

SUSTAINABLE FASHION IS “IN” AND FAST FASHION IS “OUT” – A CORPUS-DRIVEN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA NARRATIVE REGARDING THE FASHION INDUSTRY’S (UN-)SUSTAINABILITY

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Being affordable and readily disposable, fast fashion has recently been perceived as a major cause of environmental pollution and unethical labour practices. To counter these pressing global issues, sustainable fashion has been gaining in importance. Mass media has a significant role in shaping public sentiment and influencing consumers’ behaviour. This paper brings the results of a small-scale quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis of three aspects of the fashion industry’s (un-)sustainability. More specifically, we examined the media’s vocabulary when addressing fast and sustainable fashion. Our study followed the principles of corpus analysis and discourse analysis. We analysed 1,000 randomly selected media reports focusing on fast fashion and sustainable fashion in English in the NOW corpus. Key results of our study show that the fast fashion-related media narrative is negative, whereas the sustainable fashion-related narrative is positive, with some criticism. This study aims to contribute to the knowledge about the terminology in mass media narrative used to address fashion industry-related sustainability issues. Further, we aim to advocate how such narrative can and should be used as a vehicle for changes in consumer behaviour and company practices and, consequently, how it can impact the attainment of relevant 2030 SDGs.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, the fashion industry has been subject to increased media attention, particularly as regards its impact on the environment, unethical labour practices and consumer behaviour. Mass media plays an important role in informing people about different topics as well as shaping their opinions and influencing their behaviour and actions when it comes to fashion-related purchasing decisions (Rinaldi & Semprini, 2017). Based on this, the study presented in this paper aims to highlight the key terminology and topics in media narrative on fast fashion and sustainable fashion by combining corpus analysis and discourse analysis. More specifically, we present the results of our small-scale study of selected frequently occurring terms and their collocates in texts on fast fashion and sustainable fashion as well as of the prevailing attitudes towards fast fashion and sustainable fashion as expressed in the media in English.

This paper continues as follows. First, we give a brief theoretical framework for the study, which is followed by the presentation of the research method adopted for our study. After that, we present and discuss the obtained results. We conclude the paper by summarizing our findings and indicating educational implications of the study, the relevance of the study in the context of the UN SDGs and by giving recommendations for further research.

2 Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theoretical framework for the study presented in this paper is divided into a brief overview of fast fashion and sustainable fashion as two concepts related to the sustainability of the fashion industry, and into the framework for the linguistic analysis underpinning our research.

2.1 The (Un-)Sustainability of the Fashion Industry

Today, academic and media narratives related to the fashion industry often revolve around fast fashion and sustainable fashion as the opposite environmental, social and economic aspects of the fashion industry. In general, the fashion industry is defined as one of the biggest global industries, and it has a far-reaching effect on our planet. It is also one of the most polluting global industries, with an enormous toll

on natural resources, an excessive carbon footprint and huge levels of waste (Bailey et al., 2022; Brewer, 2019; Rangel-Buitrago & Gracia C, 2024; Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021).

The environmental crisis and the rising consumer awareness of pressing global climate changes and labour-related social injustices have resulted in the rise of sustainable fashion practices as the opposite trend to fast fashion. Fast fashion is characterised by inexpensively made trendy clothes which are readily available to meet consumer demands, and its production is placed in cheap-labour, low-income countries (Bick et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2021). On the other hand, sustainable fashion practices are focused on reducing environmental destruction by applying environmentally-friendly practices, good and fair working conditions for garment workers and more sustainable consumer purchasing behaviour (Gazzola et al., 2020; Henninger et al., 2016). Also, in light of the pressing environmental and social issues, consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the fashion industry's negative impacts and are turning towards sustainable fashion (Centobelli et al., 2022; Dangelico et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2024).

2.2 Corpus-Driven Analysis and Discourse Analysis of Fashion-Related Media Texts as Text Types

Fast fashion- and sustainable fashion-related mass media texts comprise, among others, newspaper articles, feature articles, editorials, opinion pieces, blogs, and interview transcripts. In line with the general text-type typology as proposed by Reiss, which focuses on the communicative function of texts (1977/89, cited in Munday (2001, p. 73)), these texts can be classified as the informative text type as their primary role is to give information or spread knowledge on a given topic. They can also be defined as descriptive, explanatory and/or argumentative texts since they encompass fashion-related reports and commentaries (including criticism) (De Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981; Hatim & Mason, 1993). In short, we can expect that the media narrative on the fashion industry includes facts about the topic as well as the attitudes and stance of the narrators towards the topic.

Texts can be analysed by using different methodologies, including corpus analysis and discourse analysis. By performing a corpus analysis of a large body of texts (i.e. a corpus), we can establish the key terms in a specific field (i.e. single words and

multi-word terms). In this way, we can shed light on the main points of the discourse, which also applies to newspaper language (Andersen, 2012; Bondi, 2010, pp. 3, 7; McEnery & Hardie, 2012). While corpus analysis gives quantitative results, discourse analysis can offer a qualitative perspective on the social implications of the narrative in which specific terminology occurs (Baker, 2009; Rusinek & Malec, 2015). In short, the combination of corpus analysis and discourse analysis of fashion-related media narrative tells us not only what is written about fast fashion and sustainable fashion but also shows how these texts add to the discourse on societal views on the plethora of issues related to the fashion industry.

Based on the above, the following research questions were formulated for our study:
Research question 1: Which single words and multi-word terms frequently occur in the media narrative about fast fashion and sustainable fashion?

Research question 2: What are the prevailing attitudes expressed in the media narrative towards fast fashion and sustainable fashion in the context of the related frequently occurring themes?

3 Methodology

To answer our research questions, we analysed 1000 randomly selected extracts from online newspapers, fashion magazines, trade magazines, online blog posts, and other types of media news collected in the News on the Web (NOW) corpus which included the terms “fast fashion” and “sustainable fashion” (*English-Corpora: NOW*, n.d.). The random sampling was done automatically in the NOW corpus; we only set the sample selection to the publication dates within the timespan of 1st January, 2019 to 31st January, 2024. As the NOW corpus includes comprehensive global coverage of the news published in English, our study included media discourse on the topic in 20 English-speaking countries. Based on this selection, we built a small-scale corpus of texts comprising two sub-corpora: the fast fashion sub-corpus (i.e. FF sub-corpus) and the sustainable fashion sub-corpus (i.e. SF sub-corpus), each consisting of about 220,000 words.

The exploratory analysis of our sub-corpora was done in two stages. First, we performed a quantitative keyword analysis by using the corpus analysis software SketchEngine (Lexical Computing, 2023). This enabled us to determine key topics

addressed in the media concerning fast fashion and sustainable fashion. Second, we carried out an in-depth qualitative contextual (discourse) analysis of the immediate context (i.e. one paragraph extract in which the terms “fast fashion” and “sustainable fashion” occurred) to get an insight into the prevailing attitudes expressed in the media towards the two types of fashion. Due to the limitations of the research presented in this paper, we focused only on the environmental impact, labour practices and consumer behaviour of both types of fashion.

4 Results and Discussion

This section brings the results and the discussion of our quantitative and qualitative study in line with our research questions. At the lexical level of analysis, we show the collocates of selected terms frequently occurring in the media reports addressing fast fashion and sustainable fashion. At the discursive level, we summarise the narrative on fast fashion and sustainable fashion and illustrate it with selected examples from our corpus.

Overall, our corpus analysis revealed the following list of multi-word terms which address various aspects of fast and sustainable fashion (see Table 1).

Table 1: The 100 most frequent multi-word terms related to fast fashion and sustainable fashion (in descending frequency of occurrence)

Multi-word terms related to fast fashion and sustainable fashion (combined corpus)	
<i>sustainable fashion, fast fashion, fashion industry, environmental impact, organic cotton, charity shop, carbon footprint, slow fashion, fast fashion industry, carbon emission, textile waste, sustainable practice, sustainable fashion brand, fashion retailer, fashion trend, fast fashion brand, fast fashion retailer, recycled material, fashion choice, sustainable clothing, second hand, circular economy, circular fashion, ethical fashion, fashion designer</i>	<i>fashion company, fashion item, new clothes, shopping habit, sustainable fashion industry, sustainable brand, polluting industry, sustainable material, textile industry, sustainable future, fashion product, global carbon emission, eco-friendly material, garment worker, clothing brand, green job, sustainable fashion choice, second-hand clothes, emission of greenhouse gases, toxic dye, fashion movement, fashion revolution, garment factory, impact of fast fashion, clothing production</i>

The above list of common phrases in both sub-corpora shows that the media narrative related to fast fashion and sustainable fashion primarily touches upon the environmental impact of the fashion industry and fashion-related waste management. Further, it addresses its economic aspects, the garment industry workers, as well as the behaviour of consumers. Notably, this vocabulary also

indicates the narrative regarding the efforts towards sustainable practices in the use of materials and, in a broader sense, the narrative on circular economy.

In line with the focus of this study, we now present and discuss the main findings for the selected terms and media narrative related to the environment, labour practices, and consumer behaviour.

4.1 Corpus Analysis of Selected Fast Fashion- and Sustainable Fashion-Related Issues –Key Terms

4.1.1 Environmental Issues

Since the environment is hugely affected by the fashion industry, we decided to focus on the collocates of the terms “environmental” and “waste” as they are strongly related to our topic (the latter being an enormous side effect of the fashion industry).

Table 2: Key noun collocates of the term “environmental” in the two sub-corpora (in the descending frequency of occurrence)

FF sub-corpus	SF sub-corpus
<i>impact, footprint, catastrophe, benefit, crisis, harm, damage, activism, destruction, problem, cost, degradation, hazard, conservation, improvement, disaster, department, implication, consciousness, justice, front, organisation, claim, plan, movement, technique, consequence, standard, violation, expert, pollution, issue, practice</i>	<i>impact, sustainability, degradation, footprint, issue, concern, awareness, toll, friendliness, protection, benefit, conservation, consciousness, health, effort, destruction, campaigner, service, problem, distress, awareness, objective, stewardship, implication, crusader, decline, activism, deterioration, education, damage, justice, ground, organisation, responsibility, pollution, action, standard, goal, cost, waste</i>

Table 2 shows a relative similarity of the collocates with the term “environmental” in both sub-corpora. This indicates that media narrative about the environment includes the same terminology in the context of both types of fashion. However, in the case of sustainable fashion, the context seems more comprehensive, and more emphasis is placed on environmental degradation and environmental protection education, responsibility, and environmental activism.

The comparison of the results from the two sub-corpora in the above table shows a moderate similarity of the groups of verbs associated with the noun “waste”. However, the results in the SF sub-corpus point to a broader media narrative

regarding fashion-related waste since the terminology includes the aspects of waste management in terms of converting or transforming waste into usable materials and new resources.

Table 3: Key verb collocates of the term “waste” related to fashion in the two sub-corpora (in the descending frequency of occurrence)

FF sub-corpus	SF sub-corpus
<i>collect, reduce, recycle, generate, trim, minimise, cut, produce, cause, include, create</i>	<i>reduce, minimise, convert, generate, tackle, reuse, mitigate, repurpose, stop, eliminate, use, transform, discard, address, produce, bring, create</i>

4.1.2 Labour Practices

Concerning labour practices, we focused on the terms “labour” and “wage” as two frequently occurring terms used in fashion-related media narratives. In Table 4, we give the collocates of the term “labour”; in Table 5, we present the collocates of the term “wage”.

Table 4: Noun collocates (adjectives and nouns) of the term “labour” (in the descending frequency of occurrence)

FF sub-corpus	SF sub-corpus
<i>cheap, child, fair, human, forced, life-threatening, low-wage, migrant, physical</i>	<i>cheap, slave, migrant, unskilled</i>
<i>force, conditions, abuse, practice, exploitation, shortage, violation</i>	<i>practice, force, standard, conditions, productivity, cost, mobility</i>

Table 5: Key collocates of the term “wage” in the two sub-corpora (in the descending frequency of occurrence)

FF sub-corpus	SF sub-corpus
<i>minimum, low, fair, good, poverty, hourly, living, high</i>	<i>fair, minimum, decent, living, liveable, hourly, poverty, poor, low, good</i>

The collocates in the above tables clearly show more criticism of the labour-related practices in the texts focusing on fast fashion than sustainable fashion, as unethical labour-related practices are emphasised (i.e. the exploitation and devaluation of workers and their skills in the textile industry). Namely, in the FF sub-corpus, more strong nouns associated with the exploitation and violation of workers’ rights are present. On the other hand, the vocabulary related to the workers’ pay (i.e. wages) is almost the same in both sub-corpora. This result points to the narrative related to

workers' economic well-being and social conditions stemming from deprivation and financial hardship.

4.1.3 Consumer Behaviour

In the context of consumer behaviour, we present the collocates of the terms “clothes” and “trend” as two terms closely associated with fashion.

Table 6: Key collocates (adjectives and verbs) of the term “clothes” (in the descending frequency of occurrence)

FF sub-corpus	SF sub-corpus
<i>new, cheap, second-hand, vintage, unwanted, quality, season-free, stylish, pre-loved, old, good</i>	<i>new, second-hand, unwanted, old, cheap, sustainable, high quality, organic, pre-loved, vintage, good</i>
<i>(to) buy, make, sell, wear, swap, need, love, rent, have, use, create, discard, outgrow, recycle, design, dump, exchange, find, incinerate, produce, sew, source, throw away, wash</i>	<i>(to) make, buy, wear, produce, sell, donate, recycle, design, upcycle, purchase, reuse, swap, throw away, collect, dispose of, find, love, manufacture, rent, repair, re-wear, source</i>

Notably, the frequent adjectives and verbs associated with the term “clothes” are almost identical in both sub-corpora. In principle, the verbs in both sub-corpora also address the same aspects, i.e., the manufacturing, the consumption, and the disposal of clothes. However, the SF sub-corpus also includes verbs related to sustainable practices such as upcycling, re-wearing and donating clothes.

Table 7: Key collocates of the term “trend” in the two sub-corpora (in the descending frequency of occurrence)

FF sub-corpus	SF sub-corpus
<i>fashion, latest, next, new, fast, important, catwalk, seasonal, TikTok, runway, hot, consumer, brand, clothing, media-driven, pandemic-inspired, consumer-led, societal, workwear, ever-changing, conflicting, prevalent</i>	<i>fashion, latest, sustainable, commercial, new, fleeting, current, big, major, memorable, repair-and-wear, DIY, seasonal, hot, fun, thrifting, top, key, recent, traditional, eco-friendly</i>

The comparison of the collocates in Table 7 shows a stark difference in the media focus (i.e. themes) regarding fast fashion and sustainable fashion trends. While the former focuses more on the trends being shaped by factors such as social media and fashion shows, the latter emphasises environmentally conscious choices and a more considerate approach to fashion.

4.2 Discourse Analysis of Media Narrative on Fast Fashion and Sustainable Fashion – Main Findings

This section brings the main findings of our discourse analysis of the media narrative on fast fashion and sustainable fashion. To align this part of our study with our corpus analysis, we focus on the narrative regarding the environment, labour practices, and consumer behaviour.

4.2.1 Media Narrative Regarding the Fast Fashion Industry – Main Topics

Table 8: Fast fashion-related media narrative – main topics

Topic	Example quotes
Fast fashion significantly contributes to environmental destruction (e.g. staggering amounts of waste, toxic dyes, carbon emissions, water source depletion, and water pollution).	<p>“The reality is fast fashion is helping kill the planet. Its negative effects are seemingly endless, from the continuing human rights abuses in garment factories and excessive water use to high CO2 emissions from airfreighted clothing.” (GB (19-04-11))</p> <p>“This is a toxic system of overproduction and consumption that has made fashion one of the world’s largest polluters, causing damage to the planet, exploiting workers, and harming animals.” (CA (22-08-09))</p>
The fast fashion industry extensively exploits cheap labour in third-world countries (e.g. low wages, exploitation and poor working conditions of garment workers).	<p>“Not only that, with so many inexpensive garments being rolled out so quickly, many items usually aren’t ethically made - so we’re left with problems like unsafe working conditions, inadequate pay and forced labour.” (IE (22-03-30))</p> <p>“Labour in fast fashion is often exploitative and dangerous, sometimes involving child labour.” (CA (21-03-21))</p> <p>“There are the toxic chemicals, poor labour conditions and the health issues that affect the workers.” (AU (19-08-10))</p>
Fast fashion is associated with reckless consumer behaviour (e.g. overconsumption of cheap clothes, impulsive buying, quick disposal of clothes).	<p>“Cheap prices and celebrity influencers have driven a “pick, click, wear and bin” mentality.” (GB (19-09-24))</p> <p>“Sadly though, one of the most enduring trends on TikTok are try-on “hauls”, where creators receive packages full of clothing from a fast fashion retailer and then review each item on video. Often, this type of content is sponsored, so creators are paid to give positive endorsements of the (usually) cheap clothing.” (AU (22-09-03))</p> <p>“Americans buy a piece of clothing every five days, on average, and we pay so little for our garments that we’ve come to think of them as disposable.” (US (21-02-06))</p>

The main topics that emerged from our discourse analysis of the media narrative on the fashion industry are as follows. First and foremost, the fast fashion-related media narrative revolves around the unsustainable nature of fast fashion in general and the detrimental impact of fast fashion on the environment. The second most common theme is unethical and exploitative labour practices in sweatshops, including child labour and workplace safety issues. In addition, the media addresses the economic aspects, such as meagre wages, to keep production costs as low as possible. A large proportion of media narrative is devoted to consumer behaviour, especially when it comes to the consumers' need to follow and buy the latest fashion trends for little money, which propels the fast fashion industry. The latter is also highlighted in the narrative on Instagramers, TikTokers and fast fashion influencers/celebrities who perpetuate the (over)consumption of fast fashion. Our findings are summarised and illustrated with the examples from our corpus in Table 8.

4.2.2 Media Narrative Regarding the Sustainable Fashion Industry – Main Topics

Like the fast fashion-related media narrative, the sustainable fashion-related media narrative also addresses issues connected with the environment, labour practices, and consumer behaviour. However, in contrast to the former, this narrative focuses on lowering the carbon footprint and reducing or minimising other environmental impacts of the fashion industry. This is narrated by advocating environmentally friendly practices such as using recycled and organic materials, upcycling, circular industry chain, lesser use of toxic chemicals and, to a great extent, the reduction of waste. The latter is intertwined with the narrative about consumer behaviour where conscious consumption is highlighted (i.e. prioritising quality over quantity, making informed purchasing decisions, buying less, using clothes for longer periods of time, and supporting ethical brands). Lastly, the sustainable fashion-related narrative concerning labour practices revolves around safe and humane working conditions as well as fair wages for garment workers. These prevailing topics established with our discourse analysis of media narrative regarding the sustainable fashion industry are summarised and illustrated in Table 9.

Table 9: Sustainable fashion-related media narrative – main topics

Topic	Example quotes
<p>Sustainable fashion emphasises lessening the fashion industry’s negative impact on the environment (e.g. waste reduction via recycling and upcycling, the use of eco-friendly/organic materials, and minimising water and chemicals use).</p>	<p>“This is the reason cutting CO2 emissions, addressing overproduction, reducing pollution and waste, supporting biodiversity, and ensuring that garment workers are paid a fair wage and have safe working conditions, are all crucial to the scope of sustainability.” (IN (22-06-08))</p> <p>“This includes responsible fabric choices, the use of non-toxic dyes, upcycling, waste reduction and ethical labour practices. Sustainable fashion considers the future of the planet and the people making and wearing the clothes.” (ZA (21-08-24))</p>
<p>Sustainable fashion advocates fair labour practices and supply chain transparency (e.g. safe working conditions, humane work environment, fair wages).</p>	<p>“Supporting sustainable fashion practices helps lessen the fashion industry’s environmental effects while encouraging fair labour standards and ethical production processes. You can make a difference worldwide by shopping from businesses that promote sustainability.” (NZ (23-04-19))</p>
<p>Consumers support sustainable fashion via conscious consumption, but this fashion tends to be expensive (e.g. choosing quality over quantity, second-hand shopping, buying less, buying clothes made of natural materials, supporting ethical brands).</p>	<p>“At the heart of sustainable fashion, we find consumers who are interested in extending the lifetime of their clothes. Clothing made from natural materials is generally far better when it comes to active life, let alone they are renewable resources not contributing to microplastic pollution.” (GB (20-01-17))</p> <p>“There’s the idea that sustainable fashion is expensive, and rightly so in a way, because if you use the right materials and pay people properly, clothes are more expensive.” (IE (19-08-25))</p> <p>“Indian consumers are warming up to the concept of sustainable fashion, as they become increasingly conscious of the environmental impact of their shopping habits. Retail brands in India are riding the trend of eco-friendly shopping by introducing sustainable offerings.” (IN (21-09-19))</p> <p>“To cut down on textile waste, we all need to commit to buying less, and buying better.” (IE (20-03-05))</p>

5 Conclusions

This study was designed to explore the media narrative on fast fashion and sustainable fashion from two interrelated aspects. First, by undertaking a quantitative corpus-driven keyword analysis, we identified the prevailing terminology frequently used in the mass media concerning fast fashion and sustainable fashion. More specifically, we focused on selected terms related to the environmental impact, labour practices, and consumer behaviour in the context of these two types of fashion. Second, the qualitative discourse analysis of the textual context in which the

terms “fast fashion” and “sustainable fashion” occurred in our corpus showed two contrastive media narratives surrounding fast fashion and sustainable fashion. That is, fast fashion is shown in a negative light as it is associated with having a detrimental impact on the environment, with unsustainable consumer habits and with unethical labour practices. On the other hand, sustainable fashion is portrayed in the media as being responsible towards the environment and the garment workers, as well as being related to ethical consumer choices.

As our study was small-scale, it was limited to a small-sized corpus and a limited number of terms under analysis. Regardless of these limitations, the study shows the views on the two types of fashion presented in the mass media. In addition, the attitudes expressed towards the two types of fashion reflect the academic research on the fashion industry as given in our literature review.

This linguistic study adds to the understanding of current societal views on the fashion industry. By actively promoting sustainable fashion and its environmental and social benefits and criticising fast fashion for its negative impacts, mass media has a vital role in shaping societal attitudes towards the fashion industry at many levels. By doing so, it also contributes to the attainment of several UN SDGs (e.g. ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, ending poverty, ensuring healthy lives and sustainable management of water, ensuring decent work).

The findings of this study have important implications for practice and research. Regarding education, the topics highlighted in this paper could be addressed at all levels of education by focusing on general or more narrow aspects of the fashion industry as defined by the key terms and narratives presented here. As for future research, comparative analyses of fashion-related media narratives across different regions and languages are welcome.

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