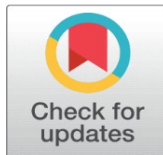


TO A GREEN AHMEDABAD: INFLUENCING CONSUMERS PREFERENCES TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FASHION

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the Industrial Revolution (1760), clothing and fashion industry have significantly influenced the consumers' preferences, and also got influenced by the same. The current ecological crisis, aggravated by the negative impact of industrial wastes, are but the eventual outcome of the same. Numerous awareness campaigns proved as inadequate to bring in positive change in the scenario, owing to the complexities of policies and instigations of overconsumption from the industries' end. Being the 'Manchester of India', Ahmedabad is in the forefront of this catastrophe. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how customer preferences can be influenced to foster a sustainable environment in the city. By incorporating outcomes of conducted surveys, and analysing previous research, this article proposes a business model focusing on the reduction of environmental impact, by means of sustainable consumption, conservation of resources, and empowerment of artisans and communities in Ahmedabad.

Keywords:

1. INTRODUCTION

As a vulnerable species, humans have always tried to survive on this planet – first by using the surrounding environment, then by altering the same. Clothing is one such instance that has a rich and complex history, reflecting the evolution of human society, culture and technology. Anthropological evidence suggests that clothing began to emerge between 100,000 and 500,000 years ago, when early humans started using animal skins, furs, grasses and leaves to protect themselves from the adverse environmental conditions. From about 30,000 years usage of sewn garments became evident that were made by stitching materials together, using simple needles made from bones (Thanhauser, 2022). Significant technological advancement became persistent with the production of woven textiles since the Neolithic period, as societies transitioned from nomadic lifestyles to settled agricultural communities.¹ Ever since then, dependence on agriculture for food and clothing has gradually increased. Domestication of selective plants and animals,

¹ <https://jdinstituteoffashiontechnology.com/a-brief-history-of-clothing-all-you-need-to-know/>

based on their utility, has become an inseparable part of this, that has hosted considerable environmental challenges – only to be intensified over time. Deforestation, soil degradation, water resource strain are all but part of what can be commonly addressed as resource depletion, that has alarmed people since the 16th century. With time this concern has grown into the concept of sustainability, and in recent times it encompasses a holistic approach that integrates environmental health, social equity, and economic vitality. The most widely cited definition comes from the 1987 Brundtland Report by the World Commission on Environment and Development, which articulated sustainable development as development that meets current needs while ensuring future generations can also meet theirs (Mollenkamp, 2023).² In the field of clothing and fashion, sustainability is described as efforts to reduce environmental impacts, protect workers producing garments, and uphold animal welfare.

2. BACKGROUND: CLOTHING, FASHION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Although historically clothing emerged in human society as a means of survival from the surrounding environment, gradually it became a powerful medium for expressing personal identity and social belonging. The choices individuals make in their attire can communicate beliefs, values, and cultural affiliations, stretching the boundaries from its fundamental utilitarian purposes to the world of fashion. The style of clothing, in contemporary society, allows individuals to align themselves with specific subcultures or movements, effectively using garments as a visual language that articulates their identities and aspirations. Scholars have associated fashion as the “second skin” of people that reflects their individual identities (Barthes, 1967), which allows them “standing out while fitting in” (Simmel, 1957) – a paradox that highlights how individuals navigate societal norms while expressing uniqueness. This duality reflects broader themes in social philosophy, where clothing becomes a site for both conformity and individuality. People are no longer users of clothes, rather consumers – a substantial unit of industries liable for mass production. Therefore, the evaluation of consumer preferences and their impact on the recent upsurge of sustainability in the domain of clothing and fashion deserves immediate attention.

In the pre-Industrial Revolution era, clothes were primarily tailored for individuals and designed to last – repaired rather than discarded, emphasizing on its durability. However, with the advent of textile machinery and factory production, in the late-18th century, ready-to-wear garments came into being, making fashion more accessible to the mass. However, since 1970s, retailers started outsourcing production to countries with lower labour costs, allowing cheaper manufacturing and quicker turnaround for new styles. This can be identified as the prelude of “fast fashion,” officially coined by the New York Times in 1989, that emphasized speed and responsiveness to fashion trends, allowing brands to offer new collections more frequently than the traditional four-season cycle. Soon enough, by adopting this strategy, Primark, H&M, Shein and Zara have become large multinationals, driving high turnover of inexpensive seasonal and trendy clothing that appeals to fashion-conscious consumers (Williams, 2022). The trend of fast fashion became mainstream in the post-economic liberalization era as retailers capitalized on consumer demand for trendy clothing at low prices, only to be accelerated with the rise of e-commerce platforms (Lewis, 1994).

While on the one side fast fashion has democratized fashion among the consumers providing budget-friendly prices, chances to adapt hitherto exclusive trends, and migrating classicism, it has also boosted considerable revenues for the retailers and created job opportunities for many (Gossein, 2024). Though, the adverse effect of fast fashion is alarming. It has faced continuous scrutiny across the world, owing to its environmental impact and ethical concerns regarding labour practices, worker’s rights and conditions in the garment industries.³ Since the entire fast fashion industry depends hugely on the consumer preferences, it is necessary to evaluate the fast fashion’s impact on the environment and the upsurge of sustainable fashion through the same lens. Studying the occurrence of the phenomenon in one of the famous textile hubs – Ahmedabad, is the primary goal of this article.

3. THE DAWN AND PROGRESS OF THE ‘MANCHESTER OF INDIA’

Ahmedabad is often referred to as the “Manchester of India,” owing to its rich history of success in the textile industry. The city’s textile business began flourishing in the mid-19th century with the establishment of its first cotton mills. By the early 20th century, the city had become a major textile hub, known for producing high-quality cotton fabrics

² <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/sustainability.asp>

³ <https://sanvt.com/blogs/journal/fast-fashion-explained-meaning-and-history>

and textiles, due to its strategic location and availability of raw cotton. During the 20th century, especially after Indian independence, the industry saw significant growth due to favourable government policies and industrialization efforts. Until the late 20th century, the textile mills contributed substantially to Ahmedabad's economy, providing employment to thousands. However, in the late 20th century, the industry faced challenges due to competition from other regions and technological changes, which was later resolved with the modernization of its operations, diversification of technicalities, and embracing of innovations. Today, the city remains a leading centre for textile production in India, known for its vibrant textile markets, advanced manufacturing techniques, and a strong presence in both domestic and international markets.

When it comes to fashion trends, Ahmedabad has experienced significant transformations since India's independence in 1947, influenced by cultural shifts, economic developments, and global interactions. In the decades following independence, traditional clothing such as sarees for women and dhotis or kurtas for men remained predominant, where handloom textiles and indigenous crafts were highly valued, reflecting a sense of national pride and cultural identity. However, since 1970s the youth of Ahmedabad began embracing Western fashion elements, leading to a fusion of traditional and contemporary styles. This period saw the incorporation of bell-bottoms, polka-dot prints, and synthetic fabrics into everyday wear. Following the economic liberalization in 1980s, various international brands and fashion trends entered Ahmedabad's atmosphere, when the city witnessed the rise of local boutiques and designers who blended global styles with traditional Gujarati aesthetics. It was during this period, when the youths were drawn towards denim jeans and jackets and the city saw a surge in denim production and consumption – making it the Denim Capital of India. Not to mention, Ahmedabad contributes to 65% of India's denim production, reinforcing its status as a leading textile hub.⁴

As of 2017, Ahmedabad was the largest contributor to Gujarat's GDP, with an estimated US\$68 billion. On the other side, according to a report of The Times of India (March 2024), Indian textile exports, with Ahmedabad as a major hub, grew by 19.54% year-by-year. Apparel exports also saw an increase of 4.88% during the same period. Indian textile exports recorded a modest growth of 1.75% year-on-year, juxtaposed with a notable decline of 11.42% in apparel exports during the same timeframe. The cumulative exports of textiles and apparel during this period showcased a decrease of 4.25% compared to the corresponding period in the previous fiscal year.⁵ Additionally, Gujarat, with Ahmedabad as a key player, attracted investments totalling \$582 million in the technical textiles sector.⁶ Despite the growth, the industry has faced challenges such as weak global demand, leading to a 15.26% drop in India's textile exports to \$8.4 billion in the first quarter of the financial year 2023-24.⁷ At present the Ahmedabad textile industry is in competition with countries like China, Bangladesh, and Vietnam, significantly affecting market share and pricing strategies.⁸

4. THE COST OF GROWTH VS VALUING RESOURCE

With such a growth of industries, Ahmedabad's ecological domain was transforming rapidly. Although, there is a dearth of substantial quantitative data on the ecological impact of Ahmedabad's textile industries since post-independence era, recent inspections have fetched light on the same. According to Centre for Environment Education's Baseline Assessment Report of 2023, the textile industry consumes approximately 425 billion cubic meters of water annually across India, with a substantial portion attributed to Gujarat's textile sector, including Ahmedabad, which leads to severe water scarcity in many regions. The report also confirms that textile industries are accountable for

⁴ <https://indextb.com/sector/textiles>

⁵ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/export-of-textiles-up-17-yoy-in-feb/articleshow/108660478.cms>

⁶ <https://indextb.com/sector/textiles>

⁷ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/weak-demand-q1-textile-apparel-exports-decrease-by-15/articleshow/101840619.cms>

⁸ <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/industry-despite-a-challenging-year-gujarats-textile-industry-may-not-see-recovery-anytime-soon-3350100/#:~:text=The%20once%20robust%20textile%20sector,to%20%244.69%20billion%20this%20year.>

approximately 10% of global carbon emissions. A significant part of this, owing to the burning of fossil fuels and chemical releases during textile production, contribute to poor air quality in Ahmedabad, impacting public health and influencing respiratory issues among the population. The emissions from energy-intensive processes like dyeing and finishing are also a threatening issue. On the other hand, textile manufacturing processes generate large volumes of wastewater, often contaminated with dyes and chemicals, which makes the industry responsible for about 20% of global water pollution, which is equivalent to the annual water needs of around 110 million people (Anusha & Kavyashree, 2024). According to a 2024 report of The Times of India, over 800 textile units contribute significantly to local water bodies of Ahmedabad with untreated effluents, affecting freshwater sources and groundwater quality.⁹ Additionally, the textile sector generates significant amounts of solid waste, including fabric scraps and packaging materials, and a large portion of this waste ends up in landfills, exacerbating environmental challenges (Anusha & Kavyashree, 2024). Also, improper disposal of chemicals used in dyeing and finishing processes leads to soil contamination and further ecological damage.

Undoubtedly, all these changes were brought forward due to economic liberalization that aided the emergence of over 800 textile units across Ahmedabad in last few decades. Simultaneously, the concern for a sustainable approach was also emerging worldwide. Rachel Carson's influential work *Silent Spring* (1962) have generated public awareness about environmental issues – shifting focus from mere conservation to the broader implications of human activity on ecosystems, while the first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970 along with subsequent international conferences on sustainability, which includes The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm marking a significant step in recognizing environmental issues on an international platform. In 1987, the Brundtland Commission published *Our Common Future* – a Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which emphasized the interconnectedness of economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity, laying the groundwork for future sustainability initiatives. However, in recent years, movements advocating for sustainable practices have gained traction across various sectors, including business, policy-making, and individual lifestyles. Social media platforms have amplified this discourse, making sustainability a defining characteristic for brands and individuals alike.

In India, the concept of ecological sustainability dates to the Vedic era, when ancient texts emphasized the interconnectedness of humans and nature, promoting conservation and sustainable practices through the idea of sacred groves and wildlife protection, showcasing early conservation efforts. The idea was later carried forward by rulers like Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka, who implemented policies for wildlife conservation and forest protection. However, the concept was confined to the royal patronage, since various communities also practiced sustainability by protecting forests and wildlife, as exemplified by their resistance against deforestation in the 18th century. The Santhal Rebellion (1855– 856), the Indigo Revolution of Bengal (1859–1860), the Kol uprising (1831–1832), and the Bastar rebellion (1910), during the colonial era can also be attributed as resistances against reformed land laws that were aimed to transform the ecology at large. In the early post-independence era various policies focused on industrialization and agricultural productivity, often at the expense of environmental health. One such instance is the Green Revolution of 1960s that increased food production at the cost of ecological imbalances due to chemical use. However, since the 1970s, when the first Earth Day was celebrated worldwide, a growing recognition of environmental issues within policy frameworks became evident. Coincidentally, as mentioned earlier, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm in 1972, and Chipko movement was held in 1973 in the Himalayan foothills of Uttarakhand. Both these initiatives highlighted the need for sustainable practices and conservation efforts.

As the liberalization policies of 1991 opened-up India's economy, industrial pollution and resource exploitation started increasing. This prompted a renewed focus on integrating sustainability into development strategies. As a result, the recent years have seen a resurgence in sustainable practices, including organic farming, renewable energy initiatives, and community-based conservation efforts. The emphasis on sustainable development is now reflected in various national policies aimed at balancing economic growth with ecological preservation.

While this was the scenario outside the world of fashion, the fashion industry was witnessing some significant changes. It was already mentioned that, since the 1970s the youth population of Gujarat began to embrace Western fashion elements including incorporation of bell-bottoms, polka-dot prints, and synthetic fabrics into everyday wear.

⁹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/a-new-textile-park-to-have-zld-to-address-pollution-concerns/articleshow/108798455.cms>

With economic liberalization international brands and fashion trends were welcomed in Ahmedabad, and the rise of local boutiques and designers blended global styles with traditional Gujarati aesthetics. Since the millennium the proliferation of online shopping platforms has made global fashion trends more accessible to Ahmedabad's residents, and fast fashion brands gained popularity, especially among the younger demographic. As the concept of sustainability made its place within the domain of business, policy-making, and individual lifestyles across the world in recent years, a growing inclination towards sustainable fashion, with designers and consumers favouring eco-friendly fabrics and ethical production methods became evident in Ahmedabad fashion world. The social network community of 'Textile Sphere' noted that fusion wear, combining traditional textiles like Bandhani and Kutch embroidery with modern silhouettes, has become a significant trend in Ahmedabad's recent fashion trend.¹⁰ According to a 2024 report of Tracxn, the city has witnessed the emergence of fashion tech startups, with a total of 194 companies, including 20 funded companies and 2 acquisitions, indicating a growing integration of technology in the fashion industry. Since 2023, the funding in Fashion Tech companies has risen to 28335.69%, covering a sum of \$3.47 million.¹¹ On the other hand, according to Gujarat Samachar report of 2024, the city's retail landscape has flourished, with events like the Ahmedabad Shopping Festival reporting sales crossing ₹69,000 crore, reflecting a 20% growth, though detailed data is not available.¹² As per the report of The Times of India, in February 2024, exports of Indian textiles grew by 19.54% year-on-year, with apparel exports also seeing an uptick of 4.88%, demonstrating the sector's robust performance.¹³ All these indicates how the demand of global trends among the consumers have affected the economic diagram, as well as the greater ecological atmosphere.



Image 1 & 2 Youths are gradually taking interest in the fusion of traditional material with modern outfit.

Image Courtesy: Author

5. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NEW FUTURE

Can this scenario be changed? With the introduction of a sustainable business model, probably yes. Followings are some of the business strategies that can bring in a better future for the forthcoming of fashion industry. The first among

¹⁰ <https://www.textilesphere.com/2023/04/gujrat-textile-and-fashion-history.html>

¹¹ https://tracxn.com/d/explore/fashion-tech-startups-in-ahmedabad-india/_GcEpkeLOoCfDteacuEixQYuenwjzckYKwPh4uVTEK8?utm_source=chatgpt.com#top-companies

¹² <https://english.gujaratsamachar.com/news/gujarat/ahmedabad-shopping-festival-sales-cross-69-000-cr-but-data-not-available>

¹³ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/export-of-textiles-up-17-yoy-in-feb/articleshow/108660478.cms>

these is the promotion of Slow Fashion. Unlike fast fashion, which emphasises quick turnover and trend-driven production, slow fashion places a higher value on quality, workmanship, and timeless design. To promote thoughtful consumption and sustainable wardrobe practices, slow fashion companies can concentrate on creating fewer collections, making investments in high-quality materials, and creating a stronger bond between customers and their apparel.

Secondly, by introducing Renting and Subscription Services. Through these services, customers can access to fashion, decreasing the need for new clothes and lessening the negative environmental effects of overconsumption. If companies encourage 'sharing economy', they can reduce waste by offering a revolving variety of clothing for temporary use.

Thirdly, by including Community platforms and Co-creation in the scenario. Through active user participation in the design and production process, this company model can aim to promote teamwork, innovation, and community development. Businesses might include consumers in the product development process by using co-creation platforms, crowdfunding initiatives, and interactive design workshops. One can anticipate its outcomes in the form of unique, meaningful fashion experiences.

Fourthly, by encouraging the trend of Upcycling. Upcycling is the process of transforming old or discarded materials into new, more valuable products. In the context of fashion, this could involve anything from using old clothes to make new ones, to creating accessories like bags or jewellery from scraps of fabric.

And finally, by promoting Zero Waste Fashion, which is more of a general movement rather than temporary trend, with the goal of ending textile waste at every stage of the fashion cycle – from manufacture to consumption. This can be accomplished in several ways, including: 1) Utilising ecofriendly materials, like recycled polyester and organic cotton 2) Creating long lasting clothing with timeless designs and premium materials 3) Mending and repairing clothing as opposed to discarding it, and 4) Purchasing used goods or endorsing companies dedicated to zero waste.

It won't be wrong to anticipate that adopting these strategies the fashion industry will bring in significant change in the scene, as all these initiatives aim to reduce environmental impact, support sustainable business, circular economy and sustainable consumption, conserve resources, as well as empower artisans and communities.