Sustainability in the fashion industry: Content analysis of corporate sustainability reports

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Abstract

Fast fashion has emerged in upper middle-class markets worldwide as an inexpensive way for the average consumer to purchase the glamor and trends associated with the fashion world. However, the 52 micro-seasons of clothing from some brands, such as H&M, Zara, and Mango, have led to serious environmental impacts, including the pollution of local water sources through the release of untreated chemical dyes, the millions of tons of textile waste from clothes that have outlived brief fashion trends, and the energy-intensive process of mass manufacturing, which has implications for greenhouse gas emissions. In the past few decades, increased awareness of social and environmental issues has brought attention to overconsumption patterns in the fashion industry, especially in fast fashion. In this study, content analysis is used to compare the 2017 sustainability reports from ten global fashion companies, particularly noting their drivers, practices, and self-reported performance. I highlight differences and similarities in approach between fast fashion and slow fashion companies that have made a commitment to sustainability. These findings are then placed into the context of recent news reports that have surfaced regarding ethical or environmental controversies certain companies have been involved in, providing an opportunity for discussion on the potential disconnect between talk and action. Demand is changing as consumers have become more conscious of sustainability in their wardrobes, and although fast fashion companies claim to be incorporating sustainable measures into their brands, more work is required to ensure transparency in reporting and that reliable evidence is used to support companies’ claims.