



# Sustainability in Fashion: A Need, A Wish, A Trend

Rossi G\*

PHD student, University La Sapienza, Italy

\*Corresponding author: Giulia Rossi, PHD student, University La Sapienza, Rome, Italy, Tel: +39 3382166003; Email: giulia.rossi@uniroma1.it

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## Abstract

The fashion industry is among the most polluting in the world. Fast fashion, widespread since the 1990s, has completely redesigned consumption models, helping to create a devastating environmental and social impact. All this is no longer sustainable and many brands think of green operations to clean their image. A true turnaround or a simple marketing operation? In the era of the post truth, dressing in green is a trend and it also shows the growth of influencers specialized who aim at a more sophisticated communication.

How can sustainable fashion be taken out of the niche of sustainability and become popular while maintaining its integrity? How is sustainability sustainable? After years of buying bulimia the trend now seems to be that of responsible consumption, the purchase of garments destined to last over time and be reused, not considering this as a minus, but on the contrary an element to be enhanced.

**Keywords:** Fashion; Sustainability; Fast Fashion; Green Fashion

**Abbreviations:** SACOM: Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour; RSC: Readymade Sustainability Council; RMG: Ready Made Garments; BGMEA: Bangladesh Garments Manufacturer and Exporter Association.

## Introduction

The UN's 'woke' climate change propaganda is an insult to science. This was the title of an article by columnist Sharelle Jacobs in the British newspaper the Daily Telegraph on December 3rd, 2019. It started quite a debate which involved opinion leaders, climate experts, politicians, and influencers from around the world [1]. Expressing a critical point of view not on the actions themselves - actions as fighting climate change, fighting for a more sustainable life, and promoting a circular economy - but on how they are communicated is often considered inappropriate and only aims at silencing the critical voices that emerge on the scene of international debate. The intent of this paper is therefore to investigate, through the direct analysis of digital media in particular

social networks, the international press review and the support of scientific sources regarding the communication of sustainability in fashion, in its many nuances [2].

The January 2020 issue of the monthly magazine Vogue Italia, directed by Emanuele Farneti, was published without the use of photo shoots, replacing them with illustrations and highlighting that in this way pollution was avoided in terms of use of electricity, disposable plastic, or travelling by fashion stylists, models, and crews with non-eco-friendly vehicles. "The 26 editions of Vogue are committed to the values of diversity, responsibility and respect for individuals, communities and our natural environment." These words, signed by the editor of the Italian issue, together with the top management of the editions in other countries, identify a path that each editorial staff develops in its own way [3]. The director's words and the images on the covers were taken up by the international press, thereby giving the publication a good exposure. Was this a marketing operation destined to last, or a communicative trick while riding a trend topic in

the fashion world and in general in the arena of international public debate? "If tomorrow the newspaper will go back to its routine production it's nice to think that something of this issue will remain: a small yet concrete action." said the editor-in-chief of Vogue Italia (Vogue Italia, 2020). He underlined the concreteness of the change from the illustrated January 2020 issue for Condé Nast Italia to using only compostable plastic to wrap the magazine.

### Sustainability and Fast Fashion: an Urgent Problem

The fashion industry is considered to be one of the most polluting industries in the world, second after the oil industry [4]. It embraces ecological issues to clean up (green washing) and win over the younger generations, from the Millennials onwards, to whom the subject is very relevant. Fashion, or rather the fashion system, pollutes in a variety of different ways. For example, making of 1 kg of fabric generates about 23 kg of greenhouse gases (because developing countries mainly use fossil fuels), and about 3/5 of the clothes manufactured in recent years end up in incinerators and landfills [5]. Moreover, in 2015, half a tonne of microfibres were dumped in the oceans. In addition to this, textile production uses about 93 billion cubic metres of water per year and about 20% of global water pollution is attributed to textile treatments [6].

As of summer 2018, the epitome of mass mobilisation for sustainable development and against climate change is the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. Thanks to the media coverage of her story, in December 2018 Greta Thunberg attended COP24 in Katowice, Poland, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, where she gave a speech that soon went viral. The following month, January 2019, Greta undertook a 30-hour train journey to Davos, Switzerland, where she spoke at the World Economic Forum. "I'm here to tell you that our house is on fire". Her words, echoed in the press all around the world, have become the manifesto of a generation that speaks of ecology as a hot topic that is not only for a few, but for everyone, as an urgent, symbolic call to arms for immediate action [7]. Greta Thunberg, who was named "Person of the Year" by the US magazine Time in 2019, gave a speech in front of the European Commission, personally met French President Emmanuel Macron, and received the support of Chancellor Angela Merkel for her actions. How has the fashion world reacted to this mass mobilisation? The subject of sustainable fashion is not new among those working in the sector, but in recent years, it is perceived as more urgent, so adopting solutions in this direction is no longer a voluntary choice but rather an inevitable one [8]. Whilst there is enough agreement on the general principles, the situation is more complicated as regards the practical solutions that need to be adopted. One

of the most shared aspects is the identification of the fast fashion phenomenon, which has grown disproportionately in the last twenty years and has been pointed to as one of the causes of the negative environmental impact of the fashion world. Zara is the archetypal fast fashion company, a post-Fordist one. Indeed, fast fashion is also correlated to what many authors have identified as the rise of a new industrial paradigm with the move in mid-1970s away from Fordism to post-Fordism, from intensive accumulation to flexible accumulation [9,10].

When we talk about sustainability in the fashion world, we have to take into account several aspects of the same problem. One of these is very serious because of the consequences that it has generated and continues to generate, that is the working conditions in manufacturing countries such as China, India, and Bangladesh, which provide cheap labour to international fashion giants, who in turn by cutting prices upstream are then able to supply the end customer with cheap goods. But what is hiding behind a T-shirt sold for 10 Euros, or a pair of pants for 20 Euros? Whilst much progress has been made in recent years on the traceability of the manufacturing process in the food sector, and while regulation at the international level has evolved incredibly, in the fashion sector a lot still needs to be done, even if some progress has been made in recent years [11].

Fast fashion, which became widespread in the 90s, has completely redesigned consumer models, contributing to the creation of a devastating environmental and social impact, as was recently investigated by the Fast Fashion Exhibition (The Dark Sides of Fashion at Mek in Berlin). In 2014, the average citizen owned 60% more clothing items than in 2000, even though they only used them for half the time. Still in 2014, Americans bought five times more clothes than they bought in 1980 (McKinsey, 2016), and as many as 10.46 million tonnes of clothes ended up in U.S. landfills. Also in the U.S., due to the excessive quantity of clothes donated to second-hand shops, only 15–20% of them actually end up on the shop shelves. In the last three years the US second-hand market has grown 21 times more than traditional retail, with a turnover of 24 billion dollars in 2018 compared to 35 billion dollars in fast fashion sales. In 2028, according to projections, the ratios will be reversed, and the sales of second-hand clothes will rise to 64 billion dollars compared with the 44 billion dollars expected for throwaway fast fashion [12].

In recent years, there have been many scandals in the fashion industry, but little seems to have changed, even though more and more attempts are being made to bring this shadowy situation to light and to try new solutions in view of a transformation, albeit only partial, of the fashion business into a sustainable production system. A path of change full of contradictions and obstacles where appearance often matters

more than substance. Many big brands are involved, for example Uniqlo, the Japanese giant that in 2015 was the target of the anti-sweatshop protests which included a protesters' march in Hong Kong. Together with the Human Rights Now! movement, the Hong Kong Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehaviour (SACOM) protested against the "harsh and dangerous" working conditions in Uniqlo factories in China [13]. In 2016, thanks to the Clean Clothes Campaign, H&M's strategic suppliers in Bangladesh were reprimanded for the dangerous working environment, not equipped with the necessary safety equipment for workers. Just three years earlier, in 2013, Bangladesh had been the scene of the biggest tragedy ever affecting the fashion industry in terms of sustainability due to workers' conditions. On April 24, 2013, 134 workers died in Savar, Dhaka district, in the capital city of Bangladesh [14], and more than 2,500 were injured, crushed by the collapse of the Rana Plaza textile pole. Clothes and garments for some of the most famous industries of fast fashion were manufactured there. Following that tragedy in 2013, an Agreement was signed for fire prevention and building safety in Bangladesh and among the signatories were the Italian brand Teddy S.p.A, Abercrombie & Fitch, Sainsbury's, and Gekas Ullared. The Agreement was then renewed in 2018 with a Transition Agreement. In order to ensure a programme of transparency, so that the unilateral inspections and audits are not carried out by the companies, the scope of the first agreement is now being widened, and more companies have joined in signing the new agreement [15]. These include the VF Corporation (The North Face, Timberland, Lee, and Wrangler), Gap, Walmart, Decathlon, and New Yorker. The Transition Agreement was signed by more than 220 clothing brands in 20 countries, including the Italian companies Chicco, Prenatal, Benetton, and Ovs spa. It aims to also include factories that produce textile and woven accessories, and fabrics for the non-clothing sector, such as IKEA. On May 19, 2019, the Bangladesh Supreme Court of Appeals accepted a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Steering Committee of the Agreement and the Association of Textile Entrepreneurs (BGMEA). The Protocol stipulates that the Agreement will continue to operate in Bangladesh for a transitional period of 281 working days during which the brands, trade unions, and BGMEA will set up a new institution called the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) which will take over the tasks of the Agreement in 2020. This will replace the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh signed in 2013 [16].

In general, the acceleration of the rhythms of life, work, production, and consumption is a typical trait of modernity, intensified thanks to the development of technologies, particularly in the second half of the 20th century. The spread of fast fashion is an example of this process and once again reinforces the link between fashion and modernity [17]. Fashion is not only a material commodity, but it also

represents values, words, and images capable of moving at the same speed. Fashion communication has adjusted to the acceleration imposed by production and distribution, and digital fashion media are a clear example of this, also dominated by the tyranny of the new fast fashion. Blogs and social networks build content that is ready to be reproduced, in a continuous present made of fragments, in a time where the blogosphere is seen as a fluid, networked identity in which the phenomenon of nomadism triumphs [18].

### Online Mobilisation and Sustainable Fashion Icons and their Communication Strategies

Today, the anniversary of that dramatic event is remembered all over the world with the Fashion Revolution media campaign, and from April 22nd to 28th the question #WhoMadeMyClothes, Who made my clothes? is spread through social media. Moreover, Generation Z and Millennials are also mobilising. On the one hand they are the main consumers of fast fashion, but on the other hand they are also those who criticise this system, believing it to be one of the major contributors to global pollution. According to the annual report produced by the magazine 'Business of Fashion' and McKinsey, The State of Fashion 2019, two thirds of the world's consumers would replace, avoid or boycott brands that base their business on controversial environmental positions.

Livia Firth is the creator and creative director of Eco-Age, currently one of the most active and credited digital communicators linked to sustainable fashion. She is among the founders of The Circle.ngo and a professional agitator (as reported on her Instagram profile) [19]. L. Firth was appointed sustainability editor-at-large of Vogue Arabia in 2020, with a monthly column dedicated to the theme of sustainable fashion and deals with the theme of sustainable fashion, in many cases supporting the thesis of recycling and putting already used garments back into circulation or readapting garments (up-cycling). Sustainability in this case is therefore understood as an interruption of the purchasing process and is seen from the angle of a consumer, already loaded with a surplus of garments that can be reused. The novelty in this storytelling is to make this process cool and not a second-choice, or the result of supporting an eco-friendly cause or a lack of economic resources needed to buy new garments. L. Firth makes frequent use of hashtags that emphasise the number of times the garments have been used, or the fact that they have been borrowed from friends, family or colleagues just as she did with the post of December 6, 2019 in which she replied to the meeting with the president of Botswana Mokgweetsi Masisi through the keywords #sustainability #sustainableliving #sharing.

Among the most recent collaborations that should be noted is the one with the entrepreneur Renzo Rosso, founder of Diesel, and president of the holding OTB Only the Brave, which controls big brands like Martin Margiela, Marni, and Victor & Rolf. The Eco-Age team worked for six months with the Diesel team in a perspective defined by L. Firth herself as “disruptive” with a view to building a strategy to rethink the company’s social, cultural, and environmental impact [20]. Alberta Ferretti’s “Love Me Starlight” capsule collection is also the result of a collaboration between the brand and Eco-Age, and is made of recycled cashmere and organic jersey, which began in spring 2019 with the “Love Me” garments launched to celebrate Earth Day. Livia Firth also participates in international campaigns against mass consumerism, such as #Take Back Black Friday. Black Friday has also been taken as a reference for opposition by the Californian sportswear brand Patagonia, and in 2019 it launched a crowd funding for donations to environmental NGOs and proposed to double all customer offers. As a result, they reached 10 million dollars, which then became 20, and this will be distributed during 2020 [21].

Meghan Markle is a new sustainable fashion icon who supports not only big eco-friendly brands like Stella McCartney, but also small emerging brands. During the royal tour in Africa in September 2019, M. Markle wore a Myamiko dress, a fairtrade brand from Malawi. The Duchess is not only interested in her wardrobe being eco-friendly, but also socially responsible [22]. An example of this is the jeans of the Australian brand Outland Denim, made by female workers saved from women trafficking. Since M. Markle wore them, there has been a 3000% increase in viewers visiting the Outland website and, thanks to increased sales, the company has been able to hire 46 more female workers.

In the era of the digital revolution, therefore, the fashion brands are communicating not only through press offices or on the catwalks, but also through an online community of individuals who identify themselves with the values represented by the brand and by wearing the brand help to spread its values. Thus, it is not only individuals who buy a brand, but also those who share an image of themselves associated with a given product, message, or image that help spread values. We often talk about an instinctive, immediate, quick identification that compels consumers to direct and immediate buying on digital platforms, known as the see now, buy now. How can this be reconciled with the pro-environment debate and the investigation into the future of the planet? This is a very complex issue indeed, where the “hic et nunc” is very difficult to define [23].

In times of dyscrasia, we play the game of sustainable fashion communication, by making a process credible and therefore documented, demonstrated, and scientifically

supported, a process that has to be communicated rapidly, through quick images capable of capturing the attention and identifying the individuals involved. If the medium is the message [24], and therefore the communication medium influences the very nature of the message to the point of coinciding with it, how is this coexistence possible?

### Initiatives by the Brands

Sustainable fashion was initially a niche theme, but it has recently become a mainstream theme in the fashion industry and has been adopted by all major brands [25,26]. The inclusion dynamic, once systematised, should make us reflect on another theme dear to fashion studies, that of the subcultures, where it is clear that one of the ways-perhaps the most effective-to disempower the subversive charge of an off-movement or of a subculture, is to make it become part of the system, ensuring its visibility and popularity across the mass media and allowing its full inclusion into the fashion industry. It happened to subcultures such as the hippies or the punks, but also to the (then mid-2000’s) “new” figures of digital communication, i.e., the bloggers who were later on redefined as influencers [27].

There are those who have embraced the theme of sustainable fashion since the very creation of their own brand, such as the designer and daughter-of-art Stella McCartney, a long-time vegetarian who creates her eco-sustainable fashion line by using only natural or synthetic fibres, that are free of animal by-products. That is how she created the shaggy deer, the fabric of the Falabella it bag, which looks like suede to the touch and to the eye, but it isn’t. Reformation, a US brand much loved by celebrities, 100% carbon neutral since 2015, makes their sustainability report available online [28,29]. Carmina Campus, by Ilaria Venturini Fendi, creates bags and accessories from reused materials. Furthermore, there is Veja, an eco-sustainable brand of shoes, which became famous when they were worn by the new icon, Meghan Markle. Brunello Cucinelli has focused on sustainability, especially labour sustainability, since his early days. He is considered an enlightened entrepreneur for his vision for the company: no one stays on site after 5.30 pm and it is forbidden to bother colleagues with emails and work calls in the evening or during weekends. “Sustainability - says the entrepreneur - at least in my opinion - should be understood as human sustainability. We must have the courage to go back to producing, if possible, without harming humanity, i.e. people, animals, things, plants” [30].

In 2017, Hennes & Mauritz created Arket, the brand that shows the place where each garment is made, with photos of the manufacturing plant. The Swedish giant did not stop there and went on to declare that by 2030 the entire H&M group will only use 100% recycled materials or other totally

sustainable resources [31]. Currently, the Conscious line is made with at least 50% sustainable materials. Diadora has instead focused on the Animal Pack, a collection of sneakers dedicated to endangered animals with faux fur inserts, and part of the proceeds go towards educational and awareness projects on environmental protection and the conservation of endangered animal and plant species. Levi's has launched a collection called Water Less, which uses 96% less water than the usual finishing process required for a pair of jeans [32].

The Italian company Fiscatech is known for having specialised in the last 50 years in making materials and haute de gamme accessories, and it has launched Rinnova, a new brand dedicated to the research of innovative materials that are made from vegetables. The 27-year-old grand-daughter of founder Achille, Carlotta Pignatti Costamagna, listed in the Forbes ranking among the 20 Italian innovators of 2019 sits at the top of the company [33].

Patrick McDowell is a new British designer and considered a new champion of sustainable fashion because he uses surplus material from the British brand Burberry's fashion show and his upcycling has become part of the Fire Fighting Aunties collection. His philosophy is encapsulated in the guide he wrote for Converse for the London fashion week in September 2019, in which explains how to be sustainable in a simple way, for example by restyling and repurposing your clothes [34].

## Conclusion

The list of initiatives dedicated to sustainable fashion by companies in fashion system is long and includes more or less effective campaigns, events, and performances of various kinds. But how many of these instantaneous mediatic actions, capable of attracting the attention of the digital public, have had or will have a follow-up in terms of real sustainable manufacturing and distribution policies? Recently, the issue of medium- and long-term green policies that are not aimed at just capturing attention in the immediate future was raised by the creative director of Christian Dior, Maria Grazia Chiuri, at the inauguration of the 2020/2021 academic year for fashion studies at La Sapienza University of Rome [35]. On behalf of a large industrial group pursuing an environmentally sustainable policy without penalising production and therefore workers, M. Grazia Chiuri stressed the problematic nature of the issue. If, on the one hand, the idea of recycling, and of reusing, seems to work perfectly, on the other it clearly reveals some flaws. If paradoxically speaking, nobody bought clothes anymore, what would then happen to the people employed in the fashion system? How is it possible to imagine a future for the fashion industry that will not harm the planet and consequently not damage us

all? Although not explicit, her words seemed to be a criticism pointing at those who use sustainability issues and green policies for communication purposes without following them up with real change [36].

Fashion looks towards young people and it is therefore essential to educate them about sustainability, and to teach younger generations new consumption habits so as to develop better future consumers and entrepreneurs who will be more capable of planning and implementing green policies. We need not only to develop more responsible consumers, but we also need a deeper and stronger culture of sustainability, that is based on scientific data and academic research and without too much media coverage, such as the one proposed by Kate Fletcher, a professor at the London College of Fashion and University of Arts. Kate Fletcher delivered her interventions through the classic academia channels, publications and conferences, but also through an excellent digital communication strategy and her participation in more popular events such as TEDx. Her approach insists on a new concept of user ship-which is no longer ownership- as being central to a new vision of sustainable fashion.

This approach seems to be fully shared by the Canadian activist Naomi Klein: "Sustainability is becoming an empty word that we find everywhere, especially in fashion. A formula that goes well with everything. Very often it's only marketing for the purpose of carrying out a green washing. The real point, and what is really no longer sustainable, is the idea that we must always have something new"[37]. Regarding the debate on fashion and sustainability Naomi Klein stresses the urgency of a different approach, not only based on questioning the ecology and the processes, but also, and above all, on how to change people's mindsets [38]. The declarations of the President of the Italian Chamber of Fashion Carlo Capasa, who stressed how the Chamber looks at fashion responsibly and above all in terms of social sustainability, were also centered on people, making it a priority to intervene on diversity so as to promote fashion as an element of identity, capable of significantly influencing the new generations in terms of inclusion and equality.

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