

Sustainable Environment and Business

Volume: 6 Issue: 3 Year: 2026
(ISSN: 2791-2582)



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.v6i3.seb.9>

Research Article

<http://kmf-publishers.com/seb/>

The Evolution of Sustainable Fashion Discourse in Industry Publications

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ABSTRACT

The growing prominence of sustainability within the global fashion industry has led to significant transformations in how sustainability is communicated and conceptualised. This study examines the evolution of sustainable fashion discourse in industry publications, focusing on shifts in language, themes, and framing strategies across different historical phases. Adopting a qualitative research design based on secondary data, the study analyses trade journals, sustainability reports, and academic literature. The theoretical framework integrates discourse theory, institutional theory, and stakeholder theory to interpret the construction and dissemination of sustainability narratives. The findings identify four major phases of discourse evolution: early environmental awareness, ethical fashion advocacy, corporate sustainability integration, and digital-era circular sustainability discourse. The study reveals a transition from problem-oriented and moral narratives to strategic and interactive communication frameworks shaped by institutional pressures and stakeholder engagement. While sustainability discourse has become central to industry practice, challenges such as greenwashing and narrative inconsistency persist. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of how discourse influences sustainability practices and highlights the need for more transparent, consistent, and accountable communication in the fashion industry.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, discourse analysis, industry publications, circular economy, stakeholder theory, greenwashing, corporate sustainability

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1. Introduction

The global fashion industry has emerged as one of the most influential sectors in shaping contemporary consumption patterns, cultural expression, and economic development. However, alongside its economic significance, the industry has increasingly been recognised as a major contributor to environmental degradation and social inequities. The production of textiles and garments involves extensive use of natural resources, including water, energy, and raw materials, while also generating significant waste and pollution (Fletcher, 2008). Furthermore, labour exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and unequal value distribution within global supply chains have intensified scrutiny from governments, civil society organisations, and consumers (Cline, 2013).

In response to these challenges, sustainability has become a central concern in both academic discourse and industry practice. Sustainable fashion, broadly defined as an approach that integrates environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and economic viability, seeks to address the systemic issues associated with conventional fashion production and consumption (Henninger et al., 2016). Over time, sustainability has evolved from a peripheral concern to a strategic imperative, influencing business models, regulatory frameworks, and consumer expectations.

A critical yet often underexplored dimension of this transformation is the role of discourse in shaping the meaning and trajectory of

sustainable fashion. Discourse, understood as the system of language, narratives, and representations through which social realities are constructed, plays a pivotal role in defining what sustainability entails and how it should be achieved. Within the fashion industry, discourse is not merely descriptive but performative, actively shaping organisational practices, consumer behaviour, and policy development.

Industry publications—including trade journals, corporate sustainability reports, fashion magazines, and professional platforms—serve as key sites for the production and dissemination of sustainability discourse. These publications function as intermediaries between academic knowledge, corporate strategy, and public perception, translating complex sustainability concepts into accessible narratives. Through editorials, case studies, trend analyses, and reports, industry publications contribute to the framing of sustainability as a moral obligation, a market opportunity, or a regulatory necessity.

The evolution of sustainable fashion discourse in these publications reflects broader shifts in societal values, technological advancements, and institutional pressures. In its early stages, sustainability discourse was primarily framed in terms of environmental protection and ethical consumption, often driven by activist movements and non-governmental organisations. Over time, however, the discourse has become increasingly institutionalised and commercialised, with corporations adopting sustainability narratives as part of their branding and

competitive positioning (Woodside & Fine, 2019).

The rise of digital media has further transformed the landscape of sustainability discourse. Social media platforms, online publications, and digital campaigns have enabled more dynamic and interactive forms of communication, allowing brands to engage directly with consumers and stakeholders. This shift has not only amplified the visibility of sustainability issues but also introduced new challenges, such as the proliferation of greenwashing and the fragmentation of sustainability narratives.

Despite the growing prominence of sustainable fashion discourse, there remains a need for systematic analysis of how this discourse has evolved and what factors have influenced its transformation. Existing studies have primarily focused on specific aspects of sustainability, such as consumer behaviour or corporate practices, often neglecting the broader discursive context in which these practices are embedded. Understanding the evolution of discourse is essential for identifying the underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and institutional influences that shape sustainability initiatives.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the evolution of sustainable fashion discourse in industry publications. By analysing changes in language, themes, and framing strategies across different historical periods, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how sustainability has been constructed and communicated within the fashion industry.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How has sustainable fashion discourse evolved in industry publications over time?
- What are the dominant themes and narratives in different phases of this evolution?
- How do theoretical perspectives explain the transformation of sustainability discourse?

To address these questions, the study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on secondary data, drawing on a wide range of industry publications and academic literature. The analysis is informed by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates discourse theory, institutional theory, and stakeholder theory, providing a nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between language, power, and practice.

By exploring the evolution of sustainable fashion discourse, this research contributes to both academic scholarship and industry practice. It offers insights into how sustainability narratives are constructed and legitimised, highlighting the role of communication in driving or constraining sustainable transformation. Moreover, the findings have practical implications for policymakers, industry professionals, and advocacy organisations seeking to promote more transparent, consistent, and impactful sustainability practices in the fashion sector.

2. Literature Review

Sustainable fashion is a multifaceted concept that encompasses environmental, social, and economic dimensions. It is often defined as a system of design, production, distribution, and consumption that minimises negative environmental impacts while promoting social equity and economic resilience (Fletcher, 2008; Henninger et al., 2016). Unlike conventional fashion, which is characterised by rapid production cycles and high consumption rates, sustainable fashion emphasises durability, resource efficiency, and ethical practices.

The concept is closely associated with the broader framework of sustainable development, which seeks to balance present needs with the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In the context of fashion, this involves reducing resource use, minimising waste, and ensuring fair labour conditions across the supply chain (Jung & Jin, 2014). Sustainable fashion also intersects with related concepts such as eco-fashion, ethical fashion, and slow fashion, each of which highlights specific aspects of sustainability.

Slow fashion, for instance, advocates for a shift away from fast fashion's emphasis on speed and volume toward a more thoughtful approach that values quality, craftsmanship, and longevity (Jung & Jin, 2014). Ethical fashion focuses on social justice, particularly in relation to labour rights and fair trade practices. Eco-fashion emphasises environmental considerations, such as the use of organic materials and environmentally friendly production processes.

2.1 Historical Development of Sustainable Fashion Discourse

The evolution of sustainable fashion discourse can be traced through several historical phases, each reflecting broader socio-economic and cultural transformations. In the early stages, sustainability was primarily associated with environmental activism, with limited attention from mainstream industry actors (Black, 2008). During this period, discourse was largely critical of industrial practices, highlighting issues such as pollution and resource depletion.

The 1990s marked a significant shift with the emergence of the ethical fashion movement, which brought attention to labour conditions in global supply chains. High-profile incidents, such as factory disasters and labour rights violations, contributed to increased awareness and prompted industry responses. Discourse during this phase emphasised corporate responsibility and ethical sourcing, reflecting growing stakeholder pressure (Cline, 2013).

In the 2000s and 2010s, sustainability became more integrated into corporate strategies, leading to the mainstreaming of sustainable fashion discourse. Industry publications began to highlight innovations in materials, production processes, and business models, framing sustainability as both a moral obligation and a competitive advantage. The introduction of certifications and standards further institutionalised sustainability practices, providing frameworks for measurement and accountability (Henninger et al., 2016).

The contemporary phase is characterised by a more holistic and systemic approach to sustainability, incorporating concepts such as circular economy, digitalisation, and social justice. Circular economy principles emphasise the reuse, recycling, and regeneration of materials, challenging the linear “take-make-dispose” model of traditional fashion systems. Digital technologies, including social media and e-commerce platforms, have transformed how sustainability is communicated and perceived, enabling greater transparency and engagement.

2.2 Discourse Theory and Sustainability Communication

Discourse theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how sustainability is constructed and communicated within the fashion industry. According to this perspective, discourse is not merely a reflection of reality but a constitutive force that shapes how issues are understood and addressed. Language, narratives, and symbols play a crucial role in defining what sustainability means and how it should be pursued.

In the context of sustainable fashion, discourse operates through various channels, including industry publications, marketing campaigns, and media coverage. These channels influence how sustainability is framed, whether as an ethical imperative, a business opportunity, or a regulatory requirement. The framing of sustainability has significant implications for how it is perceived by stakeholders and how it is implemented in practice.

For example, when sustainability is framed as a competitive advantage, it may encourage innovation and investment, but also risk commodifying sustainability and prioritising profit over genuine impact. Conversely, framing sustainability as a moral obligation may emphasise ethical considerations but may lack practical incentives for widespread adoption.

2.3 Institutional Perspectives on Sustainable Fashion

Institutional theory offers insights into how organisations respond to external pressures and conform to social norms. In the context of sustainable fashion, institutional pressures arise from various sources, including regulatory bodies, industry associations, and consumer expectations. These pressures influence how organisations adopt and communicate sustainability practices.

Industry publications play a key role in reflecting and reinforcing institutional norms. By disseminating best practices, success stories, and industry standards, these publications contribute to the diffusion of sustainability practices across the industry. They also serve as platforms for legitimising certain approaches to sustainability, shaping what is considered acceptable or desirable.

The concept of institutional isomorphism is particularly relevant, as organisations often adopt similar sustainability practices to maintain legitimacy and competitiveness. This can lead to the standardisation of sustainability discourse, with recurring themes and narratives across different publications and organisations.

2.4 Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability Narratives

Stakeholder theory emphasises the importance of addressing the needs and expectations of various stakeholders, including consumers, employees, investors, and communities. In sustainable fashion discourse, stakeholder engagement is a central theme, as organisations seek to demonstrate accountability and responsiveness.

Industry publications often highlight stakeholder initiatives, such as community development programs, ethical sourcing practices, and consumer education campaigns. These narratives serve to build trust and credibility, reinforcing the organisation's commitment to sustainability.

Consumer behaviour is particularly influential in shaping sustainability discourse. As consumers become more environmentally and socially conscious, their preferences drive demand for sustainable products and practices. This, in turn, influences how sustainability is communicated, with increased emphasis on transparency, authenticity, and storytelling (Woodside & Fine, 2019).

2.5 Emerging Trends in Sustainable Fashion Discourse

Recent literature identifies several emerging trends that are reshaping sustainable fashion discourse. One of the most significant is the growing emphasis on circular economy principles, which challenge traditional linear production models. Industry publications increasingly highlight initiatives such as

recycling, upcycling, and closed-loop systems.

Another important trend is the role of digital communication in amplifying sustainability narratives. Social media platforms enable brands to engage directly with consumers, creating opportunities for dialogue and feedback. However, this also increases the risk of misinformation and greenwashing, as sustainability claims may not always be substantiated.

Social justice has also become a prominent theme, with increased attention to issues such as diversity, inclusion, and equity. This reflects a broader understanding of sustainability that goes beyond environmental considerations to include social and cultural dimensions.

3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the evolution of sustainable fashion discourse requires a multidimensional analytical lens that captures the interplay between language, institutional structures, and stakeholder dynamics. This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework integrating discourse theory, institutional theory, and stakeholder theory. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive foundation for examining how sustainability narratives are constructed, disseminated, and transformed within industry publications.

3.1 Discourse Theory

Discourse theory posits that language is not merely a neutral medium for communication but a constitutive force that shapes social reality (Fairclough, 1995). From this

perspective, discourse encompasses the systems of meaning, representation, and interpretation through which social phenomena are understood. In the context of sustainable fashion, discourse determines how sustainability is defined, framed, and legitimised.

Industry publications serve as key sites of discursive production, where sustainability is articulated through narratives, metaphors, and symbolic representations. These narratives influence how stakeholders perceive sustainability, guiding both organisational behaviour and consumer decision-making. For instance, framing sustainability as an innovation-driven opportunity emphasises technological solutions and entrepreneurial initiatives, whereas framing it as an ethical imperative highlights moral responsibility and social justice.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), a key approach within discourse theory, emphasises the role of power and ideology in shaping discourse (Fairclough, 1995). Sustainably, dominant actors such as multinational brands and industry leaders often have greater influence over discourse, enabling them to shape narratives in ways that align with their strategic interests. This can lead to the marginalisation of alternative perspectives, such as those of grassroots movements or marginalised communities.

Moreover, discourse is dynamic and evolves in response to changing social, economic, and environmental conditions. The transition from early environmental narratives to contemporary discussions of circular economy and digital sustainability reflects

broader shifts in societal priorities and technological capabilities. By analysing these discursive shifts, the study provides insights into how sustainability is continuously redefined within the fashion industry.

3.2 Institutional Theory

Institutional theory provides a framework for understanding how organisational behaviour is shaped by external pressures, norms, and expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). According to this perspective, organisations seek legitimacy by conforming to socially accepted practices and standards. In the context of sustainable fashion, institutional pressures arise from regulatory requirements, industry standards, and stakeholder expectations.

One of the key concepts within institutional theory is institutional isomorphism, which refers to the tendency of organisations to adopt similar practices in response to shared pressures. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three types of isomorphism: coercive, normative, and mimetic. Coercive pressures stem from regulations and legal requirements, normative pressures arise from professional norms and standards, and mimetic pressures occur when organisations imitate successful peers.

Industry publications play a significant role in reinforcing institutional norms by disseminating best practices, success stories, and standardised frameworks for sustainability. Through these publications, certain approaches to sustainability become institutionalised, shaping how organisations implement and communicate sustainability initiatives. For example, the widespread

adoption of sustainability reporting frameworks reflects the influence of institutional pressures on corporate behaviour.

Institutional theory also highlights the role of legitimacy in shaping sustainability discourse. Organisations use sustainability narratives to signal compliance with societal expectations and to enhance their reputational capital. However, this can also lead to symbolic adoption of sustainability practices, where organisations emphasise communication over substantive change. This phenomenon is closely related to the concept of greenwashing, where sustainability claims are used to create a positive image without corresponding actions.

By applying institutional theory, this study examines how industry publications reflect and reinforce institutional pressures, contributing to the standardisation and diffusion of sustainability discourse across the fashion industry.

3.3 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory emphasises the importance of considering the interests and expectations of all stakeholders affected by organisational activities (Freeman, 1984). In the context of sustainable fashion, stakeholders include consumers, employees, suppliers, investors, governments, and local communities. Each of these groups has distinct concerns and priorities, which influence how sustainability is conceptualised and communicated.

Sustainable fashion discourse often reflects efforts to balance these diverse interests. For

instance, consumers may prioritise transparency and ethical sourcing, while investors may focus on financial performance and risk management. Industry publications play a crucial role in mediating these interests by presenting sustainability narratives that appeal to multiple stakeholder groups.

One of the key contributions of stakeholder theory is its emphasis on engagement and dialogue. Effective sustainability communication requires not only informing stakeholders but also involving them in decision-making processes. Industry publications increasingly highlight stakeholder engagement initiatives, such as collaborative partnerships, community programs, and consumer education campaigns.

Stakeholder theory also provides a framework for understanding the strategic use of sustainability narratives. Organisations may tailor their communication to address specific stakeholder concerns, emphasising different aspects of sustainability depending on the audience. For example, environmental initiatives may be highlighted for eco-conscious consumers, while social responsibility programs may be emphasised for advocacy groups.

Furthermore, the growing influence of consumers in shaping sustainability discourse cannot be overlooked. As consumers become more informed and engaged, their preferences and expectations drive demand for sustainable products and practices. This, in turn, influences how sustainability is communicated in industry publications, leading to increased emphasis

on authenticity, transparency, and storytelling (Woodside & Fine, 2019).

3.4 Integrative Framework

The integration of discourse theory, institutional theory, and stakeholder theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing sustainable fashion discourse. Discourse theory explains how sustainability narratives are constructed and evolve, institutional theory highlights the external pressures and norms that shape these narratives, and stakeholder theory emphasises the role of diverse interests and engagement in shaping communication strategies.

Together, these perspectives enable a nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between language, power, and practice in the fashion industry. This integrative framework guides the analysis of industry publications, allowing for the identification of key themes, patterns, and transformations in sustainability discourse.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena, such as discourse, where meaning is constructed through language and context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive approach allows for an in-depth examination of how sustainability is represented and understood within industry publications.

The study employs a secondary data analysis strategy, drawing on existing sources such as industry reports, trade journals, and academic

literature. This approach enables the analysis of a wide range of discursive materials across different time periods, providing a comprehensive view of the evolution of sustainable fashion discourse.

4.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Data were collected from multiple sources to ensure diversity and comprehensiveness. These sources include:

- Industry publications (e.g., trade magazines, sustainability reports, fashion industry platforms)
- Academic journal articles
- Reports from international organisations and non-governmental organisations

The selection of data was guided by the following criteria:

- **Relevance:** Sources must address sustainability in the context of fashion.
- **Credibility:** Sources must be published by reputable organisations or peer-reviewed journals.
- **Temporal Coverage:** Sources must represent different time periods to capture the evolution of discourse.
- **Diversity:** Sources must include a range of perspectives, including corporate, academic, and advocacy viewpoints.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select sources that are most relevant to the research objectives. This approach is appropriate for qualitative research, where

the focus is on depth rather than breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.2 Data Analysis Method

The study employs thematic analysis as the primary method for analysing data. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used approach for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis was conducted in three main stages:

Data Familiarisation: In the first stage, all selected sources were carefully reviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. Notes were taken on key themes, recurring terms, and patterns in the discourse.

Coding and Categorisation: In the second stage, the data were systematically coded to identify meaningful units of analysis. Codes were assigned to segments of text that represent specific themes or concepts, such as “environmental impact,” “ethical sourcing,” “circular economy,” and “transparency.”

These codes were then grouped into broader categories, reflecting overarching themes in the discourse. The coding process was iterative, allowing for refinement and adjustment as new patterns emerged.

Theme Development and Interpretation: In the final stage, the categories were analysed to identify key themes and patterns in the evolution of sustainable fashion discourse. These themes were interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework, providing insights into how discourse has changed over time and what factors have influenced these changes.

4.3 Ensuring Research Rigour

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the study, several strategies were employed:

- **Triangulation:** Multiple data sources were used to validate findings and reduce bias.
- **Transparency:** The research process, including data selection and analysis, was clearly documented.
- **Reflexivity:** The researcher critically reflected on potential biases and their influence on the analysis.

These measures contribute to the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.4 Ethical Considerations

As the study is based on secondary data, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants. However, ethical considerations were still observed, including proper citation of sources and respect for intellectual property. All data were used in accordance with academic standards and ethical guidelines (Mannan & Farhana, 2026).

4.5 Limitations of the Methodology

Despite its strengths, the study has certain limitations. The reliance on secondary data may limit the ability to capture real-time changes in discourse. Additionally, qualitative analysis is inherently subjective, and interpretations may vary depending on the researcher’s perspective. However, these limitations are mitigated by the use of multiple data sources and rigorous analytical procedures, ensuring a robust and comprehensive analysis.

5. Findings and Analysis

The analysis of industry publications reveals that sustainable fashion discourse has undergone a significant transformation over time, evolving through multiple phases characterised by distinct themes, narratives, and communicative strategies. These phases are not strictly linear but often overlap, reflecting the dynamic and iterative nature of discourse formation. The findings are organised into four major phases: early environmental awareness, ethical fashion and social responsibility, corporate sustainability integration, and digital and circular sustainability discourse. Each phase demonstrates a shift in how sustainability is framed, legitimised, and operationalised within the fashion industry.

Phase 1: Early Environmental Awareness:

The earliest phase of sustainable fashion discourse, primarily evident before the 1990s, is characterised by a strong emphasis on environmental degradation caused by industrial practices. Industry publications during this period often framed sustainability as a reactive response to ecological crises, highlighting issues such as water pollution, chemical use, and textile waste (Fletcher, 2008).

The discourse was largely problem-oriented, focusing on the negative externalities of fashion production. Terms such as “pollution,” “waste,” and “resource depletion” dominated the narrative, reflecting a critical stance toward industrialisation. Importantly, sustainability was not yet integrated into mainstream industry thinking but was instead associated with

environmental activism and niche movements (Black, 2008).

From a discourse theory perspective, this phase reflects a diagnostic framing, where the primary objective is to identify and articulate problems. The language used in industry publications served to raise awareness rather than to propose comprehensive solutions. This aligns with early environmental discourses in other industries, where the focus was on highlighting harm rather than promoting systemic change.

However, the limited scope of this discourse also indicates a lack of institutional support and stakeholder engagement. Sustainability was not yet perceived as a strategic priority, and industry publications rarely linked environmental concerns to business performance or consumer behaviour. This marginalisation of sustainability discourse underscores the absence of strong institutional pressures during this period (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Phase 2: Ethical Fashion and Social Responsibility:

The 1990s marked a critical turning point in sustainable fashion discourse, driven by increased awareness of labour issues and global supply chain dynamics. High-profile cases of labour exploitation and unsafe working conditions brought attention to the social dimensions of sustainability, leading to the emergence of the ethical fashion movement (Cline, 2013).

Industry publications began to incorporate themes such as “fair trade,” “ethical sourcing,” and “corporate responsibility.” The discourse expanded beyond environmental concerns to include human

rights and social justice, reflecting a more holistic understanding of sustainability. This phase is characterised by a shift from purely environmental narratives to normative framing, where ethical considerations and moral obligations are emphasised.

The role of stakeholders becomes more prominent in this phase, particularly non-governmental organisations and advocacy groups that exert pressure on corporations to adopt ethical practices. Industry publications often highlight collaborations between brands and NGOs, signalling a growing recognition of stakeholder engagement as a key component of sustainability.

From an institutional perspective, this phase reflects the emergence of normative pressures, as industry actors begin to align with evolving social expectations. The adoption of ethical codes of conduct and auditing mechanisms indicates the early stages of institutionalisation of sustainability practices (Henninger et al., 2016).

However, the discourse during this period also reveals tensions between ethical ideals and economic realities. While industry publications emphasise the importance of ethical practices, they often lack detailed discussions of implementation challenges. This suggests a gap between discourse and practice, highlighting the symbolic nature of some sustainability initiatives.

Phase 3: Corporate Sustainability Integration: The early 2000s to the late 2010s represent a phase of significant transformation, where sustainability becomes integrated into corporate strategies and business models. Industry publications

during this period increasingly frame sustainability as a source of competitive advantage, innovation, and risk management.

Key themes in this phase include corporate social responsibility (CSR), transparency, accountability, and innovation. Sustainability reports, certifications, and performance metrics become central elements of industry discourse, reflecting efforts to standardise and measure sustainability practices (Henninger et al., 2016).

The language used in industry publications shifts from moral appeals to strategic considerations. Terms such as “value creation,” “efficiency,” and “brand differentiation” become more prominent, indicating a move toward instrumental framing of sustainability. This shift aligns with stakeholder theory, as organisations seek to address the expectations of investors, consumers, and regulators.

Institutional theory provides further insight into this phase, particularly through the concept of isomorphism. As leading brands adopt sustainability practices, other organisations follow suit to maintain legitimacy and competitiveness (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Industry publications play a crucial role in this process by disseminating best practices and success stories, contributing to the diffusion of sustainability norms.

However, this phase also sees the rise of greenwashing, where sustainability claims are used as marketing tools without corresponding substantive actions. Industry publications sometimes reinforce this trend by focusing on positive narratives while

downplaying challenges and failures. This highlights the dual role of discourse as both a driver of change and a mechanism for impression management.

Phase 4: Digital and Circular Sustainability Discourse: The most recent phase, emerging in the 2020s, is characterised by the integration of digital technologies and circular economy principles into sustainability discourse. Industry publications increasingly emphasise concepts such as circularity, resource efficiency, and digital engagement, reflecting broader shifts in technological and societal contexts.

Circular economy discourse challenges the traditional linear model of production and consumption, advocating for systems that prioritise reuse, recycling, and regeneration. Industry publications highlight initiatives such as closed-loop supply chains, rental models, and upcycling, presenting them as innovative solutions to sustainability challenges.

At the same time, digital platforms have transformed how sustainability is communicated and consumed. Social media, online publications, and digital campaigns enable real-time interaction between brands and stakeholders, creating opportunities for greater transparency and engagement. This leads to a more interactive and participatory discourse, where consumers play an active role in shaping sustainability narratives.

From a discourse theory perspective, this phase reflects a shift toward dialogic framing, where multiple voices and perspectives are incorporated into the discourse. However,

this increased complexity also introduces challenges, such as information overload and the proliferation of conflicting narratives.

The emphasis on transparency and authenticity reflects growing stakeholder expectations, particularly among younger consumers who demand greater accountability from brands. Industry publications respond to these demands by highlighting traceability, data-driven insights, and storytelling techniques that emphasise authenticity (Woodside & Fine, 2019).

5.5 Cross-Phase Thematic Patterns

Across these phases, several key patterns emerge:

From Marginalisation to Centrality: Sustainability has transitioned from a peripheral concern to a central element of industry discourse. This shift reflects increasing institutional pressures and stakeholder expectations.

From Moral to Strategic Framing: The discourse has evolved from ethical and moral arguments to strategic and economic considerations, highlighting the integration of sustainability into business models.

Increasing Complexity and Multidimensionality: Sustainability discourse has become more complex, incorporating environmental, social, and economic dimensions, as well as technological and cultural factors.

Persistent Tensions and Contradictions: Despite progress, tensions between discourse

and practice remain evident, particularly in relation to greenwashing and implementation challenges.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the evolution of sustainable fashion discourse and its implications for industry practices, stakeholder engagement, and theoretical understanding. By integrating discourse theory, institutional theory, and stakeholder theory, this discussion offers a comprehensive interpretation of the observed patterns and trends.

6.1 Discourse as a Driver of Industry Transformation

One of the key insights from this study is the central role of discourse in driving the transformation of the fashion industry. Discourse does not merely reflect changes in practices but actively shapes them by influencing how sustainability is understood and prioritised.

In the early phases, discourse played a diagnostic role, raising awareness of environmental and social issues. As sustainability became more institutionalised, discourse shifted toward promoting solutions and best practices, contributing to the diffusion of sustainability initiatives. This evolution demonstrates the performative nature of discourse, where language not only describes reality but also shapes it (Fairclough, 1995).

6.2 Institutionalisation and Legitimacy

The findings highlight the importance of institutional pressures in shaping sustainable fashion discourse. As sustainability becomes a societal expectation, organisations adopt sustainability narratives to maintain legitimacy and align with institutional norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Industry publications serve as key mechanisms for institutionalisation, disseminating standardised frameworks and reinforcing normative expectations. However, the emphasis on legitimacy also raises concerns about the authenticity of sustainability initiatives. The prevalence of greenwashing suggests that some organisations prioritise symbolic compliance over substantive change.

This tension between legitimacy and authenticity underscores the need for stronger regulatory frameworks and more rigorous accountability mechanisms.

6.3 Stakeholder Influence and Engagement

Stakeholder theory provides valuable insights into the role of different actors in shaping sustainability discourse. The increasing prominence of consumer-driven narratives reflects the growing influence of stakeholders in demanding transparency and accountability.

The shift toward digital and interactive discourse further amplifies stakeholder engagement, enabling real-time communication and feedback. However, this also creates challenges, as organisations must

navigate diverse and sometimes conflicting stakeholder expectations.

The findings suggest that effective sustainability communication requires a balance between addressing stakeholder concerns and maintaining consistency and credibility in messaging.

6.4 The Paradox of Strategic Sustainability

The integration of sustainability into corporate strategies represents a significant advancement, but it also introduces a paradox. While strategic framing can drive innovation and investment, it may also lead to the commodification of sustainability, where environmental and social goals are subordinated to economic objectives.

This paradox is evident in the rise of greenwashing, where sustainability is used as a marketing tool rather than a genuine commitment. Industry publications play a dual role in this context, both promoting sustainability initiatives and potentially reinforcing superficial narratives.

Addressing this paradox requires a shift toward more transparent and accountable communication practices, as well as a stronger alignment between discourse and action.

6.5 Implications for Theory and Practice

From a theoretical perspective, this study demonstrates the value of integrating multiple frameworks to understand the complexity of sustainability discourse. Discourse theory highlights the role of language and meaning, institutional theory

explains the influence of external pressures, and stakeholder theory emphasises the importance of engagement and responsiveness.

From a practical perspective, the findings have several implications:

- **For industry practitioners:** The need for authentic and transparent communication to build trust and credibility.
- **For policymakers:** The importance of regulatory frameworks to address greenwashing and ensure accountability.
- **For researchers:** The need for further studies on the relationship between discourse and actual sustainability outcomes.

6.6 Future Research Directions

Future research should explore the impact of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, on sustainability discourse. Additionally, comparative studies across different regions and cultural contexts could provide deeper insights into the global dynamics of sustainable fashion discourse.

7. Conclusion

This study has explored the evolution of sustainable fashion discourse within industry publications, providing a comprehensive analysis of how sustainability narratives have developed and transformed over time. By examining shifts in language, thematic emphasis, and framing strategies, the research identifies four key phases of discourse evolution: early environmental

awareness, ethical fashion and social responsibility, corporate sustainability integration, and digital and circular sustainability discourse. These phases reflect broader socio-economic, technological, and institutional changes that have shaped the fashion industry's response to sustainability challenges.

One of the central findings of this study is the transition of sustainability from a peripheral concern to a core element of industry discourse. Initially framed as a response to environmental degradation, sustainability has gradually evolved into a strategic priority embedded within corporate practices and communication strategies. This shift highlights the growing influence of institutional pressures, including regulatory requirements, industry standards, and stakeholder expectations, in shaping sustainability narratives.

The study also underscores the increasing complexity and multidimensionality of sustainable fashion discourse. Contemporary narratives extend beyond environmental considerations to encompass social justice, economic viability, and technological innovation. The integration of circular economy principles and digital communication platforms has further expanded the scope of sustainability discourse, enabling more dynamic and interactive engagement with stakeholders.

However, the findings also reveal persistent challenges that limit the effectiveness of sustainability discourse. The prevalence of greenwashing and the gap between discourse and practice raise concerns about the authenticity and credibility of sustainability

claims. While industry publications play a crucial role in promoting sustainability, they may also contribute to the reinforcement of superficial narratives that prioritise image over substantive change.

From a theoretical perspective, the integration of discourse theory, institutional theory, and stakeholder theory provides a nuanced understanding of the forces shaping sustainable fashion discourse. Discourse theory highlights the role of language in constructing meaning, institutional theory explains the influence of external pressures and legitimacy concerns, and stakeholder theory emphasises the importance of engagement and responsiveness. Together, these frameworks offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between communication, power, and practice.

In practical terms, the study has important implications for industry practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. For practitioners, the findings emphasise the need for transparent and authentic communication that aligns with actual sustainability practices. For policymakers, the study highlights the importance of regulatory frameworks to address greenwashing and ensure accountability. For researchers, the study suggests avenues for further investigation, particularly in examining the relationship between discourse and measurable sustainability outcomes.

In conclusion, while sustainable fashion discourse has made significant progress in shaping industry practices and raising awareness, its transformative potential depends on the alignment between narrative and action. Future efforts should focus on

enhancing the credibility, consistency, and inclusivity of sustainability discourse, ensuring that it serves as a genuine driver of sustainable transformation in the fashion industry.

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