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Addressing Clothing Pollution: The Need for Sustainable Practices in the Apparel Industry

By Marcus Smith

Trends in the Apparel Industry

The importance of sustainability and environmental protection is an issue that has not been understated and has gained considerable attention in the media, due to the looming climate crisis. Of all the industries being pushed to develop more sustainable standards, the apparel and textile industry may not be the first one that comes to mind, with energy and automotive sectors constantly being criticized for emissions. While that criticism may be valid, the fashion industry surprisingly ranks as the second-largest polluter in the world (Charpail, 2017). The numbers reveal that consumers keep items for half as long as they used to 15 years ago, and the number of garments purchased by consumers each year is up 60% since the year 2000 (Remy, Speelman, & Swartz, 2016). These metrics are alarming as the apparel industry is expected

to produce over 3 billion tons of CO₂ emissions and use 170 billion cubic meters of water per year by 2025 (Remy, Speelman, & Swartz, 2016). This is compounded by the fact that clothing prices have risen at a lower rate compared to other consumer goods, allowing consumers to buy more for less (Remy, Speelman, & Swartz, 2016).

Why Sustainability in Apparel Matters?

Sustainability is crucial in the apparel industry due to the previously mentioned impact of its operations and the future growth expected for the industry. The industry is currently valued at over \$3 trillion USD and is expected to grow at a rate of 5% per year by 2025 (Remy et al., 2014; Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020). While this economic growth is promising, the waste that comes along with this growth is alarming. For example,

over \$400 billion worth of apparel is thrown away as waste each year, and two-thirds of these abandoned materials will take decades to decompose (Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020). The impact these practices have on climate change is pronounced, and the filling of landfills with waste from the garment industry is likewise severe. In 2018, the fashion industry contributed to 4% of the world's total greenhouse gas emissions (Berg et al., 2020). Improving a company's supply chain practices may be the best way to improve the company's overall environmental impact. On average, the supply chain of an apparel company produces over 80% of the total carbon emissions of the company's activities (Bove & Swartz, 2016). If these unsustainable patterns do not improve, the impacts of global warming and climate change may reach a point of no return.

Best Practices of Industry Leaders

When looking at current supply chain sustainability innovations in the apparel industry, we can look at firms such as Patagonia and Nike. Patagonia has started to drive sustainability from the ground up, quite literally. It is working with over 100 farmers to engage in regenerative agriculture for its raw materials, which can result in a carbon-negative farming process (Morin, 2020). Patagonia has also invested in over 70 repair centres worldwide, repairing over 100,000 products per year for consumers (Batten, 2020). These practices allow the company to prolong the life of its garments and keep them out of landfills. Additionally, the firm has committed to move towards 100% renewable and recyclable raw materials for all its products, and is well on track with 64% of this year's clothing made with recycled inputs (Patagonia Inc., 2021). Patagonia is also an innovator in the apparel industry regarding supply chain transparency, giving full disclosure on its supply chain practices to the public (Bateman & Bonanni, 2019). Nike has made impressive strides

in supply chain sustainability as well. The apparel giant has leveraged proprietary in-house recycling systems to reuse over 47 million kilograms of manufacturing scrap into new footwear and apparel products (Nike Inc., 2021). Nike has also leveraged its reverse supply chain through its reuse-a-shoe program, which has allowed Nike to recycle over 33 million pairs of used athletic shoes into new products through consumer donations (Cline, 2020). Nike's reuse of old products and manufacturing scraps allows the firm to function more sustainably while reducing reliance on raw materials from suppliers. With growing global climate concerns, adopting a more sustainable supply chain allows corporations to help the environment and its bottom line.

Future of Apparel Sustainability

The next steps in apparel sustainability largely stem from improving supply chain practices. The adoption of the circular economy model is highly enticing in terms of driving sustainability as it drastically reduces waste. At its core, a sustainable economy model involves reusing waste from the consumer or manufacturing process and then turning it into value for the consumer (Rubel, Schmidt, & Zum Felde, 2018). Another trend that is becoming apparent is the focus on supply chain transparency. From the increasing pressure by governments, consumers, and other stakeholders, companies are under pressure to show the inner workings of their supply chains and operations to those who want to see (Bateman & Bonanni, 2019). A by-product of increased supply chain transparency is the improved management and more stringent selection processes for how companies choose their suppliers. Companies are developing key performance indicators for their suppliers to track performance, allowing them to work with suppliers to improve their environmental footprint or adopt more sustainable sources (Bove & Swartz, 2016).

Conclusion

Ultimately the future of sustainability lies with the customer. How the consumer votes with their wallet and whether they advocate for environmentally friendly products will determine the future of sustainability in the apparel industry. Younger generations such as Millennials and Gen Z will pay more for sustainable products and prefer to buy from sustainable brands (Petro, 2020). Additionally, 67% of consumers consider sustainable materials to be an important buying factor for apparel (Granskog et al., 2020). These trends signal a larger shift to come, where demand may be increased for sustainable garments and fast fashion brands will be forced to adapt or fall by the wayside. Apparel companies should follow the leads of Patagonia and Nike and invest in a more transparent supply chain and the practice of reusing old material to create new products. With the issue of climate change at the forefront of the media, corporations are facing pressure now more than ever to shift to more environmentally friendly practices. Unless the fashion industry becomes more sustainable, it risks pursuing profit at the expense of irreversibly harming the environment.

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