

# ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN

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# ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN

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# Fast Fashion. Sustainability and the negative psychological and social impacts for consumers

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*Sustainable Fashion*  
*Fast Fashion*  
*Business model*  
*Consuming*

## Abstract

Fashion's purpose in society is intertwined with its meaning in people's lives. People who have different realities and different relationships with their clothes. It is risky to determine a new set of rules for all stockholders without this being taken into consideration. It's a move like this that seems to be happening in the fashion industry. All in the name of sustainability. Sustainability is not a new term in the fashion industry, however it was previously seen as just an option and often linked to a rustic, handmade aesthetic. Everything changed when news of hidden horrors throughout the supply chain started reaching the end consumer and industries across different segments started evaluating their environmental impact. Considering the pace at which fashion has followed in recent decades, it is not surprising that its industry is unsustainable. However, the rush to fix all the industry's flaws may have overlooked an important aspect to consider. Fast Fashion has reached a part of society that could never fully experience fashion as more privileged people could. However, this business model has created some horrible disasters in the industry. But sometimes his condemnation and the alternatives presented as solutions could represent an even bigger problem. In the following paper, the set of solutions presented in the name of sustainability will be analyzed and above all we will try to answer the following questions: what would it mean for those who depend on fast fashion to be involved in a new way of consuming? What would the impacts be on their lives? And finally, are sustainable practices appropriate for all consumers?

## Introduction

The purpose of fashion in society is entangled with its meaning in people's lives. People that have different realities and different relationships with its clothes. With that in mind, it is risky to determine a new set of rules for all players without that being taken into consideration. It is a move like this one that seems to be undergoing in the fashion industry. All in the name of sustainability.

Sustainability it is not a new term in the fashion industry, however, it was earlier view just as an option and often linked with a rustic and hand-made aesthetic. It all changed when the news about the horrors hidden throughout the supply chain started reaching the final consumer, as well as industries

from different segments started assessing their environmental impact. Considering the pace fashion has been working for the last decades, it came as no surprise that its industry unsustainable. Nonetheless, the hurry to right all the wrong in the industry might have neglected an important aspect to be taken into consideration.

In the last decades the world experienced fashion in a way that had never before, all that due to a business model called Fast Fashion. Fast Fashion reached a part of the society that could never fully experience fashion like more privileged people could. However, as everything in life, the system took on an extreme turn and was stage to horrible disasters in the industry. The problems with the business model are unquestionable. Nevertheless, its condemnation and the alternatives presented as solutions might present an even bigger problem.

It is the vilification and the set of solutions presented in the name of sustainability that will be analyzed throughout this thesis. What would they mean for individuals that depend on the business model to be involved in fashion? What would be the impacts in their lives? And at last, are the sustainable practices adequate for all consumers?

## Fashion? A possible background

Fashion evolves not only in clothing but also in related elements like materials and behaviors. Fashion is not superficial; it involves creating identities through product design. Designers must understand societal changes and interpret them by delivering coherent products or services. Global trends are acknowledged, but the emphasis is on global issues impacting social contexts, with sustainability being a significant concern. The paper highlights that fashion choices are political statements that define individuals' preferences based on factors like manufacturing, materials, price, and quality. Again, fashion and its dynamics can have negative repercussions and negative psychological and social impacts for consumers. Sustainability in fashion reflects awareness of choices impacting the environment and human existence. The complexity of sustainability was first defined in 1987 during the World Commission on Environment and Development's inaugural international conference. It emphasizes balancing present needs without compromising future generations' requirements. Environmental sustainability involves caring for the environment and reducing human impact on Earth. Economic sustainability aims for lasting economic growth, wealth, employment, and community support. Social aspects of sustainability are crucial, especially after events like the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh, which led to the global Fashion Revolution movement founded by Orsola De Castro. This shift focuses not only on resources and products but also on those involved in making clothes to ensure optimal welfare conditions for workers in the industry.

## So, what's Fashion?

With the development of fashion studies over the years, theorist came up with different meanings for the phenomenon. Those differences range, mostly, accordingly to the area of study. Nonetheless, it is unanimous that fashion goes way beyond garments and their production. For this study, it will be adopted the anthropological definition, highlighting the impact new sustainable practices have in low-income individuals' life.

Alison Bancroft (2012, p. 2) starts her introduction in "Fashion and Psychoanalysis: Styling the Self" saying that "Fashion is, perhaps, primarily

concerned with innovation in the surface decoration of the body, and the wider social and cultural responses of this innovation." Highlighting two important aspects of fashion for its anthropological definition: first, it is made on the surface of the body, and the object alone means nothing; second, there is a response to the act of wearing it. Those two aspects show the importance of focusing on the wearer, and that the social and cultural responses that will be instigated are directly linked with the reality of this individual, for it is the center of fashion.

Seeing as the social responses instigated by the act of wearing are part of the definition of fashion by anthropologists, it is also important to understand which are these social movements and how they are important for an individuals' life.

The first social movement explored in this paper is the theory of imitation by Gabriel de Tarde explained by Gilles Lipovetsky (2002); for Tarde, fashion is essentially a form of human relationship, as social relationship characterized by the imitation of one's contemporaries and the love of foreign novelties. [...] The resemblance among human beings is what institutes the social bond, to such an extent that Tarde can assert that "society is imitation".

Looking through the lens of anthropology imitation could be interpreted as the individuals' effort of socially belonging. As well as an important movement that promoted the diffusion of fashion.

Nonetheless, the sense of belonging does not exclude the self-expression purpose of dressing. Highlighted as the second social movement important for the development of this dissertation. As pointed out by political scientist Joshua Miller (2005), self-expression can also result in political exchanges. It is the act of presenting yourself: what you are, or what you want to be, or even what you would like others to think of you. The interaction among individuals often starts with the way they are dressed, that interaction being the third and last social aspect.

As such, one would be hardly in the wrong to assume the industry would try to be rid of a business model that democratize and expand individuals' access to fashion. But as we stand today, once again society has remembered the dire consequences of taking an endeavour to the furthest extreme, as noble as the initial goal might be.

## Fast Fashion: Villain of Sustainability

Numerous scandals surrounding the Fashion Industry marked the last decades. From the reappearance of sweatshops linked with famous USA brands in the 90's, to being one of the most polluting for its water usage, chemical abuse, and the amount of greenhouse gas emission during the entire supply chain (Sadowski, M., Perkins L., McGarvey E., 2021). However, the number of garments purchased per capita between 2000 and 2014 still increased by 60 percent (McKinsey 2016).

A way to explain the on-growing demand even with all the news mentioned above is the success of one of the most complex business models of the industry: the Fast-Fashion. This business model entails: a rapid change of collections, not adhering to the once traditional seasonal calendar of 4 collections per year but reaching a neck-breaking pace of delivering mini-collections every week. All while offering cheap purchasing prices, attained via low-quality raw-material, cheap labour, and mass production. "Sacrifices" made in the name of the democratization of fashion. However, Fast Fashion did not merely stay confined in the business model category, it went beyond and ingrained itself as a consumer behaviour, characterized by overconsumption. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise that, with an

ever-growing pressure for more and more sustainable industry, companies following the fast fashion tenets found themselves in the center of heavy scrutiny. Even though famous ready-to-wear brands also incentivized this new consumer behaviour and, often, shared the same warehouses as the Fast Fashion Brands, they bore less of the brunt. In this villainization campaign, the target was clear – and easy to pin the blame.

With organizations such as Fashion Revolution, Global Fashion Agenda, The Fashion Pact, UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, and so many other important players, the arduous work of identifying and righting all the wrongs within the Fashion Industry started. At the same time, consumers with not as much knowledge of the supply chain and less-that-trustworthy sources also started sharing their news, findings, as well as their own opinions. The legitimacy of such news channels is not being questioned in this essay; it is, however, an undoubtable force that amplified the cacophony surrounding the unique business model in question: a system that's is as faulty as it is brilliant; as lucrative as it is damaging; and as dangerous as it is inclusive.

Albeit undoubtedly unsustainable and in desperate need of reform, Fast Fashion serve as a bridge for those who have no other way of experiencing fashion. It was the first to extend their hand towards a significant portion of the population, which lacked the resources and access to alternatives. It brought up the question if the fashion industry is indeed considering these people when developing the sustainable practices being implemented.

## Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

But what sustainability looks like in the Fashion Industry? For the last decade the term sustainability has been a constant in the fashion industry. The need for a change became undeniable with the deadliest garment-factory accident in history in April 2013 at the Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Hobson J., 2013). Since then, there was an increase in scandals as consumers started to learn how the industry works to make their incredible product. They started to demand a change from the companies and part of them went beyond by changing their own consuming behaviour.

To keep the focus of this study in the psychological and social impact fashion has over an individual's life, this section will not delve into industrial practices being implemented. Instead, it will consider the new consumer behaviour advised. Again, the need of those changes will not be questioned in this dissertation, only if their application could also have a negative impact in consumers' life.

The set of new practices are, in fact, a response to the overconsumption lead by the extreme adherence of Fast Fashion. These practices are buying second-hand, prolonging the lifespan of clothes, and buying basic garments.

Resale as a business model has increased in the last few years, being expected to double its size from 2021 by 2027 according to ThreadUp (Resale Report, 2023). It is one way of leading the industry to a more circular model. It was once viewed just as channel to acquire vintage pieces or for those who had no means to buy new clothes, now it is known as a sustainable consumer behaviour.

As an additional step towards a circular industry, there is a strong incentive on prolonging the lifespan of clothes. Strategies go from raising awareness regarding the proper ways to care for garments up to offering maintenance and repair programs. The practice became even more famous after co-founder of Fashion Revolution, Orsola de Castro (2022), said "The most sustainable garment is the one already in your wardrobe".

Finally, there's also incentives for adopting seasonless clothes in order to

make one's wardrobe more versatile, longstanding. A non-rare critique for this sustainability trend is that some brands went as far as being becoming "boring" due to the basic aesthetic. Considering fashion's primary purpose as we've stated, there is a balance to be found here.

Taking only the practices above into account with the characteristics listed on the last section, it wouldn't be wrong to affirm that Fast Fashion veers in the opposite direction of what Sustainable Fashion poises to be. But, alas, it is this very same affirmation that is questioned in this essay. The reason is that this same Fast Fashion remains as the only option of a part of the population to experience fashion. So how does vilifying it and crusading against it impact the lives of lower income consumers? Surely, it must not be dismissed the environmental and waste burden brought upon by their activities, but equally important is that it shouldn't be neglected the social and psychological role their products play.

## Are the Sustainable Practices for the Fashion Industry Adequate for All Consumers?

As discussed, fashion relies primarily on the wearer and then on social and cultural responses instigated. Bearing this affirmation in mind, it's not unexpected to find the myriad of different business models we have in the fashion industry – as its product, fashion industry hardly finds a one-size-fits-all. It is then more than reasonable to expect that the reality of the wearer, their cultural scenario, social context, a broader set of circumstances should be considered when structuring any radical change in the industry.

Nevertheless, it has come to light that most strategies and practices developed to turn the fashion industry into a more sustainable one might have disregarded the efforts necessary in this exercise.

The emphasis on industrial solutions and ethical awareness effectively bypasses fashion's entanglement in more complex and contested issues, such as globalization, social conflict, the politics of identity and community, labour organization, precarious work, and the imperative to achieve, and not least public and mental health. The hope (von Busch, O., 2022) appears to be of "fixing" sustainability without questioning the systemic impact of fashion in current societies. The quote above was taken from an article by the PhD Professor from Parsons University together with a more public discussion that happen on Twitter, recounted at Business of Fashion (Deeley, R. 2023), as well as the vilification of Fast Fashion. All three different type of sources reinforce the possibility of inadequacy on the sustainable strategies for the fashion industry.

To test out this statement the next step is to analyse what would mean for the consumers that depend on Fast Fashion the implementation of the sustainable practices listed on the last section. Keeping in mind that it will all be view through a psychological and sociological lens, one of the key points highlighted by Otto von Busch: politics of identity and community and, public and mental health.

## Analysis

This analysis will be carried out by listing the sustainable practices established as relevant for this dissertation then, using a curated set of references to understand their psychological and social impact in the individual's life. The reality set for this individual is of a consumer that do not have the resources to buy outside the Fast Fashion business model.

The first practice to be analysed is the second-hand market. The resale

business model it is not new for the reality traced above, it is whoever, linked to a necessity of getting dressed. Salvations' Army, church sales and other institutions that resell clothes affordable to this public are far from offering the same trendy or vintage pieces found in the new sustainable resale shops nor at the affordable Fast Fashion hacks. To populations emerging from poverty (von Busch, O.,2022), fashion can be a tool to transgress being down-trodden and move toward new possibilities emotionally. After that we get to the second practice, expanding the lifespan of garments. Besides strategies on how to take better care of your clothes, promoting repairs, and offering a better-quality product, all three would require a financial investment above what the population in question could offer. There is a fourth strategy used to promote expanding the lifespan of clothes that is creating an emotional connection to them. However, an emotion connection first requires good memories tied to those clothes, that it is rarely the case in this reality.

The last sustainable practice it is opting for seasonless clothes. For that aspect the journalist Michelle Lee in her book *Fashion Victim*, pointed out two important social movement seen in the first section on this dissertation: the act of presenting oneself and self-expression. She says (Lee, M., 2003), clothing is one of the few things we can readily change about ourselves. Our clothes are visible symbols of who we are and who we want to be.

For individuals that have no other means to change their precarious situation in life, fashion could be their only outlet of self-expression, and their only sense of control. And finally, the vilification of Fast Fashion. The business model pointed out throughout this dissertation, as the only way a part of the population can experience fashion from an anthropological and social aspect. It is through Fast Fashion that a big part of the population on developing countries can enter in the "imitation schema" and get the sense of belonging to a community. It is also through the faulty business model that people can engage in social and political movements explained by the political scientist Joshua Miller. In conclusion, experience fashion in all its anthropological depth.

## From Fashion-good to Fashion-abilities.

This transition signifies a shift from focusing solely on the aesthetic or superficial aspects of fashion to emphasizing the capabilities and potential impact of fashion in promoting sustainability and responsible practices within the fashion industry. Vanessa Friedman, in a 2018 New York Times article, explains well that we shouldn't believe the lies that can be told about fashion. It underlines the importance of storytelling and educating oneself about sustainability within the fashion system, highlighting a deeper understanding of how fashion can evolve beyond just being visually appealing to actively contributing to positive environmental and social change. An industrial system characterized by the variability of its products should be acknowledged as significantly impactful on resources. However, it is essential to recognize that certain industrial sectors, albeit less publicized due to their divergence from topics directly related to individuals, exert far greater environmental impacts that often escape public awareness. For instance, sectors like cement and steel (Friedman, 2018) production stand out for their substantial industrial carbon emissions, despite the fact that these materials are not directly purchased by most consumers.

When considering brands committed to eco-conscious practices, as highlighted in an article by Eliza Huber (2021) in the New York Times, it is more transparent and honest to acknowledge that they may be deemed "unsustainable." This perspective emphasizes the importance of continuous improvement and the necessity for brands to address their environmental im-



pact truthfully. Rather than portraying constant progress with each season, acknowledging areas of unsustainability allows for a more genuine evaluation of efforts towards sustainability within the fashion industry.

In the realm of sustainable fashion, it is crucial to avoid distorting the reality that sustainable products, typically priced higher than others, may be accessible to affluent segments of the population, while fast fashion predominantly caters to less affluent groups. To foster a more sustainable fashion industry, designers (Karaosman, 2021) must scrutinize any inconsistencies, evaluate the values they promote, and ensure that their designs cater to those in society who are most in need of clothing.

Finally, "If we are serious about the ideals, we strive for making fashion more sustainable, the question must become how we can offer fashion users a wider interface towards the ideal practices we say we promote? If we are earnest about the virtues of sustainability, the honesty, integrity, authenticity and commodity support, how can we think of fashion as a tool for cultivating these ideals in the living practices of our users for these values?" (Karaosman, 2021).

To embrace the notion that design can encapsulate values like authenticity, honesty, or integrity, a shift in focus from fashion products to fashion practices is imperative. This transition emphasizes the importance of cultivating what can be termed as "fashion skills", highlighting the significance of how individuals engage with and care for their clothing as a means of respecting both the craftsmanship behind the garments and the natural resources that enable their creation.

## Conclusion

The social and psychological gains that Fast Fashion brings to individual that has no other access to fashion are irrefutable after the analysis. The comparison between the delimited set of sustainable practices, the curated list of references and the discussion about what is the meaning of fashion through the anthropological and social studies made that affirmation possible.

Not only that, but also that most sustainable practices need to be revised before being established as a one-fit-all solution. The need for a sustainable industry it is not the question, nor is the big part that Fast Fashion plays in the urgent matter. However, it cannot be forgotten the psychological and social purpose that this business model has in a big part of their consumers life.

The fashion industry still has a long way to become a more sustainable industry. The strategies and innovations would help lead this change, nevertheless, the impact and purpose of fashion in all individuals' lives cannot be forgotten and must be taken into consideration.

As Orsola De Castro asserts, we must learn to maintain our clothes because, by taking care of them, we respect the people who made them. But above all, we respect the nature that has provided us with the resources for that type of garment to be created and for me to have been able to choose it.

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