrics can be very harmful to the environment, but natural raw materials such as cotton, hemp and bamboo can be sustainably grown and processed without causing significant damage to the environment (Khandual & Pradhan, 2019; Shen, 2014).
- (ii) **Sustainable labour practices:** even inherently sustainable materials like cotton can harm the environment if unfair practices are used to produce textiles. Therefore, sustainable brands must ensure that they process their textile products without using toxic chemicals, and with the least harm to the environment as possible (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Vincent, 2017).
- (iii) **Sustainable business models:** an essential aspect of the sustainable fashion industry is related to fair trade. Ensuring that textile workers are paid decent wages and work in safe conditions are major concerns of many sustainable brands (Kozłowski et al., 2016; Todeschini et al., 2017).

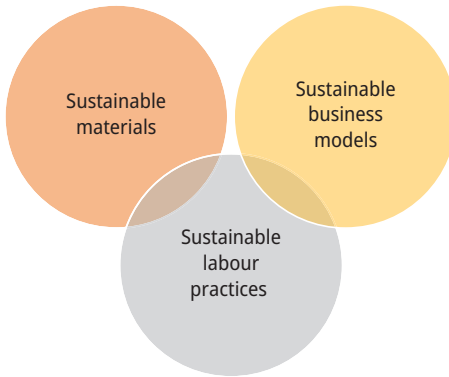


Figure 19.1: Towards sustainability.

Sustainable Business Models for Fashion

The fashion sector has witnessed a variety of attempts to implement sustainable business models; relevant buzzwords include: high-quality products, no-season products, second-hand/ pre-loved products, repairing, custom-made, fair trade, renting and exchanging (Pal & Gander, 2018). Generally, high-quality but second-hand clothes can be bought at a lower price (McNeill & Moore, 2015). However, in the custom-made method, a person pays more for a high-quality garment tailored to their body (Nosratabadi et al., 2019; Vincent, 2017). Sustainable fashion business models can look at initiatives such as: (i) using organic, natural and biodegradable fabrics (biodegradable materials are broken down by microorganisms into materials found in nature); (ii) using recycled fibres; (iii) using non-toxic colours; (iv) using zero-waste design and pattern cutting methods; (v) packaging without the use of plastic materials; (vi) applying local or traditional environmental friendly craftsmanship techniques; (vii) producing limited collections that are suitable for more seasons; (viii) producing with circular economy features (such as clothing that can be rented or recycled); and (ix) producing quality clothes, which can later be sold as second-hand.

Nowadays, technology is on the path of significant improvements and has made human life easier (Boons & Lüdeke-Freund, 2013). Hopefully, this development can contribute to sustainable solutions for the fashion industry (Olatubosun et al., 2021). In fact, by using the latest technologies, new opportunities have been discovered for the production of sustainable raw materials and the recycling of worn clothes (Pal, 2017). The following paragraphs present some relevant business models to produce and recycle products to make the fashion industry more sustainable (Figure 19.2).

(i) 3D Virtual Sampling Business Models

In the past, for the cycle of designing, selling and buying clothes, physical sampling of clothes was necessary. These samples provided the designers and sales teams with a

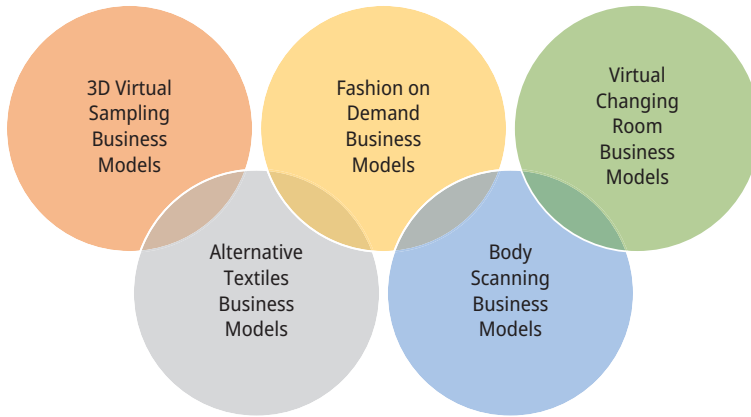


Figure 19.2: Examples of sustainable business models for fashion.

detailed final product plan (Pal, 2017). To produce a final sample of a product, sometimes 10 or more samples were needed, and the samples had to be carefully checked and measured until the design team was satisfied and the production could begin. Physical sampling lengthens the garment and fabric production process, but 3D technology can help. The waste of materials, energy and transportation during the designing and construction phases is significantly reduced. The entire design process, from pattern design to sampling and product display, can be done using 3D virtual design. Another advantage of this technology is reducing the cost of materials and the time required for physical samples. Simultaneously, virtual sampling can help to digitise the clothing production model based on demand and customer orientation.

(ii) Alternative Textiles Business Models

As mentioned, producing various fibres and textiles takes many resources, including water. For example, producing a cotton shirt takes the equivalent amount of water consumed by an individual over 2.5 years. In contrast, synthetic materials such as nylon and polyester consume less water during production but emit dangerous greenhouse gases (Todeschini et al., 2017). Some eco-friendly alternative fibres use fewer resources during their production process and are biodegradable (see Chapter 19 in this book). These natural fibres, including hemp, bamboo and ramie, are good substitutes for cotton, as long as they are ethically and sustainably farmed. Also, alternatives such as Pinatex leather, which is obtained from pineapple leaf fibres, or Muskin leather, which is produced from mushrooms, can take the place of natural leather (Pandit et al., 2020). Thus, such new technology-based business models can help us use these natural fibres and turn them into the fabric.

(iii) Fashion on Demand Business Models

In order to reduce the waste of materials and waste caused by the mass production of clothes, some manufacturers have moved to produce products based on customer demand and needs, and this has become possible with e-commerce (Caetano, 2022; Christen, 2018). Manufacturers now can take product orders using virtual space and then start production based on them. In this way, only what has been sold will be produced, reducing overproduction (Papachristou et al., 2022).

(iv) Body Scanning Business Models

Another shortcoming of clothing manufacturers is not having the exact size and measurements of their end consumers. They usually produce a collection of clothes in standard sizes, which do not fit every consumer, and therefore will be returned or not sold. In some cases, these products end up in landfills (Berger-Grabner, 2018). But today, with the technology of body scanning with a mobile phone, the remote buyer can send one's body measurements to the manufacturer, and the desired clothes can then be prepared and sent according to the measurements of the applicant. This clothing production method can lower the amount of returned products, and prevent product waste (Coscieme et al., 2022).

(v) Virtual Changing Room Business Models

Until recently there was no other option than trying on garments physically, in order to know whether the fit was fine. The need to try garments on posed a problem when online shopping was introduced – but the virtual 3D changing room technology has come up with a solution (Kannaiah & Shanthi, 2015). For instance, the buyer can stand in front of a mirror which is, in fact, computer software, and this software records thousands of information points about the person's body. Then it prepares a 3D image of these points and the desired dress. In this way, the buyer can decide if the garment is suitable for them before purchasing it (Fernandes & Morais, 2021).

Examples of the Sustainable Fashion Business Models

Creating a sustainable fashion brand is desirable for business success in current markets. Given that how people buy fashion products is changing, focusing on buying green and ethical fashion has become a key consideration almost worldwide. Plenty of clothing manufacturers can help newcomers find organic and ethical fabrics for their clothing. However, there are also other aspects to consider when creating a sustainable fashion business model. These can include:

- (i) Pricing:** generally, sustainable initiatives such as using sustainable fabric are more expensive. An explanation can be that the processes used to make this fab-

ric do not lead to fast and large production, and substitutes for previously used toxins can be more expensive. Thus, generally, the final product will end up being more expensive. Even though customers are sensitive to higher prices, creating a brand identity that focuses on the benefits will help differentiate the brand in the marketplace (Zhang & Wang, 2021).

- (ii) **Ethical principles:** the act of designing an eco-friendly fashion business model should be based on ethical principles and standards consistent with the target audience. Obtaining certification from eco-friendly associations can benefit the brand identity as a company works to build a loyal customer base (Niinimäki, 2015; Shen et al., 2013).
- (iii) **Transition:** transitioning from a general clothing brand to a sustainable fashion brand is daunting. Such a transformation requires a lot of sacrifices and making hard decisions, but it will be worth it in the long run. To achieve a more sustainable product line, many fashion brands start with their raw materials. It is logical for companies to look for the cheapest materials to protect their profit and pricing, but as it is now, cheap is rarely the most sustainable solution. In fact, the cheaper the textile product, the more likely it is to be produced with unsustainable methods (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). Even though working with sustainable textile producers may reduce gross profit in the short term, sustainable clothing commands higher prices. Customers are generally willing to pay more for products they know have been sustainably produced.

Well-known companies that have implemented sustainable fashion business models include *Levi's*, one of the world's leading jeans-producing brands. It can take about 8,000 litres of water to make a pair of jeans, from raw fibre to finished product. *Levi's* has accomplished using up to 96% less water to make one pair of pants. This brand also focuses on other sustainable processes to minimise water consumption wherever necessary (Testa et al., 2021). Another example is *Alternative Apparel*, which delivers basic casual-wear collections based on sustainable approaches. The company uses natural cotton and recycled materials to produce t-shirts, hoodies, leggings, etc. Additionally, the brand follows strong packaging and strict ethical standards to support green fashion (Gyde & McNeill, 2021). Moreover, *PACT* is a brand that works with sustainability by certifying its products. It has partnered with Fairtrade USA, Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) and SimpliZero to assure good working conditions, working with organic production methods and with lowering its carbon footprint. *PACT* produces women's, men's and children's wear (Pérez-Bou & Cantista, 2022).

In response to the consumer demand for sustainable fashion, several prominent brands have also announced new clothing lines and initiatives focusing on sustainability (Dabas & Whang, 2022). For instance, among several other initiatives and commitments, H&M has set a goal to use only recycled or more sustainable-sourced materials by 2030. Helena Helmersson, H&M's former head of sustainability, who joined as the CEO in February 2020, signalled the fashion retailer's commitment to

taking sustainability seriously. The Levi's Wellthread x Outerknown collection features products made from recycled materials and jackets with detachable hardware to make them easier to recycle. With this collection, they also introduced their cottonised hemp fibre, which they were able to make almost as soft as real cotton with new technology (Testa et al., 2021). In addition, the company's water <Less(R) denim line was created to reduce the amount of water used to produce some of the brand's most popular styles.

Platforms such as Depop, ThredUp and Poshmark, which allow people to buy and sell second-hand clothing, have grown in popularity as sustainability becomes more important to consumers. ThredUp has about 2.4 million listings from more than 35,000 brands and reported a revenue of \$186 million in 2020; the company went public in March 2021. Online second-hand shopping has grown 69% between 2019 and 2021, compared to a 15% decline in the wider retail market, according to online consignment platform ThredUp. According to industry analyst consensus CB Insights, the used clothing market is expected to grow to \$64 billion by 2028. Big retailers are catching on. In August 2020, London-based retailer Selfridges announced a sustainability initiative that includes eco-friendly clothing, a clothing rental service and a thrift store. H&M's Cos brand has also launched its own resale business. Meanwhile, fashion brands such as Anna Sui, Rodarte and Christopher Raeburn have launched sales on the resale platform Depop to attract Gen Z shoppers (Ma & Riggio, 2021).

Additionally, artificial intelligence and advanced technologies may play a role in the quest for sustainability in fashion (Hassan et al., 2022). For example, better demand forecasting can enable more efficient use of materials, reducing the volume of wasted resources – a problem in fashion supply chains. H&M launched an AI division in 2018 to tackle exactly this problem. H&M is using AI in other ways to make its retail operations more efficient and sustainable. The Swedish retail giant relies on algorithms to predict market demand, avoid overproduction of clothing and set competitive prices. The company also uses AI-based predictive analytics to automate warehouses and offer faster deliveries in Europe. Another area these technologies can improve is efficiency, which is currently a significant source of waste in the fashion industry, especially the e-commerce sector. According to reverse logistics company Happy Returns, customers return many clothing and shoes purchased online. With data and AI capabilities, retailers can more effectively match shopping behaviour and customer preferences, potentially reducing the overall number of returns.

Finally, alternative materials – such as plant-based and lab-grown leather – can play an important role in making the fashion industry more sustainable. There are many technology-based efforts in this field. For example, Modern Meadow, a US-based biotech company that has raised more than \$180 million, ferments special types of yeast to grow collagen – a key component of normal leather – and then uses this protein to process the creation of leather material. Bolt Threads is another startup that uses proteins collected from wild mushrooms to create a leather-like fabric called

Mylo. Bolt Threads has attracted the attention of fashion and retail brands, including: Adidas; Kering; Lululemon; and Stella McCartney,

Discussion and Conclusion

Since World War II, and for many years, fashion was generally divided into just two seasons. Spring/ summer lines were presented in fashion shows in late summer and early fall, while fall/ winter collections were shown in January and February, almost a year before they would hit the stores' shelves. Notably, fast fashion brands, where designs quickly go from sketch to store shelves, have changed this model. Brands like Zara and H&M built their businesses based on speed and agility. When these retailers spot a new trend, they can deploy their ultra-fast design and supply chain systems to bring the trend to market as quickly as possible. This allows fast fashion brands to beat traditional collections in the market. Clothes and accessories that hit the fashion shows in September and February may be seen and replicated by fast fashion brands before the originals hit stores. With the ability to analyse the market in real-time to get the latest styles on the shelves, fast fashion brands can offer a wider variety of clothing styles to meet the preferences of smaller and more targeted customer segments. Therefore, they remain suitable and cheap alternatives for trendy products. Even amid a retail slump and economic uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the owner of Zara reported more than \$23 billion of revenue in 2020, beating analysts' estimates. H&M also posted a remarkable record in 2020, thanks to the rapid return of business (Shabir & AlBishri, 2021).

The rise of fast fashion has changed the game of the industry. To survive, many traditional clothing brands have changed their business models, now offering many more collections a year than before. It is not uncommon for a brand to deliver a new collection each month. On the other hand, fast fashion brands may have 52 weekly mini-seasons per year. For example, Topshop featured about 500 styles a week on its website before its parent company, *Arcadia Group*, went bankrupt (West et al., 2021). What also contributes to the speed of fashion is social media, which accelerates this cycle. Influencer marketing and other social media strategies help new trends move quickly and create fast consumer demand for ultra-affordable fashion (Salamzadeh, 2021; Yakubu et al., 2022). Shoppers respond instantly to this demand thanks to “see now, buy now” tools on platforms like Instagram and Pinterest. TikTok's savvy social media strategies have translated into strong sales for companies like Fashion Nova, PrettyLittleThing and Shein. Fashion Nova is an example of a fast fashion e-commerce brand that has successfully used social media to build its customer base and brand (Ebrahimi et al., 2021; Dana & Salamzadeh, 2021; Salamzadeh et al., 2022). The company has over 19 million followers on Instagram and more than 3,000 famous influencers in the fashion house NovaBabes promoting its clothes. It is reported to have

spent \$40 million on influencer marketing in 2021. Fast fashion brand Boohoo has seen significant results from its investment in influencer marketing, saying its profits doubled after paying celebrities to promote its products on Instagram to fans aged 16 to 24. Shein, in particular, has taken fast fashion market share from established players such as Zara and H&M. The Nanjing-based shopping site has become the world's largest online fashion business, according to market research firm Euromonitor.

Cheap clothing can cause environmental damage, as the rapid production of less durable clothing causes excessive textile waste. Also, low prices encourage consumers to buy more than they need. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, about 12.8 million tons of clothing are sent to landfills annually. According to McKinsey, the global fashion industry emits 2.1 billion tons of greenhouse gases annually. It represents about 4% of total annual global greenhouse gas emissions – more than international flights and ocean shipping combined. According to some estimates, the fashion industry is responsible for 10% of global CO₂ emissions, 20% of global industrial wastewater, 24% of insecticides and 11% of pesticides used. While sustainability issues in fashion are not new, what is changing is how the industry's most influential consumers are beginning to respond. Thus, sustainability has become a critical emerging trend across sectors over the past few years (Claxton & Kent, 2020). According to the NYU Stern Center for Sustainable Business, sustainable market products accounted for more than half of the growth in the consumer packaged goods (CPG) industry between 2015 and 2019, despite only accounting for 16% of the market. In 2021, CPG items marketed as eco-friendly increased their share of US in-store purchases to 16.8%. Consumers are paying attention to the downsides of fast fashion, and socially conscious shoppers have embraced the growing slow fashion movement, which focuses on fewer seasons, fewer products and timeless designs produced sustainably. Fashion shopping app Lyst has seen an increase in sustainability-related keyword searches in early 2020 compared to the previous year, with average monthly searches rising to 32,000 from 27,000 in 2019 (Gubbay, 2021).

The growing concern about sustainability is particularly prominent among younger generations. According to a survey by the Global Consumer Confidence Association, 83 per cent of millennials in the United States value companies that implement programs to improve the environment. Similarly, 73% of Gen Z consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable items per First Insight. Young and growing brands in the fashion industry are making moves to align with this shift in consumer sensibilities. Sustainable activewear brand Girlfriend Collective emphasises transparency, selling items like leggings made from recycled polyester. Swiss company On planned to release fully recyclable shoes in the fall of 2021, paired with a subscription model to further close the recycling loop. Other brands, such as Everlane and Reformation, have also gained popularity with their sustainability and ethical marketing approaches.

Future researchers of sustainable business models for fashion could conduct multiple case studies to illustrate how pioneers move forward and identify, evaluate and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities in this industry. Our focus was mainly on sustainable and ethical fashion; thus, we used relevant definitions to explore the phenomenon. Therefore,

future research might be focused on taxonomies, phenomenologies and case studies according to other conceptualisations. We did not use specific business model frameworks, such as business model canvas. Thus, future studies could use such frameworks to understand the details of their business logic. Finally, most facts and figures are related to developed countries, and the concept is less studied in emerging and developing economies.

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