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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – LESSONS FOR THE FAST FASHION INDUSTRY

ROLUL ÎNTREPRINDERILOR SOCIALE ÎN DEZVOLTAREA DURABILĂ: LECȚII PENTRU INDUSTRIA FAST FASHION

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Rezumat. *Pe lângă efectele economice și sociale pozitive pe care le produce fast fashion, acesta are și efecte dăunătoare asupra mediului și societății. Printre acestea se numără nivelurile ridicate de emisii de carbon, condițiile de muncă nefavorabile, consumul masiv de apă, acumularea inutilă de deșeuri și utilizarea abuzivă a substanțelor chimice (Han, et.al., 2016). Cu toate acestea, există companii care își adaptează modelele de afaceri pentru a funcționa folosind sisteme mai durabile și pentru a aduce pe piață produse fabricate prin utilizarea de materiale reciclate. Slow fashion - un model de afaceri mai responsabil și mai sustenabil din punct de vedere ecologic în ceea ce privește producția de îmbrăcăminte, devine tot mai influent în zilele noastre, iar pionierii acestei mișcări de tranziție ecologică sunt întreprinderile sociale. Scopul lucrării este de a arăta cum un brand de top bine stabilit, precum H&M, poate învăța de la întreprinderile sociale din industria modei.*

Cuvinte cheie. *Întreprinderi sociale, sustenabilitate, tranziție verde, fast fashion, slow fashion, modele de afaceri, dezvoltare durabilă*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: L20, M3, O3, Q3, Q5.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Times Besides the positive economic and social effects that fast fashion produces, it also has detrimental effects on the environment and society. These include high levels of carbon emissions, unfavourable working conditions, massive water consumption, unnecessary waste accumulation, and chemicals misuse (Han, et.al., 2016). However, there are companies that are adapting their business models in order to operate using more sustainable systems and bring to the market products that are manufactured by using recycled materials. The slow fashion - a more environmentally responsible and sustainable business model of manufacturing clothing, is becoming more influential nowadays, while the pioneers of this green transition movement are the social enterprises.

The purpose of the paper is to show how an already well-established leading brand like H&M can learn from the social enterprises in the fashion industry. Although, the annual sustainability reports of the fashion giants are covering all the possible aspects of the sustainable transition, the reality does not always match the numbers and aspirations presented in the reports. H&M faced several scandals related to the “eco-friendly” materials they use and the labour force scandals that involved their suppliers in the recent years. We analyse the relevant reports and conduct the in-depth research, while observing the events that affected H&M’s sustainability profile, while explaining the implications their actions have on the society and environment.

In order to suggest a set of recommendations for the future development of H&M’s sustainable practices and transition we assess the role of social enterprises in the path to developing sustainable business models in the fashion industry. According to the research, social enterprises contribute to sustainability transitions since they play a significant role as "niche actors" in these changes. They have a distinct function since they are "hybrid" entities, mixing components from the private, public, and non-profit sectors (Battilana, 2014).

As the social enterprises can serve as role-models for the fashion giants, we further explore some examples of real social enterprises in the fashion industry that are contributing to the green transition, while raising the degree of awareness related to the impact the fashion industry has on the society and environment. In the paper we also explore the avenue for which we think that taking inspiration from social enterprises could be relevant for H&M.

According to our findings, even though H&M has been trying to undergo several improving changes in regards to the sustainability of the brand, such as moving towards a circular business model and engaging in social projects, the recommendations are focused on the practices promoted by the social enterprises, such as a partnership mindset and prioritizing impact over growth. Based on the research and analysis, the main problem lies in the business model, since H&M is still operating with its fast-fashion mindset. H&M should concentrate their efforts on adjusting their business model to a slow fashion model mainly adopted by social enterprises such as Artisan Fashion, Patagonia and Tibi. This could become a significant step for H&M on their way to the sustainable transition, along with their “Circular Business Model” aspirations.

QUESTIONS & METHODOLOGY

As the purpose of this research paper is to analyse the context in which the selected company - H&M, can improve by implementing the practices of social enterprises in the industry, the paper is focused on several questions that serve as a motivation for the conducted research:

1. What is the evolution of the sustainability concept in the fashion industry and what is the sustainability profile of H&M?

2. What is the impact of social enterprises on building a sustainable mindset in the fashion industry and what are the examples of role-models for the sustainable transition?

3. How H&M can become more sustainable by implementing the practices of social enterprises in the industry and what are the changes they can introduce for a faster transition towards sustainability?

To fulfil the purpose of the paper, we analysed the overall market and performed the in-depth research to build a clear picture of the company's background in terms of sustainable evolution. The paper also contains the case description to further explore the respective brand and the existing literature and theory to have a solid foundation for answering the research questions. To better understand the way we can improve the sustainability profile of the brand we connect the practices that characterize the actions of social enterprises to the evolution of the company in terms of sustainable development.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Various research methods are employed in this study. The historical method is used to review the evolution of sustainability concept in the fashion industry. This study employed a qualitative content analysis to investigate the perceptions and practices of social enterprises. During the research the main type of information was the secondary data. Secondary data sources were collected, and publications narrowed down to a period between 2000 and 2022. An in-depth research was conducted by analysing relevant annual and sustainability reports. Furthermore, the websites and online published articles served as the main source of information. The report includes a significant portion of H&M's annual reports. Articles from well-known publishers and scientific research papers were used in the process of building the content section. Specialised literature with a focus on the fashion industry and sustainable transition was used to compare the views and opinions of various authors to suggest relevant findings in the field of research

INTRODUCTIO

Since the 1990s, customers' understanding of and desire to buy environmentally friendly goods began to expand (Chen, 2010). The emergence of this consumer "environmentalism" has prompted businesses all over the world to adopt green marketing techniques in order to promote products by incorporating environmental claims whether about their features or about their processes, regulations, and systems (Prakash, 2002). These statements, for instance, can range from "conscious items" to "environmentally friendly" products (H&M, 2021). Even though some of the statements might be accurate, some businesses present themselves and their goods as being more environmentally friendly by giving customers incorrect or misleading information. The above described strategy is known as "greenwashing" (Kenton, 2021).

A single pair of jeans requires 7,000 gallons of water to produce. An individual would consume 2 700 liters of water - the amount needed to create only one T-shirt - in 900 days (Chung, 2016). However, the data just serve to highlight how serious the issue is. On the contrary, the textile and garment industry is a massive system that relies on human labour to operate (International Labour Organization, 2019). Millions of people are employed by the massive and exploitative industry, yet their working conditions and wages are very unequal.

Nowadays, companies all over the world are focusing on environmentally sustainable business strategies and activities in order to penetrate new customer groups and market segments, increase profits, while keeping their competitive advantage as a result of the considerable interest the climate change issue received in the recent decade (Nidumolu, et.al., 2009).

CONTENTS

H&M is one example of a company that is trying to be perceived as a sustainable and transparent brand by “adjusting” their business model and developing a sustainable collection (Zellweger, 2017). The Swedish company Hennes & Mauritz, began in 1947 under the name Hennes and initially sold women's clothing. In 1968, the company adopted the name Hennes & Mauritz after acquiring Mauritz Widfoss, a company that marketed equipment for hunters and fishers (Ehram, 2016). The H&M fashion brand operates in 77 markets, 57 of which offer online sales. With a total of 4,664 stores worldwide generating net sales of Net sales of SEK 198,967 billion in 2021 (H&M Group, 2022).

H&M's overall aim is to offer high quality, great value for money and sustainable fashion for women, men, teenagers and children enabling all of them to explore their individual style (H&M Group, 2021). As a matter of fact, the climate crisis increases the pressure for more sustainable and eco-friendly shopping behavior, especially in the fashion-industry (Kong, et.al., 2016). Therefore, as H&M's CEO and head of sustainability – Helena Helmersson states, “We develop the customer offering constantly by broadening the assortment and expanding the range of services for a more sustainable lifestyle.” (H&M Group, 2021).

Hence, by 2030, the company aims to use 100% recycled or sustainably-sourced materials for their cloth and packaging to become climate positive by 2040 (H&M Group, 2022). To achieve these goals, H&M launched its environmentally friendlier product line H&M “Conscious Collection” in 2011 (Ehram, 2016). The fashion items of this line are marked with “a green hangtag [and] must contain at least 50% sustainable materials, such as organic cotton and recycled polyester. The only exception is recycled cotton which, for quality reasons, can only make up 20% of a product” (H&M, 2022). Moreover, the fashion brand encourages its buyers online to purchase these greener clothing options as they help H&M to make the fashion industry more sustainable (H&M, 2021).

Many brands use the colour green to express their environmental friendliness (Lim, et.al., 2020). H&M, for example, uses the colour green in its communication of its Conscious Collection and labels each garment with a green hangtag. This seems to be effective as a recent study confirms that the usage of the colour green in advertisements and communications fosters consumers' perception of an eco-friendly brand and increases their brand attitude and purchase intention (Lim, et.al., 2020).

However, in regard to the Conscious Collection, H&M has been criticized for not being transparent by the Norwegian Consumer Authority. Accordingly, by failing to provide sufficient information regarding why the garments in this collection are less polluting than others, H&M is misdirecting its consumers. The authority argues that H&M does not provide enough information to consumers to discern whether they, in fact, engage in sustainable sourcing and manufacturing or whether they are simply portraying themselves as more sustainable than they are to boost sales (Segran, 2019).

Chelsea Commodore, an American marketing student who brought the "H&M Greenwashing" case to federal court in New York (22 July, 2021), remarks that several items in the Conscious Choice line constitute up to 100 percent polyester, a substance that does not biodegrade and releases microfibers into the environment (Wicker, 2022). This contradicts the claims made about the use of sustainable materials. Although H&M contends to use polyester recycled from PET bottles, Commodore adds that this does not mean "closing the loop" because, while the bottles themselves could be recycled numerous times, turning them into textiles—which are difficult to recycle—only hastens the process of going to the landfill. Lastly, the brand's recycling and take-back scheme for garments is accused of being entirely misleading (Marino, 2022).

According to The Guardian, reports of widespread sexual abuse in India sparked a scandal for H&M recently, as "Women in India making children's clothes for H&M have spoken out about widespread sexual violence they claim to have faced at one of the company's suppliers in India." (The Guardian, & Kelly, A., 2021). Staff at the Natchi Apparels factory, which produces clothing for H&M and other companies, reported to the Guardian on the basis of anonymity that female employees endured ongoing verbal and sexual harassment at work. Female workers expressed concern that if they made complaints about working conditions at the facility, they may lose their jobs. Many of the women who were interviewed claimed to be the family's primary breadwinners, generally taking care of many children and relatives.

The stakeholders of the fashion industry are becoming more and more aware of the damaging effects that fast fashion has on the environment and society, and they are attempting to aim for change by increasing the expectations towards the fashion leaders. As a result of the issues caused by fast fashion, the slow fashion movement is flourishing.

The fast fashion business model relies on high-speed production, just-in-time manufacturing with the shortest of lead times, and long, secretive supply chains that allow for high levels of consumption. (Fletcher, 2010) The fast fashion business model is a relatively new model that has taken over much of the industry. Fast fashion retailers are selling on-trend garments at low prices and rapidly turning over their inventory.

Although, H&M is introducing circular business models, as they “need to take responsibility for the impact fashion has on climate and the environment” (H&M Group, 2022), they still stick to its fast-fashion business model, since H&M releases between two and four collections a year, one for each season or grouped spring/summer and fall/winter collections.

The fast-fashion business model makes sure that goods are available instantly, but the slow fashion business model proves that instant gratification is not always the best method. The world’s natural resources are being used faster than they can be replenished, and it is because quantity is emphasized over quality (Honore, 2004). One of the most important aspect in terms of practices promoted by social enterprises is their slow fashion business model.

The social enterprises are a purpose-driven businesses with the primary objective of producing a positive social impact. Social enterprises usually aim to give their employees' interests top priority in the fashion sector while also offering decent working conditions and sustainable means of existence. They frequently have artisans leading them, enabling for preservation of traditional skills (Hertantyo, 2022).

Smaller businesses can be crucial in initiating and advancing transitions, according to the research on sustainability transitions. Small enterprises are comparatively to the established companies, independent to develop and establish sustainable "niche markets": innovative business models or systems that significantly differ from the common approach to business, in contrast to large established companies who have financial interests in preserving the status quo and frequently have no inspiration to develop new business models (Geels, 2002). Research articles have stressed the significance of leading enterprises in the development of sectors that could result in long-lasting, sustainable innovation systems (Hekkert, et.al., 2009). Additionally, recent research has demonstrated that social innovators can make a significant contribution to the development of brand-new innovation systems while simultaneously helping to establish a demand for their personal social innovations (Kukk, et.al., 2016).

Inarguably, the network of social enterprises that seeks structural transformation is expanding and evolving and has begun to exert influence over businesses, trade associations, and government authorities. There are many reasons to assume that these comparatively modest niche social enterprises can play an important role in the shift toward a more sustainable business world.

For a better understanding of how social enterprises are aligning their actions with the values we offer several examples of companies that are contributing to a faster transition. According to Patagonia – an established fashion brand with the label of social enterprise, keeping things in use longer and reducing our overall consumption are two of the best actions we can do for the environment. This entails buying less, repairing more, and trading in equipment as it becomes obsolete. Patagonia’s Worn Wear is the program to trade in and buy used Patagonia gear (Patagonia, 2022).

The founder and creator of contemporaneous fashion social enterprise Tibi, Amy Smilovic, as well as the brand's style director, Dione Davis, created Tibi Style Class with the goal of maximizing the utilization of our clothing (Tibi, 2022a). The objective was to offer their knowledge of fashion (how and where to shop for clothes, the distinction between 4-ply silk and other types of silk, and how to wear colours combined when going from a workout to diner with colleagues) and clothing to help clients make purchases they wouldn't later regret. The group went live on Instagram to discuss their thoughts on textiles, shapes, and strategic clothing shopping. They emphasized the benefits of not purchasing every item that the fast fashion industry has declared to be a trendy item every season. They also launched the “Tibictionary” for educating the customers on understanding their style and reducing the waste from irrational purchasing decisions (Tibi, 2022b).

Another example is the first autonomous social fashion enterprise of the UN Ethical Fashion Initiative which is called Artisan Fashion. By linking artisanal communities in African nations with globally renowned designers who are socially concerned, artisan fashion fosters reciprocal relationships. By working with craftspeople and using African materials sustainably into their goods, designers may help workers maintain their living standards and preserve traditional practices and techniques. The ethical enterprise collaborates with 98 artisan groups in East and West Africa. They employ a range of locally made and recyclable materials (Ethical Fashion Initiative, 2022). Their goal is to connect renowned luxury companies throughout the world with African artisans. They provide opportunities for their clients' and their customers' consumers to improve, track, and report on the lives of those involved in their production (Artisan Fashion, 2022).

According to experts in the fashion industry, discontinuing price bargaining, in which corporations reward suppliers with the lowest costs while devaluing artisanal talent in the global market, is the first step leading brands should take to modify their ways. Cipriani of the Ethical Fashion Initiative recommends "open costing" as an alternative. Before settling on margins with suppliers, brands must first determine their expenses based on living wages and a reasonable working environment for their labour force. Then, Cipriani suggests developing friendly connection with artisans and optimizing the supply chain (Chandran, 2020).

It is important to mention the H&M’s project SHEN: it states that “For the women in the villages of India, learning a craft can be a way to gain financial

independence and break out of inequality. Tag along to Moradabad, where project SNEH and H&M HOME have joined forces to bring hope to the region.” (H&M Home, 2022). 280 women have chosen to learn a craft since it first opened. The women receive three months of real training before becoming skilled craftspeople. This implies that they can employ their new skills to open their own craft store in their village or work for one of the several Moradabad craft enterprises.

H&M has also launched the Social Entrepreneurship Program in 2019, emphasizing that it “works with social entrepreneurs in developing countries so that we and our customers can make a genuine impact together.” (H&M Group, 2019). The mission of the project was to promote social entrepreneurs from developing countries, by buying from them in order to bring a positive change to the society. However, as the program was developed in 2019.

ANALYSIS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This section explores an avenue that could help H&M learn from the social enterprise community to actually contribute to a better environment and become a driver of sustainable transition. Given the efforts H&M already made in the sustainability aspect, the following practices of social enterprise can serve as a compass for H&M on their way fasten the sustainable transition.

As previously mentioned in the content section, H&M was involved in several scandals related to their environmentally “friendly” materials, the recycling program and the issues regarding their suppliers’ ethics. During our research we found out that H&M is currently faced with two main issues: the “Circular Business Model” that is mainly using poor quality materials and the supply chain misconduct. H&M is constantly trying to reduce the costs related to the materials they use in the production and their suppliers that are acting unethically, while offering cheap labour force.

According to the findings, the main problem lies in their business model. Even though, the company is introducing circular business models, they still stick to its fast-fashion model, since H&M releases between two to four collections a year, one for each season or grouped spring-summer and fall-winter collections. The recycling program might be a way of solving the waste issue, but at the same time it might appear to be misleading, since it still promotes the mass consumptive behaviour of the customers who would constantly strive to get new collections instead of wearing the same timeless item.

The inter-organizational approach of the social enterprises, specifically the practices such as implementing a “partnership mindset” and “prioritizing impact over growth” can support the idea that H&M, as a leading company in the fashion industry can adjust their business model and embed sustainability as a core element of their mindset. For incorporating sustainability as the fundamental element of the business model, H&M can learn from social enterprises through collaborating with artisan manufacture social enterprises.

A collaborative business model (co-creating with artisans) and the effort to build fruitful relationships with social enterprises would be a step for H&M to redesigning the supply-chain into a sustainable value-focused chain of socially responsible like-minded creators. As we could see in the example of the UN Ethical Fashion Initiative - Artisan Fashion, building a strong network of artisans that promote and preserve the traditional crafting practices while offering the artisan and workers a stable source of income. Meanwhile, by promoting a unique design of the products (hand-made), H&M would be able to improve the life quality of their partner communities from developing countries through contributing to SDG 8 “decent work and economic growth”. In 2019 H&M had an attempt to promote social entrepreneurs through their “Social Entrepreneurship Program”, however there were no updates for the past 3 years on the evolution of their project. They are still focused on mass suppliers that are associated with cases related to the labour force and wage discrimination the supplier factories.

Regarding the prioritization of the impact over growth, the social enterprise Tibi serves as an example of a good practice. H&M could adopt the same practice by also raising the consumer awareness related to the fashion industry and the sustainability issues that it involves. H&M should engage in teaching their customers on how to invest in their wardrobe with a long term vision, as their customers are directly contributing to the environmental change. If they will raise the awareness in terms of conscious purchasing, H&M will adopt the mindset of a social enterprise, since they would spread their values while having a positive impact on solving the mass consumerism problem of the fast-fashion business model. Through this practice they would also contribute to SDG 12 “responsible consumption and production”.

Adopting a “Quality over quantity” approach would promote the long lasting products that do not need to be recycled, since the mass recycling process is also proven to be harmful for the environment. Investing in the quality of the items in order to prevent the waste when they get damaged after several uses is a key action that would adjust the idea behind the fast-fashion business model. Slowing down the production would a considerable step for H&M on their way to the sustainable transition. They can become a model for other giants and small companies as they already have a considerable influence on the fashion industry. Redesigning their business model and adopting the changes would be a start of a revolution in the fashion industry.

As we could learn from the practice of Patagonia’s Worn Wear project (Patagonia, 2022)., H&M can design a program that would operate as a “second-hand shop” in order to offer their customers the possibility to trade their clothes cheaper with the help of the fashion giant. This action would also contribute to SDG 12 “responsible consumption and production”. Meanwhile, on the H&M website they offer some tips for repairing the items (H&M Group, 2022b).

CONCLUSIONS & LIMITATIONS

Times The fast fashion industry has placed sustainability, ethics, and corporate social responsibility on the back burner in an effort to retail trend-sensitive fashion that is easily affordable. As a leader, H&M must share a sustainable mindset and should prove that in every aspect of their activity. Starting from the materials they use for creating their numerous collections, continuing with their relations with the suppliers. They should put an emphasis on due diligence before engaging in business contracts with suppliers and strive for building partnerships with social enterprises that foster the sustainable transition. H&M, like any other fast fashion brands is faced with the contradictory wish of meeting the environmental and social expectations of the sustainable transition while also operating under the fast fashion business model that is promoting mass consumption.

It is relevant to focus on the supply chain since the fashion giants have very complex supply chains. They have to understand that engaging in business with suppliers that are not ethical and do not align with the values of the company is in contradiction with the principles adopted by sustainable companies. H&M should promote sustainable supply chains as leaders in the fashion industry.

It is most likely that as the slow fashion trend expands, fast fashion will ultimately come to an end. If more and more customers begin to favour slow fashion brands, meaning social enterprises, fast fashion businesses will be compelled to alter their business models in order to remain viable. The slow fashion revolution therefore has the potential to actually change the fashion business, even though it might require some time.

The research has confirmed that social enterprises help to develop a brand-new system and promote sustainability by building partnerships and influencing other companies (for example, by implementing viable sustainable business models), cultures (for instance, by increasing awareness regarding a social issue), and policies (by advocating for sustainability regulatory frameworks). Additionally, the practices promoted by social enterprises may encourage large-scale corporations to fill a niche and potentially lead to broader cultural and policy shifts in favour of more environmentally friendly corporate practices. This may eventually alter the behaviour of giants such as H&M on their way to the sustainable transition.

Since the focus of the research was narrowed down to articles published in English from 2000 to 2022, the publication period was a limitation of the research. The number of publications found may have been constrained by language barriers, but since the academic research on sustainable fashion and social enterprises is considered a relatively new field, more articles might not have been published over a longer period of time.

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