

Fashion's "Green Turn": Is Sustainable Fashion a Genuine Revolution or a Marketing Gimmick?

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Abstract. In the midst of ongoing global environmental challenges and the widespread emphasis on consumer culture, this paper examines the detailed complexities and often conflicting ideas surrounding sustainable fashion. It starts by clearly explaining what sustainable fashion is and exploring its different aspects, including how it impacts the environment, society, and the economy. Through in-depth comparative case studies of Patagonia and H&M, the research analyzes the fundamental strategic differences in how brands implement sustainability initiatives, examining both substantive commitments and superficial marketing approaches. The study takes a closer look at the ongoing disconnect between consumers' increasing awareness of environmental issues and their real-world purchasing choices, emphasizing the main obstacles that prevent more sustainable consumption habits. The paper offers an in-depth analysis of the widespread issue of greenwashing within the fashion industry. It presents compelling evidence to show that while sustainable fashion has real potential to drive meaningful change, it is also often exploited as a marketing tool for profit. This research brings together insights from brands, consumers, and regulators to provide a comprehensive, real-world view of the green transformation happening across the global fashion industry. It aims to deepen understanding both academically and practically, supporting the development and application of sustainability initiatives within the field.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, greenwashing, consumer behavior, fast fashion, corporate sustainability

1. Introduction

The global fashion industry is one of the most environmentally damaging sectors, ranking just behind oil in its pollution levels. Its impact goes beyond the environment, seriously affecting social equity and contributing to widespread ecological issues on an alarming scale [1,2]. The swift growth of fast fashion brands has considerably worsened key environmental problems, such as the buildup of textile waste, chemical runoff, water pollution, and rising carbon emissions. This model frequently results in workers across the supply chain experiencing difficult working conditions and receiving unfair pay [2]. The increasingly severe challenges in this industry have prompted the emergence of sustainable fashion as a new way of thinking. It emphasizes protecting the

environment, ensuring fair social practices, and achieving stable economic development through new concepts of design, manufacturing, and people's purchasing and wearing of clothing.

Although it has received increasing attention in industry discussions and consumer awareness is constantly improving, a key issue has sparked debate: Does this movement truly mark a fundamental transformation in the industry's operating methods, or is it merely a sophisticated marketing strategy aimed at satisfying environmentally conscious consumers without bringing about substantive changes? This research paper explores this core issue through a comprehensive approach. It includes comparative case studies of industry giants Patagonia and H&M, and also in-depth analyses of consumer behavior and recent regulatory changes. This study aims to conduct a comprehensive, evidence-based assessment of sustainability claims within the fashion industry, examining their authenticity and broader impacts on environmental and social progress. This research focuses on both major breakthroughs and existing obstacles to better understand the future direction of the fashion industry and its impact on the planet.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining sustainable fashion

Sustainable fashion is a comprehensive concept that encompasses all aspects of clothing production. It includes protecting the environment by using eco-friendly materials, reducing waste and pollution, containing the concept of a circular economy, adopting cleaner production methods, etc. At the social level, it emphasizes fair trade practices, ethical working conditions, paying living wages, and supporting community development [1-3]. This all-encompassing approach questions the simplistic "get-make-discard" model that has long shaped the industry. It advocates for the establishment of a system centered on restoration and regeneration, aiming to achieve positive overall impacts rather than merely reducing harm [1]. Therefore, this concept not only involves environmental issues but also includes ethical manufacturing, supply chain transparency, animal welfare, and the protection of cultural heritage. This represents an important shift in how we view fashion, how we manufacture fashion, and how consumers interact with fashion.

2.2. The rise and development of sustainable fashion

Initially, sustainable fashion was only regarded as a niche concern for environmentally conscious consumers and specific brands. However, over the past decade, with the continuous strengthening of consumers' environmental awareness, the pressure from activists, the introduction of regulatory policies, and the increasing understanding of the major environmental impact of the fashion industry, sustainable fashion has gradually gained mainstream attention and application [1,4]. Seminal reports from organizations such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation have played a key role in emphasizing the environmental impact of the fashion industry and promoting widespread change through the adoption of circular economy principles [1]. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 12 about responsible consumption and production, have really pushed industries to change and improve [5]. Advancements in sustainable materials, recycling methods, and traceability systems are now making it possible to put sustainability principles into practice on a larger scale. These developments are helping shift the idea from something theoretical to a real, commercial reality.

2.3. The concept of “greenwashing” and relevant studies

Greenwashing is when companies try to appear eco-friendly by making misleading claims or cherry-picking information in their marketing and branding [5-7]. This phenomenon has been extensively critiqued in academic literature and industry reports for systematically misleading consumers, undermining genuine sustainability efforts, and eroding trust in environmental claims more broadly [8,9]. Empirical studies corroborate that greenwashing is not merely anecdotal but a prevalent and strategic issue within the industry, with brands often developing sophisticated marketing campaigns that exaggerate minor eco-friendly initiatives while obscuring larger unsustainable practices [10]. Research demonstrates that greenwashing is particularly prevalent in the fashion industry, where brands often exaggerate minor eco-friendly initiatives while continuing fundamentally unsustainable business practices [7]. Studies have identified various forms of greenwashing, including hidden trade-offs (emphasizing one environmental aspect while ignoring others), lack of proof, vagueness, irrelevance, and outright fabrication of environmental benefits [6]. Recent research offers useful tools for spotting greenwashing in fashion. It shows how marketing stories often clash with the real efforts behind the scenes [7].

3. Case study: two contrasting models

3.1. Patagonia: the model of deep commitment

Patagonia stands as perhaps the most frequently cited exemplar of authentic corporate sustainability in the fashion industry, having built its brand identity around environmental activism and ethical business practices since its founding in 1973 [11]. The company's innovative and sometimes counterintuitive initiatives—including the groundbreaking "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign that directly challenged consumerism, the comprehensive Worn Wear repair and recycling program that extends product lifecycles, and its longstanding commitment to donating 1% of sales to environmental causes through the "1% for the Planet" initiative—collectively reflect a brand philosophy that consistently prioritizes planetary health over short-term profit maximization [11]. These substantive efforts are supported by unprecedented levels of transparency in supply chain reporting, third-party verification of environmental claims, and genuine integration of sustainability principles into core business strategy rather than treating them as peripheral concerns. The company's recent transition to a purpose trust ownership structure, ensuring all profits are reinvested in environmental causes, represents perhaps the most radical implementation of sustainable business principles in the corporate world, establishing Patagonia as the undeniable benchmark for genuine sustainable practice in fashion and beyond.

3.2. H&M: the "green" efforts and controversies of a fast-fashion giant

H&M, as one of the world's largest fast-fashion retailers, has launched numerous high-profile sustainability initiatives over the past decade, including the Conscious Collection featuring recycled materials, global garment collecting programs encouraging recycling, public commitments to carbon neutrality, and ambitious targets for transitioning to circular business models [8]. The company still draws heavy criticism from environmental groups, researchers, and eco-aware consumers. They point out the gap between its green claims and the reality—focused on quick production, constant updates, and encouraging endless buying, all of which clash with real ecological sustainability [2,7,8]. This pattern of making bold sustainability claims while operating within a fundamentally

unsustainable framework aligns with academic analyses of greenwashing tactics prevalent among large fast-fashion corporations [10]. Accusations of greenwashing are quite common and backed by a lot of evidence. Critics often point out that the company's so-called sustainability initiatives are really just tiny efforts compared to the massive environmental footprint created by its large-scale manufacturing. Some analyses indicate that H&M's sustainability marketing tends to overstate small accomplishments while downplaying the ongoing, major environmental harm the company still causes [7,8]. This example emphasizes how difficult it can be for fast-fashion brands to balance sustainability with their core focus on fast growth, high volume, and constant consumer demand.

4. Consumer perspective: the awareness-attitude-behavior gap

4.1. Consumer awareness of sustainable fashion

Recent studies show that awareness of sustainable fashion has grown considerably over the last ten years, especially among younger consumers. Terms such as "sustainable fashion," "ethical production," and "circular economy" are now commonly understood and discussed in mainstream conversations [3,12]. However, this awareness remains uneven across different regions, age groups, and socioeconomic segments, and understanding varies widely in terms of depth and accuracy. While many consumers recognize the terminology associated with sustainable fashion, far fewer possess detailed knowledge about what specific practices and certifications actually entail, leading to confusion and vulnerability to misleading marketing claims [3]. Research indicates that consumers tend to overjudge the sustainability of products when their understanding is based on superficial cues such as color choices—like green or earthy tones—generic buzzwords, or partial brand messaging. This emphasizes the importance of providing clearer, more transparent information and educating consumers more effectively about what truly makes a product sustainable [3,12].

4.2. Positive attitude vs. limited action

The biggest challenge in sustainable fashion is understanding why there's often a big difference between what people say about caring for the environment and what they actually buy. Research consistently shows that while a growing majority of consumers, particularly in developed markets, express concern about environmental issues and claim to prefer sustainable products, these positive attitudes translate into actual sustainable purchases only for a small minority [3,12]. Numerous studies have documented this intention-behavior gap, wherein consumers who explicitly state intentions to make ethical fashion choices often default to conventional purchasing patterns when making actual decisions. This gap emphasizes one of the key challenges in getting more people on board with sustainable fashion. It also points to how many different factors, beyond just awareness of environmental impact, shape consumer choices.

4.3. Key factors influencing purchasing decisions

Price continues to be the most influential factor shaping fashion buying choices for most consumers. Sustainable products, in particular, tend to carry higher price tags, making them less accessible to a wide range of shoppers [3,12]. Beyond cost, convenience factors, including availability, accessibility, and ease of purchase, strongly influence behavior, with sustainable options often requiring special effort to find and evaluate. Aesthetic appeal, personal style choices, a brand's reputation, and social influences often have a stronger impact on decision-making than

environmental factors [3]. Psychological factors also play an important role in sustaining unsustainable consumption habits. For instance, cognitive dissonance leads consumers to downplay environmental issues to resolve the discomfort between their values and actions. Similarly, doubts about the effectiveness of individual efforts can reduce motivation to make sustainable choices. Habit strength further reinforces existing behaviors, making it challenging to shift toward more environmentally conscious practices, even when people genuinely value sustainability.

5. Critical discussion: revolution or gimmick

5.1. Arguments for: the potential for revolution

There's strong evidence to suggest that sustainable fashion is genuinely transforming the industry in an important way. Technological innovations in materials science have produced increasingly viable alternatives to conventional fabrics, including fabrics made from recycled plastics, agricultural waste, lab-grown materials, and closed-loop systems that eliminate waste [1,4]. Advanced recycling technologies are progressively overcoming previous limitations in textile-to-textile recycling, potentially enabling true circularity in fashion production. Simultaneously, legislative pressures are mounting across jurisdictions, with the European Union leading ambitious policy initiatives that mandate extended producer responsibility, ban the destruction of unsold goods, and require detailed environmental reporting [9]. Generational changes in consumer values are increasingly driving market demands for authentic sustainability. Both Generation Z. and Millennials are more actively researching company practices, willing to pay extra for environmentally friendly products, and expecting businesses to be transparent and responsible regarding their social and environmental impacts [12]. These changing trends point to a new way of thinking that could change fashion completely, turning it from a harmful industry into one that restores and improves instead of just taking.

5.2. Arguments against: the reality of gimmickry

Despite these promising developments, compelling evidence suggests that much of what is marketed as sustainable fashion constitutes little more than superficial gimmickry designed to protect business-as-usual. Greenwashing is still widespread and getting more refined. Companies are using ever more subtle strategies to give the impression of being environmentally responsible, all while making little to no real effort toward meaningful change [6,7]. The core structure of the fast fashion industry—focused on continuous growth, quick seasonal cycles, and promoting high consumer turnover—remains largely unchanged despite efforts toward sustainability. These initiatives tend to be added on as small adjustments rather than integrated as fundamental changes to the business model [2,7]. The mathematics of sustainability remain daunting: even ambitious recycling initiatives capture only a tiny fraction of clothing produced, while "eco-collections" typically represent single-digit percentages of overall inventory while generating disproportionate marketing benefits [7,8]. Under today's focus on growth and profits, sustainability often seems more about image than real change. This makes you wonder if fashion can really change without rethinking its obsession with endless growth.

6. Conclusion

Sustainable fashion is a tricky and often confusing space, full of real change but also driven by big brands trying to take control of it. The case studies emphasize two very different ways of

approaching sustainability. Patagonia adopts a comprehensive strategy that weaves environmental values directly into its brand and day-to-day operations. In contrast, H&M illustrates the difficulties of aligning sustainability goals with a fast-fashion business model, which is deeply rooted in high consumption and fast growth [7-8,13]. Studies on how people shop show there's often a difference between what folks say about caring for the environment and the things they actually buy. Things like price, how easy it is to get stuff, and what others think play a big part in those choices [3,12]. Greenwashing shows how companies often mix real sustainability efforts with marketing hype, sometimes doing both at the same time [6,7]. Sustainable fashion isn't just a big change or a marketing gimmick. It's more like an ongoing challenge, with some people pushing for real transformation and others sticking to the usual way of doing things.

This study acknowledges several limitations that also represent opportunities for future research. The reliance on secondary sources rather than primary data collection limits certain insights, particularly regarding consumer motivations and decision-making processes. Focusing on just two main case studies gives us some good detail, but it also means we miss out on the many different ways fashion is changing around the world, especially in developing countries and smaller brands. Future research should incorporate empirical studies of consumer behavior across different cultural contexts, investigate the implementation and effectiveness of emerging regulations, and develop more sophisticated frameworks for distinguishing genuine sustainability from greenwashing. Research on Asian markets, especially China, would be really useful. That's because both how fashion is made and how people buy it are changing quickly there, all within unique cultural and rule-based settings.

The future of sustainable fashion will depend on how technology advances, rules are made, consumers push for change, and companies take the lead. Tighter rules requiring companies to be honest and responsible, like the ones starting in the European Union, could really cut down on fake eco-friendly claims and help honest companies compete fairly [9]. Technological advancements in materials science and recycling technologies hold promise for reducing fashion's environmental footprint without compromising aesthetic or economic considerations [1,4]. Eventually, making real change might mean facing the core drive behind the fashion industry and how consumers think that constant need to grow and change. The most promising developments may emerge from alternative business models that prioritize sufficiency over growth, quality over quantity, and well-being over consumption—pointing toward a future where fashion truly aligns with ecological boundaries and human flourishing.

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