Editorial

Sustainability in Fashion Brands

Margherita Pero [1,*], Elisa Arrigo [2] and Antoinette Fionda-Douglas [3]

[1] Department of Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, 20133 Milan, Italy
[2] Department of Economics, Management and Statistics, University of Milano-Bicocca, 20126 Milan, Italy; elisa.arrigo@unimib.it
[3] School of Social Sciences, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh EH14 4AS, UK; a.fionda_-_douglas@hw.ac.uk
* Correspondence: margherita.pero@polimi.it

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Abstract: This preview article introduces the Special Issue on "Sustainability in Fashion Brands" and presents a summary of the research. This editorial will highlight the contents and methodologies of selected papers, presenting diverse issues in sustainable fashion strategies and management. The authors conclude with a special thank you to the authors, reviewers, and the editor-in-chief for their roles in the preparation of the special issue.

Keywords: sustainability; fashion; brand management

1. Introduction

Today's society is faced with the challenges of reducing the impact of human activities on natural processes and the consumption of natural resources by manufacturing processes, as well as reducing poverty and improving labor conditions. The fashion industry significantly impacts the environment, as well as society. For example, 35% of material input at fashion supply chains ends up as waste, while only 1% of materials used to produce clothing is actually recycled [1]. Moreover, the fashion industry is one of the most labor-intensive industries with the majority of manufacturing located in low-income countries and composed of young people, mostly female; 80% of 75 million working in fashion supply networks are female between the ages of 18 and 24 [2].

Several apparel brands outsource production from developing countries with low labor cost by exploiting the relative cost advantages and causing huge effects both on their companies' home countries and abroad. From 2000 to 2015, manufacturing outsourcing caused a sharp drop in employment in the industries in Europe (−42%) and the United States (−66%) [3], and contextually started the exploitation of the workforce in foreign countries. From child labor in cotton manufacturing to forced labor in the clothing industry, the fashion supply chain frequently exploits the people who make clothes. About 90% of workforces in the global garment industry have no possibility to negotiate their wages or labor conditions [4]. The 24th of April 2020 has recently been the anniversary of the Rana Plaza factory collapse, which killed 1138 people and damaged many more in 2013 [5].

Therefore, there is a growing request of public opinion and customers for environmentally and socially responsible products. Fashion brands must take action towards environmental and ethical considerations. The fashion industry is slowly recognizing its social, environmental, and economic responsibilities as well as its opportunities to support sustainability policies in sourcing, manufacturing, and marketing [6]. By implementing sustainable marketing policies, fashion companies can support good causes and improve their customer–brand relationships by reducing the consumption of natural resources and pursuing sustainable development [7]. To this aim, they must reshape their supply chains, from raw material producers to retailers, find new ways to meet the needs of environmentally-conscious customers, and provide sustainable products to increase customers' attention towards sustainability-related issues [8].

2. Focus of this Special Issue

With the aim of opening up the debate on how fashion brands can tackle these issues, in this Special Issue, we publish state-of-the-art research concerning sustainability in fashion brands. We included in this Special Issue five papers, accepted out of all the submitted works after the review process. The accepted papers can be divided into two main groups, depending on their focus.

3. Overview of the Papers

Specifically, three papers provide insights into the way fashion brands are reporting on sustainability in the face of hanging customers and behaviors. In fact, sustainability has been recognized as an important new driver in consumers' purchasing decisions [9]. Some studies [10,11] have proved that wealthy Millennials ask their favourite fashion brands to contribute to the ecosystem wellness with concrete actions and are even willing to pay a premium price for sustainable products. Similarly, the younger Generation Z is socially and environmentally conscious, and has higher expectations towards fashion brands to be more sustainable and ethical in their manufacturing processes. Consumers, thus, want to know the provenience of fashion goods and the quality of materials used and are expecting more transparency across the entire supply chain [12]. This implies that fashion brands should be committed to developing business models based on ethical, sustainable, and circular fashion to engage and retain their customers, especially those pertaining to Generation Z [8]. However, in order to benefit from such commitment and the deriving actions, fashion brands must disclose their undertaking [7]. In this perspective, sustainability reporting has grown over the years [13], and nowadays plays a crucial role within the dialogue between businesses and stakeholders [14].

The remaining two papers provide insights into the way fashion companies can improve sustainability of their design and supply chain processes, as well as, linking to the first group, supporting the communication of sustainability achievement.

In the first group of papers, Gazzola et al. [15] deepen the role of generations related to gender in fashion sustainability [16] by carrying out a survey conducted on Insubria University's students to explore Generation Z's perceptions about sustainable fashion and the circular economy. Their results confirm the relevance of considering a gender perspective of sustainability issues in the fashion industry, since it can drive Generation Z's demand. Instead, the other two papers in this first group focus on sustainability reporting; it has been proved that companies need to meet the expectations of their stakeholders to preserve a good reputation [6,17]. Moreover, the adoption of sustainability reporting systems [18] contributes to spread awareness on their commitment. Feng and Ngai (2020) [19] address the paradigm of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting in the fashion industry, by examining sustainability reports of leading apparel companies from 2013 to 2016 to discover the changes in CSR reporting practices and identifying the possible reasons behind them. Through a longitudinal study based on content analysis of CSR communication of 12 global apparel companies in the fashion industry, they prove a predominance of environmental issues and a relevant increase in human rights-related issues in CSR reporting. Furthermore, an emphasis on human development and training in the workplace is highlighted, demonstrating a shift in apparel companies from a reactive to a proactive approach towards sustainability. Similarly, Galli and Bassinini [20] investigate sustainability initiatives' reporting on the top 100 "Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2019" (Deloitte), with a special focus on China. They highlight that the adoption of sustainability reports by luxury companies is still limited and only refers to larger companies that have already embraced sustainability strategies. With reference to China-specific sustainability initiatives, the influence of specific factors is proved on sustainability reporting such as company dimensions, company nationality, the management of the supply chain and operation in China, and the relevance of China as a key market in terms of revenues. Finally, Galli and Bassinini [20] found the existence of different homogeneous approaches to sustainability reporting by geographical area (isomorphism) through a cluster analysis.

In the second group of papers, Brun et al. [21] discuss the role external actors, i.e., the supply chain partners and the NGOs, play in supporting transparency and, therefore, in sustainability

communication. In particular, relying on relational theory, the paper explores how brands enhance transparency and the role of NGOs in the process of increasing the transparency of the supply chain. The paper concludes that strong collaborative relationships are needed to overcome the hurdles to transparency, and that NGOs can help facilitating the collaboration. From a managerial perspective, it means practitioners aiming to increase fashion brand sustainability should build long-term and constructive collaborations between supply chain actors. Karell and Niinimäki (2020) [22] look inside the company to open up the design process and discuss how sustainability can be integrated into design and the role of clothing designers in reaching brands' sustainable objectives. Using expert interviews and a survey, they investigate sustainable design practices and the role of clothes designers in sustainably-minded companies. They highlight that, despite the new knowledge on sustainable design practices generated, designers in the fashion industry are not keeping pace. They, sadly, affirm that designers are limited in their opportunities to influence environmental and social change in fashion brands. These results suggest that a faster implementation of sustainable design practices is needed, and this should be supported by a closer collaboration between researchers, companies, and policy makers.

4. Conclusions

The papers presented cover a wide spectrum of topics from marketing management to design and supply chain management with different methodological approaches and involving companies from all over the world. Therefore, in our opinion, this Special Issue can be interesting for both researchers and practitioners.

The presented papers also suggest open questions and directions for future research, that we believe can be of interest for further increasing sustainability in fashion brands.

To support the transition of fashion brands to sustainability, thus reducing the negative impacts on the environment and society of present practices, Karell and Niinimäki (2020) [22] highlight the need for empirical study to assess the actual implementation of sustainability practices, to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice. Specifically in the realm of Supply Chain Management, research is needed, as suggested by Brun et al. (2020) [21], to further investigate how to overcome the hurdles to sustainably-oriented collaboration, as well as how new emerging technology, e.g., block chain, can support increasing transparency and enable new sustainable business models.

In conclusion, we would like to thank Prof. Dr. Marc A. Rosen, editor-in-chief of *Sustainability*, for giving us the opportunity to organize and manage, as guest editors, this special issue, all the colleagues that have submitted their work for the special issue, and the reviewers for their valuable work to guarantee the academic quality of the published papers.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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