



Fashion and Sustainability

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Opinion

The fashion industry is one of the oldest industries in the world. It is responsible for thousands of jobs and it generates thousands of billions of dollars and euros every year. But the apparel manufacturing is interconnected with many sustainability and environmental issues, such as, water consumption, energy, heavy metals, professional diseases, low wages, waste of raw materials, etc. The fashion industry must have concerns about the issue of sustainability and environmental impacts. Many brands are already sensitive to these issues, but others are still not. If you ask me if it is feasible fashion be sustainable, I reply: yes, fashion must be sustainable. But there is a lot of work to do and many rules to follow. "The times when sustainability was a 'nice to have' are gone. These days it is a 'must have', an inevitable trend and subsequently a competitive advantage" [1]. According Georg Kell [2], "the \$2.5 trillion fashion and apparel industry is an economic heavyweight. One of the largest consumer industries, it employs over 60 million people along its global value chain. For many emerging markets it is a stepping stone out of poverty with women making up over 70% of the supply chain."

To correct the huge environmental disasters, we must be alert and wide-eyed. Stacey Dooley [3] uncovers the shocking environmental impact caused by an insatiable appetite for cheap clothing. Thus, cotton cultivation for the fashion industry is responsible for the almost disappearance of the Aral Sea near Uzbekistan, where river water has been diverted to cotton cultivation. Due to cotton of our clothes, where before there were fish, wildlife, tourists, employment, vegetation, etc., there is now a huge desert, a lot of sand, some camels, diseases, climate change, unemployment, toxic dust, etc. Without water there is not life. They are necessary 10,850 liters of water to produce one jeans pants 2,700 liters of water to produce one cotton t shirt [4]. Thus, by some estimates, the fashion industry is responsible for up to 10% of global CO₂

emissions, 20% of the world's industrial wastewater, 24% of insecticides and 11% of pesticides use [2].

We cannot ignore environmental disasters such as the Indonesian River Citarum, which supplies 28 million people with water, but where heavy metals such as mercury, lead, cadmium and arsenic, among others, are dumped. In this dirty river many children take a bath and have fun. It is perhaps the most polluted river in the world, an open sewage to where all kinds of toxic waste from about 400 textile factories is dumped [3]. Other countries such as Bangladesh or China also have huge environmental problems.

It is imperative to find solutions to these problems. The planet earth is our common home. Humans have no other planet where they can live. Why not collaborate with those who provide us with the materials of which our clothes are made? Why not help them get their space clean? Is it far? and our conscience do not alert us? or do we live in the world of hypocrisy where the problems of others do not interest us? Governments of affected countries and industry's leading executives of fashion brands have to face these problems. Namely, heads of government must contribute to their resolution, subsidizing those who wish to collaborate and punishing those who are only interested in profit at any price.

If Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is not voluntarily accepted, there must be laws that impose it. And there must be consequences for those who do not comply. We cannot continue to wear our clothes and ignore the problems that have arisen in the countries that supply the materials. We cannot continue to send the dirtiest jobs to more distant places and we pretend no one sees them.

But solutions to this complex world begin to appear. On the one hand, after the appearance of standard ISO 14001-Environmental Management Systems (EMS) in 1996, environmental problems

have declined, particularly in Western countries where laws and rules are more respected. Hence, it is feasible in most cases to implement the ISO 14001 Environmental Management System at Indonesian, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, China and other countries chemical companies. On the other hand, the Fair Fashion Center (FFC) located on the Glasgow Caledonian New York College campus, is proving the business case for sustainability by turning global issues into industry opportunities. The FFC develops market-based solutions that combine economic value creation with environmental stewardship, social inclusion, and sound ethics. The goal is nothing less than the Re-design of Fashion [5]. Overcoming challenges created by gaps in traditional ecosystems, the FFC creates the enabling space for cross-sector collaboration, yielding innovative solutions and unique partnerships. With guidance from public sector organizations like the United Nations and various other subject matter experts, the priorities of the FFC have been established together with the industry's leading executives. The FFC moves company initiatives beyond CSR, empowering organizations to embed sustainable practices across all business functions [5].

Other interesting solution is supported by CITEVE - a Technology Center, a private non-profit organization, based in Vila Nova de Famalicão - Portugal. STeP (Sustainable Textile Production) is a certification system for manufacturers, retailers and brands in the textile supply chain, who wish to communicate to consumers the results of sustainable production in a transparent, credible and clear way. This certification is applicable to production facilities of all stages of textile processing, from fiber production, spinning, weaving, knitting to finishing and confection [6]. The goal of STeP certification is the permanent implementation of environmentally friendly production processes, safe, healthy and socially acceptable working conditions. In addition, the dynamic development of the STeP standard and its benchmarks enable certified companies to continually improve their environmental performance and CSR, as well as, their efficiency. This, in turn, allows them to achieve the best position possible in the market in competitive terms.

Many companies have embraced a CSR framework, but it is known that there are still very few in the universe of the fashion industry. According Kozlowski et al. [7], to reduce the social and environmental impacts of apparel throughout its life-cycle, CSR policies developed by fashion companies are increasing. Hence, developing policies is an important step but implementation and integration of the policies is vital. The design and development stages in the fashion industry can play a pivotal role in incorporating these policies and/or strategies.

On the other hand, the main benefits gained from the EMS certification are, among others [8]: prevention of environmental risks; environmental protection; improvement of company image; most SMEs with certified EMS fulfil legal requirements, thus ensuring compliance with legislation; effective use of natural resources; promoting recycling; awareness of employees regarding

environmental, decreased waste generation; clear, organised work environment; decreased consumption of energy and materials.

Sustainability involves complex and changing environmental dynamics that affect human livelihoods and well-being, with intersecting ecological, economic, and socio-political dimensions, both globally and locally [9]. Thus, process and product innovation is vital for businesses to achieve sustainable development. Important requirements are needed imposed, or not, by government regulation, among others [10]: Respect for people (at all levels of the organization), the community, and its supply chain; respect for the planet, recognizing that resources are finite; and generating profits that arise from adhering to these principles. Very important also is a sense of a moral obligation and the opportunity presented by 'ethical', 'green' or 'eco' marketing in response to consumer demand [7]. The potential to realize cost reductions-particularly related to production materials, waste handling and/or liability is also very important.

The rapid development of technology, communications and business, has reduced the distance between nations and shortened the time from order to delivery. Hence, today's economy is global. Thus, in today's global markets, issues related to environmental sustainability, ethics, working environment conditions and safety, stakeholders' relations and the protection of workers' rights must have greater importance on business performances, also in the fashion industry. The adoption of CSR strategies by a company can bring benefits, of which we highlight [11]: facilitated hiring's; increase in staff motivation; increase in transparency towards stakeholders ; greater control over the Supply Chain; improvement in customer loyalty; improvement of the relationship with employees; improvement of corporate image and reputation; improvement of productivity and management efficiency; achievement of economic benefits; reduction of labour conflicts; reduction of risks at work; reduction in absenteeism; development and consolidation of partnerships; achievement of a competitive advantage over competitors. The fashion industry, being the saving of jobs in developing countries, cannot be, simultaneously, the terror of pollution and occupational diseases. Fashion brands, especially the most important ones must to take into account the working conditions of those who provide them with the materials and cheap labour for their products. They must do so in a timely manner, so that workers do not get sick because of pollution.

In the recent years, the fashion and apparel industry has seen intense competition and increasing production quantity, along with growing concern about the sustainability issues and the environmental impacts. Many companies in fashion supply chains have tried various approaches to be "greener" and procurement is one of the most important functions which influences supply chain sustainability, because procurement does not only affect the supply chain output but also change the supply chain structure [12]. It is show that, punishing can only reduce the order size, while

subsidizing may induce the retailer to change its procurement strategy from control to agency, when the subsidy exceeds a threshold. Thus, the objectives of improving sustainability and maximizing social welfare may be conflicting, so it is an important task to find a balance between them for the government [12]. In developed countries, suppliers of fashion brands have to fulfil all the requirements of environmental legislation and many requirements of social responsibility. Brands, looking for a bigger profit, are going to stock up in countries where environmental and social responsibility rules are not fulfilled. This is not ethically correct, even because suppliers who fulfil these requirements regarding the environment and social responsibility lose competitiveness. We are hopeful that the fashion industry will fulfil its obligations and contribute to sustainability and a better world.

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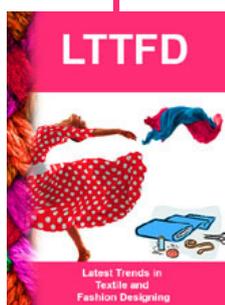


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