



# “Revolutionizing Textiles And Clothing: Embracing Sustainability For A Greener Future”

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## Abstract

The textile industry, a significant contributor to pollution globally, grapples with a multitude of intertwined sustainability challenges, shaping dialogues on climate change, resource depletion, and human rights. These concerns prompt inquiries into societal norms, economic practices, and conflicting values linked to textile production and consumption. Various stakeholders – corporations, governments, civil society, media, and individuals – engage in this complex narrative, seeking solutions that range from technological innovations to altering consumer behaviours. The urgent call for action, extending internationally, highlights the pivotal roles of businesses and consumers, given the rapid pace of the textile industry. Amidst discussions among policymakers and activists lies a fundamental question: how effectively can businesses and consumers assume responsibility for fostering sustainability in textile production? Encouraging voluntary shifts in behavior, compelling change when necessary, and devising mechanisms to drive sustainability forward represent key focal points. However, achieving these objectives hinges not only on existing strategies but also on designing novel approaches that resonate across diverse cultural, geographical, and political landscapes. Scholars stress the intricacies embedded within the global textile and clothing production network. They advocate for a nuanced approach, emphasizing that while technological remedies exist, fostering significant change necessitates addressing the underlying values associated with production and consumption. This intricate task involves navigating diverse cultural nuances and adapting strategies to fit varied socio-political contexts.

The responsibility challenge within the textile and clothing sector is intricately tied to the surge in global trade, marked by a race among big brand retailers to expand market shares by slashing manufacturing costs. This drive led to the outsourcing of production to developing nations, where lax environmental and social regulations fostered a low-cost operating environment. Simultaneously, efforts to regulate these practices by governments in developed nations remained inadequate. While private regulations like codes of conduct and eco-certifications have surfaced, they've had minimal effect in addressing structural issues within the industry. Furthermore, calls for consumer-driven change have lagged behind, posing multifaceted challenges. This trend has often translated into exploitative conditions for workers—especially women, minorities, migrants, and sometimes even children—characterized by temporary contracts, meager wages, prolonged work hours, and unsafe working conditions. Beyond human rights concerns, the textile industry's environmental impact is substantial, evident in its heavy reliance on chemicals for cotton cultivation and textile dyeing. This reliance contributes significantly to pollution of rivers, ecosystems, and intensive land and water usage. Additionally, the industry's climate impact is significant due to the prevalence of fast fashion, characterized by short-term use, frequent clothing replacement, and escalating textile waste. This unsustainable approach starkly contrasts with other sectors and amplifies the sector's overall sustainability challenges.

The textile and clothing sector's profound sustainability impact, exacerbated by the expansive reach of its commodity chains, presents intricate challenges on both the supply and demand sides. Governance challenges loom large on the supply side, owing to the involvement of diverse actors across national contexts. Conversely, consumers' increasing disconnection from production contexts necessitates heightened communication efforts to raise awareness about the sustainability impacts of their consumption practices.

In the textile and clothing sector, finding sustainable solutions isn't just challenging—it's exceptionally complex. The sector's substantial sustainability impact demands a comprehensive and multifaceted approach towards addressing responsibility. Various stakeholders—from scholars to activists, corporations, and policymakers—are deliberating how to fairly and effectively distribute responsibility for the sector's sizable sustainability impact in a manner that aligns with democratic principles.

Conventional methods of assigning responsibility are deemed insufficient by scholars and theorists like Iris Marion Young, Luigi Pellizzoni, and Frank De Bakker and André Nijhof. They argue for supplementing governmental mechanisms with broader societal involvement to tackle the globalized responsibility chain within the industry. The difficulty lies in the global scope of the supply and demand chain, which outstrips the jurisdictional and policy reach of any single government or institution. Identifying responsible actors and implementing measures to address sustainability problems becomes a formidable task due to the sector's extensive globalized chain.

Moreover, the traditional mechanisms for holding actors accountable—such as fines, compensation, or boycotts—often fall short in fostering sustainable practices. As a result, scholars emphasize the need for innovative solutions. Their role includes identifying pathways, barriers, and temporal and spatial variations in these efforts. Insights from articles within this special issue shed light on distinctive aspects of textile

consumption logic, educational initiatives fostering sustainable shopping, and the potential role of ethical businesses in promoting sustainability.

Efforts to encourage more sustainable consumption habits in the clothing and textile sector also highlight the role of governments as collective consumers and the hurdles faced by local officials in using procurement policies to advance sustainability goals. These discussions underscore the need for innovative approaches and comprehensive solutions that transcend traditional regulatory mechanisms to address the multifaceted sustainability challenges inherent in the global textile and clothing industry.

The supply side dynamics within the textile industry highlight two critical challenges. Firstly, social movements and journalists, by shedding light on sweatshop conditions and unsustainable production practices, often target prominent actors in the supply chain, compelling these entities to assume primary responsibility. Such efforts effectively pressurize big brands to safeguard their reputations and stimulate initiatives towards sustainable supply chain management. Consequently, resources are mobilized, collaborations fostered, new standards implemented, eco-sourcing promoted, and niche markets developed.

Conversely, the globally extended, intricate, and fragmented supply chains pose substantial governance hurdles. These challenges, stemming from geographical, cultural, political, legal, and communicative gaps, create substantial room for continued missteps and misunderstandings throughout the supply and demand chain. Thus, while this responsibilities tactic is effective in certain aspects, it falls short as a comprehensive problem-solving mechanism within this complex industry.

To address this, supply chain transparency emerges as a potential mechanism to hold companies accountable for sustainability. Enhanced transparency could entail disclosing information about first-tier suppliers or revealing sustainability conditions at these suppliers through factory audit reports. However, despite efforts to increase transparency, studies, such as the one by Egels-Zandén and Hansson on Nudie Jeans Company, reveal that although improved transparency influences consumers' willingness to purchase, consumers tend not to use this information to scrutinize corporate conduct. Instead, transparency initiatives serve more as corporate tools to convey responsibility and sustainability, aligning with a legitimacy-seeking strategy rather than significantly empowering consumers in the supply chain.

The successful utilization of transparency tools necessitates a certain level of sustainability knowledge, typically more attainable among organized stakeholders than individual end consumers. This highlights the limitations in leveraging transparency solely as a mechanism for consumer-driven change in the supply chain, signalling the need for more nuanced approaches to bridge the gap between transparency and consumer empowerment in the textile industry's supply side sustainability endeavours.

The case study by Barraud de Lagerie exemplifies how discursive political consumerism intersects with the broader anti-sweatshop movement, specifically in addressing responsibility for the tragic Spectrum factory explosion in Bangladesh. This incident, resulting in the deaths of 64 textile workers, spurred debates on accountability, redress for affected parties, and the extent of responsibility held by Western client firms. The Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), a European anti-sweatshop NGO, played a pivotal role in transforming this local tragedy into an international issue, implicating multinational fast-fashion retailers like Zara, Carrefour, and Scapino. These efforts pushed the involved client firms to offer economic compensation to the affected workers.

However, de Lagerie's study illuminates that assuming responsibility in such cases is not a straightforward progression but necessitates moral entrepreneurship, contestations, and dynamic interactions between political consumer campaigns and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Despite the economic compensations, the client firms refused to fully acknowledge the responsibility attributed to them by civil society actors. They cited the complexity of the supply chain, claiming the accident was beyond their control, placing responsibility on local actors, and reframing their response as an act of humanitarian charity rather than liability.

This study underscores the contested nature of responsibility and accountability struggles within supply chains, especially in the textile and clothing industry, reflecting the complexities inherent in defining and attributing responsibility.

Shifting to the demand side of sustainability in the textile industry, NGOs focus on consumer mobilization to pressure supply-side actors toward sustainable practices through political consumer activism. However, unlike other sectors where such campaigns have seen success, the textile and clothing industry presents unique internal and external barriers that hinder consumer sustainability mobilization.

Scholars identify factors such as limited consumer knowledge, restricted availability of alternative products, and the societal significance of fashion, personal appearance, and social status as key barriers to fostering more sustainable clothing shopping habits. These barriers, intertwined with the allure of fast fashion as a marker of personal appearance and social identity, complicate the transition toward more sustainable consumption practices. This observation challenges the assumption that individual consumers and families bear the primary responsibility for sustainable consumption in the textile and clothing sector, highlighting the complexities inherent in influencing consumer behavior within this industry.

The challenge lies in exploring innovative approaches to understand and diminish the barriers hindering sustainable consumption in the textile industry further. In the article "Educating for sustainable fashion. Using clothing acquisition abstinence to explore sustainable consumption and life beyond growth," Armstrong and colleagues present findings from an experiment involving fashion-oriented students who voluntarily refrained from purchasing clothing for ten weeks as part of an educational experience. The discussions among participants highlighted how clothing shopping can mirror addictive behaviour, comparable to comfort eating, driven by individual, social, and cultural factors.

Participants grappled with market-driven pressures, such as demands for seasonal changes and holiday-specific clothing, which led some to break the experiment's rules and make unplanned purchases. This underscores that addressing sustainability in clothing consumption is not solely an individual endeavour but also involves various social and market pressures. Interestingly, many participants reported benefits from the experiment, including financial savings, creative wardrobe use, and a sense of self-regulation. This study suggests that consumers require substantial support to alter their clothing consumption habits. Eco-design and eco-fashion could potentially steer consumers towards more sustainable choices while meeting individual and social consumption needs. However, conventional clothing retailers must shoulder more responsibility by integrating sustainability values into their marketing strategies to alter cultural drivers that perpetuate unsustainable consumption habits.

While social movements, NGOs, educators, and public opinion influencers aim to raise consumer awareness regarding the adverse impacts of textile and clothing consumption, their mobilization efforts have had limited impact compared to activism targeting other industries. Austgulen's contribution on politically conscious consumers of textiles and clothing in France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the UK reveals that roughly one-third of consumers consider political, environmental, and ethical values in their purchasing decisions. However, this figure falls below the national averages for political consumer shopping in these countries.

Her findings highlight that traditional factors influencing "generic" political consumerism, such as education and gender, do not strongly correlate with sustainable clothing purchases. Additionally, there are diverse profiles among sustainable clothing consumers in similar countries, indicating the need to tailor sustainability messages to specific cultural and geographic contexts rather than employing universal approaches. Despite these variations, Austgulen identifies significant commonalities among sustainable clothing shoppers that sustainability advocates should leverage to encourage more responsible consumption practices.

The Government's involvement in promoting green consumption

This primarily occurs through sustainable procurement, distinguishing their role from private sector entities like IKEA, Nike, and H&M. Unlike private organizations, governmental actors rely on tax revenue and legislation for their purchases, subject to public scrutiny and accountability. However, challenges arise in their efforts to green public procurement due to several reasons outlined in prior studies.

One significant challenge stems from the conflict between procurement legislation, which might encourage sustainability criteria, and international free trade rules that necessitate equal treatment and non-discrimination among domestic and foreign tenders. This legal, political, economic, and cognitive interplay limits opportunities for more sustainable procurement practices. The traditional territorial view of responsibility held by public actors, linked to political jurisdiction and representative democracy, further complicates their adoption of sustainability practices. This territorial notion often conflicts with the complexities of globalized supply and demand chains, constraining their ability to engage in sustainable procurement.



Examining the distinct circumstances faced by green and sustainability-oriented public procurers, Hall, Löfgren, and Peters explore the factors influencing public procurement officers' decisions regarding sustainable textiles. Their qualitative study emphasizes the role of individual actors within public settings, known as "street-level" procurement officers. While these officers possess environmental expertise and some capacity for "inside activism," unlike individual political consumers, they encounter political and organizational limitations. They cannot solely prioritize personal political inclinations but must navigate within established governing principles and frameworks guiding public servants' behavior. These frameworks encompass adherence to regulations, policy compliance, structural capabilities, and commitment to specific policy areas.

## Conclusion

In concluding remarks, it's crucial to recognize the diverse array of actors, interests, and values inherent in the clothing industry across global societies. Clothing remains deeply entrenched in socio-cultural norms and distinctions, posing a challenge in reconciling pathways towards sustainability with fundamental human desires for style, elegance, and cleanliness. The articles in this special issue underscore the need for support across all stakeholders involved in the textile and clothing industry to assume greater responsibility for sustainability. This support encompasses various consumer categories, from individual buyers to street-level procurement officials, fostering sustainable practices through innovative consumer tools such as corporate transparency guides, experiential learning in higher education, and procurement policies. Equally important is cultivating reflective awareness among stakeholders, enabling critical assessment of legitimacy claims by different actors championing "transparency," "sustainability," and "eco-fashion." Identifying consumer groups acting as pioneers in sustainable practices becomes pivotal in influencing broader behavioral changes. Acknowledging the wide spectrum between individual consumer choice, capacity building, and comprehensive problem-solving is essential. Expecting equal distribution of responsibility is unrealistic; instead, while individual consumers can strive for informed and ethical choices, collective buyers—be they public or private—can play a more professional role, equipped with expertise to foster sustainable management. A key takeaway is the necessity for long-term, learning-oriented approaches in sustainability management and responsibility-taking. The contested nature of sustainability and responsibility demands continued public debate on the roles and responsibilities of all involved stakeholders. Research serves a pivotal role in identifying current practice strengths and weaknesses, offering pathways for future progress. The ongoing public discourse and research efforts are imperative in navigating the complex landscape of sustainability and nurturing a more responsible textile and clothing industry.

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