

The Green Gap:
How Consumers Value Sustainable Fashion

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Table of Contents

What Is Sustainability?	3
What Makes a Company Sustainable?	4
Industry Analysis	6
STEEP Analysis	6
Porter's Five Forces Analysis	8
What Demographics Influences Sustainable Decisions?	12
How Has COVID-19 Affected These Choices?	14
Determining a Willingness to Pay	16
The Disconnect Between Intention and Action	17
Analysis and Conclusions	17
Works Cited	19

In recent years, fashion brands have adapted a model called “fast fashion” that utilizes cheap resources to create trendy styles that are low-cost. This is especially targeted at young consumers who want access to these styles but at an affordable price point. Because of the normalization of fast fashion, clothing is treated as a disposable commodity. In contrast, consumers are starting to increasingly value fashion options that are sustainable and ethical, but to what extent are they willing to pay up for their values? This paper attempts to answer that question by beginning with defining sustainability, conducting an external analysis of the fashion industry, identifying key customer demographics, determining a willingness to pay, and finally, drawing conclusions about the intersections of these topics.

What Is Sustainability?

Sustainability is a broad definition that encompasses various industries and disciplines but quite simply means the ability of human development to meet world needs without compromising ecological systems or future generations. The concept of sustainability as an economic and public policy topic emerged in 1987 with the publication of the Brundtland Report of 1987, which garnered widespread acceptance of this definition in public policy (Kulhman and Farrington, 3437). The original concept of sustainability was coined by German forestry in literature written in 1713. The first documented use of the German word for sustainability, *nachhaltigkeit*, meant that the forest was never harvested more than it could yield (Wiersum, 322). From these

beginnings, it is no surprise that the word has evolved into conversations surround both the economy and the environment.

A widely accepted interpretation of sustainability views it through three dimensions—social, economic, and environmental. This “triple-bottom-line” has also become known as the “3 P’s”—People, Planet, and Profit. The social dimension of sustainability focuses on people and addresses philosophical and ethical questions about human rights, labor regulations, corruption, and social equality. The environmental dimension analyzes topics such as renewable energy, clean technology, and supply chain management. Finally, the economic dimension, of course, determines how to create sustainable business practices and investments (Gutterman). Understanding these three dimensions will demonstrate why both companies and consumers are interested in environmentally friendly products.

What Makes a Company Sustainable?

As a broad definition, a sustainable company does not negatively affect the environment or society. Sustainable companies should strive to positively impact these entities. To appease stakeholders such as customers and employees, investors are becoming more interested in metrics concerning Environment, Social, and Governance (ESG). According to the United States Securities and Exchange Commission, investment in ESG funds has grown in popularity over the past few years (Environmental, Social, and Governance). These practices may include sustainable, socially responsible, or impact investing.

More and more organizations continue to implement sustainable practices into their high-level strategy. A 2017 McKinsey Global Study survey (“Sustainability’s Deepening Impact”) revealed that 70% of respondents indicated that their company had a “formal governance” of sustainability in place—Was up from 56 percent in 2014. Almost 60 percent of these respondents said that their companies were engaging in more sustainable practices than they were in 2015. As seen in the graph below, the top reasons participants cited for addressing sustainability were to align with missions, goals, or values; to build, improve, or maintain reputation; and to meet consumer’s expectations. Businesses that engage in sustainability have the opportunity to engage in a “shared value opportunity”—the overlap between “doing well” and “doing good” (Spiliakos). Those who can successfully master a sustainable business model are not only able to generate profits, but also engage in social practices and align with customer values.



Source: McKinsey & Company

Industry Analysis

Using widely accepted business diagnostic tools to conduct an analysis of the fashion industry and its macro and external environments builds the framework to determine how consumers value sustainable clothing.

STEEP Analysis

First, the STEEP Analysis is used to analyze the macro-environment and determine trends within the industry. This acronym stands for various factors that affect an industry and they are as follows (Fisher et al, 75-76):

1. *Sociocultural factors* including societal norms, expectations, cultures, and demographics.
2. *Technological factors* including technology changes and new technologies.
3. *Economic factors* including economic indicators such as gross domestic product rates, interest rates, employment levels, currency exchange rates, and income distribution.
4. *Ecological factors* including environmental issues such as global warming, sustainable growth, and consumer preferences for sustainable products.
5. *Political and legal factors* including industry rules and regulations, voting trends, regulatory agencies, and political policies.

Element	Justification
Sociocultural factors	52 micro-seasons in the fashion world (Lohr)

	Culture of overconsumption and fast fashion that targets young consumers
Technological factors	Blockchain used to track garments throughout the supply chain process New advancements such as 3D printing and AI
Economic factors	Online shopping on the rise due to COVID-19 During recessions and economic downturns, consumers choose cheaper clothing options
Ecological factors	Clothing industry accounts for 10% of carbon production and is the second-highest polluting industry (Didi, et al)
Political & legal factors	Medium regulation of the industry by the United States government (O'Connor) Concerns over ethical practices including child labor use, especially in developing countries

Over the past year, the devastating effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic have affected all industries, and the clothing industry is no stranger to these hard times. A 2020 McKinsey & Company State of Fashion report found that profits for the industry fell by 93% last year (Amed, et al). An analysis of the macro-environment reveals that many external factors are affecting the industry and a lot of factors carry themes of sustainability. The consumer culture of following fashion trends is juxtaposed with the need to turn to sustainable methods of purchasing clothing. Although economic factors

have impacted the way that society consumers clothing, ecological factors point towards a dire need for sustainability in all business operations.

Porter's Five Forces Analysis

The next framework, Porter's Five Forces, evaluates industry based on stakeholders including suppliers, buyers, and competitors. It assesses major factors that affect profitability, and they are as follows (Fisher et al, 94-96):

1. *Negotiating power of suppliers*, which increases with the following: High supplier concentration, high differentiation of inputs, high supplier switching costs, and lack of substitute inputs.
2. *Negotiating power of buyers*, which increases with the following: High buyer volumes, low switching costs for buyers, increased information available to consumers, high seller dependence on buyers, low levels of product differentiation, and substitute product availability.
3. *Level of rivalry between competitors*, which increases with the following: High exit barriers, low levels of industry concentration, high fixed costs, low industry growth, overcapacity, low product differentiation, low switching costs for buyers.
4. *Threat of new entrants*, which increases with the following: Low economies of scale within the industry, low product differentiation, low capital requirements, low switching costs for buyers, no government policy restricting the industry, limited learning curve, limited patent and trademark protection.
5. *Threat of substitute products*, which increases with the following: Low switching costs, high buyer inclination to substitute, easy ability to substitute.

Force	Strength	Justification
Negotiating power of suppliers	Medium	Overall, this factor is not the most important threat to fashion companies because capital intensity requirements are low (O'Connor). The concentration of suppliers is low, meaning that retailers also have many options, both domestic and international, for suppliers and
Negotiating power of buyers	Medium-High	Consumers have a massive amount of power over the fashion industry because there are high volumes of buyers. There are no switching costs for buyers. Information is readily available to buyers as well due to the influence of the Internet and social media.
Level of rivalry between competitors	High	The fashion industry has many factors that increase rivalry. The industry concentration is low, there are high fixed costs to produce

		products and operate, there is overcapacity and oversaturation of the market. Again, there are low switching costs for buyers.
Threat of new entrants	High	This metric is also high because, again, there are low switching costs to buyers. There is also not a lot of government policy and regulation for the fashion that would restrict new companies from entering the market. Finally, there is limited trademark protection because brands steal from designers (both luxury and local) often.
Threat of substitute products	Low	Substitute products would include second-hand clothing (Either from thrift or consignment stores or passed along by a friend or relative) or hand-making clothing. Although low switching costs and the ability to easily substitute are present, buyers who want to purchase new clothing

		are unlikely to substitute for second-hand or hand-made clothing due to economic and personal reasons.
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There are a few external factors that would hinder fashion brands from being successful. The two metrics, level of rivalry and threat of new entrants, share many of the same characteristics. These characteristics contribute to the industry being highly competitive, causing some brands to choose to differentiate based on quality and price. This had led to the growth of fast fashion and unsustainable and unethical practices, as brands rush to develop trendy clothing at a low cost to increase market share.

After conducting an external and industry analysis of the fashion industry, it is clear that consumers maintain a strong influence over the fashion industry. The culture of keeping up with a trendy fashion market has led to overproduction and overconsumption. However, these trends have shifted, especially with the lasting societal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and many consumers value the environment around them and are beginning to look for more clothing options that are sustainable. The next half of this paper will analyze what influences consumers to value sustainable product options.

What Demographics Influence Sustainable Choices?

Gender

Most studies that investigate a relationship between gender and knowledge about green issues find two different patterns. First, scholars conclude that males are more knowledgeable about environmental issues than females (Diamantopoulos et al, 466); however, females are more concerned about these issues and tend to participate in green behaviors (Schahn and Holzer). This is likely due to the way that society upholds gender norms and roles, and thus has led to these differences in socialization. If studies find that women are more likely to participate in green activities, this will include purchasing sustainable fashion as well.

Income

Because sustainable products tend to be more costly, it makes sense that there is a correlation between higher income and purchasing eco-friendly products. Zhou et. al determined that there is a positive relationship between family income and sustainable behavior (3). Higher-income may be an indicator of green behavior and a higher likelihood of purchasing sustainable clothing. A study by Kumar and Yadav (2021) confirms these findings, concluding that “greater family income facilitates hedonic motivation and green apparel purchase intentions” (Kumar and Yadav, 10).

Education

Another strong relationship is between environmental consciousness and education. In general, studies have found that obtaining more education leads to individuals being both more knowledgeable about these issues, concerned about the environment, and participating in green activities (Diamantopoulos, 471). This is likely

because this demographic is more aware of environmental issues. After all, they can understand the subject matter. Another well-agreed upon connection is between education and income. Almost all literature agrees that higher education is correlated with higher earnings (28). This ties back to the previous discussion of income as well. There is a correlation between higher education, higher earnings, higher environmental concern, and higher participation in green activities.

Age

Researchers have consistently found a negative relationship between age and holding environmentally conscious attitudes (Tamborini, 1402). This is due to differences in attitudes due to generation socialization. Older generations are more likely to uphold traditional values while younger people tend to be more open to social change. However, there is a discrepancy between attitudes and behaviors, and older age groups are more likely than their younger components to engage in environmentally friendly activities (Scott and Willits). This intention-behavior gap exists because while young consumers say they care about protecting the environment, they do not have access to the financial means to carry through with these behaviors.

How Has COVID-19 Affected These Choices?

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has sufficiently altered human life, especially consumer shopping habits and buying preferences. Although consumers are shopping less frequently, when they do make these trips or purchases, they tend to fill

up their basket more than before (Knowles et al). Although this research is still fairly new, a few papers (Cohen; Mende, and Misra) point to a connection between the pandemic and a newfound investment in the wellbeing of the planet. This may be because the trauma of the pandemic has driven consumers to become more aware of environmental impacts.

A study that was specifically conducted in Italy, the original epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak, concluded that during the pandemic, consumers increased their spending on sustainable products by ten percent (Peluso, 2). This paper also took into account the intersectionality of age and concluded that older ages were more inclined to make more sustainable purchases “due to a lower level of negative affect during the rise of contagion.”

How Do Attitudes Affect Sustainable Clothing Purchasing Decisions?

Although both demographics and the external environment affect consumer purchasing behaviors, psychology also recognizes attitude as one of the most important factors that influence these decisions (Ajzen, 1979). Over the past few decades, consumer behavior has changed dramatically shifted—They are now more likely to make purchases from brands that align with their values instead of based on price or brand loyalty (Gilg). Specifically, consumers are also trending towards preferring eco-friendly products. 45% of respondents in a Nielsen study indicated that they “prefer products with a reduced environmental impact” (“Green Generation”).

One analysis by Laura Grazzini et al. also found a positive connection between sustainability and consumer's purchase intentions. This research concluded that this relationship was due to the presence of the "perceived warmth" of sustainability (Grazzini, 2). Companies that have this warmth seem to have good intentions, have values such as kindness and sincerity, and contribute positively to the community. Consumers have positive associations with fashion brands that are sustainable because they feel as though they are contributing to society. When specifically looking at apparel, one study indicated attitude has a significant impact on college student's likeliness to purchase sustainable clothing (Zheng and Chi). Similarly, another determined that it is one of the important predictors of a willingness to pay for sustainable cotton apparel (Ha-Brookshire and Norum).

Sonali Diddi and Linda Niehm used hypothesis testing to determine relationships between consumer patronage and universal values, expectations of behavior, and knowledge of environmental issues. They found that these variables all had significant and positive effects on patronage towards brands who were engaged in socially responsible business activities. For example, one effect was between universalistic values and expectations regarding retail apparel brands' ethical behavior, indicating that an individual's values affect his or her expectations. Universalistic values and moral norms collectively explained 41% of the total variance of consumers' expectations of ethical behavior" (Diddi and Niehm, 69).

Determining a Willingness to Pay

In economics, willingness to pay (WTP) is the maximum price for which consumers will pay for a product. Consumers will pay a higher premium for a product that is more valuable to them. Some studies have found evidence that consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable products if they value environmental protection and believe that purchasing these products will contribute to that (Jung and Jin). This study also found that environmentally conscious consumers will purchase clothing less frequently and focus on quality over quantity, mirroring those behaviors discussed earlier as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A study by Ting Chi et al also concurred that WTP “significantly affects U.S. customers’ purchase intention toward fashion products,” meaning that these customers are willing to pay more for sustainable fashion (Chi et al).

When analyzing WTP, products can be classified into sustainable products (SP), environmentally friendly products (EFF), or general products (GP). A survey revealed that consumers are willing to pay 50% more for SP or EFF products (Zhang and Wang, 1). This increases for millennials; according to a 2016 McKinsey *Survey on Millennials*, 66% of the millennial demographic is willing to pay more for sustainable products, while 42% want to know how products are made before purchasing them. Overall, consumers that value environmental consciousness will identify at a higher WTP point, and some of the previously discussed demographics are likely to make this number even higher.

The Disconnect Between Intention and Action

Although many studies have identified that consumers are valuing sustainability more and more, there is a disconnect between intention and action, especially within the fashion industry (McNeill and Moore). This phenomenon of how environmental consciousness does not translate into ethical behavior is known as the “ethical purchasing gap” (Nicholls and Lee). Even though consumers view these products positively, as mentioned before, they fail to carry out these purchases (Morwitz et al). Researchers struggle to understand this disconnect, but it is vital in deserves serious intention to bridge this gap.

Another study by Diddi et al explored the gap between young adult consumer’s intention and behaviors and found that primary reasons for engaging in sustainable clothing consumption behaviors were perceived value, sustainability mindset, and uniqueness. On the other hand, they found that reasons for not engaging in this behavior included lack of style, budgeting issues, and general skepticism. Overall, consumer attitude is a weak indicator of purchasing and this gap needs to be better understood to understand why drives buyers to make sustainable clothing purchases.

Analysis and Conclusions

Recently, sustainable fashion models have emerged as an alternative to the fast fashion industry. Consumers are increasingly preferring sustainable and environmentally friendly clothing brands and options, and these preferences increase with demographics such as gender, education, income, and age. Attitudes and values are one of the most

important predictors of purchasing sustainable clothing, and consumers increasingly prefer to purchase from brands that align with their values. Although consumers value themes of sustainability, there is still a disconnect between values and actions. This disconnect is puzzling, but the fashion industry needs to further understand why consumers behave in this way to encourage more sustainable consumption. There is an opportunity for further research in this area, and if market researchers could understand this gap then the industry could leverage consumer preferences and create clothing that is valuable to consumers and sustainable for generations to come.

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