Social Sustainability in Fashion Companies

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Abstract. Fashion brands that choose the fast fashion production model are still the most expressive in the market. This model is characterized by fast production and disposal, which becomes unsustainable for the planet and for the society. While the environmental issue is urgent, the social issue also requires immediate action. Therefore, this study takes social issues as the central object of the study. Research methodologies, analysis of existing documents, semi-structured interviews, online surveys and focus group interviews, made it possible to create a group of suggestions and recommendations for projects that can be implemented in fashion companies, in order to contribute to social sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainable fashion · Social sustainability · Greenwashing · Communication

1 Introduction

The textile industry, in addition to being one of the most polluting in the world, is also one of the most dependent on natural resources and human labor. Several impacts are associated with this industry, whether positive or negative, at a social, environmental and economic level. At a social level, the textile industry can have consequences for workers, consumers, communities surrounding the production areas, suppliers, among others; at an environmental level, it has consequences due to its great dependence on natural resources and the variety of raw materials, whether natural, artificial or synthetic, and the methods used in production processes; and at the economic level, since, as it is an industry that is so prevalent in the daily lives of today's societies, it involves many financial transactions and generates a lot of profit.

Sustainability in the textile industry and fashion brands is an increasingly relevant and studied topic, however the focus is usually quite directed towards environmental sustainability. The expression "sustainable development" was used for the first time in the report Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report, a document of a socio-economic nature, created in 1987, for the World Commission on Environment and Development organized by the UN. This document defined sustainable development as the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the satisfaction of the needs of future generations" (Araújo 2014; Salcedo 2014). Sustainable development intends to meet the basic needs of all beings and to extend to everyone, without exception, the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life.

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In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, better known as Rio 92, where more than 100 heads of state met in Rio de Janeiro to discuss how to guarantee future generations the right to development, the concept of sustainable development has evolved to be based on three pillars, the environmental, social and economic pillar. Knowing that it is not possible to separate the three pillars of sustainable development, given that they are dependent on each other, this article addresses an overview of sustainability in industry, focusing on solutions to social problems; These solutions may go through the other foundations of sustainable development (UN, 2015).

1.1 Methodologies

An analysis of documents about the topics relevant to the study was carried out, as well as semi-structured interviews with fashion brands with social impact. For the selection of these brands, a market research was carried out, to understand the sustainability criteria and what is the sustainability focus of the brand. A short interview was also carried out with António Ferrari, communication advisor for Portugal at the United Nations Regional Information Center for Western Europe, the entity responsible for Agenda 2030, a consumer survey with the aim of understanding what consumers think about brands with social impact, if any are known and if these aspects are valued in the act of purchase and interviews in focus groups for the creation and discussion of proposals.

2 Greenwashing

Due to pressure from consumers, many fashion companies are tempted to resort to greenwashing practices. The concept of green marketing refers to the advertising of good quality products and services, with fair prices and that are sustainable, with the aim of promoting and optimizing the trade of these goods and services, satisfying consumer needs with low environmental impact (Carchedi and Ferrer 2020).

Many fashion companies adopt, with some frequency, a symbolic approach to sustainability, making the mistake of just talking about the theme or taking advantage of the current consumer trend to opt for more sustainable products, starting to use symbols and colors that refer to environmental concerns, without this real differentiating factor, which can have an adverse effect and weaken the credibility of the brand's sustainability plan (Gwilt 2014; Monteiro and Kempfer 2014).

Corporate greenwashing can be defined, based on the Walk or Talk Matrix, as the intersection of two corporate behaviors: poor environmental performance combined with positive communication regarding that performance. This matrix divides companies into two categories of environmental performance, on the Walk axis: companies with low environmental performance are classified as "brown", while companies with good environmental performance are classified as "green" companies. Brown companies are expected to choose between remaining silent about their environmental performance or trying to present their poor performance in a positive light. While there are varying degrees of positive communication, this matrix classifies a company's communication about its environmental performance into two categories: no communication or positive communication. Essentially, greenwashing is brown companies that decide to hide

their environmental practices, or lack thereof, through positive green communication strategies. These companies manipulate and disseminate false information based on the assumption that the consumer has limited information about the company's real environmental performance (Berrone 2016).

3 Social Responsibility

Social responsibility can be defined as the method, whether formal or informal, through which business partners contribute to better governance of their companies, contribute to better social and ethical working conditions, as well as the environment of the country, although sensitive and also taking into account their religious, historical and cultural background, are part of the protection of social, natural and cultural resources; so that they are incorporated into the company's strategic planning (Domingues and Remoaldo 2012).

According to Pires (2015), there are 11 principles and concepts of social responsibility: legal compliance; respect for internationally recognized instruments; acknowledgments of stakeholders and their concerns; accountability; transparency; sustainable development; ethical conduct; concern approach; respect for fundamental human rights; respect for diversity and involvement with the community, which can be summed up in the following:

- Legal compliance - the principle of legal compliance is the principle that assumes that the organization or company must take a proactive stance with regard to complying with legal requirements relating to social responsibility, and not wait for the body that oversees the organization to have an action and report on the matter.
- Respect for instruments recognized internationally - be they treaties, conventions, directives, declarations or other instruments, these must be adopted, proactively and voluntarily, and must be a priority of national and international bodies.
- Acknowledgments of stakeholders and their concerns - the identification of interests, expectations and concerns of stakeholders and stakeholders, such as employees, partners, suppliers, consumers, among others, are responsibilities that must be assumed by the organization or company.
- Accountability - understand the obligation to explain clearly and unequivocally to all those involved what their obligations are, internal policies, decisions taken and activities with actual or potential impact. In addition, the organization must be open to undergoing an external assessment of its actions, also inducing self-assessment.
- Transparency - sharing and making known the general functioning of the company, as well as its policies and values.
- Sustainable development - the organization must assume itself as a socially responsible agent, adopting an attitude of prudence and prevention in the three pillars of sustainable, environmental, social and economic development, not devaluing any to the detriment of others and finding a balance between the three.
- Ethical conduct - guide the organization or company by values, including the values of truth, honesty and good faith in business relationships and in the operation of the company.

- Approach of concern - use of cautious forecasts, capable of preventing eventual damages.
- Respect for fundamental human rights - not only support, but also adopt International Labor Organization standards in the company or organization.
- Respect for diversity - respect for differences in terms of race, color, religion, gender, sexual orientation, social origin, must be positively assumed as a factor of change and development. The company or organization must work for the general inclusion, including of people with disabilities.
- Community involvement - this involvement takes place through activity, usually philanthropic, carried out or supported by the organization in the surrounding communities, promoting contact between it and people.

Social responsibility is often confused with philanthropy or a company's social action. Social action refers to donations or social programs that benefit certain groups, such as communities, families of employees, schools and institutions or Non-Governmental Organizations. Corporate social responsibility involves attitudes, actions and relationships with larger stakeholder groups such as consumers, suppliers, unions and governments, it has nothing to do with typical social or environmental projects that companies implement. A socially responsible company will not invest in social projects that are not necessarily related to its business activities, which fall under the concept of philanthropy. Thus, corporate social responsibility means that corporate responsibility exceeds the mandatory legal requirements, that is, the company's actions go beyond what is a legal requirement, such as the performance of responsibility in the environmental field, respect and transparency of actions for employees and their families (Oliveira 2008).

4 Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1 Semi-structured Brand Interviews

Five sustainable fashion brands were interviewed, Näz, Happy Earth, Perff Studio, Vintage For a Cause and WeTheKnot. Of these brands, which have different goals and concepts, having the issue of social sustainability in common, there were some common opinions among them.

One of the common points found was the general perception that consumers still have more environmental concerns than social concerns; environmental concerns being discussed, investigated and exposed more than social inequality and working conditions.

Two of the five brands have their own production, but two others find it difficult to find ethical, low-volume suppliers, having already been discarded for not being able to meet the minimum production requirements. Another popular view is that brands are needed to educate consumers through their platforms. Two of the brands also find it very important to keep consumers informed about the prices they charge, as they faced the difficulty of making the consumer understand the costs associated with production. In the end, one aspect that all brands agree on is that transparency is key for fashion brands, especially sustainable fashion brands.

4.2 Analysis of Online Survey Results

In order to understand the general view of the consumer, an online survey was launched, divided into 3 parts, namely the demographic profile, shopping habits and the perception of social sustainability. The survey was initially answered by 688 people, of which 685 gave consent to participate in the study, which was considered the sample.

Most respondents in this study say that they buy, on average, between 5 and 10 pieces of clothing a year, a number that is already approximate, although smaller, than the world average. On average, in the world, each person buys about 13 pieces of clothing per year, and consumption habits vary greatly from country to country. The country with the highest consumption of fashion in 2017 was China with 40 billion pieces of clothing purchased, followed by the United States of America, where each American bought, in 2018, an average of 68 pieces of clothing per year. (Common Objective 2018 and Thomas 2019).

A very significant number of the sample purchase their clothing products in fast fashion stores, making up a total of 75% of respondents, with a much smaller number being the 13.43% who visit branded stores and the 11.39% who buy products from second-hand stores. Swap markets still have a minimal expression, visited by only 2.63% of respondents. There is also a devaluation of the designer's profession, as in addition to favoring fast fashion stores over others, 54.89% say they do not value the purchase of branded clothing.

Although 43.2% of respondents claim to be interested in the functioning of the textile industry, 56.34% are not familiar with the industry's production processes, which reveals that, regardless of whether there is an interest in the industry, the information does not reach the consumers, either due to a lack of industry transparency or a lack of consumer research.

Despite the 53.13% of the participants who say they value that their clothes are made with ecological materials and the 49.2% who value knowing where their clothes were made, only 34.46% say they actually check the composition tags a significant number of times.

Most respondents also say they do not seek certifications, about half say they do not seek certifications of ecological production and also about half, albeit slightly less, say they do not seek certifications of environmental conditions.

Almost all respondents believe that a change in consumption habits is necessary, being the opinion of 91.68%, and only 1.17% say that this change is not necessary, the remaining respondents admit they have never thought about the issue. Despite the respondents who believe that the change is necessary, only 65.4% say they would pay more for a piece of clothing, knowing that its production was ethical, only 4.53% are not willing to do so.

5 Proposals for Social Sustainability in Fashion Companies

Considering the interviews with sustainable brands, the online survey and the focus group interviews, a list of proposals that can be implemented in fashion companies was created, with a focus on social sustainability. The proposals were divided into four areas,

the area of communication, the area of working conditions and well-being, the area of community involvement and the area of management.

It is assumed that these suggestions bring improvements to the lives of workers, as well as consumers and the company, whether through education for sustainability, better working conditions or a positive and active involvement in the community.

Thus, proposals in the area of communication include the following topics:

- Public presentation of work teams, contributing to the humanization of the industry and for consumers to understand that their purchases affect the lives of real people;
- Guided tours and virtual tours, so that consumers can learn more about the textile industry and understand the manufacturing process of the garments they purchase;
- More information and more detailed information about products, brands should strive to create really informative and accessible labels, so that any consumer can understand the information;
- Inclusive, clear and direct communication, with attention to the choice of fonts, colors and sizes, whether in digital or physical format, so that anyone can read and understand the message. Pay attention to the existence of deficiencies that make it difficult to understand the message;
- Honest and transparent communication;
- Use of internal communication for the implementation and dissemination of sustainable processes.
- The proposals in the area of working conditions and well-being are then described in the following topics:
- Promotion of a photo session with the workers, in addition to transforming the workers of the industry into another profession with more prominence in the same industry, it gives the opportunity for a different experience and reveals the appreciation that the employer has for the workers;
- Regular training on health and safety, essential training for those who start working in a role, whenever there are changes in protocols and safety plans or in the devices and even on a regular basis, if there is no change in the dynamics of the company, to mitigate risks of injuries and accidents, as well as promoting individual health practices with training, for example, in mental health;
- Training in the company's areas of activity, and it is extremely important to invest in workers, in addition to training in new techniques and technologies in their areas of work, as well as initial training in the company;
- Knowledge activity of other functions, so that the process occurs organically and without internal conflicts, and to create empathy and understanding between the different departments of a company;
- Christmas dinner, annual tour and early summer initiative, allowing workers to create relationships outside the work context, which contributes to an approximation and better relationship in the work context;
- Creating a comfortable and attractive living and resting space, many of these spaces are small, disorganized and unpleasant, undervalued by employers;
- Implementation of optional teleworking for functions that allow it, the possibility of teleworking increases the motivation of workers, as they can work in the comfort of their homes and without having to travel to work;

- Creation of a healthy and sustainable canteen for workers, contributing to a better quality of life for workers, who will have the option of having a balanced meal at the workplace;
- Creation of a garden of fruit trees, if there is space for it;
- Creation of vertical gardens, if there is space for such;
- Placement of composters and composting training, if there is space for such;
- Promotion of group activities.
- The proposals for the area of community involvement are:
- Opening doors for guided tours, the possibility of opening this industry to school visits or visits by organizations is the most effective way of working in education for sustainable consumption;
- Donation of waste to schools and institutions;
- Promotion of activities in conjunction with fashion schools;
- Creation of support programs for workers, whether donations or support in financial and legal matters;
- Promotion of creative contests for the community;
- Creation of industrial incubation spaces;
- Workshops open to the community.
- The proposals in the area of management include the following topics:
- Continuous training for administrative positions, a good way to ensure the monitoring of industry advances and consumer trends;
- Auscultation of workers for major decisions that involve them, namely the reformulation of spaces, acquisition of new technologies and participation in training;
- Transparency and close relationship with workers;
- Implementation of a more demanding overtime count;
- Creation of internal competitions for new ideas to be implemented in the company;
- Creation of a workers' assembly, responsible for managing an annual budget that the management allocates to it, where workers decide what they want to improve in the company;
- Creation of a Social Responsibility Policy;
- Creation of an annual Sustainability Report;
- Promotion of sustainable mobility on the way from home to work;
- Investing in an inclusive design, designed for everyone, including adapted for people with disabilities who need adapted clothing;
- Integration in platforms and working groups in favor of sustainability, such as Aliança ODS Portugal.

6 Conclusions, Recommendations and Future Perspectives

A sustainable brand cannot limit itself to selecting ecological materials and having good environmental practices, must focus on social issues, be ethical and responsible too; it cannot be limited to supplying a product, but also to educate and raise consumer awareness for the industry and for a more conscious consumption.

Fast fashion brands, in the need to be labeled as sustainable and ecological to keep up with consumer trends, are increasingly betting on natural or recycled collections,

but continue to harm the environment with the production model used and do not show improvements in social questions. Despite this, fast fashion brands still have a strong presence in the market, as can be seen from the feedback received from the surveys carried out, although there is a greater collective awareness of these topics in general.

There are more and more projects and improvements in the textile industry related to the environment, whether in the area of waste management, use of deadstocks, new production techniques with less use of resources, more efficient buildings, among many other projects that can witness its emergence and development, however, in the social area, these advances have not been so significant. Consumers still do not have access to relevant information about the industry, for example that it is the industry that depends on the most human labor, or access to internal company policies regarding ethics and social responsibility. This can lead the consumer to believe that there are no companies with less correct social practices in Western countries, or that all companies in countries where labor laws are less demanding are companies where abuse cars can be found. Brands and fashion production companies must serve the community, not only as producers and employers, but as educators for the functioning of the industry itself, as a means of raising awareness for sustainable fashion and ethical production.

While some of the actions suggested in this article may require a greater investment, many of their activities and others in favor of sustainability and, in this specific case, in favor of social sustainability, do not require a considerable financial investment, only changes in the normal policies and procedures of the companies.

The future perspective of this study is based on the assessment of the feasibility of the proposals to be implemented in real brands, analyzing not only their implementation, but also the relevance and results, such as consumer acceptance. The analysis of proposals in a real scenario will produce more reliable and realistic results than just evaluating indirect reactions on the part of those who were interviewed, who did not experience the experience.

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