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Understanding and implementing sustainability by Polish designers – owners of small, independent fashion brands

Abstract: Implementing sustainable development goals defined by UNESCO encompasses diverse activities and spheres of contemporary life, including the issues of responsible production and consumption (goal 12). The fashion sector is often mentioned in this context and considered both ethically and environmentally problematic, especially taking into account clothing overproduction coupled with decreasing of its quality and offshoring to non-European countries. Fashion designers – owners of independent fashion brands based in specific local contexts – seem to be especially well prepared to implement in practice the idea of sustainable fashion often also referred to as responsible, ethical or slow fashion. The paper presents results of a qualitative exploratory research among Polish small, independent fashion firms. Analysing in-depth interviews with creative entrepreneurs based in different parts of Poland (Kraków, Łódź, Bytom, Warsaw, other cities and towns), the investigation considers issues such as: how do they understand the concept of sustainable fashion, how do they implement it in their entrepreneurial activities, what challenges and opportunities do they see in this respect, especially taking into account that their entrepreneurial activities situate them between the more symbolic-economy oriented creative sector and the more practically-oriented traditional garment and apparel sector?

Keywords: entrepreneurship; fashionpreneurs; Poland; SMEs; sustainable fashion

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Introduction

In the past few decades, in particular, following the development of fast fashion and strong off-shoring tendencies in the European context, **the issue of the environmental and social**

costs of fashion has begun to be increasingly noticed. Attention has been drawn to various adverse environmental impacts of the clothing industry, such as carbon emissions, depletion and pollution of water resources, and excessive waste (UNECE 2020, 2021). As a global challenge, the issue of sustainability in fashion design, production and consumption is, therefore, a leading theme in the discourse on fashion in recent years (Fletcher, Grose, 2012; Fletcher 2014; Gwilt, Rissanen, 2011; Gwilt, Payne, Ruthschilling, 2019; Henninger et al., 2017; Niinimäki, 2018). **Sustainable approaches to fashion production and consumption have many dimensions.** Most often mentioned are ecological matters, such as the use of more eco-friendly fabrics (e.g. sourced in an environmentally responsible way or recycled), minimising textile waste (zero-waste approaches), improving the quality of garments (including textiles, stitching and sewing) to ensure a longer lifespan for clothing, along with, to name but a few, opportunities for recirculation, more sustainable design allowing for flexible use, and limited and on-demand production to avoid overproduction. Social and ethical problems are also included in the concept of fashion sustainability: safe working conditions for workers in the textile industry, fair pay, and fair trade issues. Sometimes, the broader concepts of corporate social responsibility are likewise discussed. The many approaches to conceptualising the sustainability of fashion translate into a multitude of ways such practices may be referred to including, Zero-waste, responsible, green, ethical and slow fashion, and corporate social responsibility are some of those most often used terms depending on the focus of a particular producer or consumer, but also often treated as synonyms.

The need for more effective awareness-raising campaigns among various fashion market stakeholders, ranging from producers and consumers to different levels of government, while increasing the traceability and transparency of fashion value chains to enable consumers to make more informed and responsible decisions has also been underlined (UNECE 2020, 2021). From a broader angle, **more responsible clothing consumption and production is much in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, in particular, Goal 12 (Responsible consumption and production), but can also be connected to many other SDGs (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>).

Operating at the intersection of all stages in the fashion value chain and engaging in emotional labour, **independent designers – owners of small fashion enterprises – seem exceptionally well prepared to practise sustainable fashion approaches** (Heinze, 2020; Kedron, 2020). Both academic and popular publications point to their potential to act as **agents of change** and promoters of sustainable fashion to broader audiences and be inspirers of new developments in the fashion sector (Fletcher, Grose, 2012; Williams, 2015).

However, little is known about how independent fashion entrepreneurs understand and implement sustainable fashion (Gurova, Morozova, 2018). Moreover, research on independent fashion has so far been conducted mainly concerning ‘Anglo-Saxon’ or Western European contexts (Brydges, 2017; Crewe, Forster, 1993; Hauge, Hrats, 2010; Hrats, Jakob, Hauge, 2013; Leslie, Brail, Hunt, 2014; Heim, 2018; Molloy, Larner, 2010; Tuite, 2019; Tuite, Horton, 2019). The research on issues linked with sustainable fashion in Poland, however, remains very limited (consumers, fashion schools, fashion events or general ideas) (e.g. Hołuj, Murzyn-Kupisz, 2022; Koszewska, 2013; Murzyn-Kupisz, Hołuj, 2021; Raciniewska, 2014; Rudnicka, Koszewska, 2020).

Therefore, the paper aims to shed light on how independent fashion entrepreneurs in Poland understand and implement the idea of sustainable fashion. To do so, the authors considered three main research questions:

- How do self-employed fashion designers – owners of fashion SMEs – understand the concept of sustainable fashion?
- How do they implement sustainable fashion desiderata in their professional practices?
- What opportunities and challenges do they come across in this respect in the Polish context?

In addition, by exploring the attitudes and practices of entrepreneurs in the fashion sector, the paper aims to **contribute to the broader discussion on sustainable entrepreneurship** in the Polish context (Weidinger et al. 2014; Urbaniec 2018; Pinna 2020).

Independent fashion designers as sustainable fashion entrepreneurs: literature review

Before discussing the potential contribution of **independent fashion entrepreneurs** ('**fashionpreneurs**') to increasing sustainability in clothing production and consumption, it is necessary to underline the unique characteristics of their professional practices overlapping with specific features of the SMEs established and run by them. The particular features of fashion production considered independent include that it is regarded as **a unique and authentic means through which personal tastes and the ideas of specific creative entrepreneurs are expressed**. Consequently, clothing and fashion accessories are often of outstanding, artisanal quality. It is also frequently stressed that such entrepreneurs, who fulfil the dual function of designers and managers, particularly value the retention of **both creative control and economic independence**, which would be impossible to exercise within the framework of a more prominent firm (Tuite, 2019). Although such enterprises produce consumable goods and are market-oriented, the **scale of operation and profit are not the sole markers of such firms' success** as it also includes creating desired aesthetic outcomes, striving for and achieving originality while implementing and expressing personal ideas and values and philosophies (Heim, 2018; Hracz et al., 2013).

Moreover, as in the case of luxury goods, large-scale production or increasing scale is, in the case of such firms, not necessarily markers of achievement and development. They may be satisfied with a smaller production scale, which creates strong links with final consumers and the feeling of authenticity and exclusivity (Heim, 2018). The approach of such entrepreneurs (sometimes also referred to as 'fashionpreneurs' or creative entrepreneurs, taking into account that fashion is now considered a part of the creative sector) to production and distribution is, in addition, strongly conditioned by the specificity of the market subsegments in which they operate. Just like artists (Murzyn-Kupisz, Działek, 2017), they may be more commercially- or artistically- (conceptually)-oriented, ranging from high and bespoke to ready-to-wear clothes, and may be focused on either elegant and formal or on casual wear (Heim, 2018; Tuite, 2019).

An independent fashion entrepreneur is a person who establishes, owns and often manages a fashion enterprise at their own risk and under an individual brand (label) while implementing personal business and aesthetic ideas. Different authors stress several vital features which make it possible to consider a 'fashionpreneur' independent or 'indie'. The first important criterion is producing or selling collections of garments individually or engaging in cooperation within a small group (Hracz et al., 2013; McRobbie, 1998). The second feature stressed by some authors is the (relatively) small scale of operation (small business ownership, microenterprises) and its functioning on the fringes of the mainstream fashion

system coupled with a lack of affiliation with significant firms, labels or brands (Hauge, Hracs, 2010; Heim, 2018). Another characteristic trait is creative and managerial control. For instance, Brydges (2017) stresses that independence is not so much related to firm size as to having control and responsibility for the day-to-day workings of the business. Local embeddedness is another issue often mentioned (Crewe, Forster, 1993): engagement in local, often personal, cooperation networks (Molloy, Larner, 2010) and expressing local identity (Cuba, 2015). Finally, the specificity of ‘fashionpreneurs’ as producers of artisanal garments **at the intersection of art, craft and fashion is mentioned** (Tuite, Horton, 2019). Consequently, according to Tuite (2019: 6), “independent fashion is not antifashion, but instead is fashion conducted by those who wish to retain creative control of their work and develop and foster close personal connections with their peers and consumers [...]; independent fashion acts as an incubator for creative ideas and trends that find their way into mainstream fashion industry practices.”

Their motivations to implement (more) sustainable fashion approaches may also be diverse, ranging from personal conviction to a strategic (marketing) response in the face of fast-fashion competition and changing consumer tastes (Leslie, Brail, Hunt, 2014).

The way sustainability is implemented may also differ depending on the designers’ approach to fashion transformation towards sustainability. Fletcher (2013) distinguishes two main approaches. The first, which she terms as more ‘technocentric’, is focused on improving current products and processes to minimise the problems caused by the fashion industry. The second, called ‘eco-centric’ or ‘design for sustainability’, is linked to a willingness to implement more complex, profound changes to design philosophy and all stages of the fashion value chain. As Fletcher (2013: 560) writes, it involves “redesigning the systems that shape design, production and consumption: economic models, business practices, sociocultural behaviour.” Consequently, she considers the former approach weaker and reactive, while the latter anticipatory and proactive.

Methodology

The paper presents the results of **qualitative exploratory research among Polish small, independent fashion firms** conducted within the framework of the EcoFashion4V4 research project funded by the International Visegrad Fund: 12.2022–03.2023. Following desk-top research and participant observation at two editions of the leading independent fashion fair in Kraków (Kiermash) (cf. Hołuj, Murzyn-Kupisz, 2022), the author conducted ten **semi-structured in-depth interviews** with independent fashion entrepreneurs based in different parts of Poland (Kraków, Łódź, Bytom, Warsaw, other cities and smaller municipalities). They were recruited by making initial contact and explaining the project’s rationale in person during a fashion fair or by tapping into the independent fashion sector networks in which the Polish author was already present. All interview participants were owners of micro or small fashion firms, which may be considered independent. They were, however, diverse not only from the point of view of the owners’ and firms’ socio-demographic characteristics, such as age and location but also taking into account the length of existence on the market, type of wear designed and produced (i.e. more elegant and formal clothing versus more casual), the scale of production and primary distribution channels used, as well as making explicit references to sustainable fashion in their marketing strategies.

Consequently, two main groups of interviewees may be distinguished, denoted by the interview codes: SDPL for designers with an explicitly sustainable fashion orientation (SDPL1-5), and TDPL for ‘traditional’ designers who may implement sustainability-oriented practices but do not associate themselves explicitly with this fashion trend (TDPL1-5). Each interview lasted at least one hour, many taking much longer. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then translated into English. **The content analysis method** (Kellermanns et al., 2016; Neuendorf, 2012) was then used to discern the main and recurring themes in line with the main research questions.

Discussion of research results

The responses of designers who own independent fashion brands point to several key themes linked to their understanding of sustainable fashion, implementing sustainable fashion desiderata in their professional practices, opportunities and challenges, and potential links or contradictions between sustainability and fashion. All interlocutors noticed that sustainable fashion is a **timely and growing trend**. It is reflected in the following comment: “It is a very current topic. Everyone is talking about environmentalism, about ethical, responsible business. These are issues that we care about, and we see that our customers care about them” (SD4PL).

Understanding sustainable fashion

The interviewed ‘fashionpreneurs’ are **aware of the multidimensionality of the issue**, though certain aspects of sustainability are more underlined than others. As one of the designers put it:

For me, it means being in line with the [good] design, the fabric [good quality textiles], the ecology, and at the same time, it has to be fun and not harm anyone [ethical] [...]. Something that you wear for a long time, that is durable, useful and also made of environmentally friendly textiles (TD1PL).

Most of those interviewed who associate themselves explicitly with sustainable fashion see such **fashion mainly as locally manufactured, preferably from locally sourced fabrics**. They believe that in producing and purchasing locally, there is more opportunity to exert control over the production process, ‘going back’ to the shorter production and consumption chains that characterised clothing production before fast fashion’s advent. Such an approach is visible in the following statements:

The clothes that are created are produced more locally and have less of an impact on some destruction of the world and the planet. And for me, it’s a bit of a return to the roots, so these garments are more local and consciously produced and bought [...]. To make these clothes as local as possible because [...] if something is [produced] close to us, we have more influence on how it’s made, in what way and what happens during that [production process] (SD1PL).

Production as close as possible [locally] on site, we don’t have to send, travel over a long distance, European fabrics as much as possible (SD3PL).

The issue of the scale of production and avoiding overproduction is also mentioned both by sustainable and traditional designers: “Small batches, local production, that is not transported to us from somewhere in a different continent [...]. Scale is significant, it’s not tons of clothes, I’m overwhelmed by that in a [shopping] mall” (SD4PL). This matter may be linked with the **efficient use of textiles** (zero waste), **producing for specific clients, and on demand**.

Slow fashion [...] means not in some quantity of copies. If I see that a product doesn’t sell, I don’t throw it away; it’s not like I’ve produced thousands of them, and now I have to do something with them [...]. So, sustainable fashion is certainly zero waste, more ecological fabrics, and a well-thought-out production process; we don’t produce in I don’t know how many pieces [...]. It’s also in line with the zero waste trend. We have [at my brand] very little waste (TD2PL).

The next characteristic is the importance of quality as **good quality garments, well designed and well-made, functional and made from high-quality fabrics, are likely to be timeless and used for a long time**:

It is fashion that is not harmful to the environment. It seems that these are garments which are of good quality so that they can serve us for years (SD2PL).

Fashion has to be functional first; that is the basis. I once heard that a good design is usable [...] designed with the user in mind [...]. The quality of the fabrics – if something is going to last a few years, the carbon footprint I leave behind is incomparably smaller than something I buy for a pittance, and it’s only going to be useful for a while [...]. But the clothes I’ve sewn, I don’t expect some kind of rags out of them, ever. Because they just live a very long time (TD1PL).

Clothes should **not follow short-term trends** but be designed in such a way as to enable wearing them in different combinations:

It’s the kind of fashion that will always serve us [...]; it’s something off-trend, timeless. Something that no matter when you wear it, you will always feel well in it, and you can always wear it no matter what season it is, what is fashionable and what is not fashionable, you don’t feel it is passé. It’s a bit of a classic shaped and worn in different ways (TD2PL).

Selection of good quality, preferably **ecological or natural textiles**, plays an important role: “I would definitely link it [the idea of sustainable fashion] to ecology; it’s made of more ecological fabrics which are sourced more ecologically” (TD2PL). **Natural textiles which may be produced closer to the consumer should be preferred** – for instance, **linen in Central and Eastern Europe**: “Linen is completely biodegradable. It’s healthy, it’s eco-friendly, it traps all kinds of mites. We don’t have exposure to any allergens here” (TD3PL).

Good quality, timeless garments offer value for money. Therefore, they do not and **should not be sold at a discount**: “We are overwhelmed with these clothes in the chain [fast-fashion] stores [...], and there has also been a fashion for these sales [reducing prices], and in fact, some chain stores seem to be emphasising increasing sales through discounts and promotions” (TD3PL).

The last important aspect mentioned by both groups of designers is that **garments should be produced ethically, considering workers' fair treatment and remuneration**. As one of them put it: "Ethical, it's not sewn by people [working] in poor conditions" (SD4PL). Another interviewee expresses similar thoughts:

It has to be such a piece of clothing that no one should be disadvantaged in this production process. It's not my fancy at all. This price [of responsibly produced garments] is due to something: the sewing room, the seamstress, and the fabric manufacturer must earn. I wouldn't be able to cope with it if the girls sewing for me didn't have adequate earnings (SD5PL).

While mentioning the issue, some 'fashionpreneurs' underline that this may be **one of the critical differences between smaller fashion brands** still producing locally and large **fast fashion firms** who subcontract and off-shore:

But it's also important how people are treated. Company X [a large fast fashion company], they are not able to pay [fairly] to the manufacturer in Bangladesh, the subcontractor subcontracts, the employees work for a pittance (SD3PL).

Professional practices and implementation of sustainable fashion approaches

In line with the above understanding of sustainable fashion, **sustainable practices in Poland** mainly include **using natural, preferably locally sourced textiles, local and small-scale production, avoiding overproduction and producing in response to recognition of client needs** (rather than stimulating needs and overconsumption). They involve creating **timeless, flexible, good-quality clothes** that can be worn on different occasions, are sold at a 'fair' price and offer possibilities of **second-hand recirculation**. **Involvement in charitable activities** is an additional responsible activity mentioned by many interlocutors.

Among the critical issues mentioned is **using high-quality natural, organic textiles, in the Polish context, mainly linen**, which can be produced in Central Europe and has excellent properties, according to the respondents. Another responsible practice is **using 'leftover' textile stocks** of good quality. This matter resonates strongly in the responses of sustainable designers:

I design clothes from a natural textile such as linen. It's good for the skin, it's produced in Central Europe, linen clothes don't need to be ironed at all, it's better to hang them up properly after washing. If you don't iron them afterwards, they look less wrinkled when you wear them than if they had been well ironed before (SD1PL).

From the beginning something close to [us], quality, textiles produced in Europe, [taking into account] carbon footprint [...]. Other fabrics, besides linen [which dominates in the collections], are also natural, without additives, 100% wool, 100% velvet, and cotton. We also buy deadstock from a wholesaler in Italy (SD3PL).

We are exploring the topic – organic fabrics – our local market. When we can source eco organic raw materials, we do. For example, we have resigned from using melange fabrics for

T-shirts, 50% cotton, 50% polyester, and now it's 100% cotton. We use locally produced knitted textiles, cotton, flannel, viscose, some Polish textiles, linen, and wool (SD4PL).

Sourcing materials in second-hand shops for original designs, including textiles and buttons (TD3PL), is also mentioned.

The second important matter is a **'reasonably' small scale of production, avoiding overproduction and discounts and maximising the use of fabrics in the production process (zero-waste)**:

We try not to create an overproduction of garments, which means if someone ordered something, we sewed it, and if it was commissioned to this seamstress friend, she sewed it for us only after the order, or in small batches [...]. We also try not to throw away any fabrics or knitwear that we have left, resell them or make some semi-finished products out of them so that we can use them and not let them lie in a warehouse (SD2PL).

Initially, we had one piece per size, flexible production, for a specific order. We do not sew something that is unnecessary and even sell prototypes [...] at production cost [...]. There is never too much fabric; we buy 3–4 bales (SD3PL).

Small collections, so customers are assured of having unique clothes [...]. Even out of scraps, we make scrunchies. We focus on the human aspects even more than on strictly speaking ecology and on place; people come first for us. But we're slowly implementing that, for example, more and more recycled fabrics. We make good quality stuff, resell it, and exchange it afterwards. There are no big batches, we don't have to offer discounts and eliminate these overproduced clothes [rags]. We always sell completely [sell all the stock]; it may take longer, but in the end, all is sold (SD5PL).

Scraps – there are very few leftovers because I've learnt to arrange fabrics for cutting mega economically [and ecologically]. If scraps are left over, very small, I always laugh that's for a skirt for my daughter. It would probably be a waste in big companies; in our company, it's not because other clothes are made from it [...]. I rarely have promotions or discounts because we sew very little. It is calculated in such a way that there is no need, so I rarely offer sales, but I also have very few garments that do not sell; they will sell out sooner or later [...] [my price] is a well-calculated price; besides, I don't think it's fair to customers who often wait for the collection [to offer discounts later] (TD2PL).

It's a question of no overproduction; what I do is no overproduction. Those are the assumptions: there are no sales, no Black Fridays, and no seasonal discounts because why should there be? I don't make clothes of the kind – now this is fashionable – then we race to see who can sell faster what is fashionable now. The basis of this sustainable fashion, let's call it that, is that I don't have to get rid of [at discount prices] garments or fabrics, I buy for specific models, I don't generate too many clothes that litter the world (TD4PL).

A connected matter is a local production linked with controlling this process by either producing locally or owning a sewing workshop. This aspect is strongly emphasised:

The DNA of the company is localness, the design that takes place in-house, internally, local production [...]. We outsource all production to local companies, we know each other, a close working relationship, permanent cooperation with a sewing shop five minutes away, we care about quality [...]. It's a huge advantage that we can do everything locally [...], knits, yarns, there are producers who offer good quality locally (SD4PL).

We are opening [now, our own] sewing room, we want to [produce and buy] nearby, it's important to be close [to the production process]. We want to create workspaces where they [the sewing ladies] will want to come, where it's nice, where we have control [over how it's produced], better quality (SD5PL).

Complete and close control of the production and value chain allows for more sustainable behaviours in two more ways: **producing clothes in response to what clients really require** or even adjusted to a particular client's needs, **rather than catering to or creating imaginary wants, and creating simple, flexible forms, clothes that can be worn in different ways.**

It's hard to make a universal piece of clothing to please everyone [aesthetically]. Secondly, we are very different anatomically. It's a compromise, and I'm looking for universal, timeless, minimalist, and simple forms. Because it's also a bit like that, you can do more with it later. I like clothes that can be worn differently, that can be worn in three different ways, and as if the same thing can be worn three times or three days in a row [...]. I try to verify what the clients need. I may have an idea that something will be great, and then I have to change because something is not working. It's a process. I've introduced a dress, and it turns out that something needs to be changed to allow more people to wear it (SD1PL).

The quality of the textile, the form, well thought out, maybe more complicated design not like in a chain shop – here the price results from something, and more flexibility, quicker reaction, if something doesn't work out I try to do something else. We can adjust forms to clients' needs but within the existing design [pattern] (TD5PL).

Practising sustainable fashion also means **using opportunities for resale (recirculation) of already produced, used but good quality clothing, and responsible clothing maintenance, including careful reading of washing instructions which prolong clothes' longevity**: “Our fans have created an outlet of our brand's stuff on social media – on FB” (SD5PL).

In addition, **the 'fashionpreneurs' get involved in broader social and charitable activities**, mainly through donations of leftover textiles and scraps but sometimes as a solution to make good use of unsold but already produced clothes. The charitable causes mentioned by the interviewed designers included support for Ukrainian refugees, and different Polish charitable foundations and initiatives linked with animal welfare:

Supporting charitable causes, for example, after the outbreak of war in Ukraine [...]. Products that do not sell well [...], something turns out not as we planned, we give some of the clothes to charity, Polish Humanitarian Action, Maja Kotala Foundation, *Serwus Siostro* (SD4PL).

As a brand, we participate in the Open Cages campaign – we donate items to the auction annually (SD3PL).

Give all the offcuts [scraps] to companies that sew for dog shelters, for example [...], we have a wonderful X Foundation here, to which I give away leftover fabrics. A couple of metres at a time, the girls make such beautiful clothes out of it, which they then sell at charity auctions [...]. It's sheer joy that I can do it (TD4PL).

We sew waste bags [pouches] from scraps of fabric [leftovers]; I've also given pieces of fabric to studs as they are needed for horses which run in the paddock. Prints – print designs and printouts on paper, which is then used for packaging (TD5PL).

Challenges and opportunities for implementing sustainability in independent fashion production

The interviewed 'fashionpreneurs' see the **possibility of better compatibility between fashion and sustainability but also perceive it as a big challenge. For instance, good quality, natural or recycled textiles may be more difficult to get, costly and risky from the point of view of small fashion firms. At the same time, some may be less costly but not accepted by some customers due to more challenging maintenance.** There may also be **tension between designing and producing from ecological textiles versus designing and producing for longevity and durability.** These tensions are reflected in respondents' narrations regarding their entrepreneurial experiences:

Cotton is a natural fabric but yet it's very 'denatured', the process of producing it, and all that kind of stuff, it's hard to find, at the moment, to buy good quality cotton that wouldn't have all these [chemicals in it], there's this organic cotton but then it turns out it's not so organic at all [...]. And silk or wool [...], much higher prices [...], then the final price is much higher, then it's also harder to find customers for such garments, that's why [I use] linen as a natural textile but still less pricey [...]. Sewing silk is also much more challenging, not to mention taking care of it afterwards. Also, fewer people go for it, and it is easier, I don't know, to mess up in sewing. It's known that when you buy fabric for so much money, and something goes wrong later, in a sewing room, which happens, the risk is much higher (SD1PL).

Sometimes [fashion and sustainability issues] are at odds. Our popular strawberry jumper of acrylic yarn is made in X [the big city where they are based]. We were very much accused [by customers] that it is acrylic, an artificial fibre. We made a similar prototype of wool from a factory in Italy – availability to the local market was limited, timing difficulties, hard to replicate the desired colour scheme, and price comparison of PLN 189 for acrylic versus PLN 470 for a woollen jumper. Customers voted for [the natural yarn] in surveys, but the better wool option did not win out after learning the final price. I would love to, but in practice [in reality], consumer choices are different (SD4PL).

Using certain types of textiles is seen as more sustainable, though the issue is much more complex:

It is difficult to find the golden mean. Is a hat made of acrylic from Poland or Romania better than one made of wool from far away in Australia? Which is more ethical? Sometimes reducing production would do, locally reducing carbon footprint, but not 100%. Organic fabrics, too,

can be technologically embedded in polyester mesh; polyester is included in the final composition, and the customer asks why something is not 100% wool. In the new version of the firm website, we struggle to explain how we produce. We've switched completely to paper in shipping packaging to make the product consistent with the packaging. Still, we know that usually it is opened [used up] in a split second, so nice [packaging] is offered for a fee [...]. But it's hard; there's a crisis, and it's always expensive. We wanted to make jackets out of polyester from the ocean, which is a huge cost. These textiles are often problematic from the point of view of quality. The question is whether it is more ecological to produce garments of inferior quality than [produce] with non-ecological fabrics but [clothes] of better quality. It is a complex issue; it is not a simple thing that we will use an ecological fabric and the matter is settled [the problem is solved] (SD5PL).

All synthetic fibres give us something like stability, that is, whether they will not twist, the seam will be straight, the fabric will not shrink or stretch after washing because this can vary. I've recently heard that polyester should be forbidden [...] because it decomposes only after 1000 years. Then what will we make jackets, rain jackets and sportswear out of? [...] So this kind of fundamentalist ecology without knowledge doesn't make sense, I guess, because it's impractical, absolutely unrealistic [...]. It takes [many] litres of water to make a t-shirt out of cotton. Reinforcing the fibre with a bit of elastane or polystyrene enhances its lifespan (TD4PL).

According to many designers in the Polish context, it is often **challenging to source desired fabrics. There is an even bigger problem with transparency concerning their composition and origin:**

We also try to find natural substitutes, but because of the limitations of the local market, we can't do that completely [...]; maybe it would be more ecological not to produce at all (SD4PL).

"In the beginning, we were looking for a Polish manufacturer, and it was difficult. The factory in Kamienna Góra didn't want to say where they got their raw materials from. They didn't convince us" (SD3PL).

Independent 'fashionpreneurs' see **the creation and functioning of small, independent fashion brands as the best practical way to connect fashion and sustainability.**

If we think about sustainable fashion, small local brands are the most responsible because that's the polar opposite in terms of quantity, number of collections and volume of production compared to the big companies, and we are at the other end as we produce little and in such a quality that [these clothes] last as long as possible, they are durable [...]. So small local brands are more sustainable (SD3PL).

Producing new garments always poses sustainability dilemmas, so the key is balancing commercial and ecological aims and being aware of different options and challenges. According to the 'fashionpreneurs':

This is a difficult topic. Fashion always generates waste. We try to leave as small a [carbon] footprint as possible, but it would still be better to buy second-hand or use what you have in your wardrobe. It's difficult to find the middle ground. The dilemma is that fabrics made

in 20% artificial polyamide are unacceptable for female customers. But what is a sustainable fabric? That mixture makes this fabric more sustainable and last longer, so it becomes waste in a longer time perspective, or that it is natural and decomposes faster? (SD3PL).

It seems to me that people are talking about the fact that so many of these Polish brands are being created now and that it's not sustainable, as if creating more brands is not ethical for the environment. But on the other hand, I think that if these brands weren't being created, then those people who care about the environment wouldn't have an alternative; they would have to buy from 'junk' shops [fast-fashion firms], and in turn, they would fuel this consumerism in the [fast-fashion] chains. So they have to have some alternatives, and it's better to have such small Polish brands, where you know that clothes are a bit more expensive, but at least we know how they are made, that these are garments usually sewn in Poland in better conditions. So I think that you know that producing clothes is not a very ecological thing, but on the other hand, it just gives a choice to those who care (SD2PL).

Although **there is a growing interest in the issue, the overall level of awareness in Poland is still low**, which (coupled with economic constraints) means that more sustainable fashion practices are for now **restricted to a limited number of aware consumers**:

Fashion and sustainability can be reconciled, but within a limited group of customers [...]. Awareness is highly insufficient, and there won't be for a long time. We [in Poland] have this stereotype, which persists from generation to generation, that we should have a lot [of clothes, of goods in general] while our purchasing power is small. We want to have something new all the time [therefore tend to buy clothes of lower quality, mass-produced] (TD5PL).

Moreover, many consumers are not sufficiently well informed to take responsible care of their garments: "Customers don't read the washing instructions at all, and then they're surprised that garments don't serve as long as they should" (SD2PL).

Some designers, though, optimistically notice that **the number of consumers who are aware, buy and consume responsibly, especially in the younger age groups, is growing**:

There are more and more people who are aware, who want the good [quality] piece of clothing. Even young people can pull out more money and buy a nice linen dress; they buy it with awareness. [...] That's important because it's hard to pass on some ideas to older people, to make them aware, but many young people are more ecologically minded (TD3PL).

Possibly Second Life, OLX, Vinted are increasingly visible; it's very nice and encouraging. Customers are asking more and more about sustainable fashion issues (TD5PL).

The interviewed designers likewise notice that sustainable fashion production is a **controversial and challenging issue** and not every fashion firm or brand can produce in line with sustainable aims, or both producers and consumers **may have to make compromises**: "When we compromise, so that we know that it's not like that and that any company that produces clothes and wants to make money can do it in this way and not in another way, more sustainably, so that we don't avoid talking about it, otherwise it's greenwashing" (SD1PL).

Sustainable designers also stress that for both producers and consumers, it is **difficult to get reliable information on sustainable fashion**, as visible in the following statements: “It [the information] is not that accessible at all, I read, then I get conflicting information [...]” (SD1PL); „Not enough information” (SD2PL). A related issue, linking more local production and the issue of information, is the importance of having complete information on the design and production process, including **whose creativity the clothes result from**; if it is more local, “you know who has drawn particular designs, creativity rather than buying [ready graphic designs] from stock [stock images]” (SD4PL).

In turn, for **traditional ‘fashionpreneurs’**, it is not a matter of availability but the objectivity of information and dependability of sustainable declarations. They are, therefore, very **critical, not about sustainable fashion but about naïve, ‘black and white’ understandings of its application**. More sound, **objective scientific information should be available, avoiding oversimplification of sustainability issues and being realistic about specific challenges** linked to sustainable production of certain garment types and firms depending on their production scale. They also express their **distrust** of the ‘ideological’ overuse of references to the idea of sustainable fashion, in particular by more prominent fashion brands. They are **concerned with greenwashing and what may be termed ‘ethical washing’**, especially since the **idea of sustainable fashion and transparency is complex and unclear**. In their opinion, **smaller fashion brands**, very often revolving around one particular designer or family firm, because of their smaller scale and close control of the production process, are often much **more sustainable without advertising the fact** that some firms which promote themselves as sustainable.

It has become quite fashionable today. I was at a lecture at a conference [...], and one of the lecturers boasted [...] that she has now taken up such a clothing brand. She says this ideology is important, that part of the income goes to children in Africa [...]. I’m just wondering because to what extent is that? To what extent is it adding this ideology to fashion? And to what extent is it being implemented? [...] What happens to it afterwards, or where do these unsold garments go? (TD3PL).

I don’t follow [do not investigate]. I don’t wonder if a company that writes [that it is eco] really does it; how do I know? I don’t know how the procedures work, but it surprises me that ‘absolutely’ designer brands can still give a 20% discount on Black Friday. [...] Quality should not be offered at a discount [...]. Ecology is important, but let’s not get paranoid. Cotton requires pesticides, Oeko-Tex 100 certified cotton – everyone in the EU has to have it. Why write about it [on websites and labels]? People need to be aware of what the requirements are, for what certifications are [...], common sense needed, moderation. I am not a typical manufacturer; I can afford short series; I sew a lot not for a hanger but for particular customers, and there is no overproduction [...]. Yes, we can add an eco-philosophy to it. Still, it’s a matter of, well, it’s just so much common sense [...]. If [each of my clients] can order a particular shape, she can choose the length [...] a neckline [...] a long sleeve so everything is made a little bit like made to measure, but they have to wait a little bit [for the clothes to be ready]. They have to, and then they are happier that it was made especially for them (TD4PL).

Concluding remarks

Sustainable approaches to fashion are a growing global trend, visible nationally and noticed by independent ‘fashionpreneurs’ in Poland. They mention it as a positive phenomenon, particularly concerning the rising number of consumers who are more aware and responsible, especially in the younger age groups. Sustainable fashion has already captured the attention of fashion professionals (designers). However, those who identify more clearly with sustainable fashion are also more convinced about the idea. In contrast, traditional fashion designers are more sceptical and distrustful, even if, in practice, they implement many of its aims.

The awareness of the multidimensionality of fashion sustainability, ranging from ecological textiles and zero waste approaches through stressing quality, durability and longevity to ethical treatment of the workforce, seems stronger among ‘fashionpreneurs’ who explicitly identify with the notion. However, at the same time, they are more concerned with the challenges linked to sustainable fashion, such as the greenwashing practices of larger firms or negative stereotypes still maintained about second-hand clothing purchases.

Most respondents voiced **concern that although some information on sustainable fashion is available, it is often not so visible, easily obtained or reliable.** Therefore, sustainable consumer entrepreneurial practices in Poland’s fashion sector are more linked with **intuitive acting upon impressions** in daily managerial choices than following quickly obtainable guidelines. Even if diverse (potential) information sources are, at least to some extent, acknowledged, most ‘fashionpreneurs’ believe that access to reliable, more comprehensive and objective information both for firms and fashion consumers who are already somewhat interested in the issue and in particular promoting the idea of sustainable fashion to people who do not display any interest in it but could potentially get interested if such information reached them (coming across such information by chance), so far remains a big challenge. An interesting aspect of sustainability linked with education and the provision of information that seems to be somewhat overlooked in the discourse on sustainable fashion but has surfaced here is **the issue of clear information on the sources of creativity and uniqueness of design,** both as an economic and a sustainability value.

Independent ‘fashionpreneurs’ consider small fashion firms and a smaller production scale as promising alternatives to fast fashion in making fashion more sustainable. They are, however, also very **perceptive** (in particular, those who identify explicitly with sustainable fashion) **of limitations to sustainable professional fashion practices.** They know that producing new garments always unavoidably poses sustainability questions and dilemmas (unless production is stopped altogether). Therefore, it is crucial to find the best possible balance between commercial and ecological aims, consciously reviewing available options and challenges. **Compatibility between fashion and sustainability** is hence seen by ‘fashionpreneurs’ **as a possibility but also a big challenge.** Lastly, **the consumption side of the market – the insufficient level of awareness of consumers, remains the most critical challenge** to more sustainable fashion practices in the Polish context. On the demand side, the group of sustainable aficionados is, for now, restricted to a small number of more knowledgeable, aware and usually wealthier consumers. The recognition of the multidimensionality of sustainable fashion challenges and practices surely merits further investigation in the Polish context, looking from both the production and consumption points of view.

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