

# Corporate Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

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## ABSTRACT

3.6 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions. 342 million barrels of petroleum to produce plastic-based fibers (Wired, 2022). And 92 million tons of textile waste (Igini, 2022). This all stems from the fashion industry on a yearly basis. Climate change is the most pressing issue in our society today and as it progresses, comes a heavier emphasis on sustainability and environmental consciousness. Effective ESG (Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance) has been shown to affect overall profit by 60% (Henisz, 2019). With this, companies are taking advantage of and capitalizing on the new sustainability “trend”, marketing themselves as corporately responsible and committed to environmental causes.

As we are dependent on the fashion industry for clothing and contributing to the immense impact of global warming, consumers need to be educated on the true nature of the fashion industry and the extent of its impacts. As such, this research paper will provide comprehensive information for consumers to navigate through the fashion industry and ultimately be more mindful in their purchasing decisions. This project explores the role of the government, corporations, and consumers in modern sustainability practices and dives into the fashion industry, building upon the abstract concepts discussed. This includes evaluating the business models of the fashion industry in response to market trends and discussing how it impacts overall environmental sustainability. The research paper concludes by thoroughly proposing best practices firms can adopt to improve upon their corporate responsibility, simultaneously bettering the environment and business performance.

## Background

### Climate Change

As global temperatures continue to rise, ice sheets in Antarctica are melting at an alarming rate – 13% per decade (Hancock). This causes sea levels to steadily rise, resulting in flooding in coastal cities. Additionally, warmer temperatures cause extreme weather such as intense storms, heavy snowfall, and longer and more frequent droughts. These harsh conditions have major consequences on human food sources: with more frequent droughts, it becomes more difficult to grow crops and reduce water supplies (National Geographic, 2017). Furthermore, according to the National Geographic report, intense environmental conditions change where animals and plants are able to live, limiting and shifting their habitat. These effects not only endanger ecosystems but also damage human health. The warmer atmosphere increases smog in urban areas which can increase the risks of heart disease, asthma, and lung cancer for residents.

These consequences are merely the beginning. Climate change will only worsen as people exploit more of the Earth’s resources for dominant industries. As such, it is important to closely examine the relationships between the government, corporations, and consumers and the act of sustainability. Perhaps by carefully observing their intricate relationships, we can find viable solutions that will alleviate climate change’s worst effects.

## Role of Government

As the leaders of their respective countries, governments have the power to influence and alter procedures in various industries that contribute to climate change. With its integral role in the economy, the government contributes to climate change both indirectly and directly. A lack of leadership, intervention, and initiative in reducing domestic greenhouse gas emissions demonstrates indirect influence, and they will worsen climate change immensely. Directly, the government funds particular industries such as fossil fuel production to increase jobs and GDP. Globally, in 2020, \$5.9 trillion was subsidized to the fossil fuels industry and is set to increase even further (International Monetary Fund). Such actions directly incentivize the release of harmful gases into the atmosphere, speeding up rising temperatures. In business, the main objective is to generate profit, thus businesses seek the most cost-efficient methods, which are often detrimental to the environment. Due to this fact, governments, whose primary objective is to better their country, must take greater action against climate change. There is much room for improvement as surveys have shown the national governments, among experts, have the poorest contributions to improve sustainability (The GlobalScan—Sustainability Survey, 2020).

There are a number of actions the government can take to promote overall environmental sustainability, such as imposing green taxes, creating stricter regulations on pollutants, funding research and development initiatives for green innovations, and enforcing laws to protect vital ecosystems. Through the implementation of green taxes or ecotax, a tax levied on polluters with the charge in accordance with the severity of the pollution (Iberdrola, 2022), it disincentivizes activities that are deemed as harmful to the environment such as carbon taxes on the use of fossil fuel. Furthermore, there can be stricter regulations banning or limiting the use of certain materials to reduce pollutants. These laws will have the capacity to protect ecosystems, preserving animals at risk and sustaining the overall food chain. In addition to environmental policies, the government can also increase funding in research and development initiatives regarding green innovations to replace current materials and practices that pose a danger to the environment. To promote more sustainable consumption and behavior, it is essential for the government to educate the public on the environmental impact of their lifestyle choices (Atalla, Mills, & McQueen, 2022).

## Role of Consumers

Although recently consumers have been more mindful of environmental sustainability when making purchasing decisions, there is still room for improvement. The primary method for consumers to become more environmentally sustainable is for them to change or alter their consumption habits in a way that minimizes negative environmental impacts. In light of the urgency of climate change, consumers should be proactive and take on more initiative in striving to reduce or eliminate consumption of products that emit greenhouse gasses as they could reduce the millions of yearly premature deaths resulting from pollution — pollution was responsible for 9 million premature deaths in 2019 (The Lancet, 2022). The consumption behavior of individual consumers can lead to changes in the spending behavior of many others including friends, colleagues, and family. As the general public continues to leap towards sustainable choices, the market will likely respond to the demand, increasing the production and use of sustainable products, as well as reducing reliance on products that are harmful to the environment. This also incentivizes corporations to adopt more sustainable and ethical practices to attract consumers. Furthermore, many restrictions and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as inflation, have caused consumers to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle — buying less and reusing more. Through many consumers consciously maintaining a sustainable lifestyle, in the long run, there can be great benefits for the environment.

However, there are still major challenges consumers face on their path to becoming more sustainable. These include cost, lack of awareness, and resistance to change. Undoubtedly, if all things were equal, every

reasonable human being would choose a sustainable product over a product that harms the environment. However, that is often not the case, as sustainable products are often more expensive than non-sustainable products. In addition to affordability, a lack of awareness is a challenge for consumers. Without proper clarity on how to dispose of/recycle items and the importance of sustainability, consumers will lack the interest as well as the motivation to initiate environmentally conscious changes in their lifestyle. Another challenge is simply consumers who are unwilling or incapable of changing their lifestyles to be more sustainable. Some people's lifestyles are fixed upon products that are harmful to the environment and it would simply be more convenient to continue this habit than to alter it. For example, people who work long hours need to purchase take-out as they don't have time to cook for themselves. This does not mean they are not mindful of the environment, but time pressure restricts their ability to contribute to environmental sustainability. (Deloitte).

## Role of Corporations

As the urgency to resolve climate change continues to grow among consumers, some businesses are transforming their business model to capitalize on the latest "trend". Instead of merely being a boost or a conventional addition, it is now a significant competitive advantage that businesses can take advantage of to gain an edge over competitors. The primary motivating factors are consumer desires, profitability and better business performance, and reputation. Consumers tend to prefer purchasing products from companies that engage in sustainable practices than companies that do not, even if prices are more expensive. As all businesses seek profit, it is intuitive that most businesses would begin to shift towards a more sustainable business model if that were what consumers demand. This transition is further incentivized as companies experience better overall financial performance with better ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) performance. Furthermore, as companies adopt a more environmentally friendly approach with good ethics, consumers will take notice and respond extremely positively. This results in more customer loyalty, increased credibility, and a stronger corporate image and reputation.

Some key motivations behind the recent development in companies' desire to become more sustainable include the overall sustainability trend, positive business performance, corporate branding, and risk management. With increased urgency in climate change and technology that allow consumers to freely express their beliefs regarding particular products and practices, there has been an unprecedented emphasis on utilizing sustainable practices within companies' business models. Contrary to common belief, sustainable business models can indeed be profitable and increase overall business performance. Adopting more sustainable innovations can not only reduce waste but also reduce the cost of production. For example, the utilization of a circular economy can keep resources within the supply chain through recycling, repurposing, and reusing. This increases the lifespan of products and components thereby reducing production costs (Taylor, 2021). Being sustainable is a major competitive advantage for businesses as evidently, consumers have been far more willing to choose sustainable products over non-environmental alternatives and even willing to pay more — up to an additional 20% of its market price — for sustainable products. In fact, studies have shown responsible corporate practices can increase the overall sales revenue of a corporation by upwards of 20% (Whelan & Fink, 2016). In addition to better business performance, strong corporate social responsibility can result in a stronger brand image and build customer loyalty. This creates customer loyalty and as the business continues its ethical practices, allowing its corporate reputation and brand to improve. Furthermore, as companies choose to become more environmentally sustainable, they mitigate many of the risks imposed by climate change. Climate change can cause costly consequences for business operations, providing a direct incentive for corporations to improve their carbon footprint.

## The Fashion Industry

## Context

Apparel is enjoyed by everyone. As an industry that is essential to the everyday lives of humans, it is entirely dependent on consumer preference. Therefore, apparel companies strive to follow new trends which appeal to the public. This is especially true for the sustainability “trend,” where most apparel companies utilize sustainability as part of their marketing approach; some companies have even centered their entire business model around it. Despite the fact that contemporary society is striving to make greener consumption choices and be more considerate of the environmental consequences of their everyday actions, they are still mostly oblivious about their true ecological footprint. Specifically, a survey indicated that consumers are inaccurate in their abilities to estimate the trade-offs between different actions, such as comparing how long a person would need to purchase food without packaging to save the same amount of greenhouse gas emissions as one year without eating meat. The participants said 1-2 years while the true number was over a decade (Wynes, 2020). This is especially evident in the fashion industry. Industries such as transportation, agriculture, and energy are what typically comes to mind when discussing major contributors to climate change, but the fashion industry accounts for roughly 10% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and 20% of the 300 billion tons of plastic produced annually (Bloomberg). Furthermore, roughly 2,700 liters of water is required to make a single t-shirt, which is enough for one person to drink for 900 days (Malone, 2013) and 500,000 tons of microfibers end up in the ocean just by washing clothes made from synthetic materials (Wissgott, 2020). As demand increases for faster and cheaper clothing, detrimental effects on their environmental impact are overshadowed, with a lack of transparency from fashion brands on their clothing’s true harms.

## Market Demand

In 2022, the global fashion and apparel industry had a valuation of \$1.7 trillion, which is expected to grow at 12.4% this year (Ariella, 2022). For example, Shein, a fast-fashion apparel company, is the fastest-growing e-commerce company in the world, with revenue growth of 398% from 2019 to 2021 (business of apps). As the market continues to grow, rather than making products that are more durable and sustainable, some apparel businesses have strived to release new products that are cheaper and faster. To achieve these rapid processes, companies like Shein use fabrics that are made from fossil-fuel-based synthetic materials, a non-renewable resource, as they are more cost-efficient, adaptable, and accessible.

## Green Washing

Greenwashing is when a company fabricates its environmental credentials, misleading consumers into thinking that the company’s operation is environmentally responsible. A major incentive for companies to engage in greenwashing is to appeal to consumers, who are largely mindful of corporate sustainability and involve sustainability as a major component in their purchasing decisions. By appearing more “sustainable” to consumers, firms are able to enjoy a competitive advantage that is likely to give them the edge when competing with other firms that have not adopted such practices. As such, to capitalize on the sustainability trend and maximize profit, companies are likely to disguise the true extent of their environmental impacts or, in more severe cases, completely lie when marketing their products as “green”. Volkswagen, a prominent car manufacturing company, exemplified this when it installed an altered device on its vehicles during emissions tests, changing the cars’ true performance to make the vehicle appear more environmentally friendly. This occurred to support Volkswagen's sustainability marketing campaigns but in reality, the engines were emitting approximately 40 times the allowed nitrogen oxide pollutants limit (Robinson, 2022).

## Lack of Transparency

Almost all brands are unaware of their supply chain. They often purchase materials from a manufacturer without knowing where the manufacturer sourced their materials. As such, it is extremely difficult to estimate the environmental impact generated throughout the supply chain, making taking action to reduce the carbon footprint even more difficult. Thus, when brands claim their production process is entirely sustainable, it is likely to be untrue as research has shown that nearly 60% of sustainable claims from the fashion industry are greenwashing (Ho, 2021). There is no explicit framework nor standardized measurements to quantify a company's real carbon footprint. In addition to this, when businesses promote upcycling or recycling clothing, it misleads consumers into consuming even more without mitigating any of the environmental consequences. According to a life cycle analysis on cotton jeans, the environmental impact of purchasing and disposing of a pair of jeans is essentially the same as upcycling the jeans into a new pair (Enuff Mag, 2022). Similarly, recycling is used as a marketing tool to make consumers feel less guilty about the negative impacts of their consumption choices, which encourages further consumption. The benefits of recycling clothing are exaggerated and portrayed to be much more effective than its actual impact. In reality, less than 1% of all clothing is recycled into new clothing and most donated or recycled items end up in landfills in less developed countries (Pucker, 2022).

## Overarching Business Model

Faster, cheaper, and newer. These three words define the mission and operation of 90% of corporations in the Fashion industry. This includes premium brands, such as Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, and Calvin Klein to fast fashion brands, such as Zara, H&M, and Uniqlo, where they must quickly respond to fashion trends and customer demands to maintain the profitability of their business. Premium brands have the highest coverage in the global market, meaning that their products must be mass-produced and adaptable to an array of tastes and preferences. As such, these brands typically have fast supply chains that quickly produce high-quality apparel through specialization. Using economies of scale, they are able to optimize production, sustaining mass production whilst remaining cost-efficient. Fast fashion brands take this to the next level, having the quickest time to market in the fashion industry. They mass-produce trendy items at low costs and quickly sell them at low prices, when the demand is highest, attaining high-level profits (440 industries, 2019).

Regardless of the varying business models and price points, most premium brands, fast fashion brands, and luxury brands have one thing in common — their detrimental environmental impact. Premium brands and fashion brands generate immense waste as a result of the mass production of seasonal items using non-sustainable materials. Even luxury brands, whose identity is largely based on the quality of their products, employ the same non-sustainable methods. Although luxury brands charge high amounts for their products, the cost to produce these products is kept significantly low. Luxury brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton do, at times, still contain non-organic and non-sustainable materials such as polyester in their products. Some luxury brands even use sweatshops, which are essentially workplaces with inhumane working conditions that pay workers extremely low wages to reduce overall costs (Nizzoli, 2022). This is evident by the lack of transparency among major luxury brands such as Dior, Dolce & Gabbana, and Chanel, scoring less than 10% on the Fashion Transparency Index by Fashion Revolution, a non-profit organization committed to campaigning for a sustainable and accountable fashion industry (CPP Luxury, 2018).

## Allbirds: The Green Pioneer in Fashion

Understanding all this should prompt major concern for the future of the environment. One must question the role fashion plays in shaping that future — whether improving it or destroying it. Alleviating the immense effects of climate change is no easy task, but one particular green pioneer has been striving away from the

typical profit-hungry businesses, committing to sustainability. Understanding that climate change is the most pressing issue faced by generations today, Allbirds have “prioritized carbon dioxide reduction as the most important metric for our business”, according to CEO Joey Zwillinger. Allbirds’ mission is to prove that comfort, good design, and sustainability do not have to be mutually exclusive (Allbirds, 2016). Since its launch in 2014, the company has kept its word in placing sustainability above profit. By mainly focusing on research and development, rather than quickly reacting to consumer trends and producing accordingly, Allbirds ensured their products were made from natural materials whilst maintaining aesthetics and comfort, only releasing a few styles per year. “By offering a carefully curated product range fit for all seasons, we’re able to maintain a small, tight-knit supply chain.” with a smaller-scale supply chain, Allbirds is able to consistently keep in contact with its suppliers and “ensure safe, lawful, human, and ethical manufacturing practices” (Allbirds — How we operate). By using merino wool sourced from ZQ-certified sources, which certifies adequate animal welfare and environmental practice, recycled bottles for laces, castor bean oil for insoles, and recycled cardboard for packaging, sourced from small passionate suppliers, Allbirds drives its mission of sustainability. Their tremendous efforts resulted in a completely carbon-neutral supply chain in 2019.

Allbirds' commitment to long-term sustainability is evident as it urged its competitors to “steal” its business model. Allbirds urged its competitors to reduce their carbon footprint by freely adopting Allbirds' carbon measurement tool. As emphasized by Zwillinger, “We never wanted to be the only ones doing this, in fact, if we do not have other companies copy us, then our whole effort will not have the impact we are shooting for” (Toffel, 2021). Through word of mouth and a direct-to-customer approach, Allbirds are able to effectively communicate its brand identity and mission, which strongly resonates with the contemporary environmentally conscious consumer. This works to boost Allbirds’ overall popularity and sales. As the company continues to experience rapid growth, Allbirds assured the general public that it would not be complacent in climate change. They continue to strive to minimize carbon emissions in their production process. This can be seen in its latest “Flight Plan” in which it compiled ten quantitative, science-based goals that contribute to the overarching goals of cutting per product carbon footprint in half by 2025 and further reducing it to less than 1 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e by 2030 (Allbirds, 2021).

## Room for Improvement

Sustainable clothing, as of 2022, has a 4.3% share of sales within the global fashion and apparel market, but it is projected to increase to 6.1% by 2026 (Statista, 2022). Although the presence of sustainable clothing continues to grow within the industry, there are still major flaws that need to be improved upon to ensure a sustainable future in fashion.

Rather than continue to rapidly produce cheaply made clothing to maximize contemporary profit, firms could use particular aspects of Allbirds approach to ensure profit whilst producing and distributing in a responsible manner. Firms should begin by ensuring their supply chain commits to sustainable practices and maintains transparency throughout the entire operation. This can be done through active communication and strict regulations. In addition, it would be advantageous for firms to begin sourcing from smaller and native producers who specialize in the products and are more knowledgeable in its resources, such as RWS (Responsible Wool Standard) certified wool farmers, ensuring the quality of the output and better adhering to the firm’s sustainability commitment. Moreover, by using more natural materials, firms are able to increase the lifespan of products — needing fewer replacements — as sustainable products are typically more durable. As such, firms reduce long-run costs and their carbon footprint simultaneously. Even if apparel companies are unable to commit to sustainable practices in their supply chain, due to the need to quickly match market trends to maintain their profitability and popularity, they can still reduce their carbon footprint with sustainable packaging.

Packaging accounts for a third of all plastic waste, but only 14% of it is actually recycled (O’Connor, 2017). Alternatives such as FSC-certified cardboard, compostable polybags, plastic-free hangers, and paper

bags should be considered to minimize pollution (Ellington, 2022). This can be done through an active partnership with environmentally friendly packaging brands such as the Invisible Company which sells water soluble, biodegradable, compostable, and non-toxic garment bags. This would be especially beneficial in the e-commerce apparel industry as all products sold online require packaging to reach the consumer. The demand for clothing from online retailers is evident as apparel/footwear is the largest e-commerce sector in the world, valued at \$760 billion USD (Orendorff, 2022), but with this comes excessive waste. Packaging makes up one-third of the total waste generated per household and due to the low plastic recycling rates, most of this packaging ends up in landfills.

It is important for firms to attempt to use more environmentally friendly resources, but it is perhaps even more important that firms demonstrate true transparency to customers in their production processes. One such tool to help achieve this is the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) created by Allbirds, which can be freely adopted by any firm. The tool calculates the carbon footprint of each product and highlights the impact of each material choice on the overall emission of the product. To take it a step further, firms could use the information derived from the LCA and label their products with their carbon footprint. This maintains corporate ethics by helping customers understand what they are really paying for, as well as measuring progress and making adjustments accordingly.

To effectively combat climate change, firms should strongly consider expanding upon their research and green innovation sector and fully commit to the ethical image it present to the public. Furthermore, to avoid any form of greenwashing, there should be a universal definition of sustainability established by a credible source such as the United Nations. The problem is the time and resources needed to make this a reality as well as the short-term profit firms would be missing out on. However, if firms in the industry create collaborative initiatives and are open to freely sharing their sustainability insights/know-how/tools like Allbirds, then a greener and more transparent fashion industry will be far more feasible, serving as a catalyst for a greener future. As Paul Polman famously said, “Businesses cannot succeed if the society around them fails”.

## Conclusion

Certainly, the sustainability “trend” will only gain more intention as global warming worsens. Environmental consciousness could only be more prevalent, with the younger generation making up the most environmentally conscious demographic. Society, ranging from the government to corporations, to consumers, all have a unique role in overall sustainability and incentives to be environmentally conscious. Governments need to ensure growth and prosperity in their economy, corporations need to ensure profit, and consumers need to ensure welfare and satisfaction. One of the main universal human flaws is one’s resistance to change; it is easy to remain using the status quo. However, given the proximity of irreversible warming, the government, firms, and individuals must actively consider the effects of their decisions. Society as a collective must think beyond short-term benefits or inconveniences. Fashion is one industry where large improvements should be made. With the immense greenwashing, lack of transparency in the supply chain, and non-sustainable mass production methods, the fashion industry is likely to cloud the judgment of environmentally conscious consumers, diminishing consumers’ environmental efforts elsewhere. For we have one and only one home-planet Earth, it is of the utmost importance for governments, corporations, and consumers to learn their true ecological footprint and begin making a difference, starting from the fashion industry.

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