

# *Ecological Concerns in the Discourse of the Fashion Industry*

Iasmina-Andreea Lele

**Abstract:** *In this paper, I address the issue of ecological concerns in the discourse of the clothing industry, focusing on Andreea Raicu and A List Magazine. The latter is a fashion magazine, whereas the former is a well-known fashion blogger, whose influential blog deals with many fashion-related topics. My study focuses on the techniques used to inform the public on this topic. Sustainability in the field of clothing can have a very big impact on consumer behavior. Protecting the environment is for the benefit of future generations and is one of the major challenges nowadays. For a single coat in our closet, important resources of our planet are depleted. According to its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UN put forth a plan to increase and promote sustainable clothing among consumers.*

**Keywords:** *Textile Industry; Pollution; Sustainability; Economic.*

The textile industry is the world's second largest source of pollution, to which each of us contributes when we throw away a piece of clothing or buy another. However, more than three quarters of the clothes used

worldwide are not recycled. There should be more responsibility throughout the chain of use of a garment, from its purchase to the end of its life cycle. Consumers influence all stages, hence the obligation to act responsibly. The aim of this paper is to analyze the behavior of manufacturers and how information reaches consumers.

The textile industry also has a massive impact on the environment, as it produces about 20% of the world's wastewater and 10% of global carbon emissions and other waste. The major impact of the textile industry, which is less noticeable to humans, is the pollution of water with plastic fiber, as about 60% of the materials used in the manufacture of clothing are made of plastic (Nayak, 2019). Every time they are washed, clothes release an impressive number of small plastic fibers that researchers call microfibers, which end up in lakes, rivers, oceans. Water treatment plants are not required to capture them. But the chain of negative effects produced by microfibers is not limited to sewage treatment plants. They can be easily confused with food by marine life, thus having a devastating effect on underwater animals, causing endocrine and digestive disorders. They can even slow down the development of some species.

Pollution is not caused only by the finished product. It starts early in the production cycle. The process of cultivating materials such as cotton or hemp requires equipment that pollutes the air, eliminating emissions. Later in the process, the development of plant oil-based pesticides also contributes to air pollution. Harvesting also contributes to the degradation of the environment. The processing of raw materials needed by the textile industry also involves the use of water resources. All these mean that the textile industry makes use of a series of processes that negatively influence the environment, and the finished product has a short life, ending up in the garbage, thus contributing to the issue of waste management. (Nayak, 2019)

People have realized the importance of ecology and of taking care of the surrounding environment. Although this is a relatively new trend,

ecologists make their voices heard on the importance of protecting the planet and of limiting the negative influence of human activities on the environment. More recently, ecological concerns have been tied to the concept of sustainable products. Sustainability has been paramount to most production sectors and supporting it is a commitment to the company and the community of customers, respectively the environment. "The term sustainability was coined in 1987 in the Brundtland report, which means 'meeting current needs without verification finds the needs of the next generation'" (Keeble et al., 2003).

The big textile companies are channeling their way towards "ecofriendly" production, which will lead to sustainable fashion. The chemical processing of fabrics in an environmentally friendly way is being developed through the adoption of new technologies such as the use of natural dyes and dye lasers.

Non-profit and governmental international organizations put pressure on fashion companies to adopt the concept of sustainability. In the past, most factories focused on profitability, not on community wellbeing. However, more recently, under the influence of political and moral factors, several brands have taken the path of sustainable fashion in clothing, by adopting practices that support and care for the environment. Economic sustainability is defined as "the ability of an economy to sustain different levels of production to the end" (Thwink, 2014). Economic support focuses on the search for alternative sources of materials, which are natural, biodegradable and recyclable, which rely on wind or solar energy, low energy consumption as well as a low amount of water. "The third aspect of sustainability is corporate social responsibility (CSR), which ensures that corporate societies follow the approaches and creates minimal harm in the event of non-compliance, thus contributing to social improvement while generating profit. Identifying a series of CSR rules makes it difficult for corporations to comply with CSR concepts that need to be implemented in

business. One of the widely used definitions provided by Bowd, Harris, and Cornelisen: CSR is the responsibility to hold companies accountable through explicit social contracts or implicit contracts with beneficiaries in compliance with government laws and regulations and operates ethically. (Bowd et al., 2003).”

In the last decade, the concept of fast fashion has revolutionized the clothing industry system, where new styles appear weekly. Fast access both online and in stores at an acceptable price only strengthens young people’s habit of buying clothes very quickly. Besides, clothing retailers such as Zara and H&M sell clothing that can be used less than 10 times, thus supporting “throwaway fashion” culture. We can talk about ethics in the consumer clothing industry and that plays an important role in having an impact on the environment, people and animals. Clothing consumer ethics should focus on sustainable, practical, environmentally friendly products, but studies show the opposite. Indeed, when fashion trends are alert, the support of techniques capable of protecting the environment is low. It is often difficult for consumers to meet certain ethical standards because information on the topic is difficult to get. Therefore, the concept of “throwaway fashion” becomes a “fad” that may become an upward trend in the future (Nayak, 2019).

The clothing industry needs to focus on raw materials that have a more efficient recycling process and do not require a major effort, i.e. much processing, water, energy and many human resources, which affect the environment. In the paper *Opportunities and Barriers to Textile Recycling, AEA Technology, Recycling Advisory Unit*, the author Cupit claims that although some natural fibers are biodegradable in their production process, they require significant water consumption. Water consumption for the production of synthetic fibers has a lower percentage of water use compared to cotton. However, on the other hand, synthetic fiber involves consuming a larger amount of energy.

In recent years, researchers have studied the replacement of biodegradable natural fibers and found solutions to replace some of them, such as the cultivation of biodegradable and renewable soybean, bamboo and polylactic acid (PLA) fibers that are more environmentally friendly and do not affect the environment. Clothing made of soy fibers is soft, similar to cashmere, and elastic, but less durable than cotton. In the book *Thermal properties of knitted fabrics made from cotton and regenerated bamboo cellulosic fibers*, Majumdar et al. claim that organic cotton is more resistant and durable, with a higher moisture absorption level than cotton. A big plus of organic cotton production is the lack of pesticides and fertilizers to grow the plant (Nayak, 2019).

One of the main points of learning transformation theory is the continuous dialogue. The fashion industry is not just the consumer, but the union between educated consumers and the industry itself, an assumption based on the historical law of supply and demand developed by Adam Smith. Much of his theory has been to argue that everything we value, such as the functioning of the economy, can be found in people's demand. Thus, a lot of responsibilities are assigned to the consumers, an idea that can be easily overshadowed. While most economists tend to argue for consumer sovereignty, increasing their satisfaction as the ultimate goal to be achieved, nowadays, some claim that consumer behavior is cultivated more as a means for business owners. A complicated point, given that the priority of businesses is to make money, not to make a better world. This is why it has become even more critical for consumers to take a second key role on the path to more sustainable fashion. If consumers continue to buy only sustainable products, then the entire supply chain will change according to the diffusion model. And as a closed loop, consumer patterns will influence the action of producers, who will push consumer behavior to change. Thus, consumers have a responsibility to send signals to make consumption evolve while businesses have to listen to and answer these calls.

Sustainability in fashion is also a topic of major interest in the financial environment. Transforming the economy is possible. Europe has made significant progress in increasing resource efficiency. Several UN strategies and legislation include framework directives on consumer information and behavior change. According to the provisions of the UN's 2030 Agenda, consumers must be educated, and brands must also inspire consumers, leading them and guiding them towards the process of change, which is vital for the future.

In Romania, the idea of recycling clothes is less developed. Second-hand clothing stores are the only way we act. A possible model is the one proposed by Tonelli and Cristoni's "MUD Jeans", which offers customers the opportunity to repair or recycle jeans, as well as the service of renting jeans for a monthly fee. After one year, customers can return the product or choose a new pair. It is the brand's decision whether to provide vintage jeans in exchange or to recycle the jeans. More promotion campaigns are needed to popularize sustainability in Romania and to teach people to protect it. In the stores that sell sustainable clothing such as the ones mentioned above, customers should be able to choose the material, fabric or color and to customize their clothes in an environmentally friendly style, which creates a connection between the store and the consumer. This kind of action takes place in India, under the campaign entitled "Fashion on Demand", which invites the customer to choose from some options, e.g. styles, fabrics, colors, sizes, to create a unique design, using the mix-and-match concept. The order takes three weeks in which the customer enters into an emotional connection with the specially tailored product, thus motivating the buyer to use the product for a longer period, while also contributing to the sustainable creation of the product.

According to Maslow's Pyramid, all needs are grouped into deficiency needs and growth needs. Deficiency needs are fulfilled, but growth needs are unstable and require more once a segment is met. In the case of

physiological and safety needs, function is the most important, such as the purchase of a winter coat in the winter season. After physiological and safety needs comes the need for love and belonging, in which the consumer is attached to the family, colleagues, roles and status; for example, the need for a T-shirt by a teenager. From street fashion to suits, the entire clothing spectrum is affected by the need for esteem and the need for self-actualization. In the case of self-actualization, the consumer moves to another stage and wants to show their creativity and individuality to stand out from the others, but still receives the extraordinary acceptance of his social environment. Here the consumer maintains social uniqueness and image improvement. These needs of the individual or the consumer play an important role in the consumer's decision-making and purchasing process.

Fashion has become an integral part of the history of life/personality, culture and position in society. There are some possibilities to improve the situation and engage Romanian consumers in the eco-friendly trends. In what follows, I will share some of my proposals and thoughts:

Through social media. "Trait" theory is more appropriate for styles that gain adoption over time and in socioeconomic groups. Leaders and celebrities play an important role in fashion. Romanian influencers such as Alina Ceuşan, Carmen Grebenisan, Laura Giurcanu and Laura Charaba (to name only some) are people who care about fashion and represent a potential partner in promoting sustainability among young people.

1. **In the traditional media**, the best-known fashion show is "BRAVO AI STIL". It could be used as a promoter of sustainability. For instance, the producers could encourage young competitors to choose "green" outfits and launch challenges designed to stimulate creativity and sell the clothes to followers who could create or update the apparel, rearrange them for their consumption.
2. **Through education and experiential learning**. I propose the creation of personalized kits; more precisely, people can choose the materials,

colors as well as everything necessary. Of course, there may also be standard kits. These kits will encourage consumers to tailor their own creations, thinking *Of course, I can reuse them*. These kits can be available on a website for easier access or through partnerships with companies promoting this new trend in Romania. Similarly to the “Fashion Week” event, an “Ecological Fashion Week” may be organized, where producers will show consumers and potential consumers how to produce clothes, from beginning to end, on social media. Transparency towards people is something that many companies should address.

3. **Through educational policies.** At the local level, I believe that associations for children and youth can teach children about the environment and eco-friendly approaches, e.g. what they are, why such an approach is good, etc. It is better to act preventively, during the personality formation period.

The full implementation of such policies would offer many benefits. Fewer resources would be used for production and this would contribute to the protection and conservation of the environment. At the same time, the economy would benefit from fundamental innovations and greater competitiveness for European companies.

All these are extremely important to the economic and financial environment, to the natural resources, to improving people’s lives and to raising living standards. We need to learn how to spend our hard-earned money and how to generate profit in this process. The purchase of small quantities should lead to the creation of more innovative services and the production of less disposable products. We need to create a new kind of consumerism, based on shared authentic values and greater needs.



## Acknowledgements

This study in the field of communication campaigns would not have been possible without the help of Assoc. prof. Mariana CERNICOVA - BUCĂ, PhD, my dissertation coordinator, whom I kindly thank for her suggestions, patience and understanding.

## Bibliography

1. Choi, T.-M. & Cheng, T. C. E. (2015). *Sustainable Fashion Supply Chain Management: From Sourcing to Retailing*, Berlin: Springer International Publishing.
2. Muthu, S. S. (2017). *Textiles and Clothing Sustainability Recycled and Upcycled Textiles and Fashion = Recycled and Upcycled Textiles and Fashion*, Berlin: Springer.
3. Muthu, S. S. (2018). *Models for Sustainable Framework in Luxury Fashion: Luxury and Models*, Berlin: Springer.
4. Muthu, S. S. (2019). *Consumer Behaviour and Sustainable Fashion Consumption*, Singapore: Springer.
5. Muthu, S. S. (2019). *Fast Fashion, Fashion Brands and Sustainable Consumption*, Singapore: Springer.
6. Muthu, S. S. (2019). *Sustainable Fashion: Consumer Awareness and Education*, Singapore: Springer.
7. Nayak, R. (2019). *Sustainable Technologies for Fashion and Textiles*, Sawston: Woodhead Publishing.
8. Parthiban, M., Srikrishnan, M. R., & Kandhavadi, P. (2018). *Sustainability in Fashion and Apparels: Challenges and Solutions*, New Delhi: WPI Publishing.
9. Sansom, I. (2014). *Hârtia O elegie*, București: Antalis.
10. Sinclair, R. (2014). *Textiles and Fashion: Materials, Design and Technology*, Sawston: Woodhead Publishing.