



Changing Consumers' Minds - Overcoming the Fashion Industry's Fundamental Challenge Towards a Sustainable Future

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Background

Although sustainable fashion companies aiming to disrupt their industry exist, consumers still fail to make sustainable fashion choices. Yet, for these companies' vision to succeed, they need sufficient consumer support – else, the overarching fashion industry has little incentive to implement more sustainable practices in the future. Thus, this research approached the implications of this phenomenon by taking the point of view of sustainable fashion companies, as their mission statements often suggest to solve the problem of consumers' unsustainable fashion choices.

Objective

This research explored which barriers sustainable fashion companies face when trying to influence consumers to sustainable consumption choices and how they try to overcome these barriers.

Introduction

To answer this question, a theoretical framework consisting of consumer behavior and business strategy research was applied. Specifically, McNeill and Moore's (2015) classification of three types of consumers was the leitmotiv of this study, while Stephan et al.'s (2016) theory on positive social change guided the strategy aspect of sustainable fashion companies. The research proposes that sustainable fashion companies are predominantly challenged by addressing multiple groups of consumers which hold different attitudes towards sustainability in fashion. The results are based upon six interviews with European sustainable fashion companies.

Methods

For this research, a qualitative approach was chosen. The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with small sustainable fashion companies. The questions were derived from the theoretical framework of this research and summarized in a similarly structured interview guide. To analyze the data thoroughly, the interviews were transcribed and coded in Microsoft Excel in three steps (open, axial, and selective coding).

Results

Barrier #1: Different kinds of consumers demand different kinds of communication

- **Self-consumers:** prioritize style and price, do not care about sustainability aspects → need to be educated.
- **Social-consumers:** more aware of sustainability factors, but are still style and prize driven → need to be convinced.
- **Sacrifice-consumers:** see sustainability as a must → need to be satisfied.

Barrier #2: Limited Resources

- Whereas the mission statements of sustainable fashion companies aim high, their reach and impact remains low.
- Thus, the most unsustainable self-consumer group is best served by fast fashion companies still.
- Sustainable fashion companies, therefore, only try to attract social-consumers and please sacrifice-consumers to sustain their businesses.

Deep – and Surface Level Strategies

- The companies applied different strategies to circumvent the barriers they faced when trying to influence consumers.
- Surface Level:
 - Focusing on modern styles;
 - Using certifications;
 - Providing high level of convenience while shopping.
- Deep Level:
 - Fulfilling an educational role;
 - Applying positive activism;
 - Using storytelling;
 - Fostering collaborations (e.g., influencers, other labels, etc.).

Conclusions

- **Overall, sustainable fashion companies are not yet in such a strong position that they can influence consumers' unsustainable purchasing behaviors sufficiently.**
- **Priority of style and price is too enshrined within consumers that it is difficult for sustainable fashion companies to redirect their focus on sustainability aspects.**
 - Sustainable fashion needs to become more diverse and easier to understand and apply for consumers.
 - Sustainable fashion companies need to create business models that do not face the paradoxical situation of promoting the message of 'buy less' while being dependent on product sales.
- **Sustainability in fashion is a young field that lacks uniform standards and is therefore predestined for Greenwashing practices.**
 - Governmental regulations and support are needed to lead the fashion industry and consumer behavior towards a sustainable future.

