

CULTURAL CONDITIONING: A STUDY OF INHERITED SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

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Abstract

The very term 'Fashion' implies a state of flux and is characterised by rapidly changing trends and increasingly fast consumption patterns. Unfortunately, the current linear model followed by the fashion and apparel sector generates over 92 million tonnes of textile waste annually. This number is estimated to increase by about 60 per cent between 2015 and 2030, to an annual total of 148 million tonnes of apparel and textile waste. This is equivalent to annual waste of 17.5kg per capita across the planet. This instant gratification lifestyle, instigated by the fast fashion model in the quest of higher and higher profits, encourages impulsive consumption and even quicker disposal and is simply not sustainable. Less than one per cent of material used to produce clothing is recycled into new clothing, and just 13 per cent of the industry's total material input is recycled in some way after it is used for clothes. This excessive generation of waste highlights the need for innovative ways to address these unsustainable practices by feeding the waste back into the supply chain system and it underscores the need to shift towards cradle to cradle or circular fashion model to make a smoother transition towards sustainability.

After the initial literature review, questionnaires were distributed to two specific target groups, and four sustainable practices—education and engagement, recovery and redistribution, reuse, and recycling—were highlighted from the responses received. These practices are central to a framework that shows possible care while making a purchase, as well as potential garment end-of-lifecycle applications. Open-ended data, in the form of interviews collected during the course of this research, highlights the importance of cultural conditioning within our societies. The traditional Indian society has always been inherently sustainable, wherein, the adults in the Indian traditional family / society as a whole incorporates the concept of reduction, recycling and reuse into every aspect of their daily life. This in turn, is simply absorbed into the sustainable practices followed by the younger generations in an unforced, gentle way. This paper briefly focusses on the current sustainability practices followed by the Indian youth and tries to look into the initiation/ roots of these practices, in order to investigate the impact of these traditional society-led practices on their current application. This paper uses cross-generational case study to look deeper into this phenomenon.

Introduction

The very term ‘Fashion’ implies a state of flux and is characterised by rapidly changing trends and increasingly fast consumption patterns. Unfortunately, the current linear model followed by the fashion and apparel sector generates over 92 million tonnes of textile waste annually. As per the Ellen MacArthur Foundation report (2017), if we consider the 60 per cent increase projected in the next decade, this makes an annual total of 148 million tonnes of apparel and textile waste. This is equivalent to waste of 17.5kg per capita across the planet, annually. This inclination towards the instant gratification lifestyle, instigated by the fast fashion model in the quest of higher and higher profits, is just not sustainable. “Of the 30.8kg (68lbs) of clothing and textiles that the average American throws away each year, about 85 per cent of it is destined for landfill. In the UK alone, over one million tonnes of clothing is thrown away each year. Textiles present a particular problem in landfill: synthetics do not decompose within a scalable timeline; and wool emits methane during decomposition, which is a key contributor to greenhouse gases” (Brown, 2013). This is creating massive environmental issues across the globe.

Inherent Conditioning

The entire premise of the fashion industry is based on demand and supply, just like any other business. This was in healthy equilibrium in the past, wherein, consumers would have to wait to get their needs catered to, before moving on to their wants. Supply was limited owing to the slower pace of handloom production and limited availability of resources.

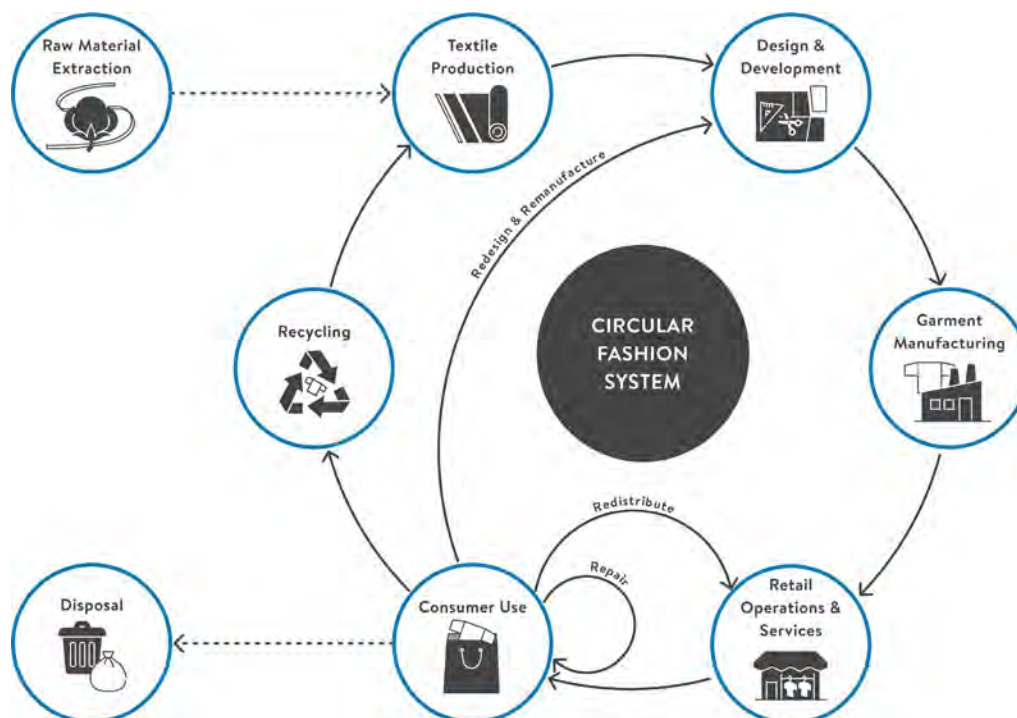


Figure 1. Circular Fashion System, Redress Design Award

Since the industrialisation of the fashion industry, we have been producing and consuming fashion as if we have an endless supply of natural resources and the unsustainable use is not affecting us. A vast majority of the industry is currently operating on a linear model: where finite resources are taken to make products that are then used for a short time, and finally disposed of as waste into landfills without any consideration towards the repercussions. Less than one per cent of material used to produce clothing is recycled into new clothing, and just 13 per cent of the industry's total material input is recycled in some way after it is used for clothes. These numbers and figures present a very dismal picture, but highlight the importance working towards a more sustainable practice, closing the loop as a circular fashion system (refer Figure 1).

This study aims to review people who actively thrift or up-cycle their clothing, thereby, reducing the apparel waste heading towards landfills and to understand the cultural conditioning, if any, behind it. Cultural conditioning, in simple words, is a process through which a person absorbs and interprets the influences, norms, and subliminal messaging from their surroundings and translates them into actions that they believe to be acceptable within their spheres. Every single person belonging to any community, works within a sphere that consists of many types of influences, both visible and subliminal, projected through different sources, some of which may overlap.

“The traditional Indian society has both a concept of hoarding (in case something might come in useful), and thriftiness. It is very normal to see things which have absolutely no value, such as old apparel items, newspapers and books, or utensils, being easily sold off to a scrap dealers to be re-used or re-cycled on the regular. Culturally, there is also an aversion to wasting anything that might be reused and this is prevalent across the grassroots levels” (Kapoor, 2022). When we focus on the recycle options for apparel products, the Indian diaspora still maintains a strict control of what finally reaches the landfills. As per the initial survey conducted as a part of this study, questionnaires were circulated among the faculty and students of National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi, between the two age groups of 18–30 years and 40–60 years. Four sustainable practices—education and engagement, recovery and redistribution, reuse, and recycling— were highlighted across the responses.

Most of the respondents mentioned that at the end of a garment's original intended use, every single item is judged as per its usability and reused accordingly. Both the target groups believe in wearing out a garment completely before casting it aside. What was interesting was the fact that 80 per cent of the older respondents (40–60 years) just donated them when they were done with it. The younger generation (18–30 years) were more creative with their handling of the worn out apparel products, wherein, 62 per cent of the respondents donated them, while 27 percent tried figuring out creative ways to reuse these products. This might just be in the form of hand-me-downs to a younger sibling or the less fortunate as long as they are in a wearable condition, or based on the wear and tear / softness of the fibres used, be converted into a light dusting cloth for use around the house. Larger pieces of fabrics like saris and so on are often layered and quilted into light duvets or, if the fabric is too worn, torn into narrow strips and braided into practical foot-mats. This is a regular practice in smaller towns, some elements of which are also practised in the larger metropolitan cities across India as well.

This practice of creating hand-made, user-friendly products for personal use has now been converted into multiple small scale business ventures, with brightly coloured products made out of recycled materials being sold across the board and in turn it offers a very sustainable way of handling post-consumer textile waste at end of garment lifecycle. It was apparent in the survey, that this practice is followed not just by the mature age group within our society, but also the younger generation between the age group of 18–30 years, which is incidentally, one of the largest spending segments on fast-fashion products as well. Digging deeper into the inception of this habit of recycling apparel products during these surveys, most of the respondents (96.7% in the 40–60 year age group) mentioned watching their elders do the same, which further highlights their importance as positive role-models.

Fashion as self-expression

In the last few years, the focus on sustainability is being embedded across all industries and sectors due to the increasing awareness levels across the world, this is true for the apparel sector as well. “The change in consumer behaviour because of their increased awareness regarding the social and environmental impact of their fashion consumption has ensued an intensified need for more ethical alternatives, thus, generating a market demand for more sustainable products. As a result, sustainable fashion has turned into the primary focus for long-term growth” (Kapoor, 2022).

What we have to realise is that in the world of fast-fashion, numbers equate to profits. Brands are selling apparel products at rock-bottom prices ensuring people buy more than they need to or possibly have any use for. “In a world where fast fashion is the norm, where most people purchase something to wear for a single evening that costs no more than a Chinese takeaway—and is thrown away as easily as the polystyrene container it comes in—investing in quality design, valuing traditional craft skills and purchasing ecologically sound design is, actually, a pretty radical notion. Upcycled and recycled fashion is merely one expression of that notion” (Brown, 2013). In the high fashion context, Vivienne Westwood had taken an activist stance in calling for clothing to be valued once more and empowering users to ‘do it yourself.’ Westwood was quoted as saying, “Don't spend money, just take what you can find, take your old things, keep on wearing them.” This position aligns to some degree with the notion of ‘slow fashion’ (quoted in Payne, 2015). This simple process, of re-wearing favourite pieces of clothing, and up-cycling wherever possible, in itself, will ease up the pressure on the unbalanced consumption prevalent in the current context.

“Fashion, and particularly its physical embodiment, clothing, is a medium for the designer to render their vision into material form and to further communicate them at an aesthetic level through cut, the fabrics, construction and other details” (Akko, 2015). The same is true for people who might not have a formal fashion degree, but still are heavily involved in creating their own personal wardrobe by recycling / refashioning existing pieces into something new and unique, using an artisanal approach towards its creation. We will focus on this artisanal approach for the case study as a part of this research paper.

Through the Ages

As a part of the primary research for this paper, once the initial responses were drawn from the questionnaires, a cross-generational study was conducted. The Initial Subject (I.S), was shortlisted based on their sustainable habits using the responses from the initial questionnaires (focus group: 40–60 years). In the next step, the generational connections were traced out to figure out the flow of these habits: a step above, the Progenitor (P) and a step below, the Descendant (D). All three members of the family were interviewed during the course of this study to figure out the links in their sustainable habits, if any, and to see if cultural conditioning makes an impact in their habits. The flow of information within their family tree has been shown in Figure 2.

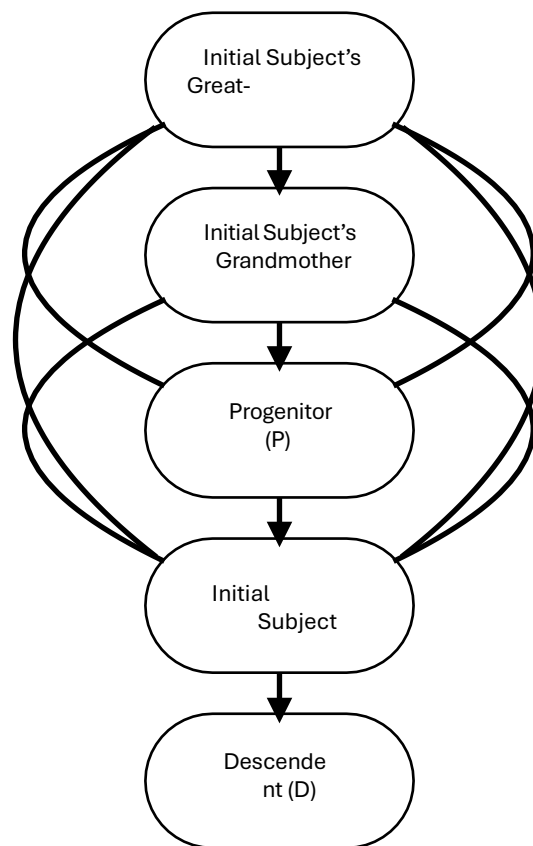


Figure 2. Family tree

We started off this case-study with an interview with the Initial Subject (referred to as I.S). During her interview, she mentions that her shopping habits focus on: “Conscious consumption and living, giving attention to longevity, circularity and planet friendly materials.” When it comes to her apparel shopping habits; the primary consideration is to focus on limited, mindful shopping as and when needed, with a substantial emphasis on thrifting majority of the apparel requirements.

The point to note here is, her purchases are needs-based, not wants-based. Buying / consuming less, focusing on classic items instead of fads, and figuring out quality materials that ensure

longevity was another focal point in her shopping manifesto. In order to reduce the excessive consumption, she believes in taking better care of the apparel items, as well as repairing and re-purposing of used items so that these products can last longer. During the course of the interview, it came to light that these sustainable habits were in fact inherited from their mother (P) and furthermore could be traced back across the generations to the I.S's great-grandmother, who was a seamstress in her time. Most of the basic life-skills like sewing and darning as well as basic repairing of apparel products that might have been damaged while in use, were taught to her by her grandmother. I.S credits her whole approach towards sustainability directly to how she was brought up. The second part of this case study was an interview with the initial subject's mother, henceforth mentioned as P (Progenitor). P's mother, I.S's grandmother, used to stitch herself as well and P remembers her first initiation into re-fashioning came about when she remade a coat to fit her better as a fifteen year old. She sews her own clothes, because a good fit is really important to her. She says if the fit is off then she doesn't enjoy wearing the garment, it has the power to affect her confidence levels. "Materiality in the context of aesthetics also implies a connection to the body. Above all, clothing serves function, which generally drives many aesthetic choices. Functionality aside, in this case materiality refers to the design process and the relationship of the garment with the body. According to Le Bihan, this dimension of materiality is especially important in fashion design for the creation of an aesthetic: "[You have to know] how to build something around the body, the real body... To have a reflection about the cut, how things are made, is very important". (Akko, 2015). P is still super conscious with the kind of materials she purchases, cotton being her favourite as it feels more comfortable against her skin and she actively avoids synthetic materials like polyester. She actively checks for good quality stitching when picking up apparel products and even mends her clothes, as and when needed. She hand washes the delicate apparel items in order to make them last longer.

"The process of creation is personal for each designer, and so is the aesthetic that each of them creates... The creation of an aesthetic is difficult to verbalize, as the process is not completely visible, traceable, concrete or linear; on the contrary, it is abstract and excursive. It seems to follow a form of thinking whose nature resides largely in the realm of the subconscious or even in "zen", in a meditative state, rather than in logical thinking. There is something mystical about it; perhaps no recipe, but just hints on the ingredients" (Akko, 2015). P, now in her 80s, is still actively into creating garments, not just for herself but for her extended family as well in the form of customised gifts. Small imperfections and minor irregularities which are impossible to replicate by machine, intentionally highlight the artisanal element in her designs and are also an aesthetic choice. "The charm of hand-made things is not necessarily visible, but is imbedded in their materiality, which induces a sensuous aesthetic experience difficult to translate into words" (Akko, 2015). This invariably creates an emotional attachment between the receiver and the garment thus created, which further ensures that the receiver takes better care of the garment and does not discard it like most people do with fast fashion products.

"Human ontology is powerfully manifested in the entwined relationship of creation and destruction. For everything that is made, something is destroyed: this is the 'dialectic of sustainment'," (Fry, as quoted in Payne, 2015). "Sustainment, then, is the act of continually

‘making time’ through redirecting all design practice towards this aim. Rather than an either / or position on technology as either saving us or destroying us, we need to acknowledge that both creation and destruction is part of our being and that sustaining ourselves will be an ongoing process of recasting our designed objects, environments and culture. In fashion's future, we will create, just as we will destroy” (Payne, 2015). P used to enjoy sewing her own clothes as well, the only change she sees in herself, now that she’s elderly, she has a harder time sewing, she now focuses primarily on wool as she finds it easier to work with. She either thrifts products with good quality wool or and unravels existing jumpers that are not being used or have worn out and uses the yarn to create something personalised as per her requirements and fit. She enjoys the process of unravelling or destroying as Payne puts it, only to create something completely unique out of it. This process of creating these upcycled gifts, in turn, also encourages post-consumer, end-of-garment-lifecycle use.



Figure 3. One of the handmade, upcycled shawls created by P. This is made from unravelled yarn from a discarded H&M sweater and contrasting yarn from a pair of thrifted sweaters.

The last part of this case study was an interview with the youngest member of the family, henceforth referred to as D (Descendant), who’s a part of the 18–30 age group. Surprisingly, the youngest member of the family, D, who is a part of the generation Z, does not believe himself to be sustainable. This is simply because he does not believe his inherent habits, which are incidentally very sustainable, to be out of the ordinary. For him, sustainability is making larger than life attempts to be seen as being sustainable. D does not consider his need-based shopping habits or his practice of using a product till the end of its life-cycle as sustainable. He credits his no frills lifestyle to his mother.

This actually proves the importance of cultural conditioning, he is sustainable in his habits without him having to go out of his way to be sustainable. It is effortless. It is inherent.

Conclusion

The ever growing demand across the globe for textiles products is fuelling the uneconomical use of non- renewable natural resources. This includes the production of synthetic fibres from fossil-fuels and is creating massive textile waste that ends up in huge landfills. These adverse impacts have their roots in a linear business model that is characterised by low or negligible scale of use, reuse, repair and fibre-to-fibre recycling of textiles. The linear model does not put quality, durability or recyclability as a priority within the design and manufacturing of apparel products. As a fast-fashion business model, it encourages the consumers into following short term fashion trends, which in turn goads them into using garments for shorter periods before discarding them, and contributes the most to unsustainable patterns of overproduction and over-consumption across the world. Environmentalists, businesses, consumers and public authorities across the world, especially in the European Union are already focussing on increasing the sustainability and circularity of this sector, but the transition is slow and the negative environmental footprints of the sector remains impossibly high.

The insights presented in this paper follow the premise that, if we as adults can present a steady, positive example to our younger generation, the change in their mindset will result in the absorption of sustainable practices in an unforced, gentle way. These artisanal, slow fashion, hand-made sustainable practices offer a positive perspective in the approach towards fashion's future. "Selection of materials that will reduce harm, mindful choices in what we wear and what we design, how we can reduce or eliminate waste are all vital elements in both an ethical and pragmatic fashion practice. Crucially, we can do these things as part of a mindful practice, not because they will 'save' our environment. At a large scale, these actions may be forced upon companies or designers due to resource constraints, or changes in environmental regulations. At an individual level, these actions become an ethic to act and design without giving into despair or apathy" (Payne, 2015).

If we look to the future with the focus on this process of creating and recreating again, as nurturers who provide guidance and gentle conditioning, the future will not just rely solely on the inception of new and better technology to clean up our mess, but in fact, highlight a change in mindset when it comes to being sustainable. Looking to our past traditional practices and approach towards consumption of resources and using them as a model for the future course of action will aid in our efforts. This will be pertinent in order to rework the conventional fashion cycle of production and consumption into a new sustainable culture of using, making and remaking or the cradle-to-cradle approach and closing the loop as a circular fashion system. This will aid immensely in our reach for a more sustainable world.

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