

# MOVING FASHION FORWARD:

A BALANCE OF PROFIT AND PURPOSE



A Global Network of UNESCO  
Chairs on Children, Youth, and  
Communities Conceptual Paper

# **A Conceptual Paper for UNESCO and The United Nations Community**

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## *Foreword*

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We are delighted to present this concept paper, *Moving Fashion Forward: A Balance of Profit and Purpose*, that explores ideas, strategies, and frameworks by which the fashion industry can lead thoughtful, evidence-based explorations of ways to sustainably manage of natural resources. As outlined in this paper and elsewhere, the fashion industry, and groups within it, are uniquely positioned to significantly advance UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and take substantial steps to mitigate climate change.

This paper also identifies key steps that can be taken industry-wide to better understand levels of resource usage, but also the impacts of preventative and sustainability focused actions. With this information in mind, companies and consumers can strategically make decisions on how their behaviors can advance or hinder sustainable development goals.

Of the many settings in which sustainable development goals can be pursued, the fashion industry is truly unique and positioned to make significant impacts. By its nature, the industry is a significant contributor to natural resource usage (water, fabric inputs, processing). Even small adjustments to the production process could result in massive reductions in resource usage, pollution, and waste.

In these and other settings, the fashion industry has the potential to build sustainability efforts into their production and to promote these to an environmentally conscious, and loyal, consumer base. The industry also drives fashion and related trends. It has the ability to shape future consumer behaviors for the purchase of new sustainable products, encourages the recycling, reuse, and donation of existing products.

With considerable thought and strategic leadership, this shift toward sustainable behaviors, need not correlate with economic loss, loss of quality, or disenfranchising loyal customers. To the contrary, the fashion industry can be seen as a transformational leader that other industries can emulate.

We hope that this paper sparks ideas, encourages critically informed debates, and creates spaces for action to help advance sustainable development goals.



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## ***Introduction***

In recent months the world has felt the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The apparel industry, specifically, has been disrupted to an unprecedented extent. Sales have plummeted as a result of quarantine restrictions and financial distress amongst consumers; leading to an increase of excess inventory and the implementation of sales/discounted rates in order to create demand (Amed et al., 2020). Additionally, nearly all production has come to a halt as a result of disruption in global trade; leaving many jobless. The industry has even seen large companies filing for bankruptcy (Amed et al., 2020). These times have demonstrated that the current supply chain is significantly fragile and can easily be broken. For this reason alone, it has proven it is unsustainable. With the world at a standstill, the apparel industry has the opportunity to rethink and reinvent business entirely.

This conceptual paper will analyze and describe examples of: 1) supply chain and production practices and their social and environmental impact; 2) leading brands and their progress in implementing and promoting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and 3) policy recommendations to resolve conflicts preventing sustainable development.

## ***Implications of the Industry's Current Operations***

Today, fashion and apparel has become a \$2.5 trillion industry as well as one of the largest contributors of greenhouse gas emissions; responsible for nearly 10% of all emissions worldwide (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2018). Clothing plays a vital role in the lives of humans; serving as a form of protection and an expression of identity. For this reason, the industry is considered essential and the issues that it presents must be addressed.

Production practices, influences on consumer behavior, and implementation of fast fashion trends are designed in a way that threatens the environment and limits sustainable development outcomes. Issues such as accelerated rates of natural resource consumption, disposal of harmful chemicals and waste, and unethical work conditions are only several of the numerous consequences resulting from the industry's operations (Kozłowski et al., 2012). Although there is a significant amount of profit that is generated from this industry, it is crucial to take into consideration the consequences garment workers and the environment face as a result of these practices.

In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report warning that we are on track for a 1.5 °C global warming increase by 2030 resulting from human

activity such as the apparel industry's actions. Leading to an increase of dangers the planet and society will soon be faced with, including but not limited to rising sea levels, natural disasters, and loss of biodiversity. Additionally, the IPCC ruled at the time of the report's release, there are only 12 years to limit the consequences of the climate crisis. To intensify this issue, the human population continues to increase with an expected 2 billion additional bodies to cloth by 2050, creating a higher demand for the apparel industry (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2018).

### ***The Supply Chain: Compounding Natural Resource Consumption & Pollution***

The increase of demand for apparel along with the production practices used to meet these needs has intensified the industry's impact on the climate crisis significantly. A majority of items produced within the industry require the use of countless natural resources throughout production. For example, 10,000 liters of water is required to grow one kilo (~2.5lb) of cotton needed to produce a singular pair of jeans. This is the equivalent of 10 years' worth of drinking water for one person (UNFCCC, 2018). According to The World Health Organization 1 in 10 people worldwide (~785 million people) are still without access to an improved water supply (World Health Organization, 2019). Because the majority of production takes place in the Global South where those who lack access to water are located, the industry's consumption of water raises significant amounts of controversy.

To add to the issue, pesticides and insecticides are heavily incorporated during the growing portion of production in order to maximize yield and promote uniformity. These chemicals are known to enter bodies of water, causing a threat to all nearby species. Cotton farming alone is responsible for 24% of all insecticide usage and 11% of pesticides (Thomas, 2019). The application of these harmful chemicals is one of the main causes of water pollution within production. There are various alternatives to pesticide and insecticide use on crop fields that could be implemented. The agricultural industry has been proving both environmental and yield benefits with more sustainable methods in recent years; crop growth for the apparel textiles could easily follow suit.

Additionally, water is polluted throughout other stages of production such as dyeing and washing stages. Each year, "the world uses 5 trillion liters (1.3 trillion gallons) of water for fabric dyeing, enough to fill 2 million Olympic-sized swimming pools" (Drew & Yehounme,

2017). Synthetic dyes are most commonly used and hold presence of lead, cadmium, mercury, arsenic, etc. which can be extremely toxic to all organisms. (Kant, 2012). Once the dyeing stage is completed, this toxic water is often disposed of into local water supplies outside dye houses; affecting surrounding farmlands and communities. As it enters these sources, wastewater depletes the clean water of its oxygen and releases the toxic chemicals exposing and potentially harming those who come in contact. Exposure to the metals and chemicals found in the wastewater can lead to allergic reactions, respiratory issues, and various diseases (Khan & Malik, 2013). As a whole, the sector is responsible for nearly 20% of all water pollution annually (Thomas, 2019). There are increasing concerns of safe water circulation and availability throughout the world, as well as the high pollution rates affecting both protected and unprotected waterways. As a major contributor to the pollution of these waters, the fashion industry should begin focusing on initiating positive change within water usage and pollution efforts.

### ***Fast Fashion's Flaws: Environmental & Social Impact***

The introduction of fast fashion trends has become arguably the biggest threat within the fashion industry to our environment and society. The fast fashion model is an approach to design, production and consumption, which encourages wasteful/exploitative practices in order to deliver the latest trends in a timely and cost-effective manner. Because these trends come and go at such a fast rate, the lifespan of each item is extremely short, oftentimes leading to high numbers of unsold inventory. To be exact, “of the 100 billion items produced each year 20% go unsold...[these] leftovers are buried, shredded, or incinerated” (Thomas, 2019). This means that significant amounts of the natural resources and energy which could be utilized for other purposes are regularly wasted in the process of creating these items. Additionally, the unsold, discarded inventory creates the issue of waste in landfills and pollution. In total, 85% of all textiles end up in landfills or are incinerated (Thomas, 2019). During the decomposition stage of these items in the landfill, harmful toxins are released contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. Unsold inventory and fabric scraps alone are responsible for 10% of the world’s carbon emissions (Cernansky, 2020). Microfibers and chemicals from these products are also released into our land and water, contaminating them. Although other areas of the industry are responsible for similar offenses, fast fashion trends accelerate this process resulting in greater waste.

Furthermore, fast fashion trends promote exploitative working conditions for those involved in the production stages. Oftentimes fast fashion brands will outsource manufacturing to the Global South due to inexpensive labor costs and quick turn over rates. Issues related to work conditions arise from the outsourcing of manufacturing due to little regulation. Because this part of production is carried out by privately owned small companies, they don't abide by the same rules as the labels, which makes it difficult to enforce any type of regulation. As a result, these companies have the ability to work their employees' long hours for little pay in dangerous conditions. This raises concern as human welfare and basic rights arguably become at risk.

As one of the highest employing industries in the world, the unfair work conditions of the apparel industry affects the lives of many. Globally, "one out of six people are employed by fashion making it the most labor-intensive industries [above] agriculture and defense, [yet] fewer than 2% of them earn a living wage" (Thomas, 2019). A majority of the textile plants where these employees produce the world's apparel are located in the Global South. In these areas of the world most employees have little to no formal education. As a result, they're often unaware of their rights as an employee. Even when workers understand they're being treated unfairly, often these positions are their best opportunity. Employers will then use this to their advantage working their employees strenuous hours with little pay to meet deadlines and reach high production numbers.

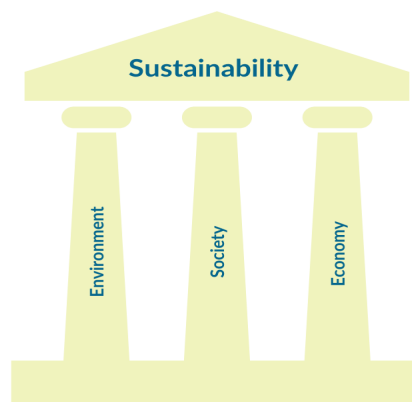
In recent years, the pattern of consumption has evolved to align with the turnover rate of fashion cycles, directly resulting from the introduction of fast fashion. In the past, there were only two fashion seasons, spring/summer and fall/winter. Today, as a result of advancements in technology, the process of production and distribution has shortened, leading to the creation of nearly 50 "micro seasons" within a year (Drew & Yehounme, 2017). These fast turnover rates of trends and low prices have allowed consumers to purchase more. On average, consumers are purchasing 60 percent more items of clothing compared to 2000, however each garment is kept half as long (Drew & Yehounme, 2017). The reason for these garments' declining lifespan is due to the use of inexpensive materials. The use of these materials allows brands to produce large quantities of their design and speed up production. Because the materials used for these pieces are of lower quality, they wear and tear at an accelerated rate and often are disposed of in landfills rather than recycled or repurposed.

In the past when pieces became damaged, consumers would either repair them themselves or take the piece to a professional to have it fixed. At that time, apparel was composed of materials of higher quality and were meant to be durable. Small damage; easily repaired, allowed for these items to hold longer life spans, which prevented additional waste in landfills. Today, the cost of labor for repairing garments is significantly higher than buying a replacement, which has led to the increased behavior of consumption and disposal. In 2014, 16.22 million tons of clothing were discarded- 71% more than in 2000 and 82% more than 1960 (Thomas, 2019). Because these items are made out of materials such as synthetic fibers, they either decompose at a slower rate or don't at all; releasing harmful emissions into the ozone.

Lack of education and awareness around the industry's practices are to blame for this consumer behavior. Because the majority of production takes place overseas for a great number of fashion houses, it is difficult for consumers to fully understand how their apparel is assembled. This lack of knowledge empowers producers to continue practices that increase their profits at the price of the environment and society.

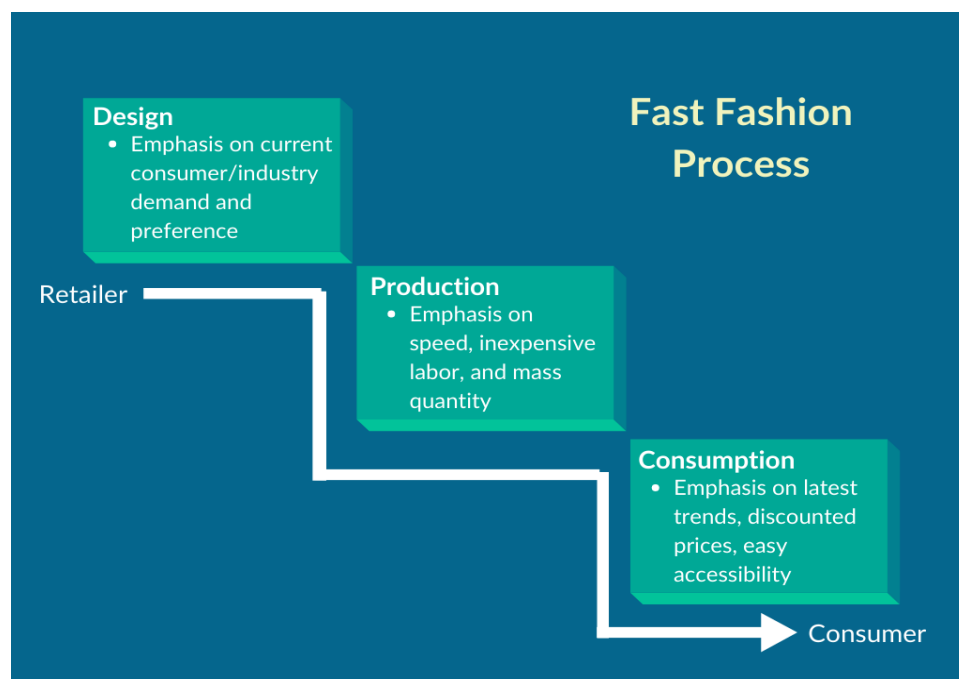
### ***Understanding Terminology Related to The Apparel Industry and Sustainability***

**Sustainability:** Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 2020). Sustainability is composed of three pillars which include- economy, society, and environment (United Nations, 2020). In order to create a solution that promotes one of the three pillars of sustainability, it must take into consideration the impact on the other two pillars; promoting them equally in order for the solution to truly be sustainable.



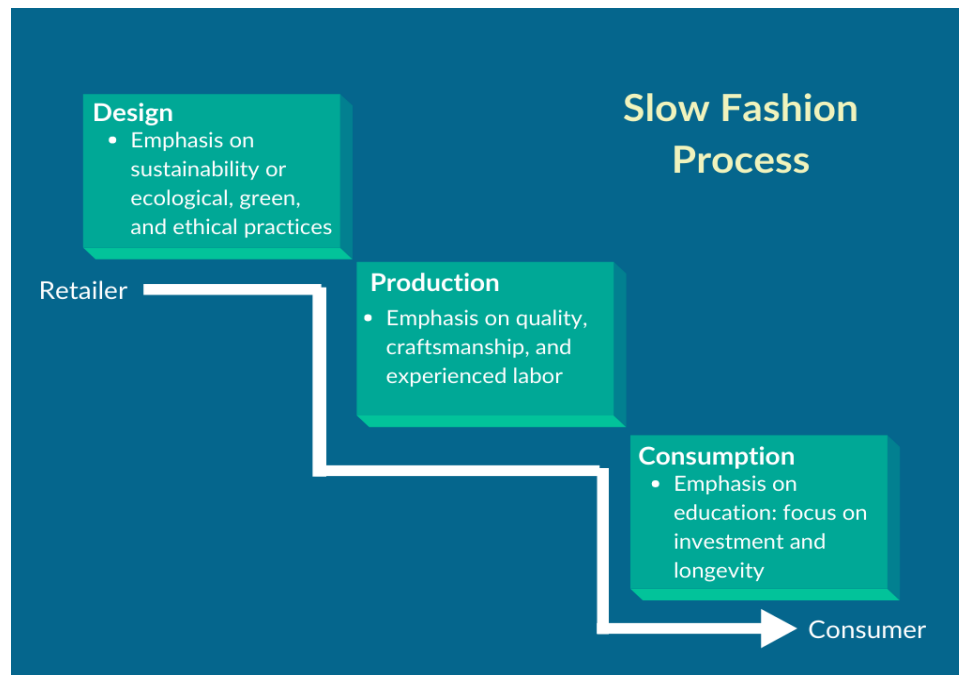


**Fast Fashion:** Fast fashion is low cost clothing based on current high cost luxury fashion trends. Additionally, it can be defined as an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers (Joy et al., 2012). The trend began in the 1970's when retailers made the realization that they could manufacture clothing themselves, cutting the time it takes apparel items to get from the designer to the consumer. In addition to this realization, advancements in technology during this time transformed the process of production; speeding up the manufacturing and shipping of these items allowing companies to get their latest designs to consumers in less than a month. Because of this innovation, seasons for fashion trends have increased from a biannual calendar to several micro seasons. Today, brands such as Zara, H&M, and Forever 21 are the leaders in the fast fashion industry (Zarrolì, 2013).



**Slow Fashion:** A response to the fast fashion trend, slow fashion is the approach to design, creation and consumption of garments for quality and longevity, mindful of its various stakeholder's respective needs (with "stakeholders" referring to designers, buyers, retailers, and consumers of the impact producing fashion has on workers, consumers and eco-systems (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). The movement derived from the slow food movement, which promotes the use of local/seasonal foods in efforts to slow down the production of waste. With

increased awareness of climate change and ethical issues associated with the industry's practices over the past decade, the slow fashion movement has come into place to challenge these methods and introduce more sustainable solutions for the industry. Examples of leaders of the slow fashion movement in today's society are, Eileen Fisher, Patagonia, and Stella McCarthy (Sachs, 2020).



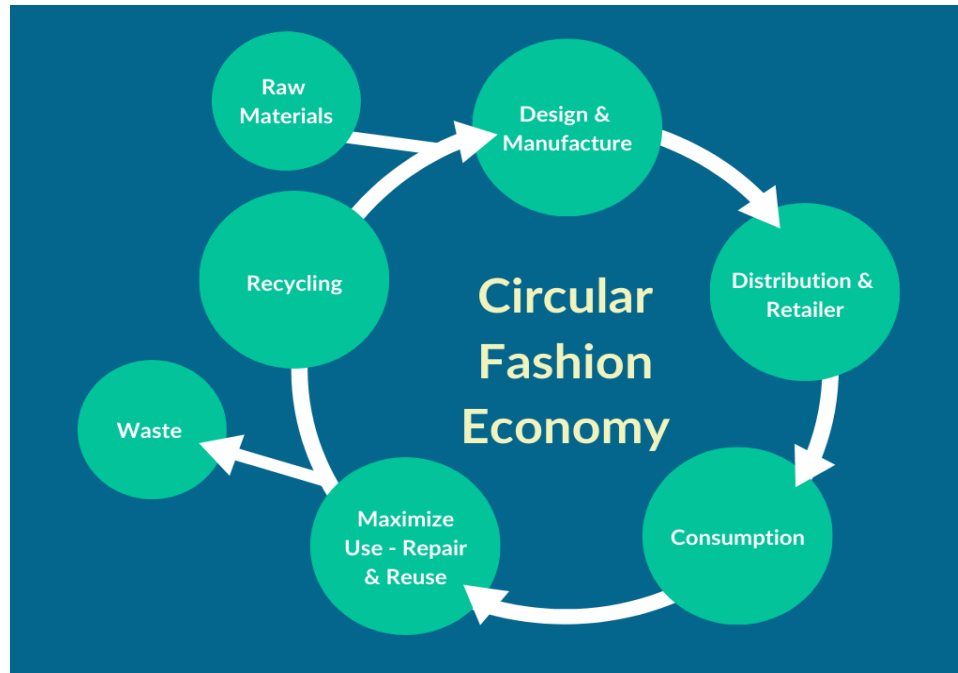
**Luxury Fashion:** Goods (apparel, accessories, jewelry and watches) for which demand increases as income rises. Luxury brands are known for their excellent quality, high transaction value, distinctiveness, exclusivity and craftsmanship (Fionnda & Moore, 2009). For most luxury brands, production of items is intentionally limited in order to maintain the brand's exclusivity. As a result, fashion houses are able to list their pieces at exceptionally high prices, targeting a very elite clientele. To be seen with these items is a symbol of high economic, political, and social status (Thomas, 2007). In the early years these luxury fashion houses often operated as small family businesses. Each item was made to order and was crafted individually. Clientele would have to wait months to receive their pieces. Today, technology advancements have allowed for faster and larger production resulting in a larger variety of clients for the luxury fashion industry.

**Greenwashing:** The process of conveying a false impression or providing misleading information about how a company's products are more environmentally sound. A term that was coined by Westerveld (1986), however, is a practice that is believed to be dated back to the 1960's during the anti-nuclear movement. As questions arose about the safety and environmental impact of nuclear power plants, a series of ads were released, claiming that nuclear power plants are clean and safe (Watson, 2016). Today, companies' environmental impact has a great influence on consumers' purchases. Because of this, brands will frame their products in a way that is "friendly" to the environment in order to gain publicity and cover for the actual impact it has on the environment.

**Carbon Neutrality:** A term used to describe a state of entity (such as a company, service, product or event), where carbon emissions caused by them have been balanced out by funding an equivalent amount of carbon savings elsewhere in the world (Carbon Footprint Ltd, 2020).

**Certified B Corporations:** For Profit Businesses that meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose. The B Corp Certification was developed by the organization B Lab in 2006 to help companies protect and improve their impact over time. This community of business's works toward reduced inequality, lower levels of poverty, a healthier environment, stronger communities, and the creation of more high-quality jobs with dignity and purpose. Today, there are more than 2,500 Certified B Corporations in over 50 countries (B Lab, 2020).

**Circular Economy:** An alternative to the traditional linear economic model (make, use, dispose), which aims to keep resources in use for as long as possible in order to maximize their value. At the end of each product or material's life they are recovered and repurposed. The goal of this model is to maximize the use of materials, reduce waste, and regenerate natural systems (The Waste and Resources Action Programme [WRAP], 2020).



**Transparency:** There are many interpretations of supply chain transparency however, it is most closely related to the disclosure of information (Bozic, 2015). In regard to sustainability, transparency often refers to the disclosure of supply-chain-related information about raw material production, sourcing, production, labor, factory conditions, etc. Supply chain transparency has become increasingly important to the success of companies as a result of the rise in consumer demand (Bateman & Bonanni, 2019).

**Traceability:** Traceability is commonly confused with transparency however it holds a different meaning. Traceability is “the process of tracking the provenance and journey of products and their inputs, from the very start of supply chain through to end use” (Norton, 2019, para. 3). In the context of sustainability, traceability provides companies with the opportunity to credibly make and verify sustainability claims (Norton, 2019)

### ***Identifying Current Challenges in the Growing Field of Sustainability***

As awareness of the climate crisis and social issues arise, fashion houses and companies within the industry have begun to adapt their mission statements and production practices to work towards a better future. Additionally, younger generations are now demanding that these companies prioritize the environment and society in their operations. In order to maintain positive publicity and to meet the demands of young consumers, these companies release statements committing to alter production practices by a set date. For example, last August, 32 companies within the fashion and textile industry created a coalition known as The Fashion Pact, committing to a variety of environmental goals within their companies' policies and production (Tashjian, 2019).

Although the agreement holds good intention, it is non-legally binding, meaning they are not required to follow through with their commitments if they don't wish to (Tashjian, 2019). This misleading environmental marketing claim is known as Greenwashing. Oftentimes companies will use this method of marketing to cover for their environmental wrong doings. Terms such as "natural", "eco-conscious", "eco-friendly," "green", etc. are loosely used, deceiving consumers (Flows, 2012). Because there is very little to no regulation on what is considered sustainable fashion, these companies are able to use these terms as they please with no penalty.

As a result of the lack of regulation for sustainability within the industry, there are many additional issues that arise. The concept of sustainable fashion is fairly new with very little research behind the best practices companies should take. Sustainability also covers a large array of issues, making it difficult to create solutions that reduce the impact of each, and every problem associated (Dixon, 2019). For this reason, it is difficult for companies who do follow their commitments to more sustainable practices to measure if they are truly making impacts. Investing in research is extremely expensive and time consuming, which can be said to be a reason for the lack of prioritization. In the words of fashion designer and leader of sustainable fashion movement, Stella McCartney, "there is a reason the fashion industry clings to old-fashioned ways of doing things - it is cheaper and it is easier" (Cartner-Morley, 2018, para. 9). However, in order for the industry to sustain, companies need to begin prioritizing these issues.

### ***Brands Prioritizing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: A Case Study***

In 2015, the United Nations released a list of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which act as a “blueprint to promote peace and prosperity now and in the future for all” (United Nations, 2020). They are interconnected goals addressing issues across the board of society, environment, and economy to be executed by government, businesses, and individuals all over the world. As stated previously, sustainability touches on a variety of issues, making it difficult for companies to address every issue within their operations. For this reason, it is common that fashion and apparel brands will focus on one or several of these goals in their practices, allowing for the industry as a whole to target issues from various angles. It can be argued that the majority of brands will either focus solely on environment or society focused goals; rarely a combination of the two. However, there are a select few that manage to prioritize the two equally, while boosting their profits.

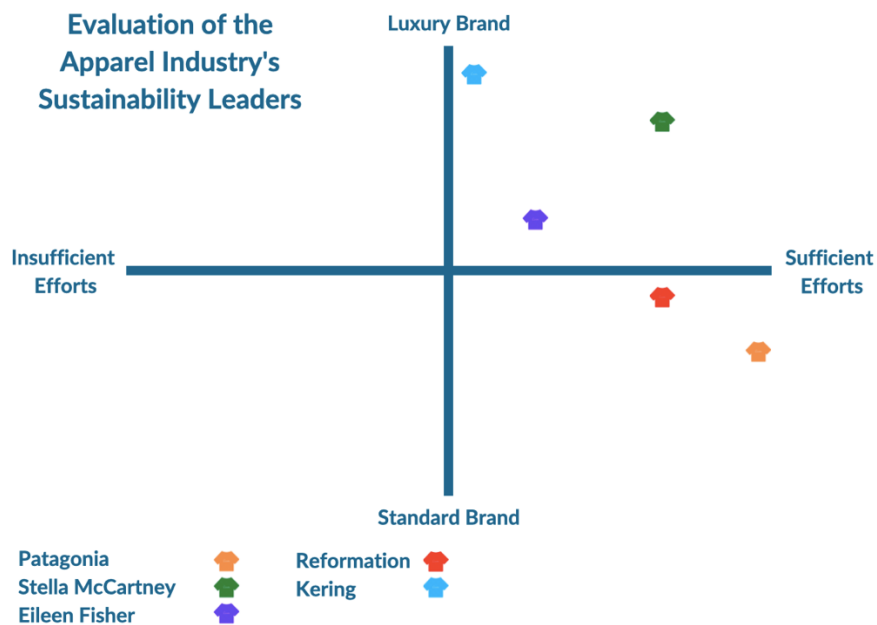


(United Nations, 2020)

In particular, there are several brands that receive continuous recognition for their commitment to these SDGs through their investment in research, alternative production practices, and advocacy; they are even often credited as the leaders of sustainability within the fashion industry. Each brand focuses on a different combination of the SDGs, creating a variety of business models which can be adopted by other companies. These brands include Patagonia, Stella McCartney, Eileen Fisher, Reformation, and Kering.

## Methodology

For the purpose of this working paper, each brand's sustainability efforts were assessed by evaluating their supply chain practices, social/environmental goals and initiatives, and the influence they have on consumers. Additionally, the timeline of each brand's efforts from the establishment of the company to present day were evaluated in order to determine their historical commitment to sustainability. Based on the findings from company statements, sustainability reports, scholarly articles, and third-party evaluators it is evident which brands are making measurable progress towards their commitments and which of those have significant work ahead of them. It is important to note that these brands vary in the clientele they serve and the products they offer. They were selected to signify that although the industry is immensely diverse, social and environmental issues are universal, and must be addressed.



Let it be known that this is an exploratory report. Information surrounding each brands' initiatives and improvements in the area of sustainability vary company to company as there are currently no set guidelines regarding what information must be disclosed. Additionally, there are a variety of issues that the SDGs address and it is recognized that there is not a one size fits all solution. The specific initiatives and improvements listed have been selected for each brand based on their relevance and direct response to the issues presented in the background of this paper; they may not reflect all the initiatives that individual companies are investing in.

## **Patagonia**

Patagonia, the California born outdoor equipment and apparel company founded by Yvon Chouinard in 1973 is arguably one of the pioneers of the slow fashion movement. The entire company's operations are built around preserving the environment and creating equal opportunity for all. They execute this through grassroots efforts, responsible sourcing, implementation of garment repair/recycling programs, and consumer education.

Transparency can be argued to be one of the key factors to the company's success. Patagonia provides many resources on their website and through other sources of media, which provides the public with information about all of the brand's operations, involvement, and crucial current events. Additionally, the outdoors brand goes beyond the use of its power to influence the industry's practices. Recently, the company gained major publicity for numerous lawsuits against President Donald Trump as a response to his decision to reduce Bear Ears National Monument boundaries. This is only one of many efforts the company has made over the years. It can be said that the company is fully committed to the SDG's with the release of its updated mission statement; "We're in business to save our home planet" (Patagonia, 2020). With the numerous resources the company publicly displays, it can act as a business model for other companies in the industry.





**History of Commitment:**

47 years

**Notable Initiatives and Improvements:**


- Support of Grassroot Efforts/Activism (1985)
  - Self-imposed earth tax- 1% of all sales is used to support nonprofits whose mission is to preserve and restore the natural environment
- Contributed to the development of Benefit Corporation (B Corp) Certification (2011)
  - Recognized as the first California company to qualify for B Corp Certification in 2012
- The Footprint Chronicles® (2007)
  - A database which traces the social and environmental impact of Patagonia products
- Worn Wear (2017)
  - A buyback program which repairs, recycles, and upcycles used Patagonia items; diverting them from the landfill and extending their lifespan
- As of 2019, 72% of the brand’s line is composed of recycled materials (whereas the industry’s recycling rate is only 15%)
  - 20,000 tons of CO2 have been removed as a result of incorporating recycled material in production practices

Third Party Certifications/Evaluators: Bluesign, BCorp, Regenerative Organic Certification

**Stella McCartney**

In addition to Patagonia, there are several brands within the luxury sector of the fashion and apparel industry that are using their status and resources to promote alternative practices in support of the SDGs. Noted as one of the first luxury brands with “socially conscious values”, Stella McCartney, is devoted to “operating a modern and responsible business” (Mission Statement, 2020). The fashion house, which is named after its vegetarian founder, prides itself in never incorporating leather or fur in its products in addition to pioneering alternative materials. Additionally, the company prioritizes its people; creating fair opportunities for workers and a positive impact for everyone affected by the industry presently and in the future. The brand is able to achieve its environmental and societal goals by sourcing and producing

items through a highly selective international network. In conjunction with the use of audits the company is able to measure progress of these goals and is held accountable to their promises. In 2018, Stella McCartney announced the launch of the United Nations Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action, a charter that recognizes the impact of the fashion sector on climate change and is committed to sustainable growth within the industry. The company became one of the 43 leaders implementing solutions to align with the charter’s goals and mission.



**History of Commitment:**  
19 years

**Notable Initiatives and Improvements:**


- Recognized as the first vegetarian luxury brand (2001)
- Ceased the use of Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC) (2010)
  - One of the most pervasive plastics and a known carcinogen during stages of biodegradation
- Incorporated Environmental Profit and Loss Measurements (EP&L) (2012)
  - Reduced environmental impact in regard to cashmere by 92%
- Use of Innovative technology/material to reduce carbon footprint
  - ECONYL® yarn – an innovative regenerated fiber created from reclaimed fishing nets and other nylon waste
  - Re.Verso™ - recycled cashmere made from post-factory cashmere waste in Italy.
- Numerous partnerships/collaborations with NGOs, brands, and industry organizations committed to making change
  - Assisted in the launch of the UN Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action (2018)
    - Targeted 30% GHG emission reduction by 2030

Third Party Certifications/Evaluators: Eco-Age

## Eileen Fisher

Similar to Stella McCartney, Eileen Fisher is a highly noted women’s clothing brand that was established in 1984 by Eileen Fisher and is known for its simplistic designs. From the beginning, the company has been recognized for its social consciousness. There are three values that the company prioritizes; business responsibility with regard to human rights, product and practice guidance towards sustaining the environment, and supporting women to be full

participants in society (Eileen Fisher, 2020). Sustainability Leader, Shona Quinn has said that their “vision of sustainability is holistic” as they target issues from various approaches. By teaming up with community partnerships, integrating environmentally safe supply chain practices, and carefully selecting manufacturing partners who meet their labor standards they are able to address a number of issues presented by the industry. In addition, the company empowers it’s consumers by providing annual sustainability reports, information on the newest technologies being cultivated, and additional ways for individuals to live a more sustainable life.



**History of Commitment:**  
36 years

**Notable Initiatives and Improvements:**

- Certified B Corp (2015)
- Renew & Waste No More (2009)
  - Buyback program which promotes circularity and extends the life cycle garments
  - Collected 1.4 million garments since launch of program
  - Gently worn items are sold second hand
  - Unusable materials and scraps are converted into artwork and home decor
- Innovative fiber technology
  - TENCEL™ Lyocell
    - Semi-synthetic fiber almost identical to cotton- made from eucalyptus trees which grows fast and thick on low grade land. Requires 5x less land than cotton for growing and does not require pesticides or insecticides
- Responsible Sourcing – Vision2020 Results (2019)
  - 98% of cotton sourced is organic
  - 47% of wool sourced from regenerative farms
  - 98% of linen sourced is organic
  - 64% of tree-based fiber sourced is Tencel
- Women Together
  - A network for women to promote female empowerment, leadership, and education

Third Party Certifications/Evaluators: Bluesign

## **Reformation**

One brand in particular, has been recognized for redefining fast fashion in a way that delivers the latest trends without the negative impact on the environment or people; all while gaining popularity amongst A-listers such as Taylor Swift, Karlie Kloss, Rihanna. Reformation, an LA based brand was founded in 2009 by Yael Alfalo. Upset by the pollution produced by the industry and the lack of sustainable brands, Alfalo was driven to build her business. The company stands by the motto “We make killer clothes that don’t kill the environment” (Reformation, 2020). Producing apparel in small batches at a time while using innovative technologies and materials, enables the fashion label to stay up to date with the latest trends without harmful impact. Additionally, a majority of manufacturing takes place in LA, which creates quick turnover rates between design concept and shipping while enabling the fashion label to enforce factory standards. The results of the standards in place are living wages for workers, use of fibers with the least environmental impact, and reduction in waste generated by the supply chain. Although there are still parts of production that take place in other areas of the world, Reformation utilizes a close-knit network of manufactures that abide by the company’s Code of Conduct and consent to annual semi-announced audits. Along with these practices, the fashion label publishes quarterly reports which provides transparency and traceability using language that is easy for consumers to digest. Finally, the brand releases its sustainability goals to the public along with its plan for execution.



**History of Commitment:**

11 years

**Notable Initiatives and Improvements:**

- Carbon Neutral since 2015
    - 235 million gallons of water restored through partnerships with Brazilian Rosewood Amazon Conservation and Bonneville Environmental Foundation
  - ¾ of Management are women/people from underrepresented populations
  - Partnerships with Organizations such as thredUP, Osometx, Feeding America
  - Quarterly Sustainability reports produced by Sustainability team
    - 183,701 garments reused or recycled (2020)
      - 114 metric tons of waste diverted from landfills
    - 74% of Factory and Distribution Center teams in California earn a living wage based on their location (2020)
  - **Innovative Fiber Technology**
    - TENCEL™ Lyocell
    - ECONYL® regenerated nylon
      - Composed of 100% regenerated nylon
- Third Party Certifications/Evaluators: Bluesign, Oeko-Tex, Eco-age

**Kering**

Lastly, global luxury group Kering, which is known for its iconic fashion houses including but limited to Gucci, Balenciaga, Saint Laurent, and Alexander McQUEEN, is using its influence over contemporary culture for the betterment of the industry. Although the group itself was created in 1963, many of its houses have been influencing the world of fashion and luxury for more than two centuries; creating a loyal following that expands worldwide. During the 90’s the group established its commitment to sustainability through the publishing of its first Code of Ethics. Since then, King's vision of sustainability has expanded and evolved immensely. The group is arguably most known for the introduction of an Environmental Profit & Loss account (EP&L); an innovative tool used to measure the impact of business activities on the

environment which was established in 2015 and is now widely used by companies across various industries. In addition to this innovation, the company has had many significant milestones including the implementation of a group wide ban of the use of Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC); one of the most pervasive plastics and a known carcinogen in 2016, publication of the luxury sector's first sustainability report in 2017, and recognition as the world's second most sustainable company across all industries by Corporate Knights' 2019 Global 100 Index (Kering, 2020) (Thomas, 2019).

Today, the group continues to make strides towards a more circular and sustainable industry. With the help of its status and resources, Kering is exploring alternative practices, introducing innovative tools, and inspiring other brands to follow its lead. In addition, the group's message of the importance of sustainability prioritization is reaching many of its followers and influencing consumer behavior and decisions.



**History of Commitment:**

22 years

**Notable Initiatives and Improvements:**

- Developed Environmental Profit and Loss Account (EP&L) in collaboration with PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) (2011)
  - Analyzes 6 major categories
    - Greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, water pollution, water consumption, waste, land use
  - Reduced overall environmental impacts by 14% in EP&L intensity between 2015-2018
  - Reduced groups GHG emissions by 77% in intensity in operations
- Carbon neutral since 2018
  - as a group in the areas of operations, sourcing, and supply chain
- Remaining carbon emissions is offset through REDD+ projects (conserving forests, biodiversity & livelihood of local communities)
- Recognized as the World's Most Sustainable Textile, Apparel, and Luxury Goods Corporation by Corporate Knights Global 100 Index (2017)

Third Party Certifications/Evaluators: Eco-Age

Although these brands vary in the products they sell, the clientele they serve, and the SDGs that they prioritize, they all are recognized as leaders within the industry; promoting change for good. By collaborating with each other, these brands can learn from one another and lay out the framework needed for companies to transition into a more responsible business model.

### ***Third Party Evaluators and Their Efforts to Regulate the Industry***

There is still a significant amount of grey area in regard to which companies are truly making improvements towards a sustainable future. As mentioned before, there is currently very little regulation within the industry regarding sustainable practices and circularity, in addition to the lack of baseline data to compare progress to (Drew & Yehounme, 2017). As a result, companies participate in Greenwashing in order to increase profits. Additionally, for the companies that are making adjustments in their practices, it is difficult to indicate whether or not these alternative practices are beneficial. In an effort to help regulate practices, third party consulting agencies assess companies' supply chain and tailor personalized recommendations to improve their practices.

Eco-age, a London based consulting agency, works with clients such as Gucci, Reformation, Stella McCartney, and Kering who have received praise for leading the industry into a sustainable future (Eco-Age, 2018). Each company is assessed by Eco-Age's team of experts and is given ratings based on criteria aligning with principles including social justice, corporate accountability and environmental stewardship (Eco-Age, 2018). Additionally, recommendations on how to improve certain areas of production are tailored specifically to each client's business model. For brands who have successfully completed their assessment and align with all of the principles for sustainable excellence, an Eco-Age landmark is rewarded. Similar to the organic symbol listed on food products, the landmark provides consumers with validation that their products abide by a set of sustainability standards.

In addition to the consulting agencies who are in business to help regulate sustainable and ethical practices, there are third party retailers who are dedicated to evaluating companies practices and aggregating the results into consumer facing platforms (Cernansky, 2020). Retailers such as Wearwell and Good on You provide consumers with a database of brands that are committed to environmental and social responsibility. Brands are grouped into categories

based on the criteria they meet, such as living wages for workers and use of recycled or organic materials. The platform allows consumers to select their preferences and make purchases directly from the website (Cernansky, 2020). Although these are two great tools for companies and consumers, there are risks that arise. Similar to the issues brands face, the question of credibility, methodology, and intention emerge as a result of the lack of regulation.

The implementation of these third-party agencies and platforms are steps in the right direction for the apparel industry and can be used as a framework to help companies report their practices and provide transparency. However, industry wide standards must be implemented in order to produce measurable data used to identify progress.

### *A Way Forward for Fashion: Recommendations for Improving the Apparel Industry*

Throughout this conceptual paper, the current practices of the apparel industry along with the consequences presented to the environment and society have been addressed. Additionally, light has been shed on specific brands and their efforts to address these issues; presenting a framework for companies to follow in order to improve the industry's impact. As readers have learned, action is required on all levels of society in order to create the most substantial change. Therefore, the following recommendations have been made and are tailored to each group in order to help the apparel industry achieve the United Nations SDGs by 2030:

#### *I. INDUSTRY*

1. **Institute regulations which require transparency and traceability within the supply chain.** By no means is transparency the grand solution to the issues presented by the industry. However, the disclosure of information regarding where materials are sourced from and how products are made can act as a tool to help companies document their practices and to empower consumers to make conscious decisions about which brands to support. By having a complete understanding of companies' internal operations, it will be easier to compare business models and narrow down problematic areas.
2. **Incorporate industry wide self-monitoring using outside, independent research and evaluation.** In regard to alternative fibers and supply chain practices, there is



currently not enough data to prove that there are long term benefits. For example, garments made out of recycled plastic may not necessarily be a great alternative as they shed microplastics through washes and at the end of their lifecycle. In order to make advancements towards the SDGs, validation is needed to confirm credibility of proposed solutions. By incorporating research and evaluation from outside organizations there is reduced risk of any conflict of interest.

3. **Establish industry wide sustainability standards.** Similar to Fair Trade and Organic certifications within the agricultural industry, a sustainability certification would require that companies who make sustainability claims in their labels and advertisements abide by a set of standards within their operations. Certifications that are currently available to companies hold little value as a result of the large variety of options to choose from due to the lack of regulations. By implementing industry wide standards, greenwashing will be reduced significantly and consumers will easily be able to decipher which products are environmentally and socially responsible.
4. **Introduce incentives for responsible disposal of unsold inventory and usable waste.** Similar to the incentives brands have in place to encourage consumers to recycle, the industry can adopt similar practices to motivate brands. In recent years, the USDA has put in place The Internal Revenue Code 170(3), which provides enhanced tax deductions to businesses to encourage donations of fit wholesome food to qualified nonprofit organizations (USDA, 2015). The apparel industry could implement a similar program for companies who donate or recycle their waste to qualified organizations and companies

## *II. BUSINESSES*

1. **Incorporate recycling programs for deadstock materials and unsold inventory.** There are many companies and programs such as New York based Fab Scrap which will buy/collect deadstock material and repurpose it. The majority of these programs simplify the recycling process for brands by providing

the steps and services required along the way. As a result, usable material is diverted from the landfill, extending its life cycle and preventing waste. Because there is very little a company must do in order to enroll in these types of programs this can easily be implemented into the business model.

2. **Create buy-back programs for damaged/unwanted items.** Programs such as Worn Wear and Renew, where consumers send in their unwanted or damaged brand products in return for rewards such as store credit have proven their success. Once the brand has possession of the item it is evaluated based on how worn it is and is either resold or repurposed. Companies can use these established programs as a framework for the creation of their own; learning from the flaws and taking note of the successful numbers.
  
3. **Produce quarterly sustainability reports made available to the general public.** Similar to a financial report, a sustainability report can help brands keep track of their progress towards sustainability goals. Additionally, it can provide transparency to their internal operations and create a framework for other companies to use. Providing this information to the public empowers consumers to learn about their clothing and to make conscious decisions based on their findings. Additionally, younger generations now prioritize environmental and social responsibility values when making decisions on where to purchase their clothing. Providing these types of reports with the right intentions will create brand appeal amongst this new age of consumers

### *III. CONSUMERS:*

1. **Consumer education on the brands they support and where their clothing comes from.** Knowledge empowers consumers to make conscious decisions. There are many resources such as apps, books, documentaries, etc. that are available to help consumers learn about the impact their clothing has on the environment and society, and how to make conscious decisions. By supporting

brands that align with individual values, consumers are voting with their dollars and creating demand for change.

**2. Invest in fewer, higher quality pieces that can be incorporated in everyday wardrobe/style.** Although it may initially be a large investment, investing in these pieces will save money over time. As stated previously, fast fashion pieces are typically made of lower quality materials translating into a short lifespan. Investing in higher quality “staple” pieces can reduce long term spending on apparel as they commonly hold longer lifespans.

**3. Utilize renting platforms for special events and unique clothing pieces.** Subscriptions to platforms such as Rent the Runway or Nuuly allows consumers to rotate their wardrobes and stay up to date with the latest trends without the environmental impact and significant cost. Consumers have the option to choose several Items each rental period from a wide range of categories such as statement jackets, evening gowns, jewelry, and shoes. Typically, these platforms’ rental period lasts a month and provide consumers the opportunity to either purchase one or all of the items or return them in exchange for new pieces.

**4. Purchase items secondhand.** Platforms such as TheRealReal sell gently used/open box luxury goods at a significantly reduced price. Experts evaluate each item on authenticity and grade each piece on the condition it is in. New items are regularly listed; providing a large variety for customers to choose from. By purchasing secondhand consumers are reducing the use of virgin materials as a result of reduced demand for new inventory and prolonging an item’s lifespan. Additionally, buying second hand provides consumers the opportunity to find rare and unique pieces that cannot be found elsewhere

#### *IV. RETHINKING FASHION AND SUSTAINABILITY A RESPONSE TO COVID-19:*

As production in the apparel industry has come to a halt, directly resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the opportunity to rethink and rebuild the industry's business model arises. What was once deemed impossible before may now be possible with careful planning and investing. In response to this window of opportunity for complete transformation, the following recommendations have been made.

**Rethink production entirely.** The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the supply chain is extremely fragile and can easily be disrupted. There are many improvements to be made in order to avoid the future risk of similar outcomes to those we have seen as a result of this pandemic.

- 1. Transition to Onshore Production.** With a majority of production offshore and import restrictions put in place, many brands have been forced to cancel orders and put a pause on production. As a result, brands have taken a financial hit and have been left with significant amounts of deadstock in factories. For those who have continued to take orders, there has been significant delay in shipment and delivery. As for companies whose production takes place stateside, the repercussions have not been as severe. Investing in the transition to onshore production is suggested. This will allow for improved turnaround time between design and consumption along with improved traceability.
- 2. Produce smaller batches/Implement made to order model.** The issue of unused material and unsold inventory has been amplified as a result of the pandemic, leading to an increase in waste. In order to create demand for this excess inventory, brands have had to implement flash sales and discounts creating financial loss. By transitioning to a Made-to-Order production model, waste and financial loss can be reduced significantly. Additionally, cultivating a sense of scarcity by announcing a limited release of products creates a sense of exclusivity leading to higher demand
- 3. Tackle the issue from the route of the problem: Sourcing.** As stated previously, more than 50% of the industry's carbon footprint comes from the raw

materials stage of production (Block, 2020). By transitioning to alternative materials and investing in practices such as regenerative agriculture alone, companies will have the ability to reduce the industry's footprint significantly. The agricultural industry has made many improvements in the area of sustainability and has a significant amount to teach the apparel industry.

- 4. Transition linear business model into a circular model.** Now is the time to begin a complete transition into a new business model. Implementing a circular model will increase the lifespan of materials, reduce the amount of waste produced and potentially increase profits for brands. The transition from a linear model to a circular model will take time, however there are small steps brands can take along the way to work towards this goal, including the introduction of buyback programs and using materials/patterns that can easily be deconstructed and reconstructed into new items.

### *Conclusion*

There is a significant amount of room for sustainable growth within the apparel industry. The framework has been laid out and the opportunity has presented itself for change. Based on the complexity of the issues presented throughout this conceptual paper, it is clear that there is no universal solution. Action must take place from various directions to address the numerous challenges presented by the industry. Additionally, collaboration is essential during this time of navigation and growth. Companies and producers can learn from each other and from other industries in order to produce the most feasible solutions. Overall, there is substantial opportunity presented during this pivotal time in the apparel industry and it is up to policy makers, businesses, and consumers to take the steps needed to create a more sustainable industry.

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