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US Buyers' Behavior Towards Social Sustainable Certificates

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US Buyers' Behavior Towards Social Sustainable Certificates

Mehnaz Fatima Monamy

Thesis submitted

to the Davis College of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Design

at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Fashion, Dress, & Merchandising

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Keywords: Social sustainable certificate, US buyers, Buyer-supplier relationship

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ABSTRACT

US Buyers' Behavior Towards Social Sustainable Certificates

Mehnaz Fatima Monamy

Growing awareness of the fashion industry's environmental footprint in terms of water and chemical use, carbon emissions, textile waste, energy usage, and water pollution has focused international attention on sustainability issues in apparel industries. To showcase their commitment to sustainability, many fashion companies turn to certifications and accreditations from third-party organizations. These certifications and accreditations not only help improve a company's performance and marketability but also give them an advantage over their competitors. US textile buyers are also becoming more selective in their purchasing decisions, looking for high-quality products that are produced in a sustainable and socially responsible manner. This is driving textile manufacturers to adopt sustainable practices and to make sure they are providing the best products to their customers. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how social sustainable certificates are valued in a buyer-supplier relationship, how sustainable certificates help buyers building trust towards their suppliers, and how the authenticity of certificates influences the relationship between a buyer and their suppliers. To achieve these goals, semi-structured interview approach was utilized to understand the U.S fashion buyers' perspective about social sustainable certification. The study findings revealed significant knowledge of the buyers regarding sustainable certification. The buyers talked about green washing, worker's wage, child labor, fire safety, and building collapse in connection to certification. However, not all participants prioritize certifications as a factor in their decision-making process. Another finding revealed that even though the buyers are aware of what is going in the fashion industry and they also agreed that certification does offer certain benefits, they do not practice certification requirement in real life.

Keywords: Social Sustainable certification, US buyers, Buyer-supplier relationship

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sustainable certification in the fashion industry has gained significant attention in recent years as brands, retailers, and consumers have become increasingly concerned about the environmental and social impacts of textile production (Oelze et al., 2020). Certification programs, such as Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Organic Content Standard (OCS), Fairtrade, Accord, and Bluesign, aim to promote sustainable practices throughout the textile supply chain, from the cultivation of raw materials to the manufacturing and distribution of finished products (Niinimäki et al., 2020). These certifications are becoming an increasingly important tool for textile and apparel companies to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability and to differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace. The certification process is usually a rigorous one, and it involves third-party verification of a company's adherence to specific environmental and social standards. These certifications can help fashion companies to identify areas of improvement and to track progress over time (Esparon et al., 2014). With the growing demand for sustainable products, sustainable certification in the textile and apparel industry is becoming increasingly important for them to meet the expectations of consumers, investors, and regulators (Niinimäki, 2010).

Sustainability has also become a key concern for consumers in the fashion industry, and US buyers are no exception (Nayak et al., 2019). US buyers of the fashion industry are individuals or representatives of organizations that purchase clothing, footwear, and accessories for US consumers (Y.-T. Lee, 2006). They play a crucial role in the fashion industry by determining which products will be sold in the US market, and their decisions can greatly impact the success of a fashion brand or designer (Şen, 2008). US fashion buyers are increasingly interested in incorporating sustainable products into their collections. This is driven by consumer demand for

environmentally friendly products as well as a growing awareness of the environmental impact of the fashion industry (Nayak et al., 2019). Many fashion buyers are now looking for sustainable certifications when sourcing products from suppliers, and are willing to pay a premium for products that meet these standards (Gehman, 2016).

The study aims to determine if US fashion buyers are aware of the social sustainable certification process and how it can affect their relationship with the suppliers. Several researchers (Bai et al., 2021; Hoque et al., 2020; Hoque & Maalouf, 2022; E. J. Lee et al., 2020) have worked on buyer-supplier relationship and certification, however, no study demonstrate the impact of sustainable certification on buyer-supplier relationship. This research, therefore, intends to investigate (i) how sustainable certificates is valued in a buyer-supplier relationship (ii) how sustainable certificates help buyers building trust towards their suppliers, and (iii) how the authenticity of certificates influences the relationship between a buyer and their suppliers.

The findings of this study will provide an understanding of US buyers perception about sustainable certification and the importance of its implementation. The fashion buyers will be concerned about seeking certification while placing any order which can help them to stay competitive in the marketplace and to comply with legal and regulatory requirements. Adopting sustainable practices and earning sustainable certifications can help companies to improve their brand image and reputation, attract and retain customers. This study also provides a huge opportunity for government to step in and help the factories to get certifications. Moreover, the fashion workers can also be benefitted if sustainable certifications are implemented in the supply chain. They are at severe risk during any disruptions in the supply chain.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 The Global Fashion Industry

The fashion industry, which is estimated to have an annual turnover of 1.5 trillion U.S. dollars in 2021, is the second largest consumer goods industry globally (Statista, 2023). According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), apparel has been the world's most dynamic product traded among countries in terms of manufactured goods since the 1950s (WTO, 2019). Despite its maturity and size, the fashion industry is highly fragmented and spread out across different countries and regions (Ha-Brookshire, 2017). For years, this industry continues to rely on low labor costs to gain an advantage in the worldwide market (ILO, 2022). Clothes are majorly produced in developing nations like Bangladesh, Vietnam, and India because of the availability of cheap labor and fewer regulations (Towner, 2019). The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that 55 percent of the global textile and apparel exports come from Asian industry. In addition, while there are currently around 70 million garment workers worldwide, with 75 percent of them being women, the Asian fashion industry employs about 60 million people (Global 16 Days Campaign, 2017; ILO, 2022).

The fashion industry began to realize the increase in power imbalance in the global supply chain since the early 2000s. The reasons behind power imbalance seemed to be state policies, technology, and pressure created by growing capital markets, especially the stock market and private equity firms (Anner, 2020). Power imbalance in the fashion industry are more commonly found in business-to-business interactions than in those between businesses and consumers (Noto La Diega, 2019). When buyers are consolidated and suppliers are spread out across developing countries, it gives the buyers more power and leverage in setting prices and determining the terms of production agreements (Gereffi & Frederick, 2010). Moreover, lead companies have the ability

to decrease the amount of money paid for clothing produced by suppliers, resulting in a decrease in wages and an increase in workload for workers (Anner, 2020). The pressure to maintain low prices also results in an unsafe work environment for workers, leading to various types of accidents in manufacturing facilities (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018).

2.2 Unpleasant side of the Fashion Industry

Even with the distinctive achievements, fashion industry has always been plagued with factory accidents around the world. Factory accidents have become a common phenomenon across the globe. Since January 2021, 65 factory accidents were reported in which 141 workers died and over 800 were injured in garment, textile and related factories in Pakistan, India, Egypt, Morocco, China, and Cambodia. There were also several massive factory fires, including in Argentina, Chile, Turkey, and Peru, that occurred at night and did not cause injury, but would likely have had devastating consequences for workers during a day shift (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2022). According to the "Pulse of the Fashion Industry Report 2017" by Common Objective, (2018), which used rough estimates from data sources such as Nike and the US Department of Labor, the fashion industry sees 1.4 million injuries each year, or approximately 5.6 injuries per 100 workers. This number is projected to increase by 7% to 1.6 million injuries annually by 2030. Moreover, nearly 27 million people working across the fashion industry—which includes jobs in raw material farming and retail— suffers from illnesses or diseases associated to their jobs and workplace environment (Common Objective, 2018).

One of the earliest factory fires took place in New York City, where 146 workers were killed in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory on March 25, 1911. This factory fire incident had a deep impact on the American industrial history and is considered as one of the most infamous occurrences. One of the main reason being that the deaths could have been prevented as most of

the fatality happened due to lack of safety features within the factory premises (Pence et al., 2003). In 1987, another catastrophic factory fire broke out at Kibbutz Urim in Israel. It was a blanket factory and forty-five workers were wounded in this fire incident inbreathing smoke (Benmeir et al., 1989). In Bangladesh, factory fire is almost a regular matter. However, the one of the most devastating one was the Tazreen garment factory fire that killed more than 100 workers in 2012. Also, in Pakistan more than 250 people died at Ali Enterprises factory fire in the same year (Kent, 2019). Even in India, several factory fires occurred in the recent years. Among these the most horrific one was the factory fire in Anaj Mandi in Delhi on 8 December, 2019 that caused death of more than 43 people and hurt 56 workers. Nevertheless, this fire incident spotlighted the negligence of big brands about their workers well-being and the safety problems in the apparel industry which has been always an issue in the fashion supply chain (Kent, 2019). Following this, in 2020 another fire incident took place at Nandan Denim, a famous denim exporter, in Ahmedabad, India. Witnesses to the accident narrated that people were screaming and begging to save them as there was only one door to get out from the place that needs to climb a ladder to get to this door. This occurrence reminded everyone of the Rana Plaza building collapse tragedy, a garment factory in Bangladesh, that killed more than 1100 people in 2013. Leaving no doubt, this denim factory fire incident again pointed out the carelessness of responsible personnel in health and safety measures in the fashion industry (Bellware, 2020). Considering all of these incidents, it is obvious that factory accident in apparel sector is still a big issue.

2.3 Factory Accidents in Bangladesh Fashion Industry

Over the last twenty years, accidents in factories have become more prevalent in the fashion industry in Bangladesh. Every year, accidents in the workplace result in thousands of injuries or deaths among employees in the Bangladesh textile and apparel industry (Donaghey & Reinecke,

2018). Following the Tazreen Fashion tragedy, at least 1,303 workers have lost their lives in various types of factory accidents within the ready-made garments industry, including building collapses, fires, and unrest. Additionally, from November 2012 to March 2018, over 3,875 garment workers were injured in different accidents (Solidarity Center, 2018).

2.3.1 Tazreen Fashions Limited

On 24 November 2012, fire broke out in the Tazreen Fashions Limited factory at around 7 p.m. killing more than 100 people and injuring more than 200. According to the report of the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims, it is believed that more than 1200 people were working inside the nine-storey building when the fire began. Eyewitnesses and fire defence officials mentioned that the fire broke out on the ground floor, where piles of fabric and yarn were stored in an open space when they should ideally have been stored in a room with fireproof walls. The blaze quickly spread across the ground floor and fire and toxic smoke spread to the upper floors. Many employees tried to escape via the interior staircase, as the factory lacked a sprinkler system or fire exit. However, it was also reported that the managers on a few floors ordered workers to continue working despite hearing the fire alarm, assuming it to be a fire drill. According to the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence official Abu N M Shahidullah and operations director Mahbubur Rahman, most of the workers who died due to the lack of adequate exits and suffocation by smoke were on the first and second floors. In addition, these officials highlighted that the factory lacks necessary closed-circuit television monitoring system and had not received an operating licence from the fire service authority upon the expiration of the previous one (Faisal & Rezoana, 2015).

2.3.2 Rana Plaza

In 2013, world's biggest tragedy in clothing history happened in Bangladesh, Rana Plaza building collapse, which took more than 1,100 of workers life and more than 2,600 were injured. This incident mainly exposed the true color of the global fashion business, a US\$2.4 trillion industry that employs about 40 million of the world's poorest workers, often in dangerous and degrading conditions (*Years after the Rana Plaza Tragedy, Bangladesh's Garment Workers Are Still Bottom of the Pile*, 2021). It was found that 29 global brands were involved with the five factories in the Rana Plaza building. All of them were responsible for that building collapse as they intentionally or unintentionally created such an environment chasing the poor labor in Bangladesh. Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018 found that two factories, Phantom Apparels and New Wave Style, who were operating business in the Rana Plaza building were inspected according to the Business Social Compliance Initiative's standard immediately prior to the collapse (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). These situations indicate the carelessness of the brands, factory owners, and the governments as well regarding safe work environment in the Bangladesh garment industries.

2.3.3 That's It Sportswear

29 workers tragically lost their lives in a fire that broke out on the 10th floor of a building of That's It Sportswear Ltd. The factory, located in the Ashulia industrial zone 18km outside of Dhaka, was owned by the renowned Hameem Group. The group operates two production complexes at the site, which employ a total of 12,000 individuals. The fire occurred in one of the buildings, where approximately 6,000 employees were working at the time The fire started on the 10th floor of the building, which was used to store trousers for shipment. It quickly progressed to the 11th floor, where a canteen and manufacturing facility were present. The stairwell gate had been locked, trapping the workers inside. In a desperate attempt to escape the heat and smoke,

some workers jumped out of windows, resulting in their deaths (Hammadi & Taylor, 2010). Just four days after the fire, as workers returned to the building, a loud thud from falling plaster and cement from the ceiling of the eighth floor caused a rumor to spread that the roof was collapsing. This panicked the workers and caused a stampede, resulting in the injury of 25 additional workers (Hasan et al., 2017).

2.3.4 Tung Hai sweater Ltd

On May 8th, 2013, a fire broke out on the second floor of Tung Hai sweater Ltd, a factory that was closed at the time of the incident. The incident occurred at 11 pm when a meeting between the company's managing director and other executives was taking place on an upper floor of the 11-story building with a senior police official. Sadly, eight people lost their lives including the factory owner and a senior police official. The cause of death was reported as suffocation. A security guard reported that repairs were being made to the factory's electrical system when the fire broke out (The Daily Star, 2013). The ground floor of the building was used as a store, the packaging section was located on the first floor and the ironing section, where the fire was suspected to have originated, was on the second floor. The incident was also considered as an act of sabotage. According to the company's Facebook page, Tung Hai was filling orders for several European clothing brands and retailers (Yardley, 2013).

2.3.5 Aswad Garment Factory

On October 8th, 2013, a fire broke out in the four-storey Aswad Garment factory located in Gazipur, resulting in the deaths of at least 10 people and injuries to over 50 others. The factory's director reported that there were 170 workers inside the factory when the fire started. The origin of the fire is said to have been in the knitting section of the factory, which is a part of the Palmal group (The New York Times, 2013). Despite supplying fabric to brands such as H&M, George at

Asda, Primark, Next, and Morrisons, the factory had not been inspected under international safety deals. The factory, Aswad Composite Mills, which is located outside of Dhaka, was not included in the nearly 1,600 sites set to be inspected under the accord on fire and building safety because it was not a garment factory that dealt directly with brands. A spokeswoman for George at Asda stated that their safety program, which is a part of the Walmart family, inspects the factories that make their garments and other products, but it does not typically extend to the facilities that make materials such as fabric for those garment factories (Butler et al., 2013).

2. 4 Sustainable Certification

In the fashion industry, sustainable certification is becoming increasingly important to US buyers (Nayak et al., 2019). Companies that can demonstrate their commitment to sustainability through certifications such as Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Organic Content Standard (OCS), and Bluesign are more likely to be preferred by consumers who are concerned about the environmental and social impacts of their purchases (Niinimäki et al., 2020). In addition, these certifications can help fashion companies to stand out in a crowded market and differentiate themselves from competitors who may not prioritize sustainability (Gehman, 2016). As a result, obtaining a sustainable certification can be a valuable asset for fashion companies looking to appeal to US buyers.

Sustainable certification can also help fashion buyers to comply with legal and regulatory requirements, such as disclosing their efforts to eradicate slavery and human trafficking from their supply chains (Gehman, 2016). BSCI (Business Social Compliance Initiative) certification ensures that the workers in the supply chain are treated with respect and dignity and have access to fair working conditions. BSCI conducts audits of factories and farms based on a code of conduct that covers areas such as child labor, forced labor, discrimination, and health and safety (Merk &

Zeldenrust, 2005). The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh certifies the factories for their compliance with the building and fire safety standards and also provide support for the factories to improve the conditions (ACCORD, 2013). Furthermore, the use of sustainable certification helps in reducing the environmental impact of the fashion industry, which is known to be one of the most polluting industries globally (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). With the increasing awareness and demand for sustainable products, buyers can gain a competitive advantage by offering sustainable certified products, as it can improve their brand image and reputation (Namhee Lee et al., 2012).

2.4.1 Accord

The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, a five-year agreement, was established following the collapse of the Rana Plaza building. Its purpose was to improve the working conditions and overall well-being of Bangladeshi workers by creating a safer work environment (ACCORD, 2013). Before the ACCORD, fires in garment factories were a frequent occurrence in Bangladesh. In 2010 alone, two separate fires at the Garib & Garib Sweater Factory and the "That's It Sportswear" factory claimed the lives of 21 and 29 workers respectively. In response, NGOs in Bangladesh attempted to address these health and safety concerns by working with major companies. This led to the first draft of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which aimed to prevent such tragedies. However, not all companies were willing to sign the MoU, with Gap continuing to self-check their facilities, and it wasn't until the Rana Plaza disaster that other brands began to follow suit. The MoU underwent several changes during the negotiation process and was eventually renamed the "Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Accord" to reflect those changes (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2013). Nearly 200 brands and retailers from more than 20 countries, global unions and Bangladeshi trade union federations signed accord agreement to

provide direct benefits to the workers (ACCORD, 2013). The parties who have signed the agreement are under a legal obligation to implement fire and building safety measures, including safety inspections, corrections and comprehensive fire safety training, for a duration of five years (Khan & Wichterich, 2015).

The Accord was a legally binding document, which means that signatory companies can be held accountable under the laws of their home countries for any violations of its provisions (Salminen, 2018). The Accord is distinct from traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, which focus on promoting decent labor conditions. CSR is a voluntary effort by companies to improve social, environmental, and labor standards, but it typically does not involve organized labor. The Accord, in contrast, is a legally binding agreement that holds companies accountable for ensuring safe working conditions in the factories they source from (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). The Accord has allocated \$11 million annually, and has employed and trained a team of 94 engineers, 35 remediation and complaint handlers, 30 trainers, and 15 training assistants to oversee fire, structural, and electrical safety in factories covered by the Accord (Croucher et al., 2019). The Accord has therefore been able to establish internationally recognized fire and building standards, set up a well-equipped organization to conduct inspections and follow-ups, and establish a legal mechanism to hold signatory companies accountable for non-compliance with their obligations (Croucher et al., 2019). Additionally, signatory companies pledged to continue doing business with their current supplier factories for at least the first two years of the Accord's five-year duration. The Accord did not prohibit signatory companies from reducing the prices they paid to suppliers, however, signatories were expected to set prices that would enable suppliers to make necessary fire and safety repairs and to operate safely (Ahlquist & Mosley, 2020).

Despite this, many North American retailers such as Gap Inc. and Walmart did not sign the accord. Instead, they established the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. It was a five-year agreement between 26 leading North American apparel companies, retailers and brands with the goal of significantly enhancing workplace safety in over 580 RMG factories that they source products from (Khan & Wichterich, 2015). The Alliance faced criticism for having weaker standards than the Accord and for not having legally binding agreements to fund improvements (Salminen, 2018). It was established on a traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR) model, resulting in self-regulation by the industry on a transnational level (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). The Alliance was self-governed by a business-like structure, with a board of directors mostly made up of business representatives. This, along with the absence of other stakeholders, led to its classification as a business-led initiative (BLI) (Leitheiser, 2021). The brands that signed the Alliance are not willing to be committed to an agreement that was negotiated with the labor unions, which have equal input on its implementation and the ability to file complaints that lead to binding arbitration.

The lack of participation from major American retailers is a significant weakness of the Accord (Evans, 2015). The formation of two separate initiatives appears to weaken the ability of foreign brands and retailers to bring about changes in the RMG sector. Brands are hesitant to acknowledge their responsibility to pay higher prices to factories or alter sourcing practices, however, they do acknowledge different types of responsibilities and pressures they are facing. Some firms, particularly German retailers, stated that they have a responsibility to provide low-income consumers with affordable products and that they are facing intense competition (Oka et al., 2020). Additionally, it is likely that factory owners may be less inclined to address worker safety issues due to the reduced pressure from global brands or the Bangladeshi government

(Ahlquist & Mosley, 2020). The Bangladeshi government is also reluctant to enforce strict regulations due to concerns that it will raise production costs and negatively impact the competitiveness of the RMG sector, which accounts for 80% of the country's exports in a highly competitive and rapidly changing global market (Reinecke, 2017).

2.5 Buyer-Supplier Relationship in fashion industry

The rise of globalization and international trade has significantly affected the way in which business to business (B2B) interactions and transactions occur between buyers and suppliers. In the field of Supply Chain Management (SCM), the buyer-supplier relationship generally refers to the ongoing exchange of goods and services between two companies, typically consisting of a manufacturer and an industrial distributor, which resells products and offers related services to other companies for use in their own production (Y.-T. Lee, 2006). This relationship is a key element in supply chain management and can have a significant impact on the success of a business. A strong buyer-supplier relationship is characterized by trust, communication, and mutual benefit (Gullett et al., 2009). The buyer and supplier work together to understand each other's needs, share information and collaborate on decision-making. This can lead to improved quality, reduced costs, and increased efficiency. The supplier can also benefit from the buyer's expertise, market knowledge and resources. On the other hand, the buyer can benefit from the supplier's specialized skills, expertise, and economies of scale. A strong buyer-supplier relationship is essential for achieving common goals, reducing risks, and achieving long-term success in the marketplace (Anderson & Narus, 1984).

The importance of nurturing and developing relationships cannot be overstated when it comes to effective partnership management (Jiang et al., 2012). In the fashion retail industry, where market trends are highly volatile and unpredictable, maintaining strong relationships is

crucial for adapting to change (Prajogo & Olhager, 2012). Studies have shown that collaborative relationships between buyers and suppliers can bring numerous benefits, such as increased commitment, loyalty, better integration and information sharing, improved financial performance, and higher product and service quality, which can give a significant competitive edge (Delbufalo, 2012; Jack & Powers, 2015; Wagner & Bode, 2014). Information technology can facilitate the expansion of businesses, formation of alliances, and direct connections between organizations throughout the supply chain (Pagani & Pardo, 2017). However, it's important to remember that, despite technological advancements, the success of buyer-supplier relationships is still heavily reliant on trust and cooperation. Ultimately, the effectiveness of business relationships is determined by human interactions within the organizations (Gligor & Holcomb, 2013).

2.6 Power in the Buyer-Supplier Relationship

The market conditions of the fashion industry are influenced by the amount of power or control that buyers have over suppliers (Frödell, 2011). For small and medium-sized firms in less developed countries (LDC), joining the global apparel supply chain as a supplier is relatively easy due to lower barriers to entry. However, buyers in the apparel industry have the power to easily switch suppliers if they do not meet their expectations. This puts buyers in a position of power in the supply chain, making them the lead firms (Y.-T. Lee, 2006). Besides, a buyer with a stronger bargaining power over a supplier may not see the need to maintain long-term partnerships with suppliers as much as a buyer with weaker bargaining power would (Ryu et al., 2007). On the other hand, a less powerful buyer is more likely to pursue a long-term alignment with suppliers, as they may not have the same leverage to direct suppliers' actions as a more powerful buyer, who can use their power to align suppliers with their goals (Frödell, 2011). This uncertainty in the market can affect a supplier's ability to develop a long-term relationship with a buyer.

Yet, one way for suppliers in LDCs to differentiate themselves is by obtaining sustainable certifications such as Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Organic Content Standard (OCS), Bluesign, and Accord (Oelze et al., 2020). These certifications demonstrate a commitment to environmental and social responsibility and can be attractive to buyers who are increasingly looking to source from sustainable suppliers (Koszewska, 2011). Sustainability certifications can also help suppliers to access new markets and increase their visibility among buyers who are looking for sustainable options (Gehman, 2016). Obtaining sustainable certifications can also help suppliers to build a reputation as a responsible and trustworthy partner, which can help to strengthen the relationship with buyers and increase the supplier's bargaining power (Koplin, 2005; E. J. Lee et al., 2020).

2.7 Theoretical Framework: Social Exchange Theory

George C. Homans, an American sociologist, was the first to identify the concept of social behavior as exchange in his work in 1958 (Emerson, 1996). Social exchange theory defines that social behavior is the result of an exchange process between individuals. According to Homans (1958), people engage in behaviors that they expect will lead to a positive outcome, such as rewards or benefits, and avoid behaviors that they expect will lead to negative outcomes, such as costs or punishments. Social exchange theory is often used to explain how relationships develop and how people evaluate the costs and benefits of different interactions.

Social exchange theory believes people behave in a certain way to establish trust and intimacy. In a buyer-supplier relationship, social exchange theory can be applied to understand how the two parties interact and how they evaluate the costs and benefits of their relationship. For example, a supplier may offer a buyer a lower price in exchange for a long-term commitment to purchase from the supplier. The buyer, in turn, may be willing to make this commitment if they

believe that the supplier will provide consistent high-quality products and good customer service. The buyer and supplier are both engaged in an exchange process where they are evaluating the costs and benefits of the relationship and making decisions based on these evaluations (Wu, 2022). Because this study is focused on the BSR in fashion sector, Social Exchange theory is a suitable framework, in as much as the theoretical underpinnings of Social Exchange theory address research questions concerning the business-to-business relationship exchange (Lambe et al., 2001). Sustainable certificates can also be an important aspect in this relationship, as the buyer may be willing to pay more for products that have been certified as sustainably produced, and the supplier may be willing to implement sustainable practices in order to obtain such a certification. This exchange process can lead to mutual benefits for both parties and also contribute to the overall sustainability of the supply chain.

It is important to note that Social Exchange theory is not a single theory, rather a framework for researching social behavior in exchange (Richard & Emerson, 1976). According to Blau, 1964 and Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, the needs and desire of the actor determine how they weigh potential costs and rewards from the relationship. On the other hand, according to Emerson (1976), social relationship theories like power, satisfaction, and trust can be incorporated into the Social Exchange theory framework and investigated as social exchange mediums. For this study, costs, rewards, power, satisfaction, trust, and expectations were used as variables of Social Exchange theory. These components collectively provide a framework to understand how social sustainable certificates affect the buyer-supplier relationship.

2.8 Research Gap and Question

Brands and retailers are required to prioritize ethical practices throughout their supply chains, because their consumers become more socially and environmentally conscious. Even

though buyers, and retailers are aware of sustainable practices, supply chain disruptions still exist around the world and we have little knowledge on the role of social sustainable certifications, such as Accord and Alliance, in shaping buyer-supplier relationships in the fashion industry. To help fill this gap, this study will be designed to gain a deeper understanding on “how do social sustainable certifications, such as Accord and Alliance, impact the development of buyer-supplier relationships in the fashion industry?”

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Study Design

Qualitative studies are used to explore and understand the experiences, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals or groups in their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). As so many things going on in the world, sometimes it can be challenging to determine what people believe about a certain subject or social issue. In such situation, qualitative research method is quite helpful for studies that focuses on comprehending public demands, expectations, and perceptions of the world. With its many different data collection methods, qualitative research methodology enables the researcher to reach out to subjects whenever it is most convenient for them. Besides, this method is helpful for studies where researchers can gain a deeper understanding of complex phenomena, identify patterns and themes, and develop theories or hypotheses for further investigation (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). Qualitative research method is quite popular in the field of fashion industry. Many fashion researchers have used qualitative method to understand complex topics like fast fashion, sustainability, consumer behavior, and more (Puspita & Chae, 2021; Sheridan et al., 2006; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). For this study, qualitative research method would be particularly well-suited as it explores complex topics like buyer-supplier relationships. Therefore, an exploratory qualitative study design was identified to investigate the US buyers' perceptions of social sustainable certification and how it impacts the buyer-supplier relationship.

3.2 Semi-Structured Interview

This study utilized the semi-structured interview approach to collect data. In-depth interviews of the US fashion buyers were performed to understand the buyer's knowledge of social sustainable certification and how it relates to the decision-making processes. Semi structured interview is a popular method which was used by many researchers to explore perceptions of

clothing design for people with disabilities (Esmail et al., 2022), to explore the drivers, inhibitors and enablers of creating a textile-to-textile recycling system (Sandvik & Stubbs, 2019), and to learn Bangladeshi RMG industry's competitive advantages (Swazan & Das, 2022). The advantage of doing in-depth interviews as part of a qualitative research approach is that it allows the participants to respond openly and directly to important questions. Semi-structures interviews involve having a set of predetermined questions or topics to be covered during the interview, but also allowing for flexibility to ask follow-up questions and explore the participant's responses in more depth (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

In this study, the semi-structured interviews were designed to understand the perception of buyers regarding social sustainable certification and whether certification can impact the buyer-supplier relationship or not. In order to acquire information specifically relevant to the research objectives given by this study, the researcher guided the interview process with a series of directed questions. These interview questions were structured in four blocks: basic company information, knowledge of certification, relationship, and impact of decision making. The interviewees included the fashion buyers from different companies in the U.S. The researcher used remote interview method due to the physical distance from the participants and their availability. According to King et al., 2018, the most obvious benefit of conducting interviews remotely is that it allows for the inclusion of respondents who are physically far away from the interviewer without the need for time-consuming and expensive travel.

3.3 Sampling and Data Collection

Participants accounts of their opinions were the primary source of data. A total of 9 semi structured interviews were carried out. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used to recruit participants for the study. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for

the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Qu & Dumay, 2011). A total of 43 fashion buyers were contacted through emails and text messages, out of which 14 responded. Only 9 participants agreed to participate in the study.

All participants were asked questions using a semi structured questionnaire instrument. Participants were encouraged to talk about knowledge of certification through open ended question, and the ordering of further questions was determined by their responses. The open nature of the questions aimed to encourage depth and validity and to allow new concepts to emerge. Interviews were conducted from February 2023 through April 2023 with data analysis being carried out both during and following the completion of the interviews. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and computer for redundancy. Then the recordings were transcribed using MS office transcribe tool and transcripts were checked manually for reliability. In addition to the recordings, the researcher made personal observations and documented them as notes. These notes were then used to analyze the interview and identify additional questions and topics to explore within the interview's scope (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3.4 Data Analysis:

In qualitative research, data analysis refers to the process of breaking data into useful components for study. Through analysis, researchers gain a comprehensive understanding of the data in order to address specific research questions (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2013). According to Hatch (2002), the analysis of data in qualitative research involves looking for patterns, determining phenomena, developing explanations, developing interpretations, or generating theories while also involving the processes of synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. Data analysis starts as soon as the project begins and continues through the drafting of the final report. Typically, inductive reasoning

involves starting with smaller concepts and working up to the bigger phenomenon (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2013). For this study, several kinds of qualitative data analysis techniques, such as keyword analysis, constant comparison, and thematic analysis, were used. Performing a keyword analysis involves looking for commonly occurring terms, irregular terms, and phrases used in context (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2013). Constant comparison refers to the concept of comparing categories and codes from prior data sets to newly gathered data in order to identify similarities and differences. According to Van Manen (1990), thematic analysis is “the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work”.

This researcher carefully reviewed the interview transcripts and made notes in the margins to code the data. To start the final coding process, the researcher chose the shortest transcript as a starting point and attempted to transform the interviewee's response to each question into a concise set of keywords. During the code development process, the researcher took into consideration the research question. For example, to address the research questions the codes were “social sustainable certification”, “Vendors’ certifications”, “Accord/Alliance”, “Factory certification realization”, “Benefits of certifications”, “Reasons of certifications”, “Sustainability Costs”, “Power to change expectations”, “Seeking certifications”, “Auditing supplier factories”, “Certification rewards”, “Impact of decision making”, “Factory Incidents”, and “Making the buying decisions”. By labeling sections of text with a few representative words, the researcher effectively encoded the content of the interview. Throughout the document review, the researcher adopted the concept of lean coding (Creswell, 2015), aiming to maintain a manageable number of codes.

As an ethical consideration of this study, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities and confidentiality of the participants. The names were generated using an automated Google search. Therefore, there was no bias in choosing the pseudonyms.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

In qualitative studies, reliability primarily depends on the researcher's commitment to being meticulous, cautious, and sincere throughout the research process. Reliability evaluates the consistency of outcomes over time (Bryman, 2016). Creswell & Poth, 2016, stated that “in qualitative research, reliability often refers to the stability of responses to multiple coders of data sets”. To ensure the reliability of the coding, the researcher employed a 'test-retest' approach in this study (Marks & Yardley, 2004). This involved applying the same code to a specific text twice, with a two-week interval between each instance. In this way, the researcher re-examined previous work to confirm the consistency of the results. While subjective factors could have influenced the coding process on both occasions, the researcher's consistent coding suggests that the distinctions between codes were clearly understood (Marks & Yardley, 2004).

While reliability measures the consistency of the outcomes, validity in qualitative research assesses the accuracy of the outcomes (Leung, 2015). Validity includes whether the research question is appropriate for the intended result, the methodology is valid for addressing the research question, the design is suitable for the methodology, the sampling and data analysis are appropriate, and finally the outcomes and conclusions are acceptable for the sample and context. According to Bryman, 2016, there are three types of validity: internal validity, external validity, and ecological validity. In qualitative research, internal validity is important because it allows the researcher to ensure that the concepts and study align by being actively involved in the social life. For this study, nine interviews were conducted with U.S fashion buyers, and data collection

stopped when the answers became repetitive. This approach enhances the study's internal validity. The external validity refers to the extent to which observations or findings from a study can be generalized to the populations (Bryman, 2016). This study included nine interviews, and as the number of interviews increased, the answers became repetitive. Therefore, it gave a complete and comprehensive understanding of the U.S buyers' perception regarding social sustainable certification, and the findings and observations can be applied and generalized to the populations beyond those directly involved in the study (Bryman, 2016). The ecological validity is about whether the scientific findings are relevant to our everyday lives, opinions, values, attitudes, and knowledge as we observe them in their natural environment. In the study, interviewees participated in the study via zoom being in their offices or in a neutral setting. Therefore, it enhanced the ecological validity by focusing on the core subject matter and its impact.

Chapter 4: Result

Social Exchange Theory was used as a framework to analyze the transcribed interviews. Seven themes emerged from keyword analysis, constant comparison, and thematic analysis of the data. The themes are (i) Sustainable certification communication, (ii) Knowledge of certifications, (iii) Sustainability Costs, (iv) Power to change expectations, (v) Trust in the certificates, (vi) Stakeholder rewards from certifications, and (vii) Buying expectations in relation to certifications. These emergent themes provide a deeper understanding of the perception of U.S fashion buyers about certification. These themes are connected to Social Exchange Theory in the following manner: (1) *Sustainable certification communication* serves as a factor influencing effective communication regarding the cost and rewards of social relationships; (2) *Knowledge of certifications* pertains to relational norms, social obligations, intra-organizational justice, and inter-organizational justice; (3) *Sustainability costs* relate to the negative outcomes or sacrifices in social interactions; (4) *Power to change expectations* relates to power in regards to social exchange; (5) *Trust in the certificates* serves as a factor of trust and commitment in the buyer-supplier relationship; (4) *Stakeholder rewards from certifications* concern the rewards and satisfaction derived from social exchange, and (5) *Buying expectations in relation to certifications* relate to the anticipated rewards and costs of future interactions in the buyer-supplier relationship.

Several sub-themes also emerged during the analysis. The *Sustainable certification communication* theme includes three sub-themes which are (i) Social sustainable certifications, (ii) Vendor certifications, and (iii) Accord/Alliance. The *Knowledge of certifications* theme includes three sub-themes which are (i) Factory certification realization, (ii) Benefits of certifications, and (iii) Reasons of certifications. The *Trust in the certificates* theme includes three sub-themes which are (i) Seeking certifications, (ii) Auditing supplier factories, and (iii) Certification rewards. The

Buying expectations in relation to certifications theme also includes three sub-themes which are (i) Impact of decision making, (ii) Factory Incidents (if any), and (iii) Making the buying decisions.

4.1 Demographics

Participants for this study consisted of U.S fashion buyers from a diverse group of retail companies. Most of the participants had been in operation for less than five years and working in different level of buyer position. The companies were a combination of individual and family-owned companies that ran businesses in a range of sectors, including men and women’s clothing, home decor, discount store, specialty boutique, and active wear.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Participant Name*	Type of Retailer	Years in Job	Position
Anna	Discount Store	1.5 Years	Assistant buyer
Sara	Home Decor	2 Years	Assistant buyer
Maya	Specialty Boutique	1.5 Years	Junior buyer
Luna	Specialty Discount Store	1 Year	Inventory analyst
Amy	Off Price Retailer	Over 3 Years	Full buyer
Lisa	Specialty Boutique	1 Year	Junior buyer
Nina	Wedding Registry Company	2.5 Years	Associate buyer
Rose	Active Wear	Over 10 Years	Senior Manager Product Sustainability
Mary	Department Store	4 Years	Associate buyer

* Pseudo Names

4.2 Sustainable certification communication

This theme emerged as the primary understanding of sustainable certifications among U.S fashion buyers. The buyers gave insights regarding social sustainable certifications, their vendor’s certifications, and Accord or Alliance certification.

4.2.1 Social sustainable certifications

Most of the participants (5 out of 9) have some insights about social sustainable certifications. Maya has significant knowledge and experience about certification as she worked in compliance before, particularly with certifications such as WRAP and Meta. She mentions that some companies, like Nike, have their own specific certifications that they use. She also said that the majority of buyers in her department are unaware of these certificates. Besides, Rose, who has over 10 years of experience in her job, shared a lot of information about certification which indicates that the company is committed to monitoring and evaluating various social aspects of its factories, ensuring compliance with standards and promoting improvements in worker conditions, social issues, and environmental impact. Lisa and Nina have limited knowledge about certification. Lisa mentioned that there is absence of sustainability efforts in her company. Mary agrees to the existence of certifications and admits she hasn't worked with them directly, but also admits that her coworkers might be more knowledgeable. Amy with over 3 years of job experience mentioned she knows pretty much nothing about certification. Based on the information provided by the participants, it can be observed that while some participants have a good understanding of social sustainable certifications, there exists a noticeable lack of awareness and knowledge among others. It was also surprising to know that most of the participants did not acquire the certification knowledge from professional experience but rather out of a personal interest. Additionally, it is evident that not all companies prioritize or actively engage in sustainable practices, as indicated by the limited knowledge and absence of sustainability efforts mentioned by certain participants.

Maya: "Actually quite a bit, because I used to work in compliance. We would deal with like WRAP certifications, Meta. A few specific companies have specific ones, like Nike, has

their own specific one that they use. So, I actually know those pretty well, I would say, most buyers in my department have absolutely no idea.”

Rose: “We audit obviously social compliance, and we use third party auditors. So, from a social standpoint we have an audit whether it's better work or some sort of industry aligned standard. Then we look to see what is the factory doing to improve the lives of the workers and what are they doing about gender-based violence, education. We ask our factories to submit their water and greenhouse gas emissions.”

Lisa: “I did learn a little bit in college about sustainability and like green washing. And how companies, you know, pretend to be sustainable. And really, they're not. Our company does not have like a social responsibility, sustainability, statement at all. So, in terms of my own work, I do not know much at all.”

Nina: “I would say, I just know, because of my own, like particular interest in it. I wouldn't say like because i'm not working with factories directly, I would say my professional experience is pretty limited in it.”

Mary: “I know that there's a ton out there. I just don't have any experience with them. But that's not to say like my coworkers don't they're probably way more educated than me.”

4.2.2 Vendor certifications

Only 2 participants (out of 9) know about their vendors certification status. The majority of them have not any clear idea of whether their vendors have any certification or not. Maya mentioned that most of their vendors are big vendors, therefore, she imagined they should have their own certification. However, her company does not actively verify or require any certification from the vendors. Mary also stated same opinion as Maya. She assumed her company seeking

certificates from vendors as the company conducts research on potential vendors and expects them to meet certain standards to do business with them. However, Mary did not mention the certification as a requirement during the research process. Nina shared that although they have some vendors who are B corp and fairtrade certified, the number of those vendors are smaller. She added that she knew very little about the sustainability practices of the bigger vendors since they do not share that information which raises concerns about transparency. Luna indicated that currently she does not work with the vendors. Besides, she mentioned that when she worked with vendors, certification issue was never brought to her attention. After analyzing these statements, it becomes evident that the companies' approach to vendor certifications lacks consistency. Moreover, it appears that different individuals or departments within the organization were responsible for overseeing vendor certifications, or there may have been insufficient emphasis or communication regarding the significance of conducting certification checks.

Maya: "A lot of our vendors are pretty big vendors. I assume they have their own certifications. Actually, we don't check any of those."

Mary: "I honestly don't know, I would have imagined yes, because we do a lot of research on the company before we work with them, and there's a lot of standards that they need to hit before we like. We'll agree to work with them."

Nina: "Yes, we do have some vendors that are B corp, Some fair trade vendors, I would say it's a a smaller portion, I think. What our larger vendors are doing is obviously a little bit that I know. I don't have as much visibility because they're not necessarily sharing that information. But I do think a lot of our vendor partners are interested in sustainability, whether it's social or environmental in some capacity."

Luna: “I don't really work with our vendors, especially at my company. When I did work with vendors I don't fully know if we did check any certification or not. it was never brought to my attention.”

4.2.3 Accord/Alliance

Majority of the participants (7 out of 9) have not heard about Accord or Alliance. Maya, who worked in compliance, is familiar with Accord and brought up Bangladesh when she heard about it. However, she did not say anything about Alliance. On the other hand, Mary stated that she heard about Alliance, but she could not explain that. It was unexpected to learn that Rose, who has worked in the fashion sector for more than ten years, is not familiar with Accord. The statements imply that Accord is not well-known among the U.S buyers or within their industry. Besides, the importance of such initiatives, Accord and Alliance, is not perceived in the U.S fashion academia.

Maya: “Yes, I have heard about Accord. What I thought of when you said it was the Bangladesh. So, all of these companies signed to help with factories and making sure they're safe.”

Mary: “Maybe I've heard of Alliance.”

4.3 Knowledge of certifications

This theme emerged as having an overview of factory certification stated by the buyers. It gave a deeper understanding about buyer's perception of factory certification, benefit of these certifications, and the reasons for seeking certification. While the buyer's perspective revealed useful insights about factory certification, not all of them have knowledge of this topic. However, all of them agreed that certification does offer certain benefits.

4.3.1 Factory certification realization

5 of the participants (out of 9) shared some knowledge of factory certification, while 4 of them said they do not know about factory certification. Nina mentioned not sourcing her own product as a reason for her lack of knowledge about factory certification. Mary and Amy said they do not personally know about the certification, however, they have another team to handle these things. These statements collectively indicate that the buyers obtain their products from another department, relieving them of direct involvement in the factory certification process, which is typically conducted to ensure compliance with specific standards. Additionally, the buyers potentially depend on their colleagues who are responsible for the certification process, or they may not prioritize or recognize factory certification as a crucial aspect of their business operations.

Nina: “So, unfortunately, I don't know a lot about factory certification. Because, I don't source my own products, and I don't have to.”

Mary: “I don't know. We have a whole sourcing team that goes out there to like visit our vendors factories, to know that they are like safe working conditions. We are working with the right people over there. So, I personally know nothing. But we do have a team for that.”

Amy: “That would be my legal team. So basically, how my job works is, I work with vendors who have their either own factories overseas, or they partner with factories overseas. So, I do not work with any factories directly I work with the people who work with them.”

4.3.2 Benefits of certifications

9 out of 9 participants felt that certification has certain advantages for both the environment and the workforce. Amy shared her own experience, for example, when the factory they were working with violated some worker's right, they took immediate action by cancelling orders and

breaking partnership. Sara emphasized the importance of environmental consideration. She believes certification can help the environment by eradicating environmental issues such as dumping dye waste water. Luna and Maya brought up the child labor issue and they believe certification can be something that can stop child labor. According to Rose, certification benefits the businesses by providing them confidence about their actions. According to the above statements, it becomes evident that Anna's company is making appropriate decisions and engaging in safe practices as they actively participate in the certification process. Their commitment to certifications highlights their dedication to ensuring compliance with industry standards and promoting responsible practices. In contrast, Sara's focus seems to be more on environmental issues rather than social aspects. This observation suggests that Sara's company may prioritize environmental sustainability over social factors.

Anna: "I know one time, the factory we're working with had violated some rights of their workers, and we immediately canceled all orders with them, and said, we have no future business with you."

Sara: "It's really important in terms of the environment. There are so many factories that will just dump dye waste water systems, and that pollutes not only their waterways, but also ours, and it hurts the ecosystems."

Luna: "The benefits are making sure we're not having children working in, making sure everything safe, doing things correctly. I definitely think those regulations putting stuff on that is definitely important."

Mary: "It should hopefully be stopping child labor, the fact that a building collapsed, the working hours, and make everything better"

Rose: "it provides more confidence to the business, but they do have a trustworthy partner. Yeah, I think just confidence in the business that they're doing the right thing, and they're engaging safely."

4.3.3 Reasons of certifications

Majority of the participants (8 out of 9) shared mixed thoughts about reasons of certifications. Anna recognizes the positive impact of certification. She believes certification does add value to the supplier factories as it helps improve the workplace environment for the workers. Sara highlighted the increasing concern of customers about the environment. She also added that companies use certification as marketing tool to showcase their efforts. Maya mentioned that certification does add value to the big companies, because big companies are concerned about their reputation and she brought up Nike as an example. Amy believes that certification not only ensures compliance but also help the companies to promote their reputation. Based on their statements, it is observed that even though some companies use certification as marketing tool, it does help some companies to improve their conditions. Therefore, buyers can consider certification as an important aspect of social exchange for their own reputation as well as for a better relationship with their suppliers.

Anna: "Yes, it helps improving the workplace environment for the workers. These certifications add value to the supplier factories."

Sara: "companies start to realize the customer is starting to be more concerned about the environment. Young millennials, they care about those things, and they want to provide a good life for their children and for the environment."

Sara: "I believe that they are used as marketing tools. I believe that it's a way for companies to say, hey, awesome, we're doing these things. You should come shop with us. Not that they really care about it"

Maya: "I think it definitely does add value, especially for big companies because the big companies are the ones who are the strictest about it. That's why Nike has such strict standards, because they have gotten in trouble before, and that's what people remember when they think of Nike and so."

Amy: "everybody's always going to want the cheapest product, but a lot of companies, not only from a legal standpoint, but from a humanity standpoint isn't going to work with a factory that isn't certified. Certification also helps them to brand themselves."

4.4 Sustainability Costs

All of the participants (9 out of 9) said that they are concerned about the issues created by the fashion industry. Maya and Sara both emphasize the environmental impact of the fashion industry. They highlight issues such as pollution from dye dumping, excessive waste generation, and the contribution of fast fashion to global warming. Maya believes that consumer demand has the potential to drive positive change as this demand can influence company's decision and actions. Sara also raised concern about overworking of people and child labor. Amy also shared her concern about the workers. She said she would never work with any factory that does not care about its people. Nina brought up the overproduction issue. She mentioned that the fashion industry is overproducing that leads to excess waste and resource consumption. These findings suggested that all of the participants know and aware of the negative outcomes of the fashion industry.

Maya: "it's definitely a big issue for me. There is a huge environmental issue. But then you do still need to make new clothes to a point. So, the biggest thing is just educating consumers on it, because consumer demand affects what factories do or not factories, what companies do."

Sara: "The fashion industry is one of the biggest polluters of the environment, based on the dumping that happens from dyes and just the overgrowth of waste and products. That fast fashion obviously is a huge, then those lead to overworking people, young people. Global warming is our big concern. We're killing off sea life with dyes and ruining ecosystems."

Amy: "I worry about the people working in those factories and their day to day lives. But then there's also a business standpoint of I would never want to work with someone that wasn't certified in doing it safely."

Nina: "I think that there's a lot of concerns with the fashion industry. First and foremost is like the end of use. Then, less waste leads to less ways throughout the production cycle. If you can produce closer to where you're selling so that way, you're obviously using less greenhouse gas emissions. Also, I think we're over producing."

4.5 Power to change expectations

This theme emerged as having an understating of buyer's power to make any decision. 7 out of 9 participants believes that they do not have any power to change the situations created by the fashion industry. Although Anna believes she does not hold the power, she thinks consumers do have that power. Amy was confident about her power to not working with any non-certified company. Sara said her power is limited within the system. Rose was confident about her role. She

believes she can contribute by making conscious choices regarding materials, partners, and manufacturing methods to create more sustainable and environmentally friendly practices. Based on these statements, it becomes evident that even though the buyers felt powerless to make big decisions about effect change, they can contribute in other ways like Rose said.

Anna: "I don't know if we have the power to change, the consumer does hold the power."

Sara: "Yes and no. I think that it depends on the company you're working for, because as a buyer in a low end company like I'm working in right now. That's just really challenging because you can't tell your you can't tell your Vp that I don't want to buy this because I don't want to continue polluting the environment"

Amy: "I have the power to not work with someone that is not certified. I do have that power. In the era that we are in, if enough buyers did it, they would have to go and change it. Luckily, I work for a company that does care."

Rose: "Yes, I think that we within our control can control how we design the products, we can pick better materials. We can ask for better dive stuff, who's making the fabric, who's doing the sewing so we can choose better partners and better manufacturing methods."

4.6 Trust in the certificates

This theme emerged as an important aspect of knowing the certification practices. It revealed the true motive of buyers regarding certification and building partnerships. Most importantly it gave an idea about whether the companies seek certification from their vendors, whether they audit their supplier factories, and whether they believe certification can help building relationship or not.

4.6.1 Seeking certifications

Majority of the participants (8 out of 9) said their company does not seek certification from their vendors. Sara mentioned that their vendors are required to sign contracts to follow their rules and the contract is legally binding, meaning that once vendors sign it, they are obligated to comply with its terms and conditions. However, she did not mention about any certification requirement, social or environmental, to do business with them. It was amazing to know that Rose and her company seek for environment certifications such as CS and GOS from their vendors. These findings indicated that, despite being aware of the issues in the fashion industry and acknowledging the benefits of certification, buyers do not prioritize it in their own practices for a better relationship with their vendors.

Sara: “So they sign our vendor contract that's just with the company, saying that they're going to abide by our rules and follow our procedures, and once they've signed that it's a binding contract that they have to follow. If they don't send quality product, we're going to ask for our money back. They don't have any other certifications that I'm aware of for just doing general business.”

Rose: “It's very specific. So we're gonna make an organic cotton product. The vendor has to be certified to the Cs. We don't do a lot of gos. If it's a recycled product, they must be certified. We do some fair trade sourcing. And so those factories are fair trade certified.”

4.6.2 Auditing supplier factories

4 out of 9 participants said they do audit their supplier factories. Anna said they visit their supplier factories twice a year. It was amazing to know that Sara’s company does surprise visit to their supplier factories to make sure that they are actually maintaining the sustainable practices. Based on the above statements, it is evident that some companies take the compliance issues

seriously and they do care about what is actually going on in their supplier factories including workers' well-being, workplace environment, and products quality.

Anna: "we would travel to India in China twice a year and visit all of our factories."

Sara: "It used to happen randomly. They would not tell them they were coming, so that they didn't have time to suddenly clear the fire pathways and make sure things are in order."

Nina: "we don't work with any factory directly"

4.6.3 Certification rewards

5 out of 9 participants believe that certification can help them working with their vendors. Anna said that certification may not be necessary for a partnership or may not contribute significantly to the outcome. As Sara mentioned before that their vendors are required to sign contracts, however, she could not mention about any certification. She added that they do make sure that their vendors are practicing sustainable processes in their factory. Maya said her company does not care about importance of certification rather it only uses certification for marketing them. Amy believes that if the vendors have certification, it would give her the confidence that the product is also have better quality. Based on these statements, it can be assumed that companies do not care about the importance of certification rather they only use certification for marketing their image which highlights a disconnection between awareness and action within the industry.

Anna: "None of them have certificates, so it doesn't, I guess, like there is no effect."

Sara: "I'm sure that they have to have certifications for us to work with them. I don't know specifically what they are, but I know that we have to make sure that they are are doing business fairly and perfectly."

Maya: "I don't know if it would help. For the company I work for they would only use it as a marketing thing. They don't really care"

Amy: "Absolutely, not only just peace of mind knowing that the product was made in a safe environment and done the right way, typically makes the product better, you know."

4.7 Stakeholder rewards from certifications

7 out of 9 participants believe that certification does affect the different stakeholders in the fashion industry. According to them, factory certification appears to have positive effects on workers, as it ensures their well-being and fosters trust in the company they work for. Anna mentioned that certification surely is helpful for the workers. For consumers, while some actively seek out ethically certified brands, others may not be fully aware of or prioritize such certifications. Rose highlighted the importance of ethical business practices for attracting and retaining employees. In particular, she said some designers prefer working for trustworthy companies. She also added that customers prefer brands with a positive reputation and the safe working conditions benefits everyone involved. Overall, the participants' statements suggested that certification in the fashion industry has a significant impact on different stakeholders, including workers, consumers, and employees, and it can benefit everyone involved by promoting well-being, trust, and a positive reputation. Therefore, certification should be an important aspect within the fashion industry.

Anna: "Obviously very beneficial for the workers. For consumers, some people choose to care. Some people choose not to care."

Maya: "It's very holistic, like the workers having good factory conditions, Makes the company look good because they're not getting in trouble. Some customers do care about and the workers, I think, do appreciate it when their company actually does care"

Nina: "I don't think the average consumer knows much about factory certification, and I'll be honest with you because I don't work with partner like factories directly. I'm also not very knowledgeable of it from a professional perspective. But I just have to trust that my vendor partners are doing their part with their factories. I was gonna say I don't think back to certification is really something that a lot of people know much about"

Rose: "We hear more employees that they care about working for a company that is doing the right thing has ethical business practices for designers. They want to work for a company that they trust. For customers, they don't want to shop for Brand that has negative Reputation. I would think it would benefit everyone and share safe working conditions for their employees. Make sure that our proper management systems in place"

4.8 Buying expectations in relation to certifications

This theme emerged as learning the buyer's viewpoint of certification during decision making processes. This gave an idea of how sustainable certification impact the buying behavior of U.S buyers. The buyers also shared their opinion about factory accidents and how they act after those accidents.

4.8.1 Impact of decision making

Majority of the participants (5 out of 9) said they believe that sustainability concept does not impact their buying behavior. Anna admitted that consumers give consideration to the country of origin while making purchases and she felt that this may have an impact in her decision-making process. Sara mentioned that certification does help doing businesses, but it also comes with cost. She added that certification is something that cannot be ignored and then it also causes potential loss to the business due to this extra cost. Lisa said that although she is aware of sustainability, it doesn't directly impact her role. She still purchases products for selling purposes. Nina stated that

her customers are increasingly interested in sustainable products, so, she keeps that in mind during decision making. She also added that price is a barrier to the sustainability and she pointed out the challenge of providing the right products to satisfy the demand for sustainability. After analyzing these above statements, it is evident that despite the current demand for sustainability, the additional costs associated with it can sometimes serve as a barrier to its acceptance. Nina's observation about price being a barrier is valid as sustainable products often come at a higher price due to factors such as eco-friendly manufacturing processes, sourcing sustainable materials, and ensuring fair labor practices. This can make it challenging for some customers to afford or justify the higher cost. Another finding suggested that some companies' primary concern is meeting the customers' demands and generating sales, rather than prioritizing sustainable practices.

Anna: "Since we don't offer many choices I don't know. However, customer does value like a country of origin."

Sara: "Anything that the factories are doing to incur their own cost. So if it takes money to be certified in certain things that are extra. They're going to pass that on to the customer, which is us the retailers, and then we will do our best to not pass that on to the consumer here in the States, or in any other country. There are consumers that are happy to pay that extra \$3. So, I do think it's important to keep up the certifications and gain any certifications they have, but the customer or the the factory has to be willing to potentially lose business that way, too. So it's a double edged sword."

Lisa: "So I'm conscious of sustainability. But in my role I don't have a say so. It really doesn't impact me whatsoever, because I'm still buying the product to have it be sold"

Nina: "I also think that couples are increasingly interested in sustainability. What is hard with sustainability is the price, more sustainably produced products tend to be at a higher price point. And I think that is the barrier to entry for a lot of people slash our couples. Conscious consumers, they care about these things. So, we are trying to provide product to satisfy that need. I think the challenge is just providing the right product"

4.8.2 Factory Incidents (if any)

Only one participant out of 9 had experience with factory accident. Anna shared that she heard of one incident when they cancelled all the orders with that factory. However, she could not mention exactly what happened there. On the other hand, Rose shared that one of the factories was repeatedly subcontracting production, which means they were outsourcing the manufacturing process to other parties without proper authorization. Therefore, they had to break partnership with that factory. Based on the above statements, the findings revealed that even though accidents in garment factories still exist globally, this topic is not covered in the fashion academia and within the participants' industries.

Anna: "I heard of one incident. They didn't tell us like what exactly happened. We just knew it was something with their factory workers. We cancelled all of our orders and pause all go forward business."

Ross: "The only thing I can think of is we had a vendor that repeatedly was caught, subcontract in production. And so we stopped placing orders because we could no longer trust them."

4.8.3 Making the buying decisions

Majority of the participants (6 out of 9) said they do not consider seeking certification as a factor during their decision-making process for the future. Sara highlighted the importance of using a factory with proper certifications, mentioning that certifications can be a reliable indicator of a factory's commitment to safety and ethical standards. Mary mentions the ongoing conversation about sustainability and the development of a sourcing team to ensure ethical sourcing practices. Maya brings up the perspective that some buyers may not consider certifications, but those who are more concerned about sustainability and corporate social responsibility might pay closer attention to them. Based on these statements, it can be observed that certain participants consider certifications to be an important aspect of evaluating a factory's credibility and reliability. Furthermore, there is a clear awareness and emphasis on promoting ethical sourcing practices and sustainability within the industry. Additionally, the level of importance placed on certifications may vary among different buyers, depending on their individual values and priorities.

Sara: "If we were given the option between 2 factories and the cost was the same, or it was very similar, and we knew one was definitely safer, more ethical than the other one. We definitely want to use the factory that has the proper certifications."

Mary: "The conversation is constantly there on how we can be more sustainable. How can we be ethically sourced like we developed a new sourcing team."

Maya: "I would say, the buyers don't even think about it in terms of certificates. I don't even think they're aware of it if you're like me and you're more into sustainability and social corporate responsibility, then you pay more attention to it."

Table 2: Results and Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes	Response
Sustainable certification communication	Social sustainable certifications	5
	Vendor certifications	
	• <i>Know</i>	2
	• <i>Does not know</i>	7
	Accord/Alliance	
	• <i>Heard</i>	2
	• <i>Have not heard</i>	7
Knowledge of certifications	Factory certification realization	5
	Benefits of certifications	9
	Reasons of certifications	8
Sustainability Costs	Sustainability Costs	9
Power to change expectations	Power to change expectations	
	• <i>Have power</i>	2
	• <i>Does not have any power</i>	7
Trust in the certificates	Seeking certifications	
	• <i>Seek</i>	1
	• <i>Not Seek</i>	8
	Auditing supplier factories	
	• <i>Audit</i>	4
	• <i>Do not Audit</i>	5
Stakeholder rewards from certifications	Certification rewards	
	• <i>Help working with vendor</i>	5
	• <i>Does not help</i>	4
Stakeholder rewards from certifications	Stakeholder rewards from certifications	
	• <i>Affect stakeholders</i>	7
	• <i>Does not affect</i>	2
Buying expectations in relation to certifications	Impact of decision making	
	• <i>Impact buying behavior</i>	4
	• <i>Does not impact</i>	5
	Factory Incidents (if any)	1
	Making the buying decisions	
	• <i>Will consider certification</i>	3
	• <i>Have no thoughts</i>	6

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Summary of the study

The purpose of this study was to better understand how social sustainable certification is perceived by the U.S fashion buyers. The study involved a diverse group of retail companies, including individual and family-owned businesses operating in various sectors such as men and women's clothing, home decor, discount stores, specialty boutiques, and active wear. The study findings revealed significant knowledge of the buyers regarding sustainable certification. The buyers talked about green washing, worker's wage, child labor, fire safety, and building collapse in connection to certification. It was surprising to know that most of them did not acquire the certification knowledge from professional experience but rather out of a personal interest. Besides, one of the participants who has been in this industry for over 3 years is unaware of sustainable certification. Another finding revealed that the majority, consisting of at least seven participants, do not have a clear understanding of whether their vendors hold any certifications. The lack of knowledge or awareness about vendor certifications among the majority suggests that the company's approach to vendor certifications is not consistent. It was also discovered that the majority of the participants, specifically 7 out of 9, were unaware of Accord or Alliance which indicates that Accord or Alliance were less well-known among the participants or within their industry. Most importantly, it was particularly unexpected that one of the participants, who has been in the industry for more than ten years, had not heard about Accord although Accord was established ten years ago after a devastating incident called Rana Plaza building collapse. Overall, these findings highlighted the lack of knowledge, awareness, and information exchange among buyers in relation to social sustainable certification (Zhao & Detlor, 2023). This aspect relates to the concept of Social Exchange Theory, as it emphasizes the importance of mutual exchange and

communication within relationships to ensure the fulfillment of obligations and the provision of benefits.

Additionally, it was found that 5 out of 9 individuals had some knowledge about factory certification, while 4 of them admitted to not being familiar with it. One of the participants, attributed her lack of knowledge to not sourcing her own product, whereas other two participants mentioned that they had dedicated teams to handle such matters. These findings suggest that these individuals may be using other teams as a shield to hide their negligence. However, it was interesting to know that all 9 participants agreed that certification provides various advantages for both the environment and the workforce. One of the participants shared her own experience where they took swift action against a factory that violated workers' rights by cancelling orders and breaking partnership. Another participant emphasized the significance of considering the environment and believed that certification could effectively address issues like the dumping of dye waste water. Confidence in business and stopping child labor were other benefits addressed by the participants. When it came to the reasons for obtaining certification, the majority of the participants (8 out of 9) had mixed thoughts. One of the participants acknowledged the positive impact of certification, stating that it adds value to supplier factories by improving workplace conditions. Another participant noted that companies use certification as a marketing tool to showcase their efforts. Another participant mentioned that certification holds value for larger companies, as they are more concerned about their reputation, using Nike as an example. These findings suggest that even though the buyers are acknowledged of benefits of certification it does not influence them to seek certification in order to have a good relationship with their suppliers. Based on Social exchange theory, individuals engage in social relationships based on a cost-benefit analysis, where they seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs (Nick Lee & Cadogan, 2009).

Therefore, the above viewpoints reflect the participants' consideration of the costs and benefits of certification, reflecting the principles of social exchange theory.

Another finding revealed that buyers does not hold any power to change the situation created by the fashion industry. Only two expressed the belief in their personal power to effect change in the industry. One of the participants believes that by making conscious choices regarding materials, partners, and manufacturing methods, she can contribute to more sustainable and environmentally friendly practices in the fashion industry. Which certainly can be a way to make change the situation. Social exchange theory is often used to examine how individuals interact and exchange resources in social relationships (Richard & Emerson, 1976). These findings highlighted the potential for individuals to exert influence through their choices and actions, emphasizing the factor power dynamics (Lai et al., 2020), where individuals can initiate change through their interactions and transactions.

Moreover, it was surprising to know that only one of the participants seek certification from their vendor. From the buyers' statements, it was evident that they know what is going out there, they are aware of the issues of fashion industry and they acknowledged the benefits of certification. However, they are still not convinced to think certification as an important aspect as they are not practicing certification requirement in their real life. One of the participants said that certification may not be necessary for a partnership or may not contribute significantly to the outcome. Another participant said her company does not care about importance of certification rather it only uses certification for marketing them. Besides, majority of the participant denied of doing auditing in the supplier factories. However, it was surprising to know that one of the participant's companies does surprise visit to their supplier factory. This indicates that the company takes the compliance seriously and they actually want to know what is going on their

supplier factories. From the Social Exchange Theory view, the participants' attitudes and behaviors related to certification reflect their level of trust in the certification process, their vendors, and their supplier factories (Ko & Hur, 2014). Despite being aware of the issues in the fashion industry and the potential benefits of certification, the participants do not actively seek certification for themselves. This suggests a lack of trust in the certification process or its effectiveness in addressing industry concerns.

When it comes to decision making process, less buyers were agreed that sustainability concept and certification impact their buying behavior. With that said, the presence or absence of certification does not significantly influence their decision-making process when selecting suppliers. It was also found that consumers are looking for sustainable products and that is something the buyers consider during decision making. It was also discovered that sustainability does come with extra cost which certainly a challenge for the buyers as they also need to think about the cheap price for the consumers. However, it was amazing to know that some buyers are interested in certification and they will consider certification requirement in the future. Based on the social exchange theory perspective, expectations play a crucial role in shaping the decision-making processes and behaviors of individuals within social relationships. From the above findings, it can be inferred that buyers' expectations about the outcomes and benefits associated with sustainability and certification are likely shaping their decision-making process (Wang et al., 2019). These expectations can influence their priorities, trade-offs, and considerations when selecting suppliers and products.

5.2 Contributions

The study reveals a significant lack of awareness and inconsistent knowledge about sustainable certifications among U.S. fashion buyers. Therefore, this study will help to understand the need for better education and information dissemination within the industry. This study will also contribute to the curriculum development of sustainability and supply chain related academic courses. The study findings might improve the content of the current curriculum by introducing social sustainable certification. Additionally, this will help to improve education for the coming generation. This study also added value to the literature. Several studies have researched on buyer-supplier relationship, however, no study investigated the impact of certification in buyer-supplier relationship.

5.3 Implications

The study results supported the purpose of the study and answered the research questions. This study has implications for the policy makers, business owners, future entrepreneurs, and academia. Policy makers can use the study findings to assess the effectiveness of existing policies and regulations related to sustainable certifications in the fashion industry. The study findings can help business owners better understand the perceptions and knowledge gaps of fashion buyers regarding sustainable certifications. This knowledge can inform their decision-making process when it comes to implementing sustainability practices and obtaining certifications. The study identifies the challenges that hinder the adoption and implementation of sustainable certifications in the fashion industry. This information can help stakeholders develop strategies to address these challenges and promote more widespread adoption of sustainable practices. The study can serve as a guide for future entrepreneurs in the fashion industry by highlighting the importance of sustainability and certifications. This study also has significant implication for academia. It can

serve as a basis for further research on sustainable practices and certifications in relation to buyer-supplier partnership in the fashion industry.

5.4 Limitation

This study was conducted with only nine participants and this gave limited perception regarding certification. Therefore, conducting interviews with a larger number of buyers can enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of certification. Additionally, the study utilized qualitative methods to explore the buyers' viewpoint on certification. Therefore, it cannot be generalized. Quantitative methods, like surveys, can be used to generate more robust findings.

Another limitation is that the study samples for fashion buyers were predominantly located in the northeast region. By including participants from various geographical areas, the study can capture a more comprehensive understanding of the certification in the fashion industry.

Moreover, the interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and virtual method also has some limitations as this may restrict non-verbal communication cues or hinder the establishment of a personal connection.

The study primarily focused on understanding social sustainable certification in relation to Rana Plaza, with particular attention given to certifications like Accord and Alliance. It was observed that the lack of awareness among participants regarding social sustainable certification like Accord and its implications was not surprising but rather concerning. Accidents in the fashion industry is not a subject that is covered in the fashion academia. Therefore, participants were not aware of these issues which may impact their responses and understanding of the broader context.

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