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**A Theoretical Research on Sustainability in the Fashion Industry**

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**Abstract**

The concept of sustainable fashion has been widely used in the literature and industry in recent years. It is seen that the rapid change of fashion trends and the increasing production and consumption rate in the garment industry bring negative environmental impacts. For this reason, the priority of sustainability in the context of the fashion industry is focused on improving existing fashion systems by prioritizing ecological integrity and social order. In this study, firstly, sustainability and its importance are emphasized and sustainability in the fashion industry is discussed. Examining the radical changes in the fashion industry, which has an important place in the economies of countries, which is changing and growing, and analyzing the practices and studies of brands that have an important positioning in the fashion industry regarding sustainability in fashion are analyzed within the framework of sustainable marketing. In this research, which provides examples of sustainability strategies applied in the fashion industry; it is aimed to raise awareness among producers, consumers and researchers, to draw attention to sustainable fashion and to make suggestions to relevant sector professionals.

**Keywords**

Sustainability, Sustainable Fashion, Sustainable Marketing Strategies

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## Moda Endüstrisinde Sürdürülebilirlik Üzerine Teorik Bir Araştırma

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### Öz

Sürdürülebilir moda kavramı, son yıllarda literatürde ve endüstride yaygın olarak kullanılmaktadır. Moda trendlerinin hızlı değişimi ve giysi endüstrisindeki artan üretim ve tüketim oranlarının çevresel olumsuz etkiler yarattığı gözlemlenmektedir. Bu nedenle, moda endüstrisinin sürdürülebilirlik bağlamındaki önceliği, ekolojik bütünlük ve toplumsal düzeni ön planda tutarak mevcut moda sistemlerini iyileştirmeye odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, öncelikle sürdürülebilirlik ve önemi vurgulanmakta ve moda endüstrisinde sürdürülebilirlik ele alınmaktadır. Ülkelerin ekonomilerinde önemli bir yere sahip olan moda endüstrisindeki radikal değişiklikler incelenmekte, değişim ve büyüme içinde olan bu endüstride sürdürülebilirlik konusunda önemli bir konumda bulunan markaların uygulamaları ve yapılan çalışmalar, sürdürülebilir pazarlama çerçevesinde analiz edilmektedir. Moda endüstrisinde uygulanan sürdürülebilirlik stratejilerine örnekler sunan bu araştırmada; üreticiler, tüketiciler ve araştırmacılar arasında farkındalık yaratılması, sürdürülebilir moda dikkat çekilmesi ve ilgili sektör profesyonellerine önerilerde bulunulması amaçlanmaktadır.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Sürdürülebilirlik, Sürdürülebilir Moda, Sürdürülebilir Pazarlama Stratejileri

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## Introduction

The development of technology, industrialization, the change of consumption habits of individuals and the rapid growth of the consumer society have shown themselves in many sectors in a way that they will lead to ecological and social problems as well as economic developments. The rapid increase in the world population, the increasing destruction of natural resources with industrialization, the uncontrolled increase and diversification of consumer demands and needs, and the unconscious consumption habits that have emerged as a result have begun to be met with reactions by both civil society organizations and conscious consumers. Consumers are now more aware of the ecological and ethical problems of the goods they purchase and are changing their shopping habits as a result (Shirvanimoghaddam, 2020; Grazzini et al., 2021). From the perspective of the fashion industry discussed in this theoretical study, efficient mass production in low-cost countries leads to low clothing prices, leading consumers to impulsive purchases and unsustainable consumption behavior. Problems such as excessive consumption, very short lifespan of products and premature disposal of products lead to concerns about sustainability today (Niinimäki, 2013). At this point, the increasing awareness of the destructive effect of the accelerating consumption worldwide has brought the efforts to protect the natural balance to the forefront, and sustainability has become one of the most critical issues in today's production and consumption discussions. With the impact of globalization on developing world economies, it is becoming increasingly important to ensure the sustainability of businesses against social, economic and environmental negativities.

As a result of globalization and rapid developments in technology, competition between businesses is increasing day by day. In this environment, businesses that want to maintain their profitability have started to be more customer-oriented in their marketing activities. Today, when the number of conscious consumers is increasing, businesses want to attract the attention of their customers within the framework of social responsibility, sensitive to the ecological balance. The most important key to the competitive advantage that businesses aim for in terms of sustainability is to be able to correctly respond to problems such as how businesses can survive, how they can improve themselves, where, when, how, and what kind of products or services will be offered to consumers in a way that is sensitive to the ecological balance and social justice. In this study, these concerns and the increasing importance of sustainability constituted the main motivation for investigating the issue of sustainability in the fashion industry.

Sustainability in fashion encompasses a range of practices, from the use of environmentally friendly materials and ethical labor practices to reducing waste and carbon emissions. It also extends to promoting circular economy models, where products are designed with longevity in mind and repair, reuse and recycling are encouraged. As consumers become more aware of the environmental and social impact of their purchasing decisions, they are increasingly demanding greater transparency and accountability from brands. This change in consumer behavior presents both challenges and opportunities for fashion companies. In this context, sustainability is not only an ethical or operational concern, but also a strategic marketing tool. Another source of motivation for this study is the compilation of practices implemented in the fashion industry. Because brands that embrace sustainability can differentiate themselves in today's competitive market and develop loyalty among consumers who prioritize ethical and environmentally conscious products. With these motivations, this study explores the scope and application areas of the sustainable fashion industry within the framework of sustainable marketing through a literature review. In order to concretize the subject, sample practices from these areas are presented and recommendations are made for both consumers and manufacturers and marketing professionals operating in the fashion industry.

### 1. The Concept of Sustainability

The meaning that the concept of sustainability has gained today coincides with the second half of the 20th century. Rapidly developing technology in the world and its industrial reflections have created environmental impacts and the problem of diminishing renewable resources has emerged. Therefore, the first awareness of the global society and the threat of extinction of the continuity of natural resources led to the emergence of an environmentalist movement that gained strength in the 70s. In this context, the Stockholm Conference held in 1972 with the participation of 113 countries is seen as the first step taken at the international level to seek solutions to environmental and ecological problems that threaten the future of humanity. The concept of sustainable development, which had been widely discussed since the late 1970s, was officially introduced to the international agenda by the World Commission on Environment and Development, established by the United Nations in 1983. This idea was thoroughly elaborated in the 1987 report titled *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report (Torunoğlu, 2023). The concrete definition of the idea of sustainability in the literature dates back to the

early 19th century (Bozlağan, 2005). During the 1970s and 1980s, marketing academics increasingly focused on environmental and ethical issues, leading to the emergence of new research areas examining how environmental concerns influence consumer behavior. Since the 1970s, both academics and consumers have shown growing interest in environmental issues and sustainable marketing within the field of marketing (Van Dam & Apeldoorn, 1996; Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2012).

Sustainability has a definition in almost every field. Perhaps the most important reason for the emergence of concepts such as sustainable production, sustainable design, sustainable living, sustainable development, sustainable packaging, sustainable distribution, sustainable consumption is the contamination of the world's resources and their gradual exhaustion. In view of the fact that concepts related to sustainability are now included as a regulatory principle in various corporate research and policy initiatives is partly due to the recognition of this reality. The concept of sustainability was first introduced in Europe in 1713 by the German forester and scientist Hans Carl von Carlowitz in his book *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* (Heinberg & Lerch, 2010).

The concept of sustainability is closely related to the science of economics. In economics, it is emphasized that individuals have unlimited needs while the world's resources are limited. For this reason, the emphasis on the best management of scarce resources reminds the goal of development in sustainability. On the other hand, when the relationship between economics and marketing discipline is taken into account, ensuring sustainability in marketing is an issue that should be given importance due to the criticism of the aim of marketing to encourage continuous consumption as a result of production (Cengiz, 2021). Sustainable marketing involves finding the most effective regulatory frameworks to manage marketing's role within the constraints of a limited ecological space. Its purpose is to satisfy consumer needs optimally by allocating environmental resources in the form of goods or services, while staying within externally imposed limits (Van Dam & Apeldoorn, 1996).

The definition of leaving a world to future generations with the most favorable economic and ecological and social conditions, in short, a livable world, actually explains sustainability to us. The fact that something is sustainable means that it maintains its current state and is able to renew itself day by day. Sustainability is the consumption of the natural environment and resources without ignoring that future generations will also use them. Namely, it is the just allocation of natural resources to meet the needs of both current and future generations (Şenocak & Bursalı, 2018).

The core idea of sustainability involves the concept of "being able to be maintained over time". This suggests that any society that is unsustainable will not be able to persist in the long run and will eventually cease to function. The term "sustainability" was first introduced in literature in 1972 in the report *Limits to Growth 2*, published by the "Club of Rome" (Colombo, 2001). When something is sustainable, it means that it maintains its current state and is able to renew itself day by day. The designation sustainability became widely adopted after 1987, when the Brundtland Report from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development expressed sustainable development as "development that satisfies the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Heinberg & Lerch, 2010). In other words, sustainability can also be explained as the fair distribution of natural resources between today's generation and the next. In this context, the aim of leaving a world that can be left to future generations with the most appropriate economic, ecological and social conditions is a step towards sustainability. Steps towards sustainability do not only mean changes in products and technologies. Sustainable development is a necessity for countries. It requires a radical overhaul not only of production technologies and styles, but also of the consumption patterns that drive them. While it is very important for businesses to design efficient industrial processes, smarter and cleaner technologies, greener and more ethical products, it is not enough. What is important at this point is the implementation of marketing strategies that will lead consumers to more sustainable consumption habits (Jackson, 2004). The main obstacle to the adoption of sustainable practices by governments, businesses and consumers is that it requires a radical change in the way individuals live and think (Peattie, 2012). While macro marketing promotes sustainable consumption as a way to achieve sustainable development, there is little agreement on how this can be accomplished (Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2012). For this reason, in the continuation of the study, sustainable marketing practices of brands that have achieved successful brand positioning in the fashion industry were examined through the integration of sustainable fashion and sustainable marketing strategies.

## 1.1. Sustainable Fashion and Sustainable Marketing

The concept of sustainability in marketing involves the creation, communication, and delivery of value to customers in a manner that maintains or improves both environmental and human resources (Martin & Schouten, 2014). According to Belz and Peattie (2009), it is the process of planning, organizing, executing, and managing marketing efforts and resources to satisfy consumer needs and desires, while also considering social and environmental factors and achieving business goals.

As a result of rapid population growth, rising global incomes, and improved living standards, the production and consumption of clothing have been steadily increasing in recent few ten years (Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020). Today, the steps taken on sustainability, which businesses attach importance to in their marketing practices, are developing day by day and new application areas related to sustainability are emerging in almost every sector. One of these is the fashion industry. Sustainability in the fashion sector is a very broad concept that includes the idea of end-of-life evaluation by considering the whole process from the production stage of the product to the usage stage. The fact that the products produced have more than one life cycle is seen as the best option among the alternatives, and it is aimed to design how they can be repurposed after their initial life round. Looking at it from an environmental angle, using the product as it is and designing a new product with minor changes or recycling it are among the best options (Niinimäki, 2013). From a circular economy point of view, for sustainability, the product should be durable, recyclable, repairable, in short, the performance of the product should be defined at the design stage before the product is produced. The circular economy offers an alternative to the traditional linear economy (which involves manufacturing, usage, and disposal), focusing on keeping resources in circulation for as long as possible. It aims to preserve the value of materials during their use and redesign them to produce new products (Shirvanimoghaddam, 2020). The choices made during the design phase impact every stage of a garment's life cycle, from the selection of raw materials to the dyeing and finishing processes, accessories, labeling, and waste utilization. For designers, designing products that do not appeal to consumers but are sustainable and fully recyclable will lag behind success and will not bring success (Koszewska, 2018). From this perspective, sustainable fashion must encompass the entire lifecycle, from production to consumption, considering all stages such as design, production, logistics, use, and disposal. This means that sustainable fashion should address environmental and social impacts at every stage of its lifecycle, aiming to minimize these effects.

The textile industry, one of the world's oldest and largest sectors, has a major impact on the economic development of both developed and developing countries. It is also a high employment industry worldwide, encompassing the production and sale of fashion, textiles and apparel. The fashion industry's production and consumption processes, which are extensive and resource-intensive on a global scale, have significant environmental consequences. The fashion industry has become one of the most environmentally detrimental industries today. The fast fashion model's assumption of infinite resources fuels environmental destruction. This industry is a major contributor to textile waste, both during production and consumer use. In the United States alone, in 2013, a staggering 12.83 million tons of clothing out of a total of 15.13 million tons were not reused (Lawless & Medvedev, 2016). This highlights the urgent need for sustainable practices and responsible consumption in the fashion industry. Iran and Schrader stated that in the USA, 2.5 million tons of textile waste in 1980 was 7.4 million tons in 1995 and 15.1 million tons in 2013 (2017). The fashion industry is known as a sector where the greatest impact on the environment is linked to primary water consumption and wastewater production (Paździor et al., 2017). The textile industry has seen a dramatic increase in production over the past two decades, doubling its output. Simultaneously, global textile consumption per capita has also doubled, rising from 7 kg to 13 kg annually. Over two-thirds of textiles are discarded, with only 15% being recycled (Shirvanimoghaddam, 2020). These figures call into question current practices worldwide and highlight the importance of solving this complex problem, which requires open collaboration between various industrial and marketing partners.

Sustainable fashion is a movement advocating for ecological and social justice in the fashion industry. It addresses not only the product but also the broader social, cultural, environmental, and economic systems related to fashion. Sustainable fashion aims to create a positive impact on ecosystems and communities. Sustainable fashion is part of a larger movement towards a more sustainable future, aiming to create a positive impact on ecosystems and communities through ethical and environmentally friendly practices. To realize this vision, strategies such as prioritizing local production, extending the lifespan of materials, emphasizing timeless designs, minimizing waste, and reducing the environmental footprint of production and consumption must be implemented. This trend also aims to raise awareness and encourage environmentally friendly consumption

(Saygın, 2023). Sustainable fashion is a fashion approach in which the rights of every link in the process, from the producer to the designer, from the consumer to the environment, are respected, a fair trade is dominant, envisages long-term use, prevents the waste of the environment and natural resources, and encourages quality shopping against unnecessary shopping (Niinimäki, 2013; Çetiner & Tunca, 2022). Therefore, sustainable fashion, a key player in the global fashion industry, is thought to have the potential to drive significant positive changes for both the environment and society.

The fashion industry's unsustainable practices have far-reaching consequences, negatively impacting society, the environment, and the economy. Eliminating or even preventing these negative impacts in the sector is possible with sustainable strategies (Fletcher, 2010). Sustainable fashion approach is not only about products. Sustainable fashion approach is a complex structure that includes social, cultural, financial and ecological systems in which fashion takes place. It is evident that sustainable practices in the fashion industry are both an opportunity and a responsibility for businesses. Therefore, instead of seeing the sustainability movement of the fashion industry as a limitation for production, it should be seen as a force that creates environmentally friendly products and develops innovative solutions (Williams et al., 2009). The fashion industry can pave the way to a sustainable future by prioritizing ethical sourcing, eco-friendly materials, and responsible production methods.

Therefore, this section delves into the sustainability strategies employed by various fashion brands.

## **1.2. Sustainability Strategies of Fashion Brands**

Mavi is the first and only Turkish ready-to-wear brand to be recognized by the world's leading environmental disclosure platform, the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), by being included in its prestigious Global "A" List for Climate Change. Beyond its dominant position in the Turkish denim market, Mavi is among the top four largest brands in the ready-to-wear sector. With its All Blue collection, Mavi produces products that use less water in raw materials and production processes. Environmental audits assess water usage and related risks within the supply chain, promoting water reuse as a sustainable solution. Additionally, the company plans to establish its own solar power plant. To reduce the significant indirect emissions from purchased goods and services, the company has implemented a strategy to evaluate suppliers' greenhouse gas emissions through audits. At Mavi, waste is handled with a circular economy approach. Waste generated throughout the production process is repurposed to create sustainable products. Mavi works with suppliers that can meet the high standards set for supply chain management, and 86% of production takes place in Turkey. Mavi also supports Turkey's socioeconomic development by directing 80% of its total payments to local producers, thus contributing to economic sustainability. Mavi has designed a sustainable store concept called the "eco store" to reduce the environmental impact of its stores, particularly their carbon footprint. Compared to a standard Mavi store, an eco store demonstrates 25% lower energy consumption, 20% reduced water usage, and 30% less raw material utilization. To enhance energy efficiency, stores are equipped with more efficient LED lighting. The products of a special collection are produced from organic and recycled sustainable materials. The brand prioritizes quality, design, and product performance when selecting sustainable fabric blends. These products, crafted using sustainable methods, are entirely vegan and feature labels made from recycled paper (Mavi, 2023). By incorporating sustainable materials and ethical production practices, Mavi's special collections demonstrate a dedication to creating a more sustainable future for the fashion industry.

Beymen, one of Turkey's leading luxury retail brands, announced its sustainability roadmap to the public by saying "We Have a Promise for the World". Among its targets, it is claimed that all packaging of Beymen Group will be made of 100 percent sustainable certified materials by 2024, and that cellulosic materials will be ensured to comply with sustainability standards by preferring Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified products. It is committed to zero waste and zero emission by 2040 with water saving, cotton sustainability and waste management targets. It aims to increase the rate of female employment in line with the principle of equality. Beymen stores also aim to raise awareness among customers with sustainability talks (Capital, 2023).

Zara is a clothing retail brand owned by the Spanish textile manufacturer founded in 1963. As one of the Spanish fashion giants, the Zara brand stands out with its promise that all clothing will be "sustainable" by 2025 and its sustainable strategies, which aim for practices that utilize more efficient technologies that consume less energy by 2040 and support the use of clean energy throughout the value chain. To achieve this goal, Zara has introduced a pilot platform that enables customers to repair, resell, or donate their used clothing, thereby extending the lifespan of the brand's garments. Clothes collection boxes are located in stores to collect customers' unused clothes and give them a new life through NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations). It is stated that 100% of the



electricity used in Zara's facilities such as offices, logistics centers, factories and stores is provided from renewable sources. Within the scope of the Green to Pack program, all packaging contents are redesigned and steps are taken to use recycled content in packaging production and to prolong the lifespan of packaging. One of the goals is to completely eliminate single-use plastics for customers and ensure that all packaging is collected and either recycled or reused within the supply chain. It also encourages the use of organic cotton and recyclable polyester in its products. The production process follows strict environmental standards, supporting the initiative to promote the production of man-made cellulose yarns, viscose and modal derived from specific wood pulps. The brand is also dedicated to protecting biodiversity, mitigating climate change, and reducing water and energy consumption (Zara, 2023). These efforts of the brand make a competitive contribution to meeting the demand of consumers for environmentally conscious products and are effective in the evolution of the sector towards a greener future.

H&M Group has been included in the Dow Jones Sustainability World Index for 11 consecutive years, with its score providing a spot on the list of global companies recognized as leaders in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance. The H&M Group is notable for its sustainability as a second-hand brand, where people sell their favorite pieces directly to other customers. In 2021, the brand launched a pilot program to recycle waste materials into new clothing and accessories. This initiative resulted in the recycling of an additional 500 tons of materials and the creation of recycled yarn for approximately 1.5 million new products. H&M established the Green Fashion Initiative to support its suppliers in switching from fossil fuels. Its goal is to reach net-zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2040 and reduce GHG emissions by 56% by 2030. It has also managed to reduce relative water consumption in the supply chain, which is a significant achievement in terms of both environmental impact and resource efficiency. The in-store clothing collection program is available to customers worldwide, with practices such as reusing or recycling donated items into new products or materials. In 2022, H&M group customers contributed to the sustainable fashion movement by delivering 14,768 tons of textiles (H&M, 2023). In another strategy for sustainability in fashion, H&M has set out with the slogan "wash less, repair, recycle and repeat" and has become an important example of sustainable fashion marketing by establishing repair workshops in its department stores in Stockholm, Vienna, London and Paris where clothes can be repaired and renewed (Metlioğlu & Yakin, 2021). Reducing water usage, a key practice for the company, not only helps preserve a vital resource, but also aligns with increasing consumer demand for sustainable practices in the fashion industry. This reduction reflects a broader commitment to minimizing the ecological footprint of its production processes, which is increasingly important in a world where water scarcity is becoming a critical issue. These efforts highlight H&M's dedication to sustainability, showcasing that both companies and consumers play a crucial role in driving positive change in the fashion industry. These efforts highlight offering customers the opportunity to participate in garment recycling, repair, and sustainable practices, H&M empowers individuals to make environmentally conscious choices, reinforcing the growing movement towards responsible consumption and helping to reduce the overall environmental impact of the fashion industry.

## **Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Studies**

Sustainability is an important concept today in the efficient use of resources for both producers and consumers. Therefore, taking important steps towards sustainability and being aware of its responsibility towards the environment and society should be one of the most fundamental duties of countries. The fashion industry attracts attention with its size and creates concern as it is one of the main industries that harm the environment. Although some measures have been taken to protect the environment in the fashion industry, how businesses can encourage consumers to buy sustainable fashion products and how consumers make purchasing decisions regarding sustainable fashion products is still a question that awaits an answer (Grazzini et al., 2021).

Unsustainable practices in the fashion industry have negative social, environmental and economic impacts. Eliminating or even preventing these negative impacts in the sector is possible with sustainable strategies. Sustainable fashion approach is not only about products. The sustainable fashion approach includes the social, cultural, financial and ecological systems in which fashion takes place. It is seen that the use of sustainable practices in the fashion industry is both an opportunity and a necessity for today's businesses to gain competitive advantage. For this reason, instead of seeing the sustainability movement as a force of production, the fashion industry should be seen as an opportunity that creates environmentally friendly products, develops innovative solutions, and contributes to leaving a livable world for future generations. In this direction, creating awareness among consumers about sustainability in the fashion industry will be an important marketing strategy.

Research and industry practices show that the concept of sustainable fashion is adopted and implemented by many conscious designers and brands. Ecological integrity and adapting to this change of unsustainable fashion systems is a necessity for businesses in the fashion industry in the competitive market. Therefore, it is thought that achieving sustainability in the world depends on the joint efforts and interest of government policies, the private sector, business stakeholders and consumers in a sustainable way, beyond being a necessity that stands out in the marketing strategies of brands.

In line with the conclusions we have drawn from this theoretical study, it is planned to understand consumer behavior on this issue by using quantitative research methods in the future. In this research, consumer-based brand equity for brands operating in the fashion industry can be considered as the dependent variable and sustainability strategies as the independent variable, and data on sustainability and the fashion industry can be obtained. It is thought that conducting a research on the perspectives of business managers will also contribute to the literature.

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