FASHION SUSTAINABILITY IN INDIA AFTER COVID-19

DIANA LINDA¹ & Dr. DEEPIKA PUROHIT²

¹Banasthali Institute of Design, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

²Assistant Professor, Banasthali Institute of Design, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the possible effects of Covid-19 on fashion sustainability and on consumers' habits in India. The pandemic has put the world at stop during the first semester 2020, and will most probably have long term and irreversible consequences. Early reactions of consumers in India have been analyzed through an online survey, which tries to elucidate the future buying habits related to sustainability, and also the thought process behind it. The Pandemic could be seen simultaneously as a revelator and an opportunity for changes, decreasing the amount of waste generated by overconsumption, and cheap fashion produced by underpaid workers, and accelerating the implementation of new strategies and technologies.

KEYWORDS: Sustainability, SDG (Sustainable Development Goals by United Nations), Fashion, Consumer habits & Covid 19

Received: May 27, 2020; **Accepted:** Jun 17, 2020; **Published:** Jul 01, 2020; **Paper Id.:** IJTFTAUG20201

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of Covid-19 started in January 2020, hitting first China, consequently Europe, USA, India and many other countries. More than 200 countries in the world have been struck by the virus Covid-19. This pandemic had not only a devastating effect on the health of the population, but also on the entire economic and social fabric. Drastic changes took place and we don't know yet which are just punctual and which are irreversible. At the time of writing this paper, we are in the middle of the pandemic of Covid-19. For the moment, we can observe the facts and the first consumer's reactions but not yet predict all the consequences.

Covid 19 had a huge impact globally, on majority of industries and services, on consumers, on stock market, on oil price, on economic growth, on raw materials prices, on supply chains, on store closures, and on labor unemployment. Like many other sectors, the textile industry has been tremendously affected. Concerning South Asia, many orders for manufacturing have been suspended or cancelled with major losses. This cancellation of orders had as consequence the unemployment of thousands of workers in Asian Countries as it has been underlined by the organization Clean Clothes ("Coronavirus and garment", 2020). Many workers have also left the factories and didn't come back. In India, majority of people were under lockdown at home from end of March to June 2020. We can note in addition, costumers refrain from buying, not only because the shops were closed but also due to an uncertain and frightening future, many emergent designers and other professionals in the fashion industry losing their jobs, or seeing significant cuts in their salaries, factories stopping their production for weeks and months and many brands going bankrupt.

Trying to guess the consumers future behaviors, many international observers during the webinar Fashinnovation on the 20th April ("Fashinnovation", 2020) supposed that there will be a paradigm shift: more

shopping on-line, less physical meetings, attendance to live streaming platform, participation to video conferences. Also, the consumers will be prudent and may buy less. Stay at home culture will make decrease some kind of purchases certainly. It is therefore, expected a major impact from the side of the consumer caused by an increasing lack of purchasing confidence.

The other change, which is expected by the international fashion industry, is concerning the place of production. Many countries have realized their dependency on China, and will try to become more autonomous in different ways: by manufacturing more locally, diversifying their production, tightening the supply chain, improving the communication with the suppliers, redefining logistics and shipments, or deciding for more robotizing and automation in order to reduce need of staff.

2. CONCEPTION OF SEEING COVID 19 AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGES

Since the pandemic is still going on, there is very little academic literature about it and the best way to research about these questions is through observation, reading news on-line, attending international seminars on the topic and collecting primary data in India.

As mentioned earlier, Covid 19 pandemic impacted the entire world and the fashion industry from the beginning of 2020. The changes have been brutal but difficulties motivate sometimes radical changes. There is an opportunity for fashion to change for the better. The way consumption was increasing in these last 20 years has to stop for protecting the environment. It is estimated that people today buy 60 per cent more than 15 years ago. The fashion system became unhealthy, delivering for instance, spring collections in November and trends becoming outdated in just a few weeks (“Fashioninnovation talks”, 2020)

2.1 A cleaner earth, water and air

After acknowledging these facts, we can really ask ourselves if the pandemic could become an opportunity and a chance for change. Indeed, the pandemic reveals that sustainability is not an abstraction but it is at our fingertips. At a global level and due to the lockdown, people stopped to buy, pollution decreased, water became clear, and sky became bluer. Everybody realized nearly overnight the damages caused by the industries. Everything came to a stop and many people started to ask if the world we knew before was really going in the right direction, if it was perhaps the right time to reset and imagine a new future world.

In India, the article “COVID-19 lockdown brings fresher air, cleaner rivers in India” (2020) underlines the same facts: *“On March 25, the first day of the lockdown, the average PM 2.5 levels decreased by 22% and nitrogen dioxide ... dropped by 15%, according to air pollution data analyzed by the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air... Pictures of pristine clear waters of the Ganges... India’s pollution monitoring body said the water had even become fit for bathing in some areas.”* The World Economic forum reports in an article: *“Could COVID-19 give rise to a greener global future?”*(2020): *« The coronavirus pandemic is a wake-up call to stop exceeding the planet’s limits. After all, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change all make pandemics more likely. Deforestation drives wild animals closer to human populations, increasing the likelihood that zoonotic viruses like SARS-CoV-2 will make the cross-species leap. Likewise, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that global warming will likely accelerate the emergence of new viruses. »* Last reports have also find out that pollution exposure increased the risks of fatality caused by the coronavirus: *“The study results underscore the importance of continuing to enforce existing air pollution regulations to protect human health both during and after the Covid-19 crisis,”* (Wu, 2020).

2.2 Refocusing on Family Values and Home

Due to the lockdown and the fact that people also found time to think about the situation, suddenly all the wrongs of the society became clearer. People start to revalue social contact, family values, reconsider their behavior. The pandemic seems to play as an accelerator of economical and societal changes; an accelerator towards digitalization, new technologies implementation, new values, and new systems. In all sectors, including the textile industry, the brands which will be agile enough to implement mindfully the changes will survive and the others will die.

2.3 Pandemic as Revelator of Dark Aspects of Society

The pandemic seems also to play the role of revelator for some even darker aspects of the society which need to be urgently tackled: violence against women, child labor, poverty and number of unstable jobs. It is a pandemic inside the pandemic. Violence against women has increased dramatically during the time of Covid all over the world. The Guardian reported “*Women and children who live with domestic violence have no escape from their abusers during quarantine, and from Brazil to Germany, Italy to China, activists and survivors say they are already seeing an alarming rise in abuse.*» (“Lockdown around”, 2020). For India, the same has been observed. Economic Times wrote: “*NEW DELHI: There has been a steep rise in crime against women across the country amid restrictions imposed due to the coronavirus outbreak, with the National Commission for Women receiving 587 complaints from March 23 to April 16, out of which 239 are related to domestic violence*”.(“ India witnesses”, 2020). Violence against women is certainly not directly related to the fashion sustainability, but needs to be underlined here, because it is also part of the SDG (sustainable development goals of the United Nations) in which sustainability is not seen just as the environment concern but includes the human factor.

Another very worrying fact is the situation of child labor in India in farms, but also in factories. The researcher could not collect confirmed data about the textile industry. However, it is a known fact that there is child labor in the textile sector and what happened in the farm sector could very possibly happen also in many other sectors. Reuter reports: “*Death of 12-year-old Indian farm worker spurs child labor probe*” (2020). Majority of Indian Medias also related the death of this 12-year-old girl, who died from hunger during lockdown while she was trying to go back to her village. She left the farm, where she was working and walked for more than 60 km. Then she died at 20 km from her house. During the same period, other children were reported to have been locked in factories, while the owners were going to safer places. The Deccan Herald relates: “*India has more than 10 million child laborers, according to the country's 2011 census. Many are trafficked into their jobs and kept confined to their workplace by their employers.*” (“Indian noble”, 2020). This needs to be mentioned in this research, because it is concerning too the fashion and textile industry. Child labor and violence against women happens in the work places.

On another hand, fashion has also the opportunity to raise awareness and to make changes. Aldijana Sisic (Chief, United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women) has given a talk on 21 April “Fashion is creativity and innovation”. In this talk, she reports that one in 3 women are gone through gender-based violence in her life and that fashion can do a lot for help and make a difference. Fashion can make the invisible visible. Fashion can educate on the runways, or disrupt, or through talks, can make unfashionable violence against women, can make it “uncool”. Violence against women is directly linked with women empowerment and an increase of domestic violence reveals that there is still a lot of work to do in order to support and empower the women. Child labor also needs to be totally eradicated and workers need to receive proper employment contracts, which can protect them and help them to plan their future, and not only to survive.

2.4 An Opportunity for a more Human Sustainable World

The whole world has to become more human and companies more responsible towards the environment and their workers. There is an urgency in this change because this crisis, which is also a collateral effect of globalization, may not be the last one and it is already predicted that many pandemics of this kind could happen in the future if serious changes are not undertaken promptly. Every factor is in reality interconnected with other factors as it is well highlighted in the SDG, the 17 sustainable development goals of the UN to be achieved by 2030. Protection of environment, poverty, gender equality, ending violence against women, cleaner water, cleaner air, decrease of waste are all intimately connected.

2.5 An opportunity for a Digital Solidarity

Hopefully this pandemic revealed also solidarity, communication and care. Physical distance has been overcome by social connection on internet and on the several digital platforms such as zoom, Utube, Google Meet for people from all horizons, professionals, educators, consumers, activists, Ngos, to join and support each other to find solutions. Competitiveness seems to decrease for generating dialogue and empathy. The Indian fashion education and the fashion industry have also organized webinars for communication and knowledge open to all public.

Like in the rest of the world, Indian fashion industry and education reacted to the pandemic very fast by organizing on line talks and classes. People came together for discussing the future changes and trying to help each other in this global crisis. For example, S.V College, SNDT women university, Santa Cruz Mumbai organized a webinar (26 May- 4 June 2020): “You- Mean Covid 19: Let’s tackle it together”. It was a pluri- disciplinary webinar and the fashion department participated with 2 topics: Fashion trends post Covid and Safety first: Use of personal protective clothing in fight against pandemic. Fiber2fashion.com organized number of webinars linked to the post Covid situation. Just a few examples among them: COVID 19 - The Superstorm in Global Supply Chain, Coronavirus Outbreak: Brands and apparel makers are redefining the Game plan and opportunity, Panel Discussion: Survival of the Fittest: How will Indian Manufacturers revive post Covid-19? Reboot, rebuild, rebound, fashion industry ready for resurrection. Majority of these talks were made free of access. As the titles of these topics suggest it, the people unite in order to find solutions to revive an industry in which many actors are at risk to not survive after the pandemic. Uncertainty related to export, internal market, supply chain, workers, safety.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

In this paper, the focus is on the possible effects of Covid19 in India, for the fashion industry, fashion education and consumer behavior in relation with sustainability. The main questions looked at are:

- How the pandemic is affecting the fashion industry and specifically the goals towards sustainability?
- Will brands, designers, shops become more digital, more transparent, and less competitive?
- Will consumers adopt another behavior in their purchases? Will they ask themselves if they really need the purchase?
- How fashion education will be affected?

The objective of the research is to find out how the people are reacting to the pandemic in term of fashion purchases, and if they are concerned more or less concerned about sustainability.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Sampling Techniques

The pulse of these potential changes, representing the primary data, has been taken with the help of a survey realized on line to general public and consumers in India, during the month of Lockdown in May 2020, through an online questionnaire: "Fashion habits and sustainability after Covid 19" with 10 questions concerning the possible change of habits in buying, relation with the brand, industrial and educational impacts.

4.2 Sample Selection

The questionnaire has been sent through Whatsap group to over than 250 persons in India, 40 persons have replied. The questionnaire was anonymous, therefore there are no data concerning the population, except that all the respondents belong to the Indian Middle Class.

4.3 Tools used for Analysis of Data

The questionnaire is composed by 10 closed questions, some of them allowing a maximum of 3 answers. In order to analyze the replies, the researcher applied simple percentage and pie charts.

5. FINDING OF THE RESEARCH

Data concerning the answers to the 10 questions of the questionnaire are presented here.

1. *As a consumer, after the pandemic of Covid 19, will your concern for sustainability will decrease because your main objective will be for survival and to spend less?*

This answer shows that in reality, after Covid 19, only 15 % of the respondents are not concerned by sustainability

2. *As a consumer, after the Covid 19, will your fashion purchases become more meaningful? You will think more if you really need the garment or the accessory?*

This answer shows, that after Covid 19, 45% of respondents are ready to change attitude and do more meaningful purchase while 52% were already doing before meaningful purchases.

3. *During the pandemic, rivers have become clearer; air became cleaner in just some weeks. Do you think fashion industry and the other industries should be enforced to not pollute the earth and this is a very urgent matter?*

This answer shows that the big majority of respondents is really concerned by pollution and thinks that some strict laws should enforce factories to not pollute

4. *Will you purchases be more on-line in term of fashion purchases after Covid because it is not so safe anymore to purchase in shops and on the streets?*

For this answer, 82.5 % of respondents will purchase more on-line. This give a clear indication that e-commerce is going to expand even more after Covid 19.

5. *How do you think, as consumer, that sustainable fashion houses can influence and attract more customers, choose maximum 3, the most important for you?*

Answer	Votes
a. Interact more on social network like FB and Instagram	15.1%/ 18
b. Influencers and celebrities giving out the message of sustainability	10.9%/ 13
c. Digital platform where all sustainable enterprises are gathering	21.8%/ 26
d. Increasing special event like flea sustainable and up cycled markets in the cities	10.1%/ 12
e. Personalized contacts with customers, web conversation, interactivity	10.9%/ 13
f. Be Visible on video channels	2.5%/ 3
g. Offer Sustainable tutorials	15.1%/ 18
h. Organizing talks and workshops	13.4%/ 16
Total votes 119	

For this question, the three favorite answers are in order: customers think that a digital platform where all sustainable enterprises gather is the best strategy, followed equally by giving sustainable tutorials on line and interact more on social medias. All the three strategies are linked with digital.

6. How fashion education should change after Covid 19? Choose 3

Answer	Votes
a. More people will learn on line	14.8% / 17
b. It will break more barriers. Education will be more accessible to all social classes.	8.7% / 10
c. Continuous online education will be developing for all ages and continuous training	14.8% / 17
d. Sustainability and digital must be linked in the syllabus. It will become more technology oriented.	24.3% / 28
e. Increase of Students Giving back experience to community through social projects even not in the fashion: cancer foundation, charity one, street children.	6.1% / 7
f. Workers will need to be trained for new technologies and innovation	19.1% / 22
g. Sustainability and gender empowerment should be integrated to the fashion education at more than 50%	10.4% / 12
h. I am really not concerned by all this. I prefer not to answer. Not interested	0.9% / 1
Other	0.9% / 1
Total votes 115	

This answer shows, the 3 preferred answers are again all-linked with online and innovation. Sustainability and digital must be linked in the syllabus itself and students will be more oriented towards sustainable new technologies. The second concern is about the training of workers for new technologies. In third position, we have the fact that more people will learn on line and that continuous training for all ages will develop.

7. *How, do you think, Covid 19 will change the fashion business? Choose 3*

Answer	Votes
a. Retails go digital	16.8%/ 20
b. Cashless society	14.3%/ 17
c. Distance in the shops	16.0%/ 19
d. Seasonalibility will desappear	4.2%/ 5
e. Inventory models and Stock management will change	7.6%/ 9
f. Sourcing and place of production will change	7.6%/ 9
g. Customers will do more meaningful purchases which they will keep for longer	14.3%/ 17
h. Digital skills will develop, Digital advertising and digital marketing understanding will increase	16.0%/ 19
i. Physical Fashion shows will desappear	3.4%/ 4
j. Am not interested in all this	0.0%/ 0
Total votes 119	

For this answer, retail goes digital, distance in the shops and increase of digital skills from the people working in the industry is the 3 favorite answers. It is worth to note also that majority of people don't think that fashion shows will disappear. In fact, it seems that the major change that respondents thought of is about buying habits that will shift or change.

8. *For small sustainable fashion enterprises what is changing? Which services or characteristics will be more successful? Choose 3*

The respondents think that the most successful sustainable business will be the one, which will be transparent about the making of the clothes; the one who create communities of consumers, organize talks and workshops and the ones who will focus on line and do home delivery. There is a wish to have a kind of personal relation with the seller, which creates a bound.

9. *Are you aware that some cheap clothes you are wearing are done under exploitation and in suffering?*

This answer shows that there is an urgent need to inform better the consumers and the citizen because many are just not aware about the exploitation and working conditions during the making of their clothes.

10. If you decide to participate as citizen to fashion revolution which way you will choose first?

This answer shows that, a great majority of people will try in every way to be more sustainable. The other respondents will try to buy less and mend their clothes. As we observed earlier in this research, the second-hand market is still not considered by majority of people in India.

6. DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several trends of thoughts and opinions have been highlighted in this survey.

6.1 Acceleration towards Digitalization for the Consumer, Industry and Education

This survey reveals very clearly that, general consumers predict acceleration towards digitalization and increase of the e-commerce. A high proportion of people will prefer to buy on-line rather than to go to shops. They think that the fashion business and education will need also to re-orientate in this direction and acquire the skills linked with it. They wish that all sustainable fashion companies are gathered together on a digital platform for an easier buying experience.

6.2 More Interaction and Transparence between Brands and Consumer

The communication between brands and consumers will change and will become more interactive and informative. The consumer is not anymore, a blind consumer, he/ she want to know what is behind and, in their clothes, and he/she wants transparency.

6.3 Meaningful Purchases and Active Consumer

Many consumers think also that they will change their buying habits after Covid, do more meaningful choices, think before

buying, or buying less, and try to do more sustainable choices. Some of the respondents think also that they will try to mend their clothes.

6.4 Thirst for Tutorials and DIY

The consumers also look for more than just buying; they look for a special connection with the brands, for talks, workshops and for DIY tutorials.

6.5 Changes in Education towards a continuous Education

The fashion students need to learn about new sustainable technologies and innovation and link sustainability with digitalization. The fast-changing technology will demand people to learn at all ages and to train continuously workers. The advantage of digitalization is that it could allow more access to education to people of different social stratus or to people living in remote areas.

6.6 A Real Concern towards sustainability

Many people have realized the urgency to have a cleaner environment and claim that after Covid-19 pandemic, they will make more fashion sustainable choices. The people want a cleaner world and realize that the environmental situation before COVID has to change, and that the industries have a big role to play. They are worried about pollution and they wish too that countries' legislation force companies to respect and protect the environment.

6.7 Need to Raise Awareness about Child Labor and Exploitation in the Fashion Sector

Apparently, not many people are aware of the real working conditions in some factories. NGOs and Medias, but also schools and college should raise awareness about this essential problem.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The trend towards digitalization is therefore, observed at all levels and in every possible sector from the consumers to the industry and also in education. On these platforms, many professionals of the fashion industry and education are discussing several strategic points such as the fragility of supply chains dealing with big volumes, which ultimately generate dead stock and end in landfills or the need of innovation and implementation of new technologies like laser cutting and 3D design, which can help to reduce the waste and the making of too many samples. Sustainable companies and many designers agree on the importance to be completely transparent with their costumers about their costs, how their products are made and what is inside their product, because it is also about choosing carefully the material with which they work. Finally and perhaps thanks to the Covid 19, many fashion consumers, industrials and educators who spoke to each other to plan the changes together, for a brighter future.

REFERENCES

1. *Coronavirus and garment workers in supply chains, Organization Clean Clothes, (2020, April). Retrieved in May 2020 from <https://cleanclothes.org/news/2020/april-2020-covid19-blog>.*
2. *Fashinnovation worldwide talks (2020, April 20), Retrieved in May 2020 from <https://event.fashinnovation.nyc/>*
3. *Could COVID-19 give rise to a greener global future? (2020, March) Retrieved in May 2020 from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/a-green-reboot-after-the-pandemic>*
4. *COVID-19 lockdown brings fresher air, cleaner rivers in India, (2020, April 22) retrieved in May 2020 from*

- <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/covid-19-lockdown-brings-fresher-air-cleaner-rivers-in-india-2020-04-22>)
5. *Death of 12-year-old Indian farm worker spurs child labour probe*, (2020, April) Reuter. Retrieved in May 2020 from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-workers-trfn/death-of-12-year-old-indian-farm-worker-spurs-child-labour-probe-idUSKCN2231OQ>
 6. *Lockdowns around the world brings rise in domestic violence*. (2020, March 28). *The Guardian*. Retrieved in May 2020 from (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>).
 7. *India witnesses steep rise in crime against women amid lockdown*, (2020, May). *Economic Times*. Retrieved in May 2020 from https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-witnesses-steep-rise-in-crime-against-women-amid-lockdown-587-complaints-received-ncw/articleshow/75201412.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst
 8. *India Nobel laureate urges rescue for child workers trapped in coronavirus lockdown*, (2020, April 25), *Deccan Herald*. Retrieved in May 2020 from <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/india-nobel-laureate-urges-rescue-for-child-workers-trapped-in-coronavirus-lockdown-829619.html>
 9. Xiao Wu, Rachel C. Nethery, Francesca Dominici, (2020, April 24). *Exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States: A nationwide cross-sectional study*, Department of Biostatistics, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, 02115, USA. Retrieved in May 2020 from (<https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>)
 10. Kumar, R. (2017). *Prospects of Sustainable Fashion Design Innovation*. *International Journal of Textile and Fashion Technology (IJTFT)*, 7 (6), 5, 14.
 11. Karunaratne, P. V. M. *Mundane Beauty: Female Fashion Of Costumes Addressing Drapes And Folds As Fashion Devices Used In Female Costumes During 16 Th Century In Sri Lanka*.
 12. Jaiswal, G. *Empowering Creative Rural Women Through Fashion*.
 13. Menon, V., & Bai, S. K. *Exploring The Influence Of Cubism Art Movement On Fashion*.

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Diana Linda, Educated in Fashion design (B.Sc. and M.Sc.), Philosophy (Ba, Ma, and M.Phil.), and Mass medias and Journalism (Ma) Diana Linda is a designer committed to the causes of slow, sustainable, feminist design and a visiting faculty teaching sustainable design process, and history of costume in Indian Universities and Institutes such as Banasthali Vidyapith, Svt college in Sndt (Mumbai), and Soft (Pune).

Dr. Deepika Purohit

She is presently working as Assistant Professor at Banasthali Vidyapith and since 2016 is the coordinator of fashion and lifestyle design course. She has eleven years of experience in fashion and textile designing and is a member of the research advisory committee at Banasthali Vidyapith and Research Supervisor.