The 'whatever' phenomenon: Investigating indifference to sustainability in the fashion industry

Claudia E Henninger[1] and Taylor Brydges[2,3]

[1]University of Manchester, Department of Materials, Manchester, UK
[2]Centre for Urban Environments, University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada.
[3]Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

No matter how glamorous the fashion industry may portray itself to be, it has a dirty secret: it is one of the most wasteful and energy intensive industries in the world. Although sustainability has emerged as an industry priority in recent years, with commentators suggesting initiatives may be accelerated through the COVID-19 pandemic, meaningful change towards a more sustainable fashion future remains elusive. Indeed, despite the existence of myriad fashion pacts, accords and commitments, a business-as-usual approach continues to dominate much of the industry. We take on a critical stance towards sustainability and highlight key challenges and opportunities that emerge in the 21st century, where digitalisation and new business model innovations are starting to impact the way consumers consume and organisations operate. Drawing on various international research projects, we question whether sustainability is ever going to play a major driving role in the fashion industry, or will a 'whatever, we have to do it' approach continue to prevail.

Introduction

In this chapter, we investigate a range of fashion industry approaches to the growing sustainability crisis facing the industry. We argue that despite the existence of myriad fashion pacts, accords and commitments, a business-as-usual approach continues to dominate much of the industry. We take on a critical stance towards sustainability and highlight key challenges and opportunities that emerge in the 21st century, where digitalisation and new business model innovations are starting to impact the way consumers consume and organisations operate. In particular, we investigate the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on sustainability initiatives. Themes for future research are also put forth.

This is an interesting time to be probing sustainability in the fashion industry. On the one hand, there has never been more attention and interest surrounding sustainability and the need for designers, manufacturers, retailers, and consumers to be accountable for their actions. On the other hand, the advent of ultra-fast fashion and intensification of social media culture, as well as economic uncertainty, supply chain disruptions and inflationary concerns, are all contributing to renewed downward cost pressure on the industry (Boardman et al., 2020; Monroe, 2021). In this context, brands have choices to make regarding the prioritization of commitments and investments to sustainability, which as we will see, are taking a variety of approaches.

Taking the term 'fashion' quite literally, it is by definition something that is seasonal and timely, and thus can go in and out of trend rather quickly (Blazquez et al., 2020; Marquis, 2021). The fast (and now ultra-fast) fashion industry is a prime example of this 'seasonality' having created an average of 52 seasons a year (Azevedo, 2018; Monroe, 2021). Yet, this mode of production and consumption comes at a cost, seeing as the ever-decreasing price of fashion items has also seemingly decreased value perceptions, which has led to a throw-away culture that is characterised by not only overconsumption practices, but also a waste problem which is contributing to the growing global climate crisis (EAC, 2019; Stringer et al., 2020). Thus, this could imply that fashion and sustainability sit on two opposing ends of a spectrum (Athwal et al., 2019; Morgan, 2020; De Klerk, 2021). It has to be noted here that fast and ultra-fast fashion are not the only sectors that face these challenges, but rather that they are industry wide (e.g., Athwal et al., 2019; Davies et al., 2020), however, fast fashion is often at the centre of attention (cf. Bick et al., 2018; Blazquez et al., 2020).

Yet not everything is doom and gloom, as there are various 'movements' that seek to counteract these issues (unsustainable practices) with sustainable fashion and circular business models (or business model innovations) being just some of the more prominent examples (e.g., Henninger et al., 2016, 2021; Brydges, 2021). Although we see changes in this highly volatile market environment, we question in how far sustainability will ever be a major driving role in the fashion industry, or whether the 'whatever, we have to do it' approach will continue to prevail.

Defining sustainable fashion and circular business models

Prior to going into the sustainable fashion and circular business model debate, it is vital to understand what sustainability means. Sustainability has stirred debate since the 1970s with definitions broadly focusing on finding an equilibrium between the environmental, social, and economic angle (e.g., Elkington, 2008; Henninger et al., 2016). This is often portrayed through the overlap of circles, whereby the intersection between these three areas visualises sustainability. Yet, these depictions of sustainability have been heavily criticised in the past, and are at times described as a utopic state, as it is unclear how strongly these circles need to overlap in order to create a state of sustainability (e.g., Moyer & Hedden, 2020; Nature, 2020).

One of the more recent perspectives on how to view the concept is through Fletcher and Tham's (2019) Earth Logic, which makes the definition more tangible, especially for businesses. Within the Earth Logic, there are two key dimensions that need to be considered. First, the focus is on planet earth's health and survival, thus business practices should align with this train of thought and reduce their overall impact, by finding an equilibrium on how they produce/manufacture products whilst at the same time look after the planet. The focus here is on harmony and ensuring that 'living with one another' is promoted. Second, businesses should not operate in a vacuum and follow their own trial and error run, but rather there needs to be an emphasis on sharing and disseminating knowledge to avoid mistakes from the past, but also to educate consumers. Sir Francis Bacon once said, "*knowledge is power*" (Alimodian, 2018), which holds true in this case, as the more we know the more we can act upon and drive change. Within this chapter we follow this line of thought and explore whether the 'whatever, we have to do it' approach continues to prevail.

Defining 'sustainable' fashion is highly contested terrain, with not only a variety of definitions and interpretations having emerged, but also several descriptions of the term that are often used interchangeably (e.g., eco, slow, organic) (e.g., Joergens, 2006; Henninger et al., 2017; Blazquez et al., 2020; Mukendi et al., 2020). Putting this into context of the fashion industry, and more specifically the fast fashion industry, we have seen a rapid increase of collections that fall within the remit of 'sustainability'.

For example, various fast fashion brands utilise recycled fibre content in their garment collections, which could be seen to have a reduced impact on the environment, as fewer virgin materials are used (Bryce, 2021; Rauturier, 2021). Thus, by definition, these collections could be seen to be more 'sustainable', as they align with the environmental angle. Within the fast fashion industry, companies such as H&M and Primark are making use of these raw materials and advertise this in store and online.

Yet, fast fashion brands are not the only ones that use recycled content, more sustainable oriented brands have also capitalised on the idea and taken it a step further. For example, Melbourne based brand Elle Evans produces swimwear using regenerated Econyl ® yarn made from "fishing nets and other nylon waste from the ocean" (Elle Evans, 2022). Elle Evans provides a creative story line of their swimwear collection, highlighting that their "fabric has a long and fascinating story before it even reaches our workspace" and purchasing one of their garments does good for the environment, as it helps clean the oceans (Elle Evans, 2022). Moreover, The Common Good Company (2022) produces their garments from pre-consumer textile waste and recycled polyester, emphasising that they "eliminated the unnecessary waste, water use, land use and pollution that are typically involved with the production of yarns made from virgin materials".

On the other hand, there are also more fashion collections designed with material innovations, such as pineapple, orange, or banana fibre, or made from organic materials (e.g., organic cotton) that are often third party certified (e.g., Better Cotton Initiative) (Bryce, 2021; Rauturier, 2021). H&M seems to be a pioneering the fast fashion industry, having had collaborations in 2019 with both Orange Fibre (Orange Fibre, n.d.) and Piñatext (Ananas Anam, 2019). Yet, these collaborations are often only short term, and one offs. On the other hand, the Swiss brand INUIKII (2022) which was inspired by Greenland's Inuit produces shoes made from bananatex, that are labelled as luxury products that "allow the wearer of each of our shoes to feel stylish and comfortable, but most importantly when they put on the shoes, create an individual personal fashion statement that is all their own while not costing the earth" (INUIKII, 2022). This outlines that whilst these materials are seen to be luxurious, they can still be affordable and may provide an alternative to other raw materials. We also see a return to natural fibres, such as linen, hemp and merino wool. For example, A.BCH (2022) is an Australian company focused on circular design strategies which produces garments made from organic materials that can be recycled and/or reused, once the garments have reached their end-of-life.

Using natural and/or 'waste materials' from other industries (e.g., orange peels) has the potential to be a more sustainable way of creating fashion collections. Especially the latter, as it quite literally addresses the 'waste' problem, whilst at the same time creates collaborations between industries (Orange Fibre, 2022). Using different raw materials is not the only way to create 'sustainable' fashion, different design processes are also used, such as creating zero waste and/or easily adjustable fashion (e.g., Garments Fragments) or through upcycling techniques (e.g., McCormick et al., 2019; Henninger et al., 2022).

The myriad of different execution strategies to produce 'sustainable fashion' may also not necessarily help with sustainability and fashion being seen as an oxymoron (e.g., Henninger et al., 2016; Athwal et al., 2019). As mentioned earlier, there is no clear-cut definition of what sustainability is, but rather it has often been described as an intuitively understood concept (Henninger et al., 2017; Niinimäki, 2018). Therefore, what is considered sustainable and what is not depends on how businesses as well as individual consumers define the term and understand it.

Thus, fast fashion by nature could be seen as less sustainable, due to its seasonality, whilst luxury fashion arguably also shows a questionable alignment, due to the nature of raw materials used. On the other hand, both industry sectors may have some sustainable practices incorporated at certain stages of their supply chains. What becomes apparent here is that sustainability within the fashion industry is a complex area, and whilst it is beyond the scope of this book chapter to elaborate this fully, it is vital to keep this in mind for discussion of this chapter.

Moreover, in recent years, we have seen an increase in circular business model innovations (Mukendi & Henninger, 2020; Henninger et al., 2022b). Circular business model innovations are broadly speaking those that seek to re-loop materials as often as possible and for as long as possible to minimise waste (e.g., Brydges et al., 2020; Brydges, 2021). Examples of business models can either follow an access mode (e.g., renting) whereby consumers are granted 'access' to an item for a certain amount of money and for a defined period of time (e.g., Hu et al., 2018; Mukendi & Henninger, 2020), or re-distribution model (e.g., swapping, re-sale), whereby pre-loved items gain a second/third/n-th useful time (e.g., Henninger et al., 2021). These specific business models focus on the end-of-life stage of garments and have gained popularity in recent years, as evidenced by an increased number of collaborations between fashion retailers and platforms that can facilitated these access and re-distribution modes (Brydges et al., 2020b; Vogue, 2020; Lee & Magnus, 2021).

Case study: Can fashion week become more sustainable?

When talking about fashion, people may initially think about mega events, such as fashion weeks, where designers showcase their newest collections, with (in the past) a select few having the privileged to attend these events in person (at least prior to COVID-19) (Manning, 2014; Henninger et al., 2022). With increased digitalisation this has shifted to now more often than not having an online component. Topshop was one of the digital pioneers making this transition, being the "world's first in telepresence and virtual reality" (Mortimer, 2014). For London Fashion Week Topshop provided the everyday consumer with an opportunity to interactively take part in this event through virtual reality immersion (Gayomali, 2014), which was positively received by consumers.

These mega events (fashion weeks) whether they be organised in a physical space or through virtual immersion can best be described as experiences with a big entertainment value, seeing as orchestras and/or singers are hired to perform in swanky locations. Burberry for example has in the past hired singers such as Rhodes and Alison Moyet, to perform the Fashion Show in Makers House, London (Burberry, 2016). Being part of the events moves us, as consumers, into a world of wonder and glamour, and often lets us forget that fashion comes at a cost, namely environmental and social.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which we will discuss in more detail in the next section, has further accelerated the online transition, seeing as local and national lockdowns and its social distancing restrictions limited and still are limiting not only people's movements, but also the amount of people that can meet in one space (Davis, 2020). Moving online and in metaverses has its benefits, as they are now more accessible than ever before. On the other hand, they could also be seen as more sustainable, with less traveling involved. Although a counter argument could also be provided with digital technologies often using a lot of electricity and also polluting the environment (e.g., GHG emissions) (Lebleu, 2020). One can also pose questions about the impact of these innovations, given that they are currently quite niche.

Covid-19 and sustainability in the fashion industry

During the ongoing recent COVID-19 pandemic, issues surrounding sustainability have been magnified, with consumers now becoming even more conscious of their actions (Brydges et al., 2020; Fish, 2020; Latham, 2021) and increasingly demanding more sustainable options. Recent research has shown that COVID-19 sparked environmental and social consciousness amongst some consumers, who have changed their current consumption practices (ibid). Thus, it could be argued that the topic of this chapter becomes increasingly important.

With consumers having had more time to research, and often less disposable income to spend on things, including fashion, sustainability has been found by some to be a key driver for consumers during the pandemic (Latham, 2021; Iran et al., 2022). According to Haller et al. (2020) "every age group indicates that sustainability, environmental, and/or personal wellness attributes are significant considerations in selecting brands". Consumers also voice their concerns on social media platforms about their outrage of fashion companies not (in their opinion) complying with sustainability practices.

Moreover, in the past, consumer and stakeholder pressure has also forced organizations to engage in 'sustainable' initiatives, such as signing accords and/or making public commitments to changing practices. This has only been accelerated during the pandemic. Although disasters, such as the Rana Plaza factory incident or the recent global COVID-19 pandemic, may drive an initial momentum in the fashion industry to invest in more sustainable practices (Brydges and Hanlon, 2020), headlines, such as "is fast fashion taking a green future seriously?" prevail (Chan, 2019).

In this context, what is currently unknown however is in how far companies are engaging in sustainability measures either out of a necessity, or part of the core vision and mission. Regulatory and stakeholder pressures can dictate and/or guide industry practices, which is also one of the reasons as to why larger companies for example need to disclose a corporate social responsibility report. At the same time, there is hardly any fashion company that does not at least have a sustainability message somewhere on their website.

Discussion: 'Whatever, we have to do it' – or is it more?

In reflecting on the myriad of changes taking place in the industry, are sustainability strategies in the fashion industry going far enough and are they being taken seriously? Or are they simply a mechanism to overcome issues that have been pointed out? As aforementioned, the fast fashion industry is often used as a prime example, as it has received negative media for fostering overconsumption and generating more waste than necessary (EAC, 2019). Yet, other parts of the industry are no better. For example, headlines of unsold luxury goods being burned or slashed have been making their rounds, thereby accusing these high-end fashion retailers of wrongly dealing with deadstock (Cernansky, 2021).

What becomes apparent here is that we are seemingly dealing with a reactive approach to dealing with sustainability issues. To explain, fashion brands could be seen to only reflect on certain practices, once these have received a public outcry, rather than a proactive and significant overhaul of their business models. As such, they are reactive thereby counteracting negative press, rather than working in a preventive or proactive way to dealing with a sustainability issue, such as deadstock.

Of course, we also see positive examples in the fashion industry with fashion brands increasingly developing fashion lines with material innovations, cutting other materials (e.g., leather, fur) completely out of their production processes, and having very detailed codes of conduct (social responsibility) in place. As such, it can be argued that any change made towards integrating sustainability is a step in the right direction as it is a proactive way of dealing with a global issue. Thus, any company that produces more sustainable lines and/or starts collaborations in order to reduce their pre- and/or post-consumer waste should be commended for their efforts.

Yet, on the other hand, we may hear voices that cry out for current measures not going far enough. Returning to fast fashion industry, it seems that several fast fashion brands are being very vocal about their sustainable collections, thereby emphasizing that they are doing their bit to become more sustainable, but are seemingly neglecting the elephant in the room – namely what happens with the rest of their collections that are made in a business-as-usual approach?

Taking a hypothetical example. If a company produces 52 micro-seasons, each containing 5 collections, of which one is classified as sustainable, a total of 52 collections could have a positive impact on the environment, whilst 208 collections could be seen to not necessarily fit with the same goals. Seeing as most collections are manufactured in exactly the same countries, and most likely in the same manufacturing plants, a key question that arises is why not all 260 collections are made from these 'more sustainable' alternatives?

From interviews with key players in the Canadian, Australian, Swedish and UK industry (Henninger et al., 2016; Brydges, 2018, 2021; Brydges et al., 2020), it becomes apparent that these sustainable collections act as a defence mechanism or way for brands to give the impression they are engaging in sustainability, albeit in preliminary or superficial ways. Many of the fast fashion brands we interviewed admitted reluctance to engage with sustainability because they have been scrutinized in the past and feel like they cannot get things 'right'. This I a key reason why the sustainability messaging that accompanies such campaigns is typically quite evasive. However, this often fails to have the intended effect and rather opens these businesses up to criticisms around corporate greenwashing.

Engaging with sustainability can often be a pandora's box. For example, one of the brand's we interviewed received unexpected pushback after releasing a special swimwear collection made of more environmentally-friendly materials. The criticism they received was not for the materials they had chosen to use but rather for the decision to fly to a beach many miles away which was critiques as the unsustainable practice.

It is also important to keep in mind that the sustainability team working for a fast fashion brand is often quite small, which further creates challenges in integrating a sustainability mindset into fashion brands. If internal resourcing and communication of sustainability are a challenge facing the business, this may further help to explain why these messages can go awry.

However, given the magnitude of the sustainability crises facing the industry, such a business-as-usual approach is not good enough. Moreover, not discussing what they do and keeping things on the downlow may also not be the best options, as consumers – now more than ever – research what it is that brands do. If they (consumers) feel companies are not going far enough, they are also quite vocal, which means brands may run the risk of making a bad situation even worse.

Conclusion

Our research has found that fashion brands often deal with a lose-lose situation as opposed to a win-win. With quotes going along the sentiment of *'you are doomed if you do and doomed if you don't'.* Often the "whatever" seems to be the go-to approach, with only key messages of successful actions broadcasted, and those that may also make an impact being sealed behind closed doors. Whilst this attitude could be seen to simply adhering to regulatory and stakeholder pressures, and thus portrays the 'we do what we have to' attitude. Future research is needed to trace these trends as the industry continues to evolve and respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as well as environmental and economic crises.

Although a slightly bleak outlook, there is hope on the horizon. Within the Earth Logic (Fletcher and Tham, 2019) we see a focus on togetherness, which has also manifested itself within society during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. To explain, consumers and also fashion industry players are increasing focusing on providing a harmonious relationship between people and planet. Capitalizing on this thought process will be essential in explicitly outlining that finding this balance is vital if the sustainability crisis is to be controlled. Future research could thus investigate whether this conscious behaviour that has already been alluded to in new publications (e.g., Iran et al., 2022; Vladimirova et al., 2022) will remain to stay and/or how it could be made to stay.

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