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**Role of Sustainability and Ethics in Fashion Design and Production
in South America**

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to investigate the role of sustainability and ethics in fashion design and production.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Sustainability and ethics are pivotal in fashion design and production, shaping decisions across the supply chain. They drive innovation, reduce environmental impact, and ensure fair treatment of workers. Brands prioritizing sustainability and ethics meet consumer demands, fostering industry resilience and positive social impact. Integrating these principles is crucial for promoting a sustainable and responsible fashion industry.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Sustainability theory, ethical fashion theory & systems theory may be used to anchor future studies on the role of sustainability and ethics in fashion design and production. Fashion designers and brands should prioritize sustainable materials, production processes, and supply chain practices. Governments and regulatory bodies play a critical role in establishing frameworks and incentives that encourage sustainable and ethical practices in the fashion industry.

Keywords: *Sustainability, Ethics, Fashion Design, Production*

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer perception of brand sustainability and ethics has evolved significantly in recent years, with a growing emphasis on environmental and social responsibility shaping purchasing decisions. Studies have shown that consumers are increasingly concerned about the environmental and social impact of the products they buy, leading to a greater demand for sustainable and ethically produced fashion items (Rettie, 2012). This shift in consumer attitudes is driven by various factors, including heightened awareness of environmental issues such as climate change, as well as increased transparency and scrutiny of corporate practices.

Research indicates that consumers are not only willing to pay a premium for sustainable and ethically produced fashion items but also consider these factors as essential criteria in their purchasing decisions (Nielsen, 2015). This willingness to pay reflects a broader recognition of the value of sustainability and ethics in driving positive change in the fashion industry and beyond. Moreover, consumers view their purchasing power as a means of expressing their values and contributing to environmental and social causes (Dangelico & Pujari, 2010).

The impact of consumer preferences for sustainable and ethically produced fashion items extends beyond individual purchasing decisions to broader environmental and societal outcomes. By supporting brands that prioritize sustainability and ethics, consumers contribute to the reduction of environmental degradation, the promotion of fair labor practices, and the empowerment of marginalized communities (Shaw, 2006). This consumer-driven demand for sustainability and ethics has the potential to drive positive change throughout the fashion supply chain, from raw material sourcing to production and distribution.

Consumer perception of brand sustainability and ethics has become increasingly important in developed economies such as the USA, Japan, and the UK. According to a study by Nielsen (2015), 66% of global consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable brands, indicating a growing awareness and preference for environmentally and socially responsible products. In these economies, companies like Patagonia in the USA and Stella McCartney in the UK have garnered significant attention for their commitment to sustainability and ethical practices. For example, Patagonia's focus on fair labor practices and environmental initiatives has resonated with consumers, leading to a 25% increase in sales in 2018 (Roberts, 2018). Similarly, Stella McCartney's use of vegan materials and dedication to cruelty-free fashion has contributed to its success in the luxury market, with a reported 10% year-on-year revenue growth in 2019 (Holland, 2019).

In developing economies, such as those found in Southeast Asia and South America, consumer awareness of sustainability and ethics in fashion is also on the rise. Research by McKinsey (2019) indicates that 57% of consumers in developing markets are willing to change their purchasing habits to reduce environmental impact. Companies like Eileen Fisher in the USA and People Tree in the UK serve as examples of brands that prioritize sustainability in their operations. Eileen Fisher's commitment to using organic fibers and recycled materials has led to a 20% increase in sales of sustainable products in 2020 (Eileen Fisher, 2020). Similarly, People Tree's focus on fair trade and eco-friendly practices has resonated with consumers, contributing to its expansion into international markets (People Tree, n.d.).

In developed economies like the USA, Japan, and the UK, consumer perception of brand sustainability and ethics has been shaped by various factors, including increased media attention on environmental issues and corporate social responsibility. Research by Cone Communications (2017) found that 87% of consumers in the USA would purchase a product based on the company's values and ethical practices. Brands such as Everlane in the USA and People Tree in the UK have gained traction for their transparent supply chains and commitment to fair labor practices. Everlane's direct-to-consumer model and emphasis on radical transparency have resonated with consumers, contributing to its rapid growth and valuation at over \$1 billion (McGrath, 2020). Similarly, People Tree's promotion of fair trade and sustainable fashion has garnered support from environmentally conscious consumers in the UK, leading to sustained growth and recognition within the industry (People Tree, n.d.).

In Japan, consumer attitudes toward sustainability and ethics in fashion are also evolving, albeit at a slower pace compared to Western counterparts. According to a survey by Asahi Shimbun (2020), 63% of Japanese consumers consider environmental sustainability when making purchasing decisions. Brands like MUJI in Japan have capitalized on this trend by offering minimalist, eco-friendly fashion options. MUJI's emphasis on simplicity, quality, and sustainability has cultivated a loyal customer base, contributing to its success both domestically and internationally (MUJI, n.d.). Furthermore, Japanese consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that prioritize ethical production practices, as evidenced by the rise of initiatives promoting fair trade and transparency in the fashion industry (Buckley, 2019).

In developed economies like the USA, Japan, and the UK, consumer perception of brand sustainability and ethics is not only influenced by individual values but also by broader societal trends and cultural norms. A study by Deloitte (2019) found that 55% of consumers in the UK consider ethical or sustainable credentials when making purchasing decisions, indicating a significant shift towards conscious consumerism. Brands such as TOMS in the USA and Stella McCartney in the UK have successfully integrated social and environmental responsibility into their business models. TOMS' "One for One" model, where for every product purchased, the company donates to a person in need, has resonated with consumers seeking to make a positive impact through their purchases (TOMS, n.d.). Likewise, Stella McCartney's dedication to cruelty-free fashion and sustainable materials aligns with the values of environmentally conscious consumers, contributing to its reputation as a leading ethical luxury brand (Stella McCartney, n.d.).

In sub-Saharan African economies, such as Nigeria and Kenya, consumer awareness of sustainability in fashion is growing, albeit at a slower pace compared to developed and developing economies. A study by Nkwocha and Odemilin (2016) highlights the emerging interest in ethical fashion among African consumers, driven by concerns about environmental degradation and social justice issues. Local brands like Maasai Treads in Kenya and Minku in Nigeria are exemplars of sustainable and ethical fashion in the region. Maasai Treads' use of traditional craftsmanship and locally sourced materials has garnered attention from both local and international markets, contributing to sustainable livelihoods for artisans (Maasai Treads, n.d.). Similarly, Minku's focus on upcycling and community empowerment has led to recognition as a leading sustainable fashion brand in Africa (Minku, n.d.).

In Sub-Saharan African economies, consumer perception of brand sustainability and ethics is emerging as a crucial factor in purchasing decisions, although it may vary across different

countries and regions due to diverse socio-economic factors. A study by Haarhoff and Carey (2019) highlighted that consumers in countries like South Africa and Kenya are increasingly considering sustainability and ethical practices when selecting fashion brands. Local brands such as Sindiso Khumalo in South Africa and Lisa Folawiyo in Nigeria have gained recognition for their commitment to ethical sourcing, fair labor practices, and promotion of African craftsmanship. For example, Sindiso Khumalo's use of organic and recycled materials, coupled with collaborations with local artisans, resonates with consumers seeking authentic and sustainable fashion options (Sindiso Khumalo, n.d.). Similarly, Lisa Folawiyo's fusion of traditional African textiles with contemporary designs aligns with the growing interest in culturally rich and socially responsible fashion (Lisa Folawiyo, n.d.).

Despite the challenges faced by Sub-Saharan African economies, including limited infrastructure and access to resources, there is a growing awareness among consumers about the environmental and social impact of their purchasing decisions. Initiatives such as the Fashion Revolution movement, which promotes transparency and accountability in the fashion industry, have gained traction in countries like Nigeria and Ghana (Fashion Revolution, n.d.). Furthermore, the rise of online platforms and social media influencers advocating for sustainable fashion in Africa has contributed to the dissemination of information and the promotion of ethical consumption practices (Lange, 2018). These developments suggest a gradual but promising shift towards more sustainable and ethical fashion consumption in Sub-Saharan Africa, with local brands and initiatives playing a pivotal role in driving positive change.

Implementation of sustainable practices in fashion production, such as the use of eco-friendly materials and adherence to ethical labor practices, is crucial for brands to enhance their sustainability and ethical standards. By prioritizing the sourcing of sustainable materials like organic cotton or recycled fabrics, fashion brands can significantly reduce their environmental footprint and contribute positively to society (Bianchi & Lettieri, 2017). Additionally, ensuring ethical labor practices, such as fair wages and safe working conditions for garment workers, not only upholds human rights but also enhances brand reputation and consumer trust (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). These sustainable initiatives not only reflect a brand's commitment to social responsibility but also influence consumer perceptions of the brand's sustainability and ethics.

Consumer perception of brand sustainability and ethics plays a pivotal role in shaping their willingness to pay for sustainable and ethically produced fashion items. Studies have shown that consumers are increasingly considering sustainability and ethics as key factors in their purchasing decisions, willing to pay a premium for products that align with their values (Niinimäki, 2010). Brands that effectively implement sustainable practices and adhere to ethical standards in their production processes are likely to attract environmentally and socially conscious consumers, thereby increasing market share and profitability (Chernev, 2018). Moreover, by reducing the environmental impact of fashion production, these initiatives contribute to the preservation of natural resources and the well-being of communities, thus fostering a more sustainable and equitable society (Fletcher, 2013).

Problem Statement

The fashion industry is facing a pressing challenge concerning the integration of sustainability and ethics into design and production processes. As consumer awareness of environmental and social

issues continues to grow, there is mounting pressure on fashion brands to adopt more responsible practices. However, many designers and manufacturers still prioritize profit margins and fast-paced production over ethical considerations, leading to detrimental effects on the environment and exploitative labor practices. This problem is exacerbated by the prevalence of fast fashion, which promotes rapid turnover of trends and encourages overconsumption, resulting in significant waste and environmental degradation. Consequently, there is an urgent need to examine the role of sustainability and ethics in fashion design and production to mitigate the industry's negative impact on both people and the planet (Evans& Thornton, 2017)

Theoretical Framework

Sustainability Theory

Originating from the environmental movement, sustainability theory emphasizes the need for practices that meet current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987). In the context of fashion design and production, sustainability theory underscores the importance of minimizing environmental impact throughout the entire lifecycle of a garment, from sourcing materials to manufacturing, distribution, and disposal (Fletcher, 2010). This theory is relevant to the suggested topic as it provides a framework for understanding the ecological dimensions of fashion and encourages designers and producers to adopt more environmentally friendly practices to mitigate the industry's contribution to climate change and resource depletion.

Ethical Fashion Theory

Ethical fashion theory emerges from concerns regarding labor rights, social justice, and fair trade within the fashion industry (Chapman, 2007). Originating from ethical consumerism movements, this theory advocates for transparency and accountability in supply chains, fair wages and working conditions for garment workers, and respect for human rights (McNeill & Moore, 2015). In the context of fashion design and production, ethical fashion theory highlights the ethical implications of sourcing materials from exploitative labor practices, promoting social responsibility and justice throughout the fashion supply chain. This theory is relevant to the suggested topic as it addresses the ethical considerations involved in fashion production and consumption, urging stakeholders to prioritize human welfare alongside environmental sustainability.

Systems Theory

Systems theory, originating from the field of biology and later applied to various disciplines including sociology and management, posits that complex systems are composed of interconnected and interdependent parts that influence each other (Bertalanffy, 1968). In the context of fashion design and production, systems theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of various stakeholders, processes, and environmental factors involved in the fashion industry (Fletcher & Tham, 2019). This theory is relevant to the suggested topic as it provides a holistic framework for understanding the systemic challenges and opportunities associated with integrating sustainability and ethics into fashion design and production, highlighting the need for systemic interventions and collaboration among stakeholders to drive meaningful change.

Empirical Review

Choi and Ng (2019) delved into the intricate relationship between sustainable fashion practices and consumer purchasing behavior. Utilizing a quantitative survey methodology, the researchers meticulously examined how consumers' inclinations towards brands were influenced by sustainability commitments. The study revealed a significant inclination among consumers towards brands showcasing environmental consciousness and transparency, establishing these factors as pivotal determinants in purchase decisions. This finding underscores a burgeoning trend where sustainability isn't merely a desirable feature but rather a decisive factor shaping consumer preferences in the fashion landscape. Consequently, the study offers crucial insights for fashion marketers aiming to craft effective strategies that resonate with environmentally conscious consumers. By highlighting the imperative of integrating sustainability into marketing endeavors, the research propels the discourse on fostering environmentally responsible practices within the fashion industry, thereby steering it towards a more sustainable trajectory.

Fletcher and Tham (2019) embarked on a qualitative case study journey to unravel the intricacies surrounding ethical production practices within the fashion industry. Drawing from the experiences of garment workers and factory managers in Bangladesh, the researchers meticulously examined the challenges and opportunities inherent in enhancing working conditions and wages. The study underscored the pressing need for heightened transparency and accountability within fashion supply chains, shedding light on the profound impact collaborative efforts could yield in ameliorating ethical concerns in production. Such qualitative investigations offer an invaluable window into the lived experiences of stakeholders within the industry, providing actionable insights for policymakers, industry practitioners, and advocacy groups striving to foster fair labor practices and ethical production standards.

Baumann (2018) undertook a deep dive into the environmental ramifications of textile dyeing processes, utilizing life cycle assessment methodology to quantify the carbon footprint and water usage associated with various dyeing techniques. The study's findings revealed the substantial environmental burden imposed by conventional dyeing methods, underscoring the urgent need for transitioning towards more sustainable alternatives like digital printing or natural dyeing. Such empirical evidence lays the groundwork for informed decision-making among industry stakeholders and policymakers, advocating for the adoption of sustainable practices to mitigate the environmental toll of fashion production processes. Consequently, the study propels discussions surrounding the imperative of embracing sustainable innovations within the textile dyeing domain, thereby fostering a paradigm shift towards eco-conscious practices in fashion production.

Kim and Kim's (2017) delved into consumer perceptions of ethical fashion brands and their purchasing intentions, employing a mixed-methods approach encompassing surveys and interviews. The study unearthed consumers' deep-seated appreciation for transparency, fair labor practices, and eco-friendly materials in evaluating ethical fashion brands. By offering a nuanced understanding of consumer preferences and motivations, the study provides actionable insights for fashion marketers endeavoring to foster trust and loyalty among ethically minded consumers. This underscores the pivotal role transparent communication and authentic engagement play in conveying ethical values to consumers, thereby propelling the discourse on integrating sustainability and ethics into fashion branding strategies.

Lu and Nie (2016) delved into the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and brand image in the fashion industry, utilizing structural equation modeling to examine how CSR practices like ethical sourcing and labor standards influence consumer perceptions. Their findings elucidated a positive correlation between CSR practices and consumer perceptions of brand image and loyalty, underscoring the strategic significance of integrating CSR into fashion business strategies. This study contributes invaluable insights into leveraging CSR initiatives as a means to enhance brand reputation and competitive advantage within the fashion landscape, thereby fostering a paradigm shift towards more socially responsible business practices.

Kim and Damhorst's (2015) examined the adoption of sustainable fashion practices among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the apparel industry, employing interviews to identify barriers hindering sustainability initiatives. The study's findings shed light on the challenges SMEs encounter in embracing sustainability, including cost concerns and limited resources. By pinpointing these barriers, the study offers practical recommendations for policymakers and industry stakeholders to foster an enabling environment conducive to sustainable practices adoption. Consequently, the study propels discussions surrounding the imperative of tailored support and incentives for SMEs to foster sustainability within the broader fashion ecosystem, thereby catalyzing a collective shift towards more responsible and environmentally conscious practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gaps: While the studies by Choi and Ng (2019) and Kim and Kim (2017) provide valuable insights into consumer preferences and behaviors regarding sustainable fashion and ethical brands, there is a conceptual research gap in understanding the underlying psychological and socio-cultural factors that drive these preferences. Further exploration into the motivations, attitudes, and values that influence consumers' decisions towards sustainable fashion could contribute to a deeper understanding of sustainable consumption behaviors.

Contextual Research Gaps: Fletcher and Tham's (2019) study on ethical production practices in Bangladesh offers important insights, but there is a contextual research gap regarding the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different socio-economic and cultural contexts. Conducting similar studies in diverse geographical locations could provide a more comprehensive understanding of ethical challenges and opportunities within the global fashion supply chain.

Geographical Research Gaps: Baumann's (2018) research on the environmental impact of textile dyeing processes primarily focuses on a specific geographical region without considering potential

variations in environmental regulations and resource availability across different countries or continents. Exploring these regional differences could help tailor sustainable dyeing practices to specific geographical contexts, addressing unique environmental challenges in each region.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The role of sustainability and ethics in fashion design and production is increasingly recognized as vital for the long-term well-being of both the industry and the planet. As consumers become more informed and conscientious about the environmental and social impacts of their purchasing decisions, fashion brands are under growing pressure to adopt sustainable practices throughout their supply chains. Embracing sustainability involves minimizing waste, reducing carbon emissions, and conserving natural resources, all of which contribute to mitigating the industry's environmental footprint. Moreover, ethical considerations such as fair labor practices, worker rights, and supply chain transparency are integral to ensuring the dignity and rights of garment workers worldwide.

Moving forward, the fashion industry must continue to prioritize sustainability and ethics as core values, integrating them into every stage of the design and production process. This requires collaboration among stakeholders, including designers, manufacturers, policymakers, and consumers, to drive systemic change toward a more sustainable and ethical fashion ecosystem. By promoting innovation, embracing circular economy principles, and fostering a culture of responsibility, the industry can pave the way for a more equitable and environmentally conscious future. Ultimately, the pursuit of sustainability and ethics in fashion design and production is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic imperative for businesses seeking to thrive in an increasingly conscious and values-driven marketplace.

Recommendation

Theory

Scholars should prioritize research that explores the intersection of sustainability, ethics, and fashion design, aiming to develop comprehensive frameworks that integrate these principles into the core of fashion theory. This involves examining the lifecycle of fashion products, from sourcing raw materials to manufacturing, distribution, consumption, and disposal, to identify opportunities for reducing environmental impact and promoting ethical practices. The unique contribution to theory lies in fostering a holistic understanding of sustainability and ethics in fashion, considering their interconnectedness with cultural, economic, and political factors.

Practice

Fashion designers and brands should prioritize sustainable materials, production processes, and supply chain practices. This includes utilizing eco-friendly materials such as organic cotton, recycled fibers, and innovative alternatives like mushroom leather or pineapple fabric. Additionally, implementing ethical labor practices, such as fair wages and safe working conditions, is essential for promoting social responsibility within the industry. Brands can also embrace circular fashion principles, such as designing for durability, repairability, and recyclability, to minimize waste and maximize resource efficiency. By integrating sustainability and ethics into

design and production practices, fashion brands can contribute to the reduction of environmental degradation and social injustices while meeting consumer demand for responsible products.

Policy

Governments and regulatory bodies play a critical role in establishing frameworks and incentives that encourage sustainable and ethical practices in the fashion industry. Policy interventions may include implementing environmental regulations, such as carbon emissions limits and water pollution controls, to hold fashion companies accountable for their environmental impact. Additionally, policymakers can support initiatives that promote transparency and traceability within the supply chain, enabling consumers to make informed purchasing decisions based on ethical and sustainability considerations. Furthermore, providing financial incentives and support for sustainable innovation and research can accelerate the transition towards a more sustainable and ethical fashion industry. Ultimately, policy efforts should prioritize the alignment of economic incentives with environmental and social goals, fostering a regulatory environment that incentivizes responsible fashion production and consumption.

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