The Influence of Sustainability and Social Responsibility on Fashion Trends

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Abstract  The purpose of this study was first, to examine the causes for the recent acceleration in the increase of textile/apparel waste and the current practices for reducing waste in the global textile and apparel industry; and second, to explore the influence of sustainability and social responsibility on fashion trends. Extensive literature on sustainable apparel and sustainable and socially responsible practices by global textile and apparel firms was reviewed in conducting this research. First, an accelerated fashion diffusion speed due to fast fashion was focused on as a cause for the increase in textile/apparel waste whereas mass customization was focused on as a potential solution for reducing waste. Then, the influence of the social trend toward sustainability and social responsibility on fashion trends was discussed, particularly the trends toward green products and recycled fashion, the trend against using real fur or leather, and minimum-fabric-waste fashion in design and product development. This study furthers consumers’ understanding of sustainability and social responsibility related to fashion trends and hopefully increases their consciousness in becoming socially responsible consumers. This study will also contribute to better decision-making in apparel and textile firms to produce sustainable fashion products.

Key words  environmental friendliness, green, recycling, social responsibility, sustainability, waste

Introduction

Contemporary consumers are becoming increasingly conscious about their purchases and are looking to reduce the impact of their consumption on the environment. Consequently, many companies have embraced a “green marketing” concept to attract environmentally conscious consumers (Kim & Damhorst, 1998). Coupled with a rapidly growing world economy and the accelerated speed of fashion trend diffusion, sustainability and social responsibility have become increasingly important concepts affecting many aspects of the fashion business.

The terms “sustainability” and “social responsibility” are often interchangeably used. However, Dickson, Loker, and Eckman (2009) differentiate one from the other; social responsibility is an umbrella term including all responsible practices related to labor standards, human rights, and the environment while sustainability implies improving, building upon, and achieving responsible practices that are maintained over the long term (Dickson, Loker, & Eckman, 2009). According to Stern and Ander (2008), sustainability is defined as “a system utilizing renewable resources that meets the requirements of the present without...
compromising the requirements of future generations or disrupting present or future environmental balance” (p. 40). Dickson, Loker, and Eckman (2009) argued that sustainability is the ultimate goal of successful socially responsible practices, which improve the lives of people and the health of the environment in which they live for the future.

Until the 1990s, there was little discussion about environmental impacts of the production and consumption of apparel or other products. Following the previous decade when labor issues received the most attention, environmental issues emerged as the next area of social responsibility that companies were expected to address (Dickson, Loker, & Eckman, 2009). For example, companies have focused their efforts on the adoption of environmentally friendly materials and on production processes that have low toxic chemical use and waste. In addition, the importance of total energy use, including transportation costs for production and distribution as well as end-of-life options such as recycling, redesign, and biodegradable disposal, has been integrated into business strategies (Dickson, Loker, & Eckman, 2009). Companies such as Patagonia and Timberland quickly moved toward this direction and began integrating both environmental stewardship and social responsibility into their mission, vision, and business strategies (Dickson, Loker, & Eckman, 2009). There are numerous other companies currently focusing on sustainability including Gap, Banana Republic, Nike, Liz Claiborne, and Levi and Strauss & Co. With growing sensitivity toward social and environmental issues, business executives recognize that long-term economic growth is not achievable unless that growth is socially and environmentally sustainable (Epstein, 2008). Epstein (2008) argued that a balance between economic progress, social responsibility, and environmental protection will provide a competitive advantage to a firm.

Compared to several other disciplines such as architecture, landscape architecture, environmental design, and interior design, research on sustainability in the field of apparel has a relatively short history. Much of the research conducted has focused on social responsibility concerning labor issues in the manufacturing process. Also, there have been studies on sustainable fibers and textiles; however, little research has been conducted on sustainability and social responsibility related to fashion trends, including product design and development processes and methods.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to address this void in the research. To meet this need, the study first examines the causes for the recent acceleration in the increase of textile/apparel waste and the current practices for reducing waste in the textile and apparel industry; and second, it explores the impacts of sustainability and social responsibility on fashion trends. Extensive literature on sustainable apparel and sustainable and socially responsible practices by textile and apparel firms was reviewed in conducting this research. This study furthers consumers’ understanding of sustainability and social responsibility related to fashion trends and hopefully increases their consciousness in becoming socially responsible consumers. This study will also contribute to better decision-making in apparel and textile firms to produce sustainable fashion products.

Causes for Increasing or Decreasing Textile/Apparel Waste

Increased Waste Due to Accelerated Diffusion of Innovation

Change is an essential component of fashion, and its process indispensably produces waste (Kaiser,