

“Study on Customer Engagement in Sustainable Fashion: The Influence of Marketing Practices”

Nidhi Singh¹
Amity Business School
Noida

Introduction

Sustainable apparel is defined as ‘clothing which incorporates one or more aspects of social and environmental sustainability’, but a sustainable supply chain considers the triple bottom line. For consumers who are interested in sustainable products, supporting companies that practice the triple bottom line is essential. Over one billion apparel and accessory products are produced every year, adding over \$3 trillion to the global economy. The cost of producing these items involves extensive resources, including water, cotton, and energy. In addition, three-fifths of the products purchased are discarded within one year. While sustainable initiatives begin with production, it must also include a change in consumer consumption patterns. Since trends in apparel products change quickly, it is difficult to promote the reuse or extended use of the product. If all of the trashed apparel and textile products were recycled, the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the reduced impact would be the equivalent of the carbon dioxide emissions of 7.3 million cars.

Consumers have limited awareness of the unsustainable impact of apparel consumption and have a limited understanding of sustainability in general. Despite attempts to educate consumers on the challenges of sustainable apparel consumption, it has become clear that the premise of sustainability itself will not elicit changes in consumption patterns. In order for change to take place, consumers must understand the role that the care for and disposal of apparel products have on environmental sustainability.

Delaying the disposal of an apparel product helps sustainability. However, it is essential to permanently reduce needless waste through making thoughtful purchases and using already purchased apparel to the end of its lifecycle. Recycling reduces the volume of textile waste in landfills, as well as the resources such as water, fibers, and chemical dyestuffs. There is a significant lack of recovery of apparel waste when attempting to recycle textiles, as consumers do not typically have the necessary knowledge on how to dispose of their apparel in a sustainable way, including the proper recycling method.

Some communities in the United States have attempted to facilitate the recycling of apparel through recycling contests and corresponding prizes. Overall, consumers’ positive emotions found when recycling can overshadow the negative emotions associated with being wasteful. Thus, a call for research on the factors that influence waste, reuse, and recycling was made by Sun and Trudel, which would lead to actionable initiatives for policymakers.

¹ Amity Business School, Noida.

Consumers must also communicate with others about sustainability in order for it to ‘catch on’ among their peer groups. In a study by Youn and Jung, consumer data on sustainability were analyzed and determined that consumers were talking the most about “eco-friendly”, “recycle”, and “ethical”. These terms are broad in nature and signal a way for retailers to communicate with consumers. Researchers must also continue research on sustainable apparel to help the industry, even though active research on sustainability in the apparel industry has dramatically increased in the recent years.

Its high time that people in general move towards sustainable fashion if not completely than at least partially but even in today’s world where everyone is so well informed and educated about anything and everything, most of the general public tends to ignore the impact that fast fashion has on our environment.

Fast fashion is something that severely impacts the nature and environment but textile industry is such a huge industry on a global as well as domestic level and also it is an unavoidable industry as in not even a single person can do without clothes and wearing just any clothes also won’t suffice as fashion these days is an integral part of people’s lives and is taken very seriously and there is a lot of thought put into what one should wear in order to his or her best.

Different occasions call for different types and styles of clothing. From ethnic to western, from casual to partywear, from edgy to chic and vibrant, fashion is something that differs from person to person. People treat fashion as a way to showcase as well as enhance their personality.

But what people tend to forget is that being fashionable comes at a very big cost not just on the monetary aspect but also in respect to the resources that are used or we can wasted in producing these fashionable looking clothes and the adverse effect the production of these products have on the environment.

Big fashion brands that are constantly launching new lines of clothing or new collection in every few weeks or months are loved by their customers for their ability to come up with new styles and looks regularly and giving them endless options to choose from but what they don’t understand is not only is it unnecessary to buy clothes so frequently but it also is extremely hazardous for nature and the human beings as production of new clothes on such a large scale and such frequent rate leads to depletion of natural resources that are very difficult or we can say impossible to replenish which poses a huge threat of lack of resources for our upcoming generations.

Leading Fast fashion brands like Zara, Hennes & Mauritz AB, Marks & Spencer, Forever 21, etc are some of the leading fast fashion brands that are immensely popular among the youth of Indian as well as International consumers but the level of harm they cause to the environment due to their business is just not something that should be overlooked.

Sustainable fashion- A niche market

Even though sustainable fashion is the need of the hour, it is still a very niche category in the whole of fashion industry. When it comes to sustainability in fashion it is definitely costlier than fast fashion as people are still not very keen on moving towards sustainable fashion choices, also the market as a whole lacks the infrastructure that is needed for sustainable fashion brands to scale on huge levels leading to it being on the higher side of pricing.

Consumers, especially the youth consumers who are still studying or have just started earning look for products that look good and at the same time are not very heavy on their pockets leading them to avoid buying from sustainable fashion brands even if they are aware of them and their positive impact on the environment as their disposable income is comparatively low yet they strive to maintain their appearance. Having said that, today's youth is the sort of generation that does not shy away from trying new concepts or products if given the right amount of push and especially when it comes to clothing the youth loves experimenting. Also, the younger generation is proving to be more in touch with the reality of what our environment is going through or what needs to be done to function sustainably.

Sustainable fashion needs to be made more mainstream and massy so as to reach to maximum consumers and popularize its concept and increase its demand in opposition of fast fashion. It can be done only when sustainable fashion labels or brands are successful in increasing their market share by capturing as much market as possible. It can be done only when such brands get the chance to build the right infrastructure that is needed for its market expansion and mass production. If such brands are able to build the right infrastructure then they will also be able to decrease their production cost leading to a significant decrease in their prices making it a cheaper product that will be easy to afford for a wider section of consumers making it a massy category in contrast to the existing niche product that it currently resides in due to the constraints that it currently faces such as lack of infrastructure of proper funding, etc.

Some of leading sustainable fashion labels in India:-

- **No Nasties:-** it is one of the most affordable sustainable fashion brands in the Indian market. Completely eco-friendly and organic, it is proving to be an awesome clothing wear option for consumers who are to embrace slow fashion.
- **Anokhi:-** it is one of the oldest brands to come up as a sustainable couture label. There exceptional quality and attractive hand dyed products are some of the best there is and since the past forty years, it is taken slow fashion to the forefront.
- **The Pot Plant:-** known for its naturally sourced clothing materials mainly Khaki garments this brand has never failed to deliver value-for-money products. Its easy breezy style of clothing has a very relaxed vibe to it.

Customer engagement

The customer-marketer relationship is not a one-time concept. If a brand is striving for its customers to be loyal to the brand, repurchase from the brand and also recommend it to others then it needs to make sure that the customers that purchase their product or are on the verge of purchasing their products or can be potential buyers all are well engaged and invested in the brand. Brands need to focus on building a relationship with such existing or potential buyers so that these consumers feel connected to them and also feel a sense of pride in the fact that they are being recognised by the brands they are associated with and that the brand that they purchase or might purchase products from does not only takes them as an additional number to add to its revenue but as someone that they would want to keep serving and coming up with new and better products for.

Customer engagement helps in giving a human touch to businesses and brands by giving a human or personal touch to different points of contact between the brand and its consumers or the buyer and the seller. It leads to better customer retention chances and also increases the chances of your brand attaining new customers on a regular basis as customers these days aren't interested in buying the products that they can use once or twice and move ahead of instead they want to associate themselves with brands and products that gives them satisfaction and makes them want to stay stuck with them using their products for as long as these consumers can and also increase the number of customers by giving positive word of mouth and reviews of their product to potential new buyers and build a community of people using same brands or products.

A brand that is successfully performing the task of engaging its customers is a sure shot successful brand as engaged customers tend to stick with their brand for a far longer period in comparison to that of unengaged customers and at the same time they encourage new consumers to purchase from that brand by giving good reviews, recommendations, etc.

Research Objective

The following are the objectives of doing this research:-

- To find out how many or what percentage of people are ready to adopt sustainable fashion.
- To study the influence of marketing on people's minds in the case of sustainable fashion
- To study whether more men or more women differ from changes.

3.1.1. Sampling

Sampling in research is defined as “the selection of a small number of elements from a larger defined target group of elements and expecting that the information gathered from the small

group will allow judgments to be made about the larger group” (Joseph F. Hair, Bush, & Ortinau, 2002, p. 333). Sampling is an essential step in the research process. Sampling is an art and science of selecting a relevant and representative sample from the target population to guide data collection and analysis in the right direction to obtain reliable and applicable results.

3.1.2. Population and Sample

A population is defined as “The aggregate of all the elements, sharing some common set of characteristics, that comprise the universe for the marketing research problem” (Naresh K. Malhotra & Birks, 2007, p. 405). To understand the important issues related to sampling in research, the population can be modified to "defined target population," which consists of all those elements identified for investigation (Joseph F. Hair et al., 2002). This target population can be identified as “The collection of elements or objects that possess the information sought by the researcher and about which inferences are to be made” (Naresh K. Malhotra & Birks, 2007, p. 406). These target populations and their characteristics can be identified with the context or environment the research is being conducted. Since the present study is not a census survey where all the elements of the population are available and considered, a sample has to be selected as participants or respondents of the study. A sample is a subset of elements of a target population with the entire representative characteristic.

The present research focuses on customer engagement behavior towards sustainable fashion brands; the study is confined to youth who are believed who might be concerned about their appearance and hence also about the fashion choices they make. Hence, the target population broadly considered for the study is Indian customers who are between 18 to 26 years of age.

3.1.3. Sample size

Sample sizes become critical in determining the overall cost of collecting the required primary data, the accuracy or representativeness of the data, and the insights that should be included in the current research models. According to the central limit theorem, data collected by a large sample size are approximated to be normally distributed. It is not always necessary to sample size should be large to better get better results. The concept of how large sample size can be decided with statistical methods or expert researcher advice. What sample size is adequate for a study is always a consensus issue. The researcher can provide a statistical, experiential or literature-based justification on the required sample size. However, it is important to minimize the sampling error while decided on the sample and its size. A “sampling error is any type of bias that is attributable to mistakes made in either the selection process of prospective sampling units or determining the sample size” (Joseph F. Hair et al., 2002, p. 340).

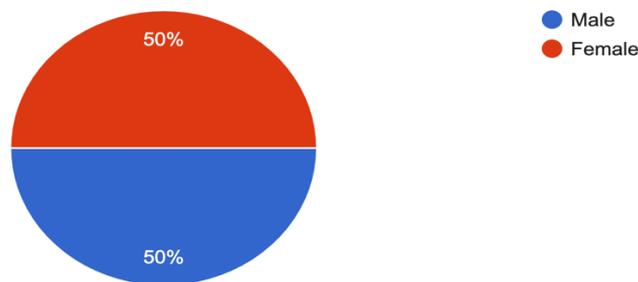
The present study has a sample size of 106 respondents consisting of both male and female respondents who were asked about their opinion on the need to shift to sustainable clothing and the impact that the shift might have on the environment and if they think that marketing can play a significant in popularizing the product category that is sustainable clothing.

3.2. Survey Instrument

To collect the data for the testing of hypotheses, a structured questionnaire is designed consisting of 13 different types of questions which help us understand consumers’ knowledge of sustainable fashion as well as their perception, also by analyzing the data collected through this questionnaire we get to know what the marketers can do to increase the interest as well as engagement of the buyers in this product category.

Gender

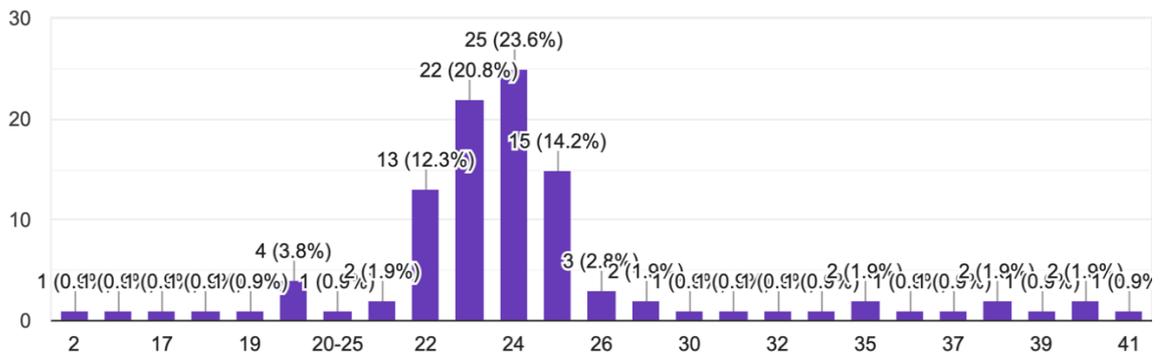
106 responses



The 1st question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired about the gender of the respondents and the respondents were to choose male or female and by looking at this pie chart it is clear that out of the total number of respondents that participated in this survey i.e. 106 respondents, the proportion of male and female respondents was absolutely same as 53 were male whereas 53 were female.

Age

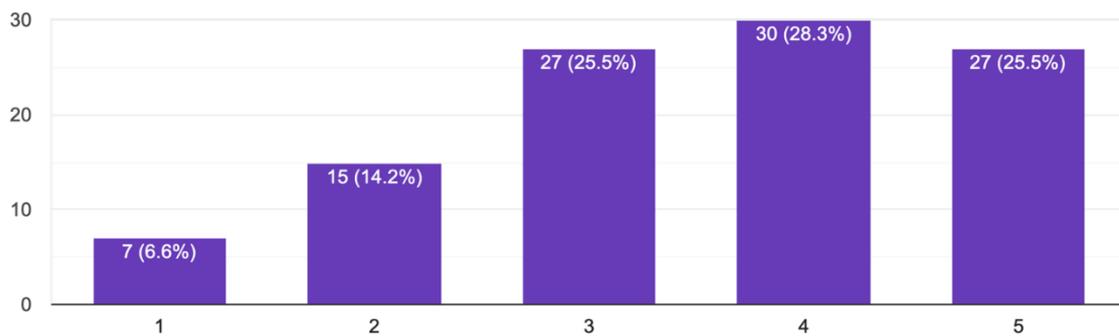
106 responses



The 2nd question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired about the age of the respondents and response type was a short answer where the respondents wrote their age in years. As this survey was done with the intention to study about the youth's perception, understanding and outlook towards sustainable fashion so most of the respondents of this survey were also from the age group of 20-30 years of age. Only about 10% of the respondents who participated in the survey were above the age of 30.

On the scale f 1-5 how important is fashion for you?

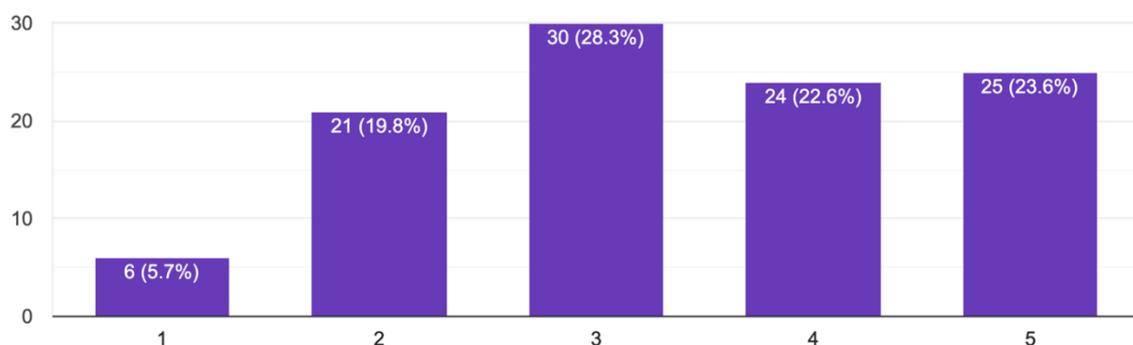
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The 3rd question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired about the importance that fashion held in the lives of the respondents. The response type was a Likert scale wherein 1 stood for least amount of interest whereas 5 stood for showing high interest in fashion and through this survey we got to know fashion holds high importance for the people of this generation as nearly 80% of the respondents rated the importance of fashion with 3 or a higher number and 1/4th of the respondents said the highest rate to show the importance of fashion in their lives.

On the scale of 1-5 how concerned are you about the environment?

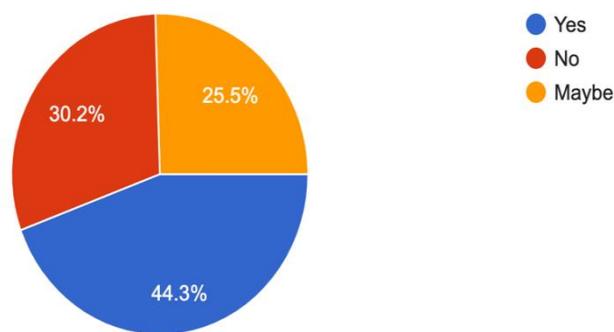
106 responses



The 4th question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired about the level of concern that the respondents had for the environment and by looking at these responses one thing becomes very clear that the youth nowadays is concerned about the environment as nearly 50% of them choose to rate their concern for the environment 4 or 5. Seeing this we can even say that it shouldn't be very difficult for marketers to make buyers shift from fast fashion to sustainable fashion as it has a very severe impact on the environment.

Have you heard of the concept of sustainable fashion?

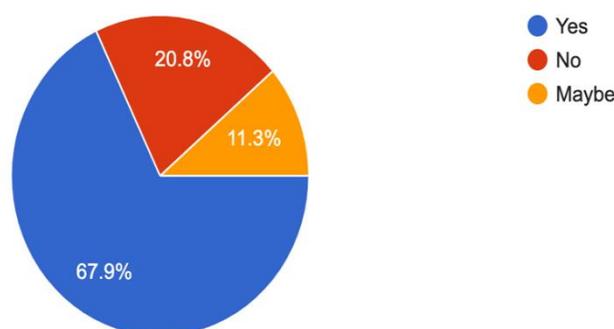
106 responses



The 5th question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired whether the respondents were aware of the concept of sustainable fashion or not. Nearly half of them said that they were already aware of the concept of sustainable fashion whereas the remaining half were not very clear about the concept. This shows that there is still a long road ahead when it comes to creating awareness about the concept and marketers have to work a lot on it so as to increase the awareness and interest of the youth in sustainable fashion which might lead to an increase in the market of sustainable fashion.

Are you an active user active user of social media?

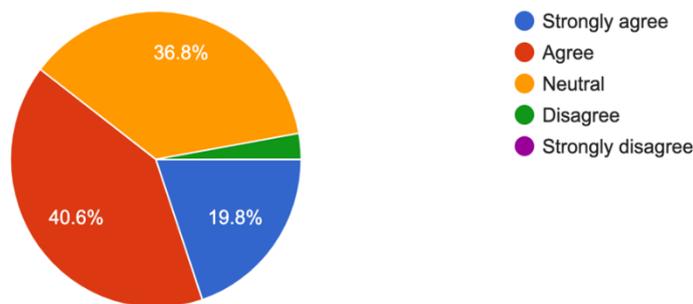
106 responses



The 6th question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired whether the respondents active users of social media or not and the results as expected show that most of them are indeed active users of social media and out of the 1/3rd of respondents that said that they aren't active social media users, more than 11% of the respondents at least were on social media platforms and using it often if not regularly and only 20% were not at all active on it. Hence social media can be a great way to promote sustainable fashion and increase customer engagement in the same.

Do u think it becomes easier for potential customers to adapt to new products or concepts (i.e. Sustainable fashion) if they are educated well about it?

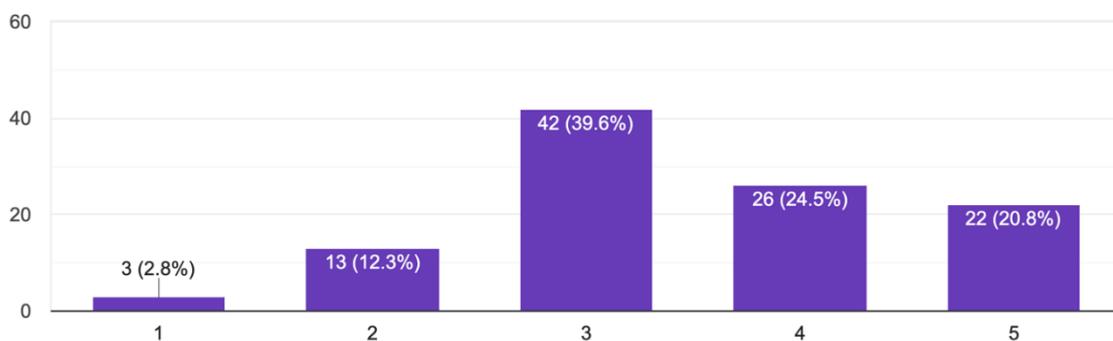
106 responses



The 7th question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired if the respondents think that it becomes easier for potential customers to adapt to new products or concepts if they are just educated well about it and 60% of respondents said yes to the question solidifying the need for marketers to educate and create awareness as much as possible if they want to increase their market share.

On a scale of 1 to 5 how important it is to educate customers about the benefits of choosing sustainable fashion over fast fashion

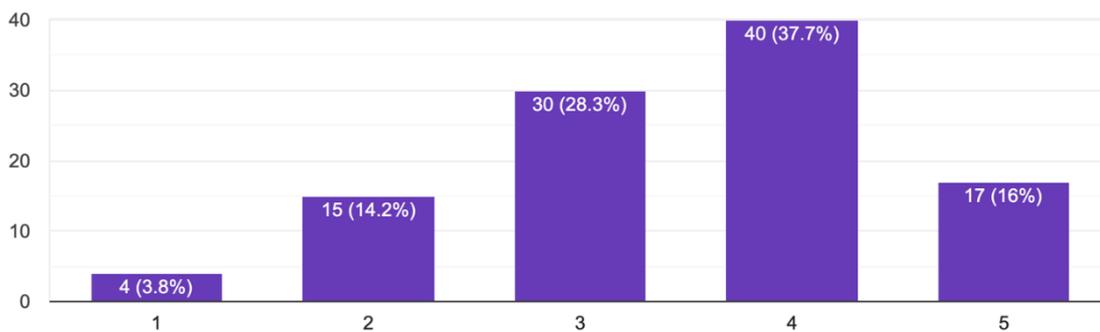
106 responses



The 8th question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired about the importance that it held to educate about the benefits of choosing sustainable fashion over fast fashion and nearly half the respondents said that it is indeed important, also if the target customers are aware of these benefits it becomes easier to shift to sustainable fashion from fast fashion making it is easier to avoid the harmful effects of fast fashion.

On a scale of 1 to 5 how much a marketing campaign can lead you to buy from sustainable fashion brand?

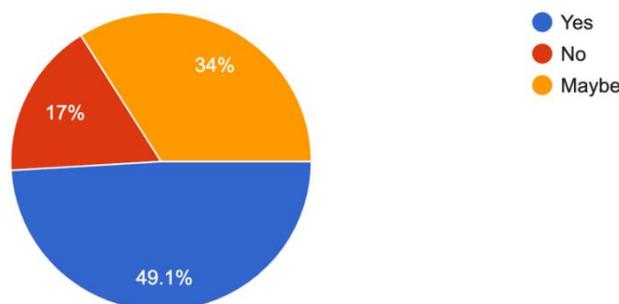
106 responses



The 9th question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired about the level to which the respondents think that marketing campaigns by sustainable fashion brands can lead the target customers towards buying such brands and nearly 80% of the respondents gave a rating of 3 or higher for this question solidifying the fact marketing indeed would an important role when it comes to making the target customers to buy more from the sustainable fashion brands.

Do you think making sustainable fashion choices impacts the environment?

106 responses



The 10th question which was asked in the questionnaire inquired from the respondents whether or not they think that making sustainable fashion choices impacts the environment and nearly 50% out of the total respondents said that indeed sustainable fashion choices impact the environment whereas as out of the remaining half, 34% weren't very sure about its impact on the environment which gives the marketers a chance to educate and turn such respondents in favour of sustainable fashion over fast fashion.

Findings

- Consumers often face the problem of sustainable clothes being out of their budget and hence they are left with no choice but to buy from fast fashion brands, but it can be cheaper than it is right now if the brands manufacturing it get the right infrastructure and are given a chance to scale their businesses.
- As the above-done hypothesis suggests, young consumers are definitely intrigued by the concept of sustainable fashion and are willing to even switch to it from fast fashion.
- Marketing can be a game changer when it comes to increasing the business of sustainable fashion brands as our hypothesis also tells us that doing the right kind and amount of marketing campaigns will surely impact the sales of a brand positively.
- According to our hypothesis, we can say that men as well women both are equally open to changes and hence should focus on coming up with clothes for both genders so as to get a large target market.

Suggestions

- Sustainable fashion brands should focus not only on making good products but also make sure that their brand is able to reach out to maximum number of people and teach them about the benefits of choosing their products over fast fashion brands.
- Social media is a great platform to maximize their reach and build not only a brand but to connect to new people and build a community of your consumers.
- Reach out to influencers who are popular amongst your target consumer base and have high engagement and try to collaborate with them for a long period of time as it helps in building trust in the consumers' minds.
- The government should try to provide support by helping them building the right infrastructure required to do business on large scale or giving such brands brands tax relief or grants so that more people get inclined towards starting a business that is sustainable and does not harm the environment.

Conclusion

Sustainable fashion is undeniably the need of the hour and consumers also are ready to move on from fast fashion brands to something that not only makes them look good but also helps them better the environment and save the planet. People these days are rapidly moving towards conscious choices not only in fashion products but other daily use products.

Even the people who aren't really aware of the concept of sustainable fashion can be led towards it with the help of right marketing practices done by the brands manufacturing and selling these products. Marketing will not only help in acquiring new customers but also retain old or existing customers by increasing the customer engagement of these brands.

And when it comes to increasing the customer engagement of any brand or giving it a platform to market there is nothing better than social media as it allows you to reach out a huge chunk of your target market at once that no offline marketing platform has the capacity of achieving so easily and it helps brands be consistent in their efforts and attracts the attention of people who are using social media which in today's times most people are doing.

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