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Sustainable Fashion: Designers' Perspective in the Mass Apparel Retailing Sector.

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The Fashion and Apparel industry plays a vital role in the development of the global economy. Globally, it was valued 1391.15billion USD in 2017 and it gained a significant share in the world export market; 483 billion USD in 2014. The clothing and textile sector is the 4th largest global merchandise export and it accounted for 5% of global merchandise exports in 2016.The global apparel consumption was 62 million tons in 2015 and it would be increased up to 102 million tons in 2030.

The apparel industry creates severe environmental impacts: high resource consumption, carbon emission and generation of wastes. Production of natural fibres such as cotton requires large amounts of water and pesticides, while synthetic fibres are manufactured from non-renewable resources. Textile and apparel production processes consume high energy resources and emit significant amounts of carbon and waste to the environment. Moreover, the consumer and post-consumer stages create immense impacts on the environment due to the disposal of used clothing. These impacts would be multiplied because of the predicted increment of the apparel consumption in 2030 onwards.

Therefore, integrating sustainability into apparel products requires a radical change across the whole system to face future challenges. While environmental impacts are generated every stage of apparel production, the major impacts arise due to decisions made at the fashion design stage. Therefore, it is vital that fashion designers consider the reduction of the environmental impacts of apparel products during their decision making process.

The focus of this study was to investigate designers' perception of environmental sustainability in the mass scale fashion sector, with the aim of discovering practical and realistic approaches to reduce the impacts of the apparel industry. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with five fashion designers who have over five years' experience of working with mass scale European and US apparel brands. The study reveals that the designers exhibited little knowledge regarding the sustainability aspects of products and understood sustainability in very narrow form: e.g limited to the use of organic cotton. Heavy competition, new rules and regulations of the governments on labour wages, and low budgets have led the designers to take a minimalist, compliance on applying sustainability aspects to the product. The study also identified the need for a convenient and user friendly approach to raise the awareness among designers regarding environmental sustainability. Sustainable design strategies need to be incorporated into the design thinking process, with strategies taking a whole life-cycle approach including the concept of the circular economy, instead of only focusing on the materials and production processes. This new approach needs to be facilitated by other parties in the apparel product ecosystem: buyers; technical teams; merchandisers; and also investors, who have the ability to apply pressure on designers to increase the environmental sustainability of the industry in 2030.