



Social media and sustainable fashion adoption: An investigation of consumer behaviour and decision-making

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Abstract

In recent years, the fashion industry has witnessed a significant shift towards sustainability, driven by increasing consumer awareness and concerns about environmental and social issues. Social media has become an indispensable part of people's lives, influencing their decisions and behaviors in various aspects, including fashion consumption. At the same time, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for influencing the behavior of consumers and shaping public opinion. The influence of social media on the adoption of sustainable fashion is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that requires a deeper understanding. It is essential to delve into the distinctive social networking platforms that have the most significant impact on users' perceptions of sustainable fashion, as well as the function of influencers and content created by users in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors.

This paper presents a comprehensive review of existing literature to explore the impact of social media on the embrace of sustainable fashion choices. Through an examination of scholarly articles, reports, and case studies, key themes and findings are synthesized to offer perspectives on the complex relationship between social media and sustainable fashion adoption. The review highlights the intended use of social media platforms in raising awareness, facilitating information dissemination, fostering community engagement, and influencing consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions towards sustainable fashion. Additionally, it identifies opportunities and challenges associated with social media influence, including issues of greenwashing, authenticity, and the need for greater transparency in the fashion industry.

Keywords: Social media, sustainable fashion, consumer behavior, social media platforms, fashion industry

Introduction

The endorsement of United Nations member states gave their approval to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during the landmark Sustainable Development Summit in 2015^[9] as a strategy to progress towards sustainability. SDG 12 highlights responsible consumption and production, to reshape the existing consumer behavior and framework towards a more sustainable approach. Target 12.8 of Goal 12 of the SDGs specifically focuses on spreading relevant awareness and knowledge about sustainability and environmentally friendly lifestyles. Similar objectives are outlined in SDG 12 to ensure sustainable manufacturing. For example, Target 12.6 emphasizes the importance of encouraging businesses, especially large and multinational ones, to embrace sustainable business practices and incorporate sustainability information into their reporting processes.

In contemporary society, the fashion industry hurts the environment and society across all stages of the product life cycle. For example, Clothing and footwear alone account for 5.2 million tonnes of waste, equivalent to 12 kg of waste per person every year. Currently, only 22% of post-consumer textile waste is collected separately for reuse or recycling, while the remainder is often incinerated or landfilled (European Commission, 2023)^[17]. The fashion industry is recognised as the second largest polluter worldwide, following the oil industry, due to its significant environmental footprint; as a result, the concept of sustainability within this sector has garnered increasing attention, positioning it as a key area of investigation and development. The rapid expansion of the fast fashion

industry has led to a variety of environmental challenges (Claudio, 2007; Gam & Banning, 2011)^[8, 11]. Initially, a significant amount of resources is necessary for the production of fashion items. Subsequently, attention and consideration are essential in the usage of these fashion products. Furthermore, as outlined by Fletcher (2008)^[7], various fashion items like bags, clothing, footwear, cosmetics, and more, generate substantial pollution during production and also require extensive landfill space for waste disposal. Essentially, the fast fashion model prioritizes minimizing the time between fashion product production and consumption to keep up with trends and meet consumer demands. Nonetheless, this approach has indeed resulted in more detrimental effects on the environment and society (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007)^[1].

The influence of social media on the adoption of sustainable fashion is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has garnered significant attention in recent years. As the fashion industry continues to grapple with the devastating social and environmental impacts of its practices, social media has emerged as a critical platform for sharing information, promoting sustainable consumption practices, and driving social change. Research indicates that social media can play a dual role in influencing sustainable fashion consumption. On the one hand, it can encourage overconsumption and normalize fashion obsolescence (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022)^[16]. On the other hand, it can spread information about unsustainable practices of the industry and promote more sustainable consumption alternatives (Kapoor *et al.*, 2023)^[17]. The role of social media influencers in promoting sustainable fashion is particularly noteworthy. Research has

found that influencers can significantly impact attitudes towards sustainable fashion, with consumers being more likely to engage with sustainable fashion if they encounter it more frequently (Kong *et al.*, 2016) ^[18]. Moreover, social media platforms like Twitter offer a unique opportunity for influencers to disseminate information and promote sustainable fashion practices to a broad and diversified audience.

Objective of the study:

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a thorough and organized examination of available secondary data to comprehend the influence of social media on the adoption of sustainable fashion. Specifically, the study intends to:

- To investigate how social media promotes the consumption of sustainable fashion.
- Identify key influencers and strategies used to promote sustainable fashion practices.
- Analyze the role of social media in driving consumer engagement with sustainable fashion.

Review of literature:

Sustainable Fashion

Carey and Cervellon, 2014 ^[6] emphasize that sustainable fashion is recognized as a component of the slow fashion movement, also referred to as "eco fashion," "green fashion," "ethical fashion," or "organic." As per Souza (2015) ^[10], "eco-fashion" or "environmental fashion" not only entails being environmentally friendly but also involves restoring the environment for future generations. Various researchers (Claudio, 2007; Joergens, 2006) ^[8, 15] argue that "eco-fashion" entails creating garments that benefit society without causing harm to the environment. Clark (2008) ^[7] posits that "slow fashion" and "ethical fashion" are terms that can be harmonized, with "slow" denoting sustainable and ethical practices in clothing production and consumption, akin to the principles of "ethical fashion." Cervellon and Wernerfelt (2012) ^[5] define sustainable fashion as synonymous with "green fashion." The term "slow" sustainable fashion is explored by de Brito (2008) and Henninger *et al.* (2017) ^[4, 14] about the fashion industry's economic, social, and environmental aspects. Various definitions of slow fashion include:

- The Slow Fashion concept emphasizes sustainability in fashion design by incorporating high-quality, small-scale production, regional sourcing, and fair labor practices (Slow Fashion Award, 2010).
- Slow Fashion clothing is designed to be durable and foster a personal connection with the wearer.
- Slow Fashion entails a shift away from trend-driven consumption towards considering the garment's origins and purchasing items that retain value beyond seasonal trends.

Sustainable Fashion Development in India:

India's progression towards sustainable fashion is propelled by various elements, such as increased consumer consciousness, changing market dynamics, and technological innovations. The industry's potential to adopt sustainable practices is significant, with a focus on natural textiles, eco-friendly practices, and technological advancements. As the sector progresses, it is crucial to confront issues such as educating consumers and ensuring affordability, while also capitalizing on advantages such as

innovation, export prospects, and the generation of employment opportunities. By embracing sustainable practices, India can become a global hub for sustainable fashion, driving positive change in the industry and contributing to a more sustainable future. The sustainable fashion industry in India has evolved significantly over time, transitioning from traditional practices to embracing eco-friendly and socially responsible approaches. Initially, India's fashion industry faced challenges related to pollution, waste, and unsustainable practices, but a shift towards sustainability has been observed. Factors such as increased consumer awareness, government initiatives promoting sustainable development, and the availability of eco-friendly materials have been pivotal in driving this evolution (The Times of India).

Over the past few years, there has been an escalating need for eco-friendly fashion in India, which has resulted in numerous Indian brands and designers embracing sustainable practices. This transition has been driven by various factors such as the adverse environmental effects of the fashion sector, the requirement for ethical labor standards, and the demand for transparent supply chains (Entrepreneur. INDIA). Furthermore, India's abundant textile heritage and skilled craftsmen have played a pivotal role in the advancement of sustainable fashion items that cater to both domestic and international markets. While the sustainable fashion industry in India is still nascent, it has displayed consistent growth, with an estimated Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 10.6% between 2021 and 2026. This upward trend is anticipated to persist due to the rising consumer consciousness and willingness to invest in sustainable goods, along with India's potential to achieve a \$9 billion sustainable fashion market by 2025 (The Times of India). The sector's shift towards sustainability marks a significant reorganization of the Indian fashion scene, emphasizing accountability, environmental awareness, and societal influence (The Environment. in).

The Indian government has implemented various measures to encourage sustainable fashion within the country. Initiatives such as the Sustainable Resolution (SU RE) and the Handloom and Handicrafts Development Programme have been introduced to promote sustainable practices in the fashion industry. Additionally, the government has unveiled the National Guidelines for Responsible Business Conduct (NGRBC), which advocate for specific business principles, including ethical conduct, sustainable provision of goods and services, and efforts to protect and restore the environment. Legislation such as the Companies Act of 2013 and the Companies Corporate Social Responsibilities Policy Rules of 2014 hold businesses accountable for adhering to sustainability reporting standards, necessitating a minimum allocation of 2% of their average net profits towards Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities. Furthermore, the SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) mandates that the top 1000 listed companies submit a Business Responsibility Sustainability Report (BRSR), which must disclose sustainability goals and performance metrics related to resource usage, waste management, and carbon footprint.

The Role of social media in promoting sustainable fashion:

Social media has been recognized as a potent instrument for increasing awareness regarding global concerns, such as

sustainability (Strähle and Gräff, 2016) ^[18]. Fashion brands that adopt sustainable practices and ethical standards receive acknowledgement and backing from users of social media, inspiring them to embrace sustainable endeavours and diminish their ecological impact (De Vries, Gensler, and Leeftang, 2012) ^[12]. Research has shown that social media can impact consumer attitudes towards sustainable fashion, with consumers more likely to engage with sustainable fashion if they encounter it more frequently (Kong, Ko, Chae, and Mattila, 2016). Strähle and Gräff (2017) ^[18, 23] identify eight roles of social media in influencing sustainable (fashion) consumption: publicity, transparency, education, engagement, customer relationship management, community building, co-creation, and advocacy. Social media can serve as a platform for raising awareness about sustainability issues, fostering discussions, and empowering consumers to make more informed choices. Notably, social media influencers have been shown to have a significant impact on endorsing sustainable fashion, given their proximity to the desired audience compared to conventional marketing approaches. According to Minton *et al.*, (2012) ^[19], social media plays a significant role in the realm of fashion. Social media serve as a highly efficient platform for online marketing and advertising, primarily because they enable companies and advertising agencies to gather data on consumers' characteristics such as interactions, networking, and interpersonal relationships. Additionally, social media stands out as a particularly suitable online communication channel for engaging with the appropriate target audience (Brodie *et al.*, 2013).

However, the impact of social media on sustainable fashion adoption is not without its challenges. For instance, the overemphasis on fast fashion and the normalization of fashion obsolescence can perpetuate unsustainable consumption patterns (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022) ^[16]. Furthermore, the influence of social media on consumer behavior can be fleeting, with consumers often returning to their pre-purchase intentions after the initial excitement of a new product wears off (Kapoor *et al.*, 2023) ^[17]. Despite these challenges, the potential of social media to promote sustainable fashion adoption is significant. By leveraging the power of social media to raise awareness about sustainable fashion practices, promote sustainable consumption alternatives, and engage consumers in discussions about the environmental and social impacts of fashion, the industry can work towards a more sustainable future.

Research Methodology

The present study utilizes a research methodology that relies on secondary data analysis, employing a systematic approach to collect, synthesize, and evaluate existing literature on the topic "Influence of social media on the adoption of sustainable fashion: a comprehensive review of existing literature". A range of sources, such as peer-reviewed academic publications, industry reports, and empirical research that have looked into different facets of social media, sustainable fashion, and their interactions, will be used to gather secondary data. A conceptual method is applied to analyze the synthesized data to detect recurring themes and patterns in the literature. The research seeks to establish conceptual groupings concerning the impact of social media on the adoption of sustainable fashion. These groupings will facilitate data analysis and aid in identifying

patterns, connections, and differences that contribute to the research outcomes. The study upholds ethical considerations throughout to ensure integrity, transparency, and accurate referencing. The results of the literature review are presented coherently and understandably which adheres to academic writing standards. The outlined methodology aims to enhance our understanding of this crucial aspect of energy efficiency by offering a rigorous and systematic framework for investigating the influence of social media on the adoption of sustainable fashion.

Findings and Discussion

The Global Sustainable Fashion Market report predicts a strong compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 22.9 per cent from 2023 to 2030, fueled by rising consumer interest and the growing use of environmentally friendly textiles. The apparel sector stands out as a key segment, driven by consumer favouritism towards sustainable clothing, while recycled fabrics experience growth in tandem with the increasing demand for eco-conscious materials (FashionUnited). India, as an emerging nation, is striving to emerge as a prominent player in the realm of sustainable fashion consumption on a global scale. The city of Delhi stands out for its notable fashion consumption practices within the realm of sustainability in the Indian context. Despite these efforts, India continues to encounter numerous obstacles in embracing circular fashion practices. While prior studies have delved into the subject of sustainable fashion consumption among Indian consumers, there remains a dearth of research in this area. Existing literature has predominantly focused on consumer behavior (Muralidharan *et al.*, 2019; Sharma and Kurani, 2004) ^[22], with limited attention given to sustainable fashion.

Social media is a powerful tool that influences the adoption of sustainable fashion by shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors. It serves as a platform for education, transparency, community engagement, and effective marketing. To capitalize on this influence, brands must ensure authentic and meaningful engagement with sustainability issues. Further research is needed to explore innovative social media strategies that can promote deeper consumer commitment to sustainable fashion practices. Yasmin (2015) ^[26] asserts that content marketing is currently a prevailing global phenomenon adopted by numerous firms to attract a larger pool of potential customers to their online platforms, while simultaneously enhancing knowledge of sustainable fashion, brand awareness and interaction with clientele through various social media outlets. Engaging with customers via social media channels offers companies the opportunity to remain attuned to customer needs, bolster their brand presence, cut down on expenses, and expand their reach to a broader international customer base helps in sustainable strategies (Yasmin *et al.*, 2015) ^[26].

Conversely, consumers utilizing digital marketing channels, such as social media, benefit from staying abreast of product offerings and services, engaging more deeply with a company's operations, and being continuously informed about available products or services which helps in attaining sustainable fashion, conducting comparisons with similar offerings, making purchases from any location at any time, effortlessly sharing product or service information, and promptly acquiring desired items. Digital marketing, including social media, serves as a supplementary resource to traditional advertising methods, contributing to increased

sales. Furthermore, Henninger *et al.* (2016) ^[13] contend that social media platforms offer a cost-effective avenue for reaching a broader and more targeted audience.

Direction for future research

Fashion and clothing have become one of the fastest-growing online categories, yet it remains one of the slowest industries to adopt new technologies. However, the advent of the Internet, especially social media platforms, has transformed the interaction between fashion brands and their customers (Casciani *et al.*, 2022) ^[3]. This has created new opportunities for sustainable fashion to gain traction and become more mainstream.

To further comprehend this intricate phenomenon, upcoming research efforts may delve into different approaches. Specifically, future studies could focus on examining how social media affects various demographic groups in embracing sustainable fashion and assessing the efficacy of different social media platforms in advocating for sustainable fashion. Further investigation is warranted to scrutinize the capacity of social media to catalyze fundamental shifts within the fashion industry towards sustainability.

Conclusion

Social media significantly influences the adoption of sustainable fashion by increasing awareness and educating consumers about sustainable practices and brands. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter allow for the sharing of information, trends, and sustainable fashion initiatives, which can change consumer behavior and preferences. Influencers and brands use these platforms to promote environmentally friendly practices and products, which can lead to increased consumer demand for sustainable fashion. During the period of digital transformation, online communications play a significant role in impacting the sustainability of an industry or organization. According to Vien (2015) ^[9], content marketing is currently a prevalent global strategy utilized by numerous companies to attract potential customers to their websites and enhance interaction with customers through social media platforms. Engaging with customers through social media channels allows a company to gain insights into customer needs, enhance its visibility, reduce expenses, and expand its customer base globally (Yasmin *et al.*, 2015) ^[26]. Conversely, customers utilizing digital marketing channels, such as social media, have the opportunity to stay informed about products or services, engage more closely with company activities, stay updated on offerings, compare products or services, make purchases anytime and anywhere, easily share product information, and promptly make desired purchases. Digital marketing and social media serve as tools that complement traditional advertising methods and drive sales growth. Additionally, Henninger *et al.* (2016) ^[13] suggest that social media platforms offer a cost-effective means to reach a broader and more targeted audience. Consequently, there exists a notable research gap and a promising avenue for investigation regarding the impact of digitally delivered messages (via digital marketing platforms) on consumers' perceptions of purchasing sustainable fashion items.

Social media plays a pivotal role in driving the adoption of sustainable fashion. With the constant news updates and competition on social media platforms, brands need to

design unique sustainable fashion products that attract attention and resonate with consumers. By leveraging social media platforms, fashion brands can communicate their commitment to sustainability, share information about ethical sourcing and production practices, and engage with consumers on a personal level. This active presence on social media helps to educate and inspire consumers about the benefits of sustainable fashion and encourages them to make conscious choices in their purchasing decisions. Furthermore, social media allows for greater transparency and accountability in the fashion industry. Consumers can use social media platforms to voice their concerns and hold brands accountable for their sustainability practices. This increased transparency puts pressure on fashion brands to improve their sustainability efforts and encourages them to adopt more ethical and environmentally friendly practices. Consequently, a significant research void exists, presenting a promising opportunity to investigate the impact of digitally disseminated messages (via digital marketing platforms) on consumers' perceptions regarding the purchase of sustainable fashion products.

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