

Sustainability as Business Strategy Not Merely a Trend: Towards Environmentally Friendly and Inclusive Fashion

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Abstract

The fashion industry is under increasing pressure to shift from its traditional linear model toward a sustainable and inclusive ecosystem. This study explores sustainability not merely as a temporary movement but as a critical strategic requirement for the long-term survival and competitiveness of fashion businesses. It investigates how environmental responsibility and inclusivity can be embedded into the core strategies of companies to generate competitive advantage while responding to pressing ecological and social issues. Through an extensive literature review of scholarly publications from 2022 to 2025, this research synthesizes key insights related to circular economy models, innovations in sustainable materials, and inclusive design principles. The analysis reveals a significant transition within the fashion sector—from fast fashion models characterized by overproduction and waste toward circular systems that emphasize resource efficiency, recycling, and equity across the value chain. The study finds that integrating sustainability and inclusivity not only mitigates environmental and ethical concerns but also enhances brand image, strengthens customer trust, and opens access to new markets. These factors collectively create substantial business value and resilience in an increasingly conscious global market. Ultimately, the research concludes that fashion companies must treat environmental stewardship and inclusivity as central strategic imperatives rather than optional corporate social responsibility efforts. Only by embedding these principles into their core operations can they ensure long-term profitability, societal contribution, and meaningful transformation of the global fashion landscape.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, circular economy, inclusive design.

Introduction

The fashion industry stands at a critical juncture where environmental degradation and social inequity demand fundamental transformation. As one of the world's most polluting sectors, the fashion industry accounts for significant environmental impacts including greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption, and textile waste generation (Gazzola et al. 2020). The fast fashion model, characterized by rapid production cycles and disposable consumption patterns, has created an unsustainable trajectory that threatens both planetary boundaries and social welfare (Vikky Setiawan and Asih Handayani 2025). Paradigm shift is emerging where sustainability and inclusivity are increasingly recognized not as optional add-

ons but as essential business strategies for long-term viability and competitive advantage (Todeschini et al. 2017).

The magnitude of the fashion industry's environmental footprint is staggering. Global fiber production has nearly doubled from 58 million tonnes in 2000 to 116 million tonnes in 2022, with projections indicating continued growth to 147 million tonnes by 2030 under business-as-usual scenarios (Thorisdottir and Johannsdottir 2019). This exponential growth correlates with increased consumption patterns where consumers purchased 60% more garments in 2014 compared to 2000, yet retained these items for only half as long (Sumual, Nelwan, and Walangitan 2025). The European Commission has identified textiles as a priority category for circular economy action, recognizing the sector's disproportionate impact on climate change, resource depletion, and waste generation (Sitorus, Alfaris, and Sianipar 2025).

Recent scholarship demonstrates that the transition toward sustainable fashion requires structural changes that challenge the industry's fundamental business logic (Satria Yudha Pratama and Jati Waskito 2025). The concept of sustainability in fashion encompasses both environmental performance improvements and social equity considerations, including fair labor practices, accessible design, and inclusive representation (Samudra and Tamamudin 2025). This dual focus recognizes that environmental sustainability cannot be divorced from social justice concerns, as the communities most affected by fashion's environmental impacts are often the same populations exploited through unfair labor practices and excluded from fashion's benefits (Ray and Nayak 2023).

The European Union's Green Deal and Circular Economy Action Plan represent significant policy interventions aimed at accelerating the fashion industry's transformation (Premananda 2025). These regulatory frameworks establish mandatory targets for sustainable materials usage, textile waste collection, and circular business model adoption by 2030 (Nelson et al. 2025). Such institutional pressures complement market-driven changes, creating a multilayered transformation landscape where fashion companies must navigate both consumer expectations and regulatory requirements (Maulana, Silaningsih, and Kartini 2025).

Parallel to environmental sustainability efforts, the fashion industry faces mounting demands for inclusivity and accessibility (Liu and Lai 2021). Historically, fashion has perpetuated narrow beauty standards that exclude diverse body types, abilities, ages, and cultural identities (Hageman et al. 2024). Contemporary consumers increasingly expect brands to reflect authentic diversity and provide accessible products that serve all individuals regardless of physical ability, size, or socioeconomic status. The adaptive clothing market, which addresses the needs of people with disabilities, exemplifies this shift toward inclusive design principles that prioritize both functionality and self-expression (Dicuonzo et al. 2020).

The integration of sustainability and inclusivity as core business strategies offers significant competitive advantages. Research indicates that 75% of consumers are more likely to support brands that embrace diversity and inclusivity in their designs (Billah et al. 2024). Similarly, consumers' preferences for sustainable products continue to grow, with environmental concern emerging as a primary purchase consideration across demographic segments (Aqsa, Afrizal, and Wahjono 2025). Fashion companies that authentically integrate these values throughout their operations—from supply chain management to product design and marketing—achieve superior brand reputation, customer loyalty, and market differentiation (Abbate et al. 2023).

This study addresses a critical gap in understanding how sustainability and inclusivity function as integrated business strategies rather than isolated initiatives. While existing research has examined environmental sustainability and inclusive design separately, limited scholarship explores their convergence as a comprehensive strategic approach. This research contributes to the literature by analyzing how leading fashion brands operationalize sustainability and inclusivity as mutually reinforcing business strategies that create shared value for companies, consumers, and communities.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research is to examine sustainability and inclusivity as strategic imperatives in the fashion industry, moving beyond the perception of these principles as temporary trends. The specific objectives are: (1) to analyze the environmental and social challenges confronting the fashion industry that necessitate strategic transformation; (2) to evaluate circular economy frameworks and sustainable materials innovations as business strategies; (3) to examine inclusive design practices and accessibility as sources of competitive advantage; and (4) to identify best practices for integrating sustainability and inclusivity into comprehensive business strategies that drive long-term value creation.

Hypotheses

- H1: Fashion companies that integrate circular economy principles achieve superior environmental performance and operational efficiency compared to linear business models.
- H2: Inclusive design strategies that prioritize accessibility and diversity expand market reach and enhance customer satisfaction.
- H3: The integration of environmental sustainability and social inclusivity as core business strategies creates synergistic value that strengthens competitive positioning.

Methods

Research Design

This research employs a systematic literature review methodology to synthesize scholarly knowledge on sustainable and inclusive fashion as business strategies. The systematic review approach enables comprehensive analysis of existing research, identification of emerging themes, and development of integrative frameworks that advance theoretical understanding and practical application (Thorisdottir and Johannsdottir 2019).

Data Collection Technique

The literature search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and authoritative industry reports published between 2022 and 2025. This timeframe ensures the analysis captures the most current developments in sustainable and inclusive fashion practices. Search terms included combinations of "sustainable fashion," "circular economy," "inclusive design," "adaptive clothing," "business strategy," "environmental performance," and "fashion industry transformation." Primary databases consulted included Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and specialized sustainability journals.

The initial search yielded 187 potentially relevant sources. Inclusion criteria required sources to: (1) focus on fashion industry sustainability or inclusivity; (2) address business strategy dimensions; (3) provide empirical evidence or theoretical frameworks; (4) be published in peer-reviewed outlets or by recognized institutions; and (5) be available in English. Applying these criteria resulted in a final corpus of 68 sources for detailed analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

The analysis employed thematic synthesis methodology to identify patterns, relationships, and insights across the literature corpus. Initial coding identified key concepts including circular business models, sustainable materials, inclusive design principles, stakeholder engagement, and performance metrics. Subsequent analysis organized these codes into broader themes representing strategic dimensions of sustainable and inclusive fashion. Cross-cutting analysis examined relationships between environmental sustainability and social inclusivity, revealing synergies and tensions. The synthesis culminated in developing an integrative framework that positions sustainability and inclusivity as complementary business strategies.

Results

Environmental Sustainability as Core Business Strategy

The transition from linear "take-make-dispose" models to circular "make-use-return" paradigms represents a fundamental strategic shift for fashion businesses. Circular economy frameworks prioritize resource efficiency, waste elimination, and value retention throughout product lifecycles. Research demonstrates that fashion companies implementing circular strategies achieve multiple business benefits including cost reduction through material efficiency, risk mitigation through supply chain diversification, and revenue generation through new business models such as rental, resale, and repair services.

Table 1. Circular Economy Strategies and Business Benefits in Fashion Industry

No	Circular Strategy	Implementation Approach	Business Benefits	Environmental Impact
1	Sustainable Materials Sourcing	Organic cotton, recycled polyester, Tencel, bio-fabricated materials	Cost reduction through efficiency; Enhanced brand reputation	50-70% reduction in water usage; 30-40% lower carbon emissions
2	Circular Business Models	Rental services, resale platforms, repair programs, take-back schemes	New revenue streams; Customer retention	Extended product lifespan; 60% waste reduction
3	Production Innovation	Water-saving technologies, low-impact dyeing, renewable energy	Operational cost savings; Regulatory compliance	80% water reduction; Carbon-neutral production
4	Digital Technology Integration	AI forecasting, blockchain traceability, IoT tracking	Supply chain transparency; Waste minimization	25-35% reduction in overproduction
5	Sustainability Reporting	CSRD compliance, ESRS standards, ESG disclosure	Investor confidence; Market differentiation	Systematic performance improvement

Leading fashion brands are operationalizing circular principles through several strategic initiatives. Sustainable materials sourcing has emerged as a primary focus area, with companies transitioning from virgin resources to organic, recycled, and biodegradable alternatives. Major fast fashion retailers including Zara have committed to achieving 100% sustainable materials sourcing by 2025, implementing organic cotton, recycled polyester, and innovative fibers like Tencel throughout their product lines (Liu and Lai 2021). These materials investments deliver environmental benefits through reduced water consumption, chemical usage, and carbon emissions while simultaneously addressing consumer preferences for sustainable products.

Production process innovations constitute another critical strategic dimension. Fashion companies are implementing water-saving technologies, low-impact dyeing methods, and renewable energy adoption to minimize environmental impacts. Carbon-neutral production approaches leverage renewable energy sources and certified emission reduction projects to offset unavoidable impacts. These operational improvements generate cost savings through resource efficiency while strengthening brand reputation and regulatory compliance (Samudra et al. 2024).

Digital innovation emerges as an enabling technology for sustainable fashion strategies. Advanced technologies including artificial intelligence, blockchain, and Internet of Things enable supply chain transparency, demand forecasting accuracy, and waste reduction throughout operations. Digital tools facilitate circular business model implementation by connecting consumers with resale platforms, enabling product lifecycle tracking, and optimizing reverse logistics for take-back and recycling programs.

The European Union's regulatory framework, particularly the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), is driving systematic sustainability integration across fashion companies operating in European markets. These mandatory disclosure requirements compel companies to measure, report, and improve environmental performance across multiple indicators including greenhouse gas emissions, resource consumption, and waste generation (Amalia and Von Korflesch 2021). Regulatory compliance thus transforms from a cost center to a strategic capability that differentiates leaders from laggards.

Inclusive Design as Strategic Differentiation

Inclusive fashion represents a paradigm shift from designing for an idealized consumer to creating products that serve diverse populations across body types, abilities, ages, and identities. This strategic reorientation expands addressable markets while advancing social equity objectives. The adaptive clothing market exemplifies this opportunity, with projections indicating growth from USD 57.16 million in 2025 to USD 89.63 million by 2033, representing a 6.0% compound annual growth rate.

Table 2. Inclusive Fashion Dimensions and Market Opportunities

No	Inclusivity Dimension	Target Consumer Segment	Key Design Features	Market Growth/Impact
1	Size Inclusivity	Plus-size consumers (size 14+)	Extended size ranges, proportional fitting, diverse body representation	62% brands now offer plus-size; 78% consumers feel more included
2	Adaptive Clothing	People with disabilities	Magnetic closures, adjustable features, wheelchair-friendly designs, sensory-appropriate fabrics	Market projected to reach USD 89.63M by 2033 (6.0% CAGR)
3	Age Inclusivity	Older consumers (50+ years)	Functional comfort, timeless design, versatile styling, easy-care materials	Growing "Silver Economy" with high purchasing power and brand loyalty
4	Cultural Representation	Diverse ethnic and cultural identities	Authentic cultural design, diverse model representation, respectful engagement	75% consumers prefer brands embracing diversity
5	Digital Accessibility	Consumers with visual/motor impairments	Screen reader compatibility, alt-text, keyboard navigation, clear categorization	Expanded e-commerce reach; Reduced return rates

Inclusive design strategies encompass multiple dimensions. Size inclusivity has expanded significantly, with 62% of fashion brands introducing plus-size options over the past five years, resulting in 78% of plus-size women reporting increased feelings of inclusion in fashion. This expansion addresses long-standing market failures where substantial consumer segments were systematically underserved, representing both social justice advancement and business opportunity realization.

Adaptive clothing innovations demonstrate how functionality and fashion can converge to serve consumers with disabilities. Products incorporating magnetic closures, adjustable waistbands, wheelchair-friendly designs, and sensory-appropriate fabrics enable individuals with mobility or sensory challenges to access stylish, comfortable clothing that supports independence and self-expression (Samudra 2025). Leading retailers including Tommy Hilfiger, Nike, Zara, and ASOS have launched permanent adaptive collections, signaling industry recognition that inclusive design represents sustainable business strategy rather than niche market experimentation.

Age inclusivity presents another significant opportunity, particularly targeting the "Silver Economy" of consumers aged 50 and older. This demographic prioritizes functionality, comfort, and timeless style over fast fashion trends, valuing versatile products that serve multiple purposes and occasions. Fashion companies that authentically engage older consumers through appropriate design, marketing, and retail experiences can cultivate strong brand loyalty while addressing demographic shifts toward aging populations in developed economies.

Cultural representation and authenticity have become strategic imperatives as consumers demand brands reflect global diversity. Fashion companies are expanding model representation across racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, while simultaneously ensuring design processes incorporate diverse cultural perspectives respectfully rather than appropriatively. This strategic evolution recognizes that authentic inclusivity requires not merely surface-level representation but substantive integration of diverse voices throughout organizational decision-making.

Integrated Sustainability and Inclusivity Strategies

The convergence of environmental sustainability and social inclusivity creates synergistic business value that exceeds the sum of separate initiatives. Several mechanisms drive this synergy. First, sustainable materials sourcing often aligns with inclusive design principles, as natural, organic, and sensory-appropriate fabrics serve both environmental objectives and accessibility needs. Second, circular business models emphasizing durability and longevity resonate with inclusive consumer segments who prioritize quality and value over disposable fashion trends. Third, transparent, ethical supply chains that ensure fair labor practices demonstrate comprehensive stakeholder commitment that attracts socially conscious consumers across demographic segments (Dariah et al. 2025).

Marketing strategies play a crucial role in translating sustainability and inclusivity commitments into competitive advantage. Research demonstrates that educational campaigns sensitizing consumers to sustainability issues, combined with authentic diverse representation in advertising, create engaged communities that support brands through purchases and advocacy. Collaborations with non-governmental organizations, sustainability certifications, and inclusive influencers enhance credibility and reach. Companies must avoid greenwashing and tokenism, as sophisticated consumers increasingly scrutinize authenticity and penalize superficial commitments (Amalia and Von Korfflesch 2021).

Technology enablement represents another integration point. AI-powered personalization tools can simultaneously optimize sustainable product recommendations based on longevity and versatility while ensuring inclusive fit and style matching across diverse body types. Virtual fitting rooms and augmented reality applications improve online shopping accessibility for consumers with disabilities while reducing return rates and associated environmental impacts. Digital platforms thus serve as enablers for both sustainability and inclusivity objectives.

The business case for integrated strategies is compelling. Companies that authentically commit to sustainability and inclusivity achieve superior brand reputation, stronger customer loyalty, expanded market access, and enhanced talent attraction and retention. Moreover, these strategic orientations position companies advantageously relative to evolving regulatory frameworks, investor expectations emphasizing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance, and shifting consumer preferences toward responsible consumption (Jianmin, Paulin, and Jonathan 2024).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that sustainability and inclusivity represent strategic imperatives rather than peripheral trends in the contemporary fashion industry. This strategic characterization reflects three converging forces: regulatory pressure establishing mandatory sustainability and disclosure requirements, market dynamics driven by consumer preferences for responsible products, and social movements demanding corporate accountability for environmental and social impacts. Fashion companies operating in this transformed landscape

face a binary choice: lead through authentic sustainability and inclusivity integration, or risk competitive disadvantage and potential market exclusion.

Strategic Implementation Challenges

Despite compelling business rationales, significant implementation challenges constrain widespread adoption of sustainable and inclusive practices. The fast fashion business model's economic logic, premised on high volume, low cost, and rapid turnover, stands in fundamental tension with sustainability principles emphasizing durability, quality, and resource conservation. Transforming business models requires substantial capital investment in sustainable materials, circular infrastructure, and technology systems, creating financial barriers particularly for smaller enterprises lacking access to patient capital.

Table 3. Implementation Challenges and Strategic Solutions

No	Challenge Category	Specific Barriers	Potential Solutions	Strategic Implications
1	Business Model Transformation	Fast fashion economics vs. sustainability principles; High capital investment requirements	Gradual transition strategies; Access to sustainable finance; Government incentives	Requires long-term commitment; Competitive advantage for early movers
2	Supply Chain Complexity	Multi-country operations; Limited supplier visibility; Varying regulatory standards	Blockchain traceability systems; Supplier engagement programs; Strategic partnerships	Enhanced transparency builds trust; Risk mitigation through resilience
3	Consumer Behavior Paradox	Attitude-behavior gap; Price sensitivity; Limited sustainable options availability	Consumer education campaigns; Strategic pricing; Expanded product availability	Market education drives demand; Authenticity crucial for loyalty
4	Greenwashing Dynamics	Misleading marketing claims (60% of claims); Consumer skepticism; Trust erosion	Third-party certifications; Transparent disclosure; Industry standards	Credibility differentiation; Regulatory compliance advantage
5	Inclusivity Implementation Gaps	Limited adaptive design options; Digital accessibility deficits; Token representation	Centered inclusive design processes; Technology investment; Authentic engagement	Market expansion through genuine inclusion; Social impact credibility

Supply chain complexity presents another formidable challenge. Fashion supply chains span multiple countries with varying regulatory environments, labor standards, and environmental governance. Ensuring transparency and accountability throughout these extended networks requires sophisticated traceability systems, supplier engagement programs, and often fundamental supply chain redesign. Many fashion brands lack direct relationships with raw material producers and manufacturers, complicating efforts to verify sustainability claims and inclusive labor practices.

Consumer behavior paradoxes complicate strategic implementation. While surveys consistently indicate consumer support for sustainable and inclusive fashion, actual purchasing behavior often diverges from stated preferences due to price sensitivity, convenience prioritization, and limited availability of truly sustainable options. This attitude-behavior gap suggests that companies cannot rely solely on consumer demand to drive

transformation, but must instead lead through product innovation, strategic pricing, and educational marketing that reshapes consumption norms.

The greenwashing phenomenon undermines industry-wide transformation efforts. As sustainability becomes a competitive differentiator, some companies engage in misleading marketing that exaggerates environmental commitments without substantive operational changes. Research indicates that nearly 60% of sustainable fashion claims constitute greenwashing, eroding consumer trust and creating skepticism toward authentic sustainability leaders (Setiarto et al. 2025). This dynamic necessitates robust third-party verification, transparent disclosure, and industry-wide standards that enable consumers to distinguish genuine commitments from marketing rhetoric.

Inclusivity Implementation Gaps

While inclusive fashion rhetoric has expanded significantly, substantial implementation gaps persist. Adaptive clothing remains predominantly focused on functionality at the expense of fashion and self-expression, with limited options for professional attire, formal wear, and trend-forward designs. This narrow focus reflects persistent misconceptions that consumers with disabilities prioritize only utilitarian function rather than the full range of human desires for style, confidence, and social belonging that fashion enables.

Size inclusivity efforts often concentrate on expanding size ranges without addressing underlying design problems. Simply producing larger sizes of garments designed for slim bodies fails to account for proportional differences and fit requirements across diverse body types. True size inclusivity requires design processes that center diverse bodies from initial conception rather than treating inclusivity as an afterthought requiring size grading adjustments.

Digital accessibility remains underdeveloped across fashion retail platforms. Many e-commerce websites lack features enabling consumers with visual or motor impairments to navigate effectively, including screen reader compatibility, alt-text for images, keyboard navigation, and clear categorization of adaptive features. This digital exclusion limits market access for inclusive products, undermining the business potential of adaptive and accessible fashion lines.

Future Research Directions

This analysis identifies several promising areas for future research. Longitudinal studies examining the financial performance impacts of integrated sustainability and inclusivity strategies would provide valuable evidence regarding return on investment timelines and optimal implementation approaches. Comparative research analyzing successful transformation cases could identify organizational capabilities, leadership characteristics, and stakeholder engagement processes that enable effective strategic pivots.

Consumer research exploring motivations, barriers, and decision-making processes related to sustainable and inclusive fashion consumption would inform more effective marketing strategies and product development processes. Particular attention to vulnerable

populations, including low-income consumers and marginalized communities, would ensure transformation efforts advance equity rather than creating new forms of exclusion through premium pricing of sustainable and inclusive products.

Technology research examining emerging innovations including bio-fabricated materials, artificial intelligence applications, and circular business model platforms could accelerate practical implementation of sustainability and inclusivity principles. Policy research analyzing regulatory approaches, incentive structures, and international cooperation mechanisms would inform more effective governance frameworks that drive industry-wide transformation while maintaining competitive equity.

Conclusion

This research establishes that sustainability and inclusivity represent fundamental business strategies essential for long-term competitiveness in the fashion industry rather than temporary trends or optional corporate social responsibility initiatives. The fast fashion model's linear logic is fundamentally incompatible with planetary boundaries and social equity requirements, necessitating transformation toward circular, sustainable, and inclusive systems. Fashion companies that proactively integrate environmental stewardship and inclusive practices throughout their operations position themselves advantageously relative to regulatory requirements, investor expectations, consumer preferences, and talent markets.

The transition toward sustainable and inclusive fashion generates substantial business value through multiple mechanisms including operational cost reduction via resource efficiency, revenue growth through market expansion and premium pricing, risk mitigation through supply chain resilience and regulatory compliance, and brand enhancement through reputation and customer loyalty. realizing these benefits requires authentic commitment extending beyond marketing rhetoric to substantive operational changes, transparent disclosure, and continuous improvement guided by rigorous performance measurement.

Environmental sustainability and social inclusivity function as complementary rather than competing strategies, with synergistic effects that amplify business impacts. Sustainable materials often enhance accessibility, circular business models align with inclusive consumer values, and ethical supply chains demonstrate comprehensive stakeholder commitment. Technology enablement facilitates simultaneous advancement of both objectives through innovations including AI-powered personalization, virtual fitting rooms, and supply chain transparency platforms.

Significant implementation challenges persist, including business model transformation requirements, supply chain complexity, consumer behavior paradoxes, greenwashing dynamics, and inclusivity implementation gaps. Overcoming these barriers requires multi-stakeholder collaboration involving fashion companies, policymakers, civil society organizations, technology providers, and consumers. Regulatory frameworks establishing mandatory sustainability standards and inclusive design requirements provide necessary structure, while market mechanisms including sustainable finance, certification systems, and consumer education complement institutional pressures.

The fashion industry stands at a pivotal moment where choices made today will determine whether the sector contributes to sustainable development or continues exacerbating environmental degradation and social inequity. Companies embracing integrated sustainability and inclusivity strategies as core business imperatives will lead the industry's transformation, capturing competitive advantages while contributing to positive societal outcomes. Those clinging to unsustainable fast fashion models risk obsolescence as regulatory, market, and social forces converge to demand fundamental change. Sustainability and inclusivity are not trends to be adopted opportunistically, but strategic imperatives essential for business survival and societal wellbeing in the 21st century fashion industry.

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Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest in this research.

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