

INVESTIGATING CONSUMERS' AWARENESS OF SUSTAINABILITY IN CLOTHING: A CASE STUDY OF PAKISTAN

Faiza Azeem, and Afzal Adamjee

ABSTRACT

Sustainability is the most pressing issue of our time and it is particularly relevant in the textile industry, especially when it comes to Fashion. The fundamental change that is essential to go down the path of sustainability in fashion is to transform into a circular economy which is the very radical substitute to a traditional economy that start from scratch, redesign, reuse, and fully remodel an item of clothing. This is the proper use of available resources by preserving the value for a period while reprocessing the fabric after it has completed its life cycle. Wasting textiles cause major climate change; therefore, reducing, reusing, and recycling are the steps that must be taken for the sustainable fashion industry.

Considering the importance of sustainability in today's world, this research is much needed to determine the degree of awareness among Pakistani consumers concerning Sustainable clothing. The collected data showed that consumers were conscious but to some degree and required further growth, as in their view, sustainability is limited to the definition of biodegradability, recycling, usage of organic materials and less use of chemicals. Additionally, it is also observed that while consumers are concerned about the negative impacts of the fashion industry and aware customers are willing to pay extra for sustainable clothes based on quality and design, but still there is enough gap in their understanding of ethical fashion which needs to be filled. This paper also analyses the disposal behavior of consumers and found that donating cast-off clothes is the most widely used method in Pakistan.

Keywords: Circular economy, Consumer awareness, Conscious consumers, Ethical fashion, Fast Fashion, Perception, Sustainability, Sustainable Clothing.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a sustainable approach towards the fashion industry is recent. While the Concept of sustainability had been around for years, it was in the early '90s that stylists and Design trendsetters first stepped outside of the archetype that condensed the fashion industry and learned options outside what had become the custom for apparel construction and consumption. The realization that garments could be made in a manner that would maintain “environmental, Societal, and cultural miscellany” and encouragement of “advanced business models” created the ground for significant movement and departure from the routine of “fast fashion”. The concept of fast fashion that emerged in the last 20 years is the rapid mass production of cheap trendy clothes from low-quality material which encourages mass consumption. The opportunity to shop and buy like anyone else feeds the flames of fast fashion. Also, the insatiable appetite for the latest trends presents a generous challenge to the campaign for sustainable fashion.

According to the study published in the journal *Environmental Health*, it is stated that globally, each year 80 billion pieces of new clothing are purchased, translating to USD 1.2 trillion annually for the fashion industry. This massive garment production involved environmental and social costs such as the growth of water-intensive cotton, the release of untreated dyes into local water sources, emission of approx. 1.2 billion tons of CO₂ per year, use of hazardous synthetic chemicals, intensive use of energy and natural resources, worker's low wages and poor working conditions, as well as millions of tons of textile waste in landfills.

As the textile industry is heavily responsible for developing a large and comprehensive environmental and social footprint, from the cultivation to processing and from textile production to the disposal of post-consumer products, it is now the responsibility of businesses to adopt sustainable behavior in terms of energy consumption, water conservation, waste management, controlling pollution, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The word sustainability is an incredibly intricate concept. Sustainability is the ability to preserve, by focusing on the needs of the present without harming and compromising the ability of the coming generations to meet their needs. It typically refers to the capacity for the ecosphere and human beings to coexist. According to Hethorn and Ulasewicz (2008) sustainability in fashion implies that there is no mischief done to individuals or the planet

and that a thing or process, when set in motion, can improve the prosperity of individuals who collaborate with it and the climate it is created and utilized within. Sustainability hence alludes to adjusting human actions vis-a`-vis the natural environment for the reason of decreasing the hurt on both human creatures and the environment caused by these actions.

Since there is so much textile waste produced around the world, textile reprocessing, reuse, and recycling can be an eco-friendly choice for lessening the amount of landfill and reducing the output of new textile material by triggering a reduction in the use of energy and having a smaller environmental effect. Also, on the consumer side increasing consumers' awareness about the need and adoption of sustainable fashion and associated risks related to conventional clothing is the key for the technologies to sustain.

Thus, due to the growing urgency of sustainability in the textile industry, the organizations which are working on sustainable fashion need to acquire acknowledgement by illuminating purchasers about their products and services. However, the familiarity of customers about sustainability is yet not known. Therefore, in this study it was tried to determine the level of Pakistani consumers' awareness about sustainable fashion by investigating their perception and buying attitude.

Sustainability in Textiles

Due to being one of the world's largest industries, the textile industry has the potential to make a significant difference environmentally, economically, and socially and this is the cause because these enterprises are known as the second most polluting industry on the planet, close to oil businesses. Additionally, just around 1% of the manufactured garment material was reused totally towards sustainable creation. Past investigations also assessed that the greater part of clothing that was manufactured using fast fashion strategy was discarded in less than a year causing the tremendous issue of landfills.

Sustainability being a burning issue in textiles, the idea behind it is highlighted by the concept of reuse, recycle, and reduce; encouraging companies to use fewer resources such as water, electricity, oil, and property. To attain this objective, the emergence of a circular economy took place. In a model of the circular economy, the method we tend to use the textiles must alter/modify at a basic level. A circular economy is an alternative to a conventional economy (production, use and dispose of) in which we keep

resources in a very loop for the maximum amount of time as possible, attempt to keep up their value while being used and repurpose for the generation of the new item at the end of utilization.

By converging on a circular economy, the garment can be used over a longer lifespan and reprocessing of the materials enables us to reduce textile waste and enjoy the full benefit of the textile garment.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this research are:

- To identify the level of consumer's awareness about sustainable fashion
- To explore consumers' perception of environmental/ social aspects in the context of the fashion industry
- To find consumers' purchase intentions towards sustainable clothing

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fraj & Martines (2006) explained the sustainable buying behavior of consumers as selecting recyclable products, being socially responsible, and taking other steps to protect the environment. There are many more studies that tried to examine consumers' perception of sustainable products and consumers' final purchase decisions. Noteworthily, several studies found that even though consumers, in general, have positive attitudes toward sustainable products but they often end up not purchasing them. (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; McDonald, Oates, & Thyne, 2009; Nicholls & Lee, 2006).

Clark (2008) describes sustainable fashion appears as resistant to fast fashion. Eco-fashion represents one of the forms of anti-consumption (Joy et al., 2012) or alternative consumption, such as eco-consumption, green consumption, ethical consumption, and political consumption (cf. Littler, 2009), and is a form of the cultural economy (Culture Unbound, 2014: vol. 6, theme 5).

Akko and Koskennurmi Sivonen (2013) summarize the practices of sustainable fashion and describe them systematically in the following categories: taking and returning resources, materials sourcing, fabrics treatment, production methods, societal implications, saving resources, information transparency, and enhancing attachment and appreciation of sustainable fashion.

The approach towards sustainable fashion inevitably involves the transition from a linear Industrial system to a circular system that can be enabled by the introduction of a new business model, manufacturing cycle of a product in a view to both economic and environmental sustainability. (Towards the circular economy: An Economic and Business Rationale for an Accelerated Transition, 2013)

Shen, Richards & Liu (2013) stated that sustainable fashion is a term that covers the idea of green and ethical fashion. Whereas green fashion link with the environmental theme by encouraging utilization of recycled materials and biodegradable fibres, in contrast, ethical fashion focuses more on fair trade principles, and a production system free from unethical labor practices. Both dimensions together make the sustainable fashion concept more comprehensive and richer in scope.

Bismar (2020) proposed certain principles of circular economy concerning designing and to increase the lifespan of the product. He focused that purpose-based construction, multifunctional design, and biodegradable products that can be beneficial for a circular society.

In the light of present urgency of sustainable fashion several studies also attempted to investigate the level of consumers' awareness towards sustainable clothing. All this research conclude that the consumers do not have enough knowledge and their perception of sustainability is mostly limited to some aspects. Therefore, there is an urgent need for more awareness-raising initiatives, to make consumers more conscious about the options available and the desire for a more sustainable use of Clothing. (Saricam, Erdumlu, Silan, Dogan & Sonmezcan, 2017; Indrajith, 2018; Patil, 2018; Paco, Filho, Avila & Dennis, 2020)

METHODOLOGY

To Study the perception of sustainability in fashion amongst Pakistani consumers, survey responses of women were collected from all over Pakistan. According to Saunders (2012) sample size calculation table, out of the total population of women 38,039,766 living in Pakistan, the sample size should be 385 participants. Therefore, 385 responses were randomly collected for the survey.

The survey questionnaire was created by using Google Module which is a powerful full featured comprehensive survey tool for data collection

to collect input from people that belong from diverse cultural backgrounds, religions, and ethnicities to encompass diverse opinions in the research. This research tool was used to extract consumer insights about their preference in buying and discarding clothes because of Sustainability.

The data obtained were then analyzed by using descriptive analysis and the outcome was presented with the help graphs.

RESULTS

The survey was conducted to find out the level of awareness about sustainable fashion among women in Pakistan. 385 complete and accurate questionnaires were processed showing that most of the participants belonged to the age group of 15-25 i.e., 63%, which was followed by 26% with the age group of 26-35, 7% were in the age group of 36-45 and the rest of 4% were above 45. Out of the total number of respondents 41.5% were employed and 53.7% were students. The level of qualification of participants was 52% graduation, 27% Masters or higher and the rest of them were intermediate.

To assess consumer perception regarding sustainable fashion the questions asked were related to their idea of sustainability in clothing, their concern about the environment in the context of the fashion industry, the way of disposing of clothes and the willingness to pay the extra price for ethical fashion.

According to the response analysis, only 61% of the women are concerned about the social, environmental, and ethical impacts of the fashion sector. Given that, only 52.5% of the participants heard the term sustainability in fashion and about 44% were aware of the negative effects of this industry. It is now obvious, that there is a lack of understanding and recognition among Pakistani people concerning the social and environmental effects of the textile sector and about the concept of sustainability.

As a result of the question regarding the idea of sustainable clothing, most participants believed that it is associated with the usage of organic or natural materials as well as biodegradability in fabrics. Another response selected by a considerable number of women was recycling, reusability, and reduction in toxic chemicals during garment manufacturing. The least number of respondents selected the option of fair labor practices following no harm to animals indicating that people are still ignorant of the fact of unfair labor practices and brutal slaughtering of animals that were linked to garment manufacturing. Else, they do not consider those practices as a part of the

concept of Sustainability.

The query related to willingness to pay more for sustainable clothing considering style, comfort, and quality as same as conventional clothing 50% of the respondents answered as yes while 33% replied not sure. The result that half of the sample population responded positively, and the other half were neutral or were on the negative side was because most of the Pakistanis belonged to the middle class or lower middle-income group who consider price as an important factor while making a buying decision. This obliquely advocates the action of local brands in Pakistan for not offering sustainable clothing at large.

However, 50% receptivity among participants to pay extra for sustainable clothing affirms that conscious buyers are concerned about the environment and willing to buy sustainable clothing even if it costs more than what they usually pay. But their decision to buy eco Fashion largely depends on the factors of quality and design of the product.

Concerning the disposal of clothes, 75% of the participants responded that they donated their discarded clothes to charity or gave them to their servants. Whereas another option that practiced mostly by the sample population was passing on their cast-off clothes to their younger family members. 33% of the respondents agreed that they throw away their unwanted garments which verify the problem of Landfill that the textile sector creates each year.

CONCLUSION

Apparel production is a resource-intensive and emissions exhaustive industry that has a catastrophic impact on the environment. With the emergence of fast fashion globally, consumers can now buy more affordable clothes, but it comes at an environmental cost. As consumers can play a significant role in the sustainability of the fashion industry by making ethical buying decisions, it is now the dire need of this time to increase the knowledge of people regarding ethical fashion. Considering the importance of this issue and consumer role in such a scenario this study was conducted to assess the level of awareness among Pakistani women about Sustainable Fashion in Pakistan.

According to the results, it appears that the customers are aware of this concept up to some extent but lack in covering all the aspects of sustainability as most consumers relate sustainable clothing to biodegradability, reusability, recycling, usage of organic materials and reduction in chemicals. Some of the

neglected aspects of sustainable fashion are fair labour practices, no harm to animals and the production of product locally. The survey also revealed that though there is a lack of knowledge about the negative impacts of the fashion industry, still over 61% of respondents are concerned about the practices used in manufacturing garment, which is influencing the planet socially, environmentally, and ethically. Hence, the more conscious buyers are willing to pay extra to purchase sustainable brand along with the attributes of quality and tempting designs.

Furthermore, the findings also showed that in terms of clothes disposal majority of consumers preferred to give them to charity or servants or passed them to their younger family members. Although, this way of disposing of clothes is appreciable still there is a chunk of people that throw away their cast-off clothes causing landfills.

Additionally, the analysis of the relationship between socio-demographic characteristic and level of awareness among Pakistani women suggested that the participants who aged from 18-35 and belonged to the group of students or in the working group had more awareness about sustainable fashion. This result is also linked to the factor that both of such groups had an education level of graduation or above.

In conclusion, there is a demand for sustainable fashion in Pakistan which can be upsurged through promoting the importance and need of ethical buying among consumers. The growing requirement of such clothing can be catered to with the introduction of sustainable clothing collection by local retailing brands. In this context, a few of the Pakistani brands had already started to practice slow fashion but adoption is quite slow due to the low customer support. To gain full benefits from this opportunity of growing demand, brands need to create more awareness about ethical fashion and to develop such a line at competitive prices. If customers support these ethical brands, they may be more brands that can shift towards creating sustainable fashion pieces paving the way for sustainable fashion in Pakistan.

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