

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CONSUMER TREND TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE CLOTHING

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Abstract: *There is a growing shift in demand towards sustainability in the clothing industry due to the negative impact the sector has on the environment with its push for excessive consumption of clothing, as well as the pace of change in clothing trends and fashion. Many factors have contributed to this, including the increased speed of production processes which have arisen as a response to higher demand for new products and the use of social media as a platform for promoting them. Relatively little is known about the harmful effects which clothing factories have on the environment, or the poor working conditions that employees have to endure. However, an increasing awareness of environmental issues and the consequences of excessive consumption in the fashion industry have begun a trend of new and innovative ways of consuming and producing fashion. It is encouraging that these new methods have helped reduce the negative impact on the environment and societies in general. Building on this cognizance, this study explores the possibility of channeling consumers' preferences towards sustainable clothing by highlighting and promoting alternatives through the use of social media. The study highlights the existing awareness Saudi consumers have regarding the concept of sustainable clothing, as well as the key factors affecting consumers' purchasing behavior. The study, using multiple focus groups, has identified the key deterrents to purchasing sustainable clothing including high price, lack of aesthetic design and unavailability of products at consumers' nearby stores. The study observed that consumers demand sustainable clothes that are attractively designed, of good quality and priced reasonably. In addition, consumers have stressed the need to be sufficiently informed about such clothes on social media.*

Keywords: *Sustainability, consumers, preserving the environment, social media.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Today, the world has become increasingly conscious of the need to protect the environment by using methods and techniques that reduce the environmental risks which threaten the survival of humanity and the decrease living standards, such as air and water pollution, global warming and other environmental risks. The fashion industry is a huge global concern and is principally one of the heaviest polluters in the world after oil. It is responsible for significant environmental problems associated with the production process due to its wide-scale use of toxic chemicals, which can adversely impact the natural environment and human health [1]. Further environmental and social problems have been caused by the rapid shift to the production of low-cost textiles and clothing in Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Additionally, cultivation of fiber crops (especially cotton) has increased significantly and has been subsequently accompanied by excessive production of pesticides and depletion of energy and natural resources. Meanwhile, the weaving of fabrics (textile production) requires using harmful chemicals throughout various stages

of the production and manufacturing processes, including dyeing, bleaching and finishing.

Tracing the more recent origins of this industry, the 1900s can be said to have heralded the beginning of the 'fast fashion' era. During this period, companies started to expand the scale of products in response to changes in market demands and shopping behavior [2] which saw new styles of fashion being introduced approximately every week. This frequent introduction of new merchandise and speedy delivery of products was referred to as fast fashion, a name derived from "fast food" [3].

In terms of its delineation, the World Committee on Environment and Development (WCED) defines sustainability as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. However, it is worth noting that the majority of sustainability definitions typically include the triple bottom line concept, which incorporates the environment, people and the economy [4]. In order for this relationship to become a reality, consumers and companies must

shoulder the burden by ensuring efficient consumption of natural resources, prevention of pollution and protection of the environment for future generations [5]. Governments, companies, corporates and individuals must collectively work together to achieve sustainable development for the economy and environment [5]. Companies have realized that fast fashion, while highly profitable, also raises considerable ethical issues [6]. Among those issues related to the fashion industry, there are a number of key environmental concerns such as: pollution of water and air, as a result of the use of toxic chemicals in the manufacture and production of clothing, and its serious impact on the health and safety of workers, in addition to 'fast fashion' products of poor quality which affect wear and longevity, thus increasing the amount of waste produced. The fashion industry is also linked with social issues, where many garment factory employees in developing countries work in highly polluted environments for more than 16-18 hours a day, while receiving low wages that do not meet basic family needs such as food, clothing, housing and medical care [7]. In this sense, many researchers, civil societies and individuals have become more conscious of the need to raise public awareness on ethical issues associated with fast fashion through magazines, journals and social media and to bring the public's attention to the value of sustainable fashion. However, in order for companies to produce sustainable fashion, consumers' behavior must be changed by means of channeling their preferences to products of sustainable fashion.

2 STUDY PROBLEM

The study problem can be summarized as follows:

1. Are consumers aware of the importance of sustainable fashion and its impact on the environment?
2. To what extent are Saudi consumers aware of fast fashion? How does fast fashion impact the environment?
3. Can social media be utilized to channel consumer preferences toward sustainable fashions?
4. Are there any obstacles impeding the expansion of sustainable fashion?

3 METHODOLOGY

The researcher used the descriptive method due to its consistency with the objectives of the study, which are to understand consumer opinion on the concept of sustainable clothes, and its role in preserving the environment. This has been done by examining the awareness of Saudi consumers toward sustainable clothes and their impact on the environment, as well as their awareness of fast fashion and its potential harm

to the environment. The study has also sought to examine the potential of social media in channeling consumers' preferences towards sustainable clothing. Therefore, it was imperative to solicit the opinions of sample respondents by means of surveys, which were collated and analyzed in order to answer the study questions accordingly. From the data gathered, 506 responses were analyzed using the SPSS software. Surveys were verified before the testing process. Six focus groups were established to collect data on key obstacles preventing the purchase of sustainable clothes. A group of Saudi female respondents, aged 21-44 of various social and economic backgrounds, were targeted. The total number of female respondents, used in this study, was 34.

4 STUDY FINDINGS

Based on the objectives of the study, which were to ascertain the level of awareness, through social media, of the sample of Saudi consumers as it relates to sustainable clothing, the following findings were observed:

The study revealed the existence of limited knowledge among consumers on sustainable fashion and its importance in preserving the environment, with 47.1% of respondents saying they had never heard of the term. This lack of knowledge can be attributed to the fact that the term sustainable fashion and clothes are not widely spread among Saudi consumers, as, "sustainable fashion is a relatively new concept in the textile and apparel industry" [8]. Additionally, only 39.2% of consumers believed that their purchase of bio-based products would indirectly preserve the environment.

Social media channels such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube play a key role in introducing Saudi consumers to sustainable clothing, as manufacturers are increasingly using these types of online media tools for marketing and advertising their products, due to the popularity of social media (particularly in Saudi Arabia), and its tendency to be used heavily and continuously in the country. In addition, manufacturers rely on social media to identify consumers' preferences, desires and trends, so as to target and improve the quality of their products.

As per the study findings (Figure 1), Instagram was ranked first among the type of social media platforms used by the sample of Saudi consumers with 51.1%, a figure that closely mirrored the findings of Wiberg's study [9]. The latter also revealed that Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms used to follow brands of fast fashion in Swedish society. Based on this finding, the researcher believes that Instagram should be the main conduit used in attempting to raise consumer awareness on sustainable fashion.

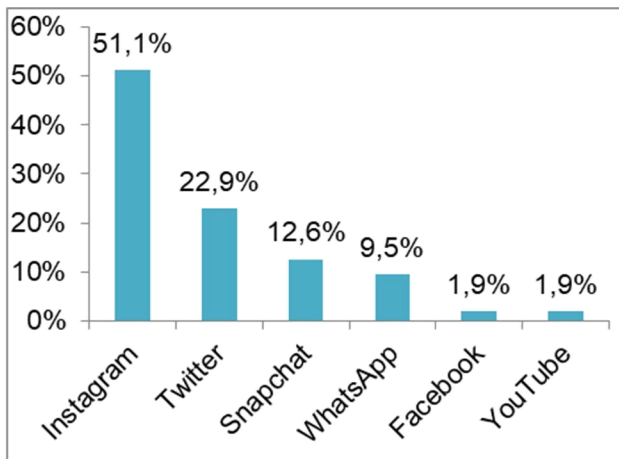


Figure 1 Analysis of sample responses of Saudi consumers highlighting type of social media used most frequently

Despite the importance of social media in introducing sustainable clothes to Saudi consumers, its impact has been relatively weak as the information provided to date has not helped to significantly increase awareness among consumers for sustainable clothes and their economic and environmental significance. Nor has it actively encouraged them to intensively purchase sustainable clothes. As per the results of the survey, 57.9% of Saudi consumers believed that social media had not managed to raise their awareness of the value of sustainable clothes. Additionally, 50.8% of Saudi consumers said that ads circulated through social media had not had the desired effect of tempting them into buying sustainable clothes. It was also noted that 85.4% of Saudi consumers said internet influencers' recommendations on social media had not prompted them to buy sustainable clothes. However, these findings contradict Al-Yaseen's study [10], which used statistic-based evidence to prove the positive impact of social media on consumer purchasing behavior in Jordan, in particular the power of social media based word of mouth by celebrities and friends. Lack of awareness among Saudi consumers with regards to sustainable clothes can be attributed to the nature of social media, in that it is a public and unspecialized medium. Moreover, Saudi consumers have little confidence in the information provided through social media due to the prevalence of false information on various platforms. They also display discernment of the fact that social media platforms are frequently used as tools to promote and market various products, many of which are not necessarily of high quality or value.

97.2% of Saudi consumers are aware of the problem of environmental pollution, which is considered a serious social and economic issue at the world level; yet they do not have sufficient information about the negative impact of the clothing industry

on environment and in particular the impact of low-quality fast fashion. As per the survey, 68.9% of consumers were not aware that the clothing industry is one of the heaviest polluters in the world after oil, while only 37.8% of consumers were aware of the fact that fast fashion is made of environment-polluting materials.

Despite the economic, health, and environmental importance of sustainable clothes, they are still not regarded as being highly popular among Saudi consumers. This is due to the many obstacles hindering the spread of such clothing such as its high price, unavailability in nearby markets, and the availability of alternative clothes of lower quality at prices which are affordable to the different social classes.

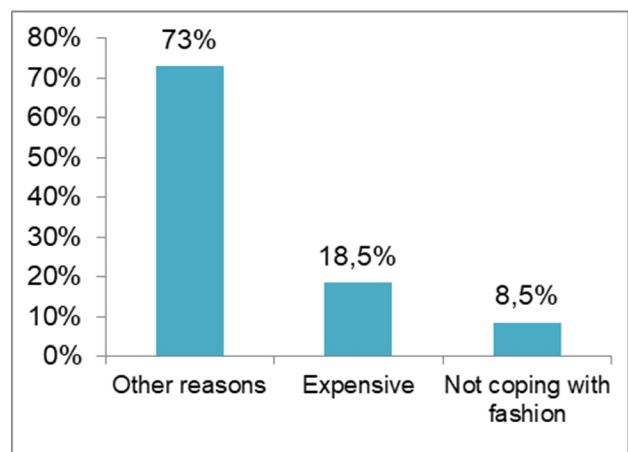


Figure 2 Analysis of Saudi consumers' responses for reasons that have resulted in them from refraining to purchase sustainable clothes

To generate greater demand companies must reduce the price of sustainable clothes, make them more easily available, improve their quality and increase awareness, focusing on emphasizing the health and environmental importance of this type of clothing, as this can help to create a positive narrative and increase consumer demand. To accelerate the sales of newly produced sustainable fashion, the willingness to purchase has to increase. Fashion consumers demand sustainable fashion with appealing design, high quality as well as varied product options [11]. Increased loyalty to trademarks or products is linked to increased consumer demand [12].

In brief, awareness among Saudi consumers of the importance of sustainable clothes and its impact on the environment is still nascent, while social media performs a secondary role in introducing sustainable clothes to consumers. Moreover, online platforms are limited to commercial marketing and advertising of these products. Numerous obstacles prevent the spread of sustainable clothes, including price, unavailability

in nearby markets, and availability of alternative clothes of lower quality and at prices affordable to different social classes.

5 FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Based on the discussions from the focus groups in this study, the following factors were identified as those which influence consumer purchasing decisions:

- *Price* - This factor is more important than that of design and quality. For example, respondents in the first focus group indicated that “sustainable fashions are expensive so that they cannot buy them”. Previous research has shown that a price higher than 10% above consumers’ acceptable price range will not affect their purchasing decisions [11]. However, if the price is 25-30% higher than their acceptable price range, it will most likely result in the consumer refraining from making that purchase [13-15]. As sustainable fashion products usually have a higher price than other products, they are most likely to have an impact on purchasing decisions [16]. Previous studies have shown that price and quality are significant features being considered by consumers when making a decision, but priorities can change for some individuals when their surroundings change [17]. However, beliefs and behavior are a result of other factors playing a more important role in determining purchase behavior, which include price, value, trends and brand image [18].
- Most respondents in the focus groups believed that many sustainable clothes lack a sense of modern fashion and said they wanted sustainable products to be aesthetically pleasing and engineered with the attractive designs of the modern fashion lines. The conflict between fashion and environment was discussed by the focus groups and almost all respondents believed that it was difficult to have eco-friendly modern fashion and that therefore sustainable clothing often tends to be non-modern [19].
- *Quality* is an important factor influencing consumer purchasing decisions. All respondents in the focus groups agreed that sustainable fashion is of high quality and lasts for a longer period. A respondent in the fifth group has described sustainable clothes as practical as they are able to more easily withstand the effects of ironing and washing processes.
- Most respondents in the focus groups agreed that more information was needed on sustainable fashion, citing a lack of information as to why most consumers don't buy sustainable fashion. For example, a respondent in the first group mentioned that “there is lack of awareness among consumers that there is a category of clothing that is sustainable and that it has

a positive impact on environment”. Another respondent in the same group stressed that “many consumers are unaware of the benefits of these costumes”. A respondent in the fifth group stated that, “nobody knows about sustainable clothing.” Another respondent in the same group also confirmed that “sustainable fashion is not sufficiently promoted.”

- Unavailability of sustainable clothes in the markets was cited as one of the main reasons behind weak purchasing in this sector. A respondent confirmed that these types of clothes are generally not available.
- Aspects related to the products are not the only factors influencing consumers purchasing decision; information and external factors such as peer pressure are also important [11]. This is supported by the comments made by a respondent in the fourth focus group who said, “A friend of mine has informed me about sustainable clothes... they are eco-friendly clothes made of natural materials. The main objective is to produce clothes that don't harm the environment.” As for her familiarity with organic foods, she maintained, “I receive information about organic food from the social media, especially by social influencers. Journal and academic essays also give me more information”.
- The other external factors influencing participants are the ways in which they acquire information on sustainable fashion, which varied widely among all participants. The majority of them are influenced by the various social media channels such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and WhatsApp. One respondent believed that the best way to advertise sustainable clothes would be to hire celebrity brand ambassadors, going on to say that, “Usually, the objectives of ads for certain stores is to attract consumers. It is such a good idea to hire a celebrity brand ambassador to attract people to sustainable clothes”.

The findings obtained through the focus groups were consistent with the survey’s findings in terms of lack of awareness among Saudi consumers on sustainable clothes and their role in protecting the environment. It was noted that the price factor is more important than that of design and quality. In addition, consumers believe that many sustainable clothes lack the element of attractiveness and say they want sustainable products to be of good quality, aesthetically pleasing and available at affordable prices. Thus, the results of this study are consistent with many other studies in highlighting the types of deterrents that hinder purchasing patterns in sustainable products, such as high price, quality issues, consumers’ lack of awareness of value of sustainable products and

unavailability of sustainable clothes in nearby markets [20]. The price barrier also impacts consumer purchasing behavior, as the majority of consumers believe sustainable clothes are expensive [7]. Moreover, the lack of information on sustainable clothes, and consumers' lack of understanding of certain marketing methods (i.e. posters) has led to an underestimating of the value of sustainable clothes [21]. The common beliefs that sustainable clothes are neither elegant nor modern, and based on older designs, are among the other factors influencing consumer behavior in this arena [22].

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