

# Perspective on sustainability of Hong Kong fashion designers

## Abstract

Sustainability is one of the most concerned global issues in the past decade. It has been widely studied and developed in different aspects. Sustainable Fashion has been claimed as the future of the industry. With very limited education and development in this aspect, this research intends to investigate the awareness on sustainable elements of Hong Kong fashion designer while they design a product. Quantitative research methodologies will be adopted in this study, with four local fashion designers and one sustainable fashion expert being invited to interviews and discuss their insights of sustainable fashion in Hong Kong. By the end of the study, the feasibility of sustainable fashion in Hong Kong will be measured, the limitation that the industry is facing will be discussed, and the gap to elevate sustainability locally will also be identified.

**Keywords:** fashion, fashion design, sustainability

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## Introduction

The environmental disruptions caused by human impacts have been debated for nearly five decades. The fashion industry has been criticized by society for its destructive practice on the environment. The industry believes that adopting sustainable elements in fashion can be one of the solutions to the problem. Sustainable fashion does not have a standard definition. It is generally interpreted as an environmental and ethical consciousness in fashion production and design process.<sup>1</sup> The idea is surrounded by various issues like environmental problems, labour relations and animal rights.<sup>1</sup> It could also interchangeably with other terms, such as “green-fashion”, “eco-fashion” and “ethical-fashion”.<sup>2</sup>

The clothing industry occupies the major manufacturing sector of Hong Kong. It is one of the largest manufacturing employers, with 603 establishments hiring 4,027 workers as of 2018.<sup>3</sup> Nowadays, people in Hong Kong are considering more about dressing green. Numerous international fashion brands incorporate sustainable elements into their products.<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, sustainable business and design strategies will become an essential part of the industry in the next few years.

Sustainable fashion is widely introduced to the market and consumers in western countries but only seems to gain traction locally in these couple years.<sup>4</sup> The geographical advantage of Hong Kong has led it to a sourcing hub in Asia, which attracts several international fashion trading firms and retailers. Hong Kong is also reputable for ODM (Original Design Manufacturer) and OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) production.<sup>3</sup> However, there are very few sustainable fashion brands in Hong Kong. Sustainable fashion has not been developed and promoted efficiently. This research aims to examine the awareness of sustainable elements in the design process of Hong Kong local fashion designers. This study targets to examine the perspective on the sustainability of local fashion designers. Previous research studies on sustainable fashion focused on fashion consumer practice and supply chain were found,<sup>5</sup> but lack of in-depth investigation on the designer point of view, especially towards Hong Kong fashion designers. To fill the gap, this study aims to analyse

and provide outcome which can further develop sustainable fashion design in Hong Kong, as well as to promote green fashion.

## Literature review

Fashion designers face many restrictions from different aspects in the design process. They are required to overcome the concern on production technology, cost and profitability. To achieve a significant impact in this area, designers and retailers should be adopting sustainable elements efficiently in the production process.<sup>6,7</sup> To investigate the perspective on sustainability of fashion design, the influential factors from the stakeholder models were studied, including industry, public, academic and government.<sup>8</sup>

## Industry: the design process

Fashion designers, as one of the key role in the fashion production process, work closely with a wide range of departments during the process. The design strategies play a significant influence in the product life cycle. Sustainable design strategy is defined as the structure approach which helps reduce certain environmental and social impact of the end product. Similar to environmental protection concepts, sustainable solutions focus on recycling, reusing and repurposing. However, sustainable design will also integrate a wider range of strategies.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1 shows that fashion designers should strive to balance among ethical, social issues, as well as economic needs. There are different aspects that fashion designer can adopt on the product, from design, production, distribution, use to end-of-life. It is believed that sustainable design strategies can fulfil the following principals<sup>9</sup>:

- Reducing the consumption of resources, such as zero-waste design.
- Implementing low-impact processes and resources.
- Enhancing production techniques
- Enhancing distribution systems, for example, consider for need, minimize transportation, engage with local communities.

- e. Minimizing the impacts created during use, such as consider multifunctional design, customization and low-impact care.
- f. Enhancing the product's lifetime, such as durable design.
- g. Enhancing the use of end-of-life systems, for example, consider re-use, disassembly and recycling.



Figure 1 Sustainable design strategies.<sup>10</sup>

### Public: consumer's perceptive

Ethical consumerism is one of the keys to sustainable fashion industry. Nowadays, consumers show their support on ethical fashion, but most of them lack adequate education on this aspect. In the former researches, they show that the level of awareness on ethical fashion brands of Hong Kong consumers is relatively low. These studies reflect that insufficient effort is put into promotion.<sup>7</sup> Besides, fashion designers believe that the demand and willingness of consumer will drive them to put more concern on sustainability during the design process. However, average consumers are used to mass-produced products. The most popular places for garment purchasing are those offering conventionally produced clothing such as H&M and Zara. Consumers consider the facade, including the products' appearance and price.<sup>6</sup> Previous studies also indicated that fashion consumers do have interests to purchase eco-fashion, but tend not to pay a higher price for sustainable product.<sup>5</sup> Price is always one of the crucial factors to purchase sustainable fashion items, and it has been considered as too high.<sup>10</sup> Most of us noticed that sustainable development is essential for a better future. Nonetheless, there is a lack of aggressiveness on the implementation among society in Hong Kong. According to the Global Sustainable Fashion Consumption Survey in Fashion Summit 2018, it reported that 78% of the surveyed respondent said that they are concerned about the environment, pollution and wastage; 64% of them regard themselves as supportive of sustainable fashion; 43% think that their society is supportive of the concept. About 80% of respondents in Hong Kong said that they are concerned about the environment, but only 8% of them willing to pay a higher price for sustainable fashion products.<sup>11</sup>

### Education

It takes time to plant the seed of knowledge and to educate a generation on new thoughts. Majority of local college and university students receive limited or no exposure to sustainability within

their study. There are very few incentives for institutes to adopt sustainability elements into teaching. McFarlane and Ogazon<sup>12</sup> suggested that employing sustainability course across the curriculum can ensure the basic concepts of sustainability are exposed to the students. Education on sustainability will also motivate learners to actively participate in improving the fashion industry in various ways. It engages students' sense of social responsibility and recognizes their roles in nature and society at the same time.<sup>13</sup>

### Government

Government takes up a key role in sustainable development. At the opening ceremony of the Fashion Summit 2018,<sup>11</sup> Chief Secretary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government Matthew Cheung told the audiences that the government is committed to promoting sustainable fashion development. He also emphasized that the government has always been supportive of eco-labels certification schemes, as well as the development of new technologies to accelerate green-production and marketing of fashion product.<sup>14</sup> A special advisory group called "Implementation of Fashion Initiatives" has been set up in 2017 to promote the sustainable development of the fashion industry. The advisory group incorporated industry practitioners, it aims to counsel, guide and co-ordinate the implementation of measures. The key focus area is to nurture fashion start-ups that can conduce the sustainable development of Hong Kong. Besides, the government-funded organization, The Hong Kong Research Institute of Textiles & Apparel, has adopted "sustainability" as the major focus of the Research and Development in its technology development plan. A variety of technologies are being explored to promote sustainability, included zero discharge techniques, waterless technologies and energy efficiency improvements.<sup>15</sup>

### Research design

Qualitative research has been adopted in this study. One to one semi-structured interviews with local fashion designers and expert have been conducted to discuss their insight of sustainable fashion in Hong Kong. Subjects were recruited from the local fashion design industry through the author's network. Five interviews were carried out to explore the insight of Hong Kong fashion designers regarding sustainable issues. These interviews aimed at understanding the situation of sustainability in the Hong Kong fashion industry, as well as learning the perspective from the designer point of view towards green fashion. To compile a diverse vision from the interview, these interviewees consisted of fashion designer who works in local retail brand, fashion designer who works in sizeable international fashion corporate, fashion designer who runs an individual designer label, fashion designer from local sustainable fashion brand and Education Director from NGO Redress.

### Findings and discussion

Five interviews have been conducted, the interviewees include the followings.

Interviewee A-Fashion designer who works in local retail brand.

Interviewee B-Fashion designer who works in sizeable international fashion corporate.

Interviewee C-Fashion designer who runs an individual designer label.

Interviewee D-Fashion designer from local sustainable fashion brand.

Interviewee E-Education Director from NGO Redress.

## Awareness of sustainability through design process

Regarding the sustainable design strategies principals,<sup>9</sup> the interviewees were being asked about their knowledge and cognition of sustainability to evaluate their level of awareness. All of the interviewed designers and expert show varying levels of awareness of sustainability through the design process. Interviewee A has limited knowledge and showed impoverishment understanding of sustainable design strategies and show less awareness among others. The company of interviewee B manages a team to oversee their vendors to make sure the production process can meet their standard of sustainability. Training on sustainable development is offered to the employees and their vendors regularly. As a sizeable international corporate, the company has supplicated planning on sustainable development, including product development, production, labour rights and interests and so on. Interviewee B agreed that overseas companies are more forward on sustainable development in their business strategy. She possessed in-depth cognition on sustainable design strategies and was highly alerted to this issue. Being a founder and designer of the individual designer label, Interviewee C demonstrated high awareness and well understanding on sustainability. Some of the sustainable design strategies have been applied to the collection, and he intended to involve more in the design process in the future. Interview D and E were active in the local sustainable fashion network, they both showed abundant knowledge on sustainability.

## Limitations and challenges toward sustainable design strategies

More than half of the interviewees mentioned that the main challenges of implementing sustainable design strategy are cost and profit. Both interviewee A and C believe that consumer and stakeholder do not have an adequate understanding of sustainability, as a local business are very much driven by capitalism. The industries in Hong Kong are very pragmatic about their business situations, so they will not make unnecessary sacrifices when sustainable options are difficult or costlier to meet. On the other hand, Interviewee C and D considered sourcing of raw materials is another critical challenge. The choice and source of sustainable materials are so narrow that restricts the design process substantially.

## Consumer perception

The organization where interviewee E worked in operates a second-hand shop. In the very beginning, most customers were expats. However, it seems that there is a rise in number in local customers now. Interviewee B pointed out that there is an increase in customer asking for sustainable products such as garments that are made by sustainable materials. On the other hand, the majority of the consumer still have limited contact regarding sustainability. Interviewee B suggested that retailers can enhance the marketing strategy in this area to introduce and educate their customers. Finally, interviewee A believed that society can have certain influence on this issue, but it requires people from different categories to cooperate.

## Education

Four interviewees believe that education is one of the keys to arise the cognition on awareness towards sustainable issues. Interviewee C thinks that local university students are only moderately aware of the sustainable issues because the concept has not proliferated the Hong Kong market. In comparison, students in western countries have a higher awareness because it is more ingrained in their education and culture. Besides, it is not just education that lacks an emphasis and concern for sustainability and the environment, but all the sectors

of the society are lacking in this regard. Interviewee A and B, who are both educated in local institutions, stated that they do not recall any memories that sustainability was delivered in any class. Besides, Interview C and E are educated in western countries, they are more aware of sustainability, as they have been introduced and trained to employ sustainability through their studies.

## Government support

Interviewee E mentioned that the government does support sustainable development. The NGO Redress is a good example. The Redress Design Award is supported and sponsored by Hong Kong government. In contrast, three interviewees thought that there is not enough support and promotion from the Hong Kong government regarding sustainable fashion. Interviewee A claimed that it is hard to source sustainable material while the company might consider as one of the limitations. Over half of them suggested that the government should make concrete planning to educate the society and support the industry concerning sustainable issues.

## Conclusion

Sustainable fashion development undoubtedly shows urgent needs in the industry. Although there is a rise of the concern in the society, the absence of a concrete and comprehensive planning in the industry is still a huge obstacle to overcome. Findings show that the interviewees demonstrate different levels of awareness in sustainability in the design process. Different level of awareness leads to different business strategies and target customers in these companies. These local fashion designers show intention to apply sustainable design strategies in the design process, especially for individual design brands. These brands have more autonomy and less burden of the brand image and business strategies. The education background of these designers also illustrates differentiation in the level of awareness. These findings demonstrate that education takes a significant role to raise the awareness of sustainable concern, where people with western education shows more concern on sustainable issue in the design process. Sustainable design strategy is definitely the latest and long-term development of the fashion industry. However, it requires comprehensive planning including education of consumer and industry personnel, support and planning of the government.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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