

Why Is Fast Fashion Thriving in the Era of Sustainable Shoppers?

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Consumers have **become more socially conscious** in the ways they shop. At the same time, the notoriously unsustainable practice of fast fashion is thriving.

There are several possible explanations for this consumer paradox. Awareness about fast fashion and its impact on the environment is not fully disseminated. And despite consumers' increased focus on sustainability, value is still paramount for shoppers when it comes to apparel and footwear.

An August 2019 survey from **GlobalWebIndex** asked internet users in the US and UK which industries should have better corporate social responsibility policies. The top-cited industries were food, pharmaceutical and energy, but a third of respondents held the fashion industry to the same standards.

Industries that US/UK Internet Users Believe Should Have a Better Corporate Social Responsibility Policy, Aug 2019

% of respondents

Food	52%
Pharmaceutical	50%
Energy	49%
Manufacturing	46%
Agriculture	41%
Automotive	41%
Financial services	40%
Internet (e.g., Microsoft, Google)	39%
Transport (i.e., shipping)	39%
Construction	38%
Electronics	38%
Telecommunication	38%
Social media	36%
Hotels, tourism & catering	34%
Fashion	33%
Aerospace	32%
Film	28%
Music	26%

Note: UK n=2,531, US n=2,134; ages 16-64

Source: GlobalWebIndex as cited in company blog, Jan 14, 2020

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The practice of fast fashion — mass producing trend-inspired clothing at inexpensive rates — **came to prominence** in the past decade. However, environmentalists have been critical of fast fashion for contributing to **textile manufacturing pollution** and encouraging consumers to **buy and discard clothes** as quickly as trends change.

Some fast-fashion retailers have already taken steps to become more environmentally friendly. For example, fast-fashion giant H&M uses **sustainable materials** and is implementing **AI to forecast demand**, so unsold clothes don't go to waste. In the larger scope of fashion, newer brands like Allbirds and Everlane have built their image around sustainable clothing, which could help cast a positive light on the industry going forward.

It's also possible that some consumers are aware of fast fashion's environmental impact but simply aren't willing to sacrifice a good deal.

A study published earlier this month by the **National Retail Federation** (NRF) and the IBM Institute highlighted consumers' greater focus on value when it came to fashion, compared with other industries. When shopping for food and beverages, 44% of respondents said they were mainly purpose-driven, seeking products and brands that aligned with

their lifestyle or came with health and wellness benefits. However, in the apparel and footwear category, more respondents said their pursuits were value-driven (46%), compared with 35% who identified as purpose-driven consumers.

The NRF and IBM also asked about sustainable shopping habits and found considerable interest among younger generations. According to the study, 70% of millennials and 69% of Gen Z respondents said they either rented or wanted to rent products instead of purchasing. Additionally, 77% of millennials and 78% of Gen Zers said they had purchased or wanted to purchase pre-owned, repaired or renewed products.

These numbers aren't specific to fashion, however, nor do they necessarily mean that younger generations will abandon fast fashion entirely. Gen Z, in particular, has an affinity for **a new wave of fast-fashion retailers** like Fashion Nova, PrettyLittleThing and Missguided. But younger cohorts and sustainable consumers have also flocked to companies like Rent the Runway, which allows customers to **rent designer brands**, and Poshmark, a **peer-to-peer fashion marketplace**. Their business models bring together the benefits of both value and ethics.