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Transformation Toward Slow Fashion: A Literature Synthesis on the Ecological and Social Impacts of Fast Fashion

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Abstract. This study synthesizes recent literature on the ecological and social impacts of fast fashion and explores slow fashion as a sustainable alternative. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following the PRISMA protocol, analyzing peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2024 and indexed in Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The findings indicate that fast fashion contributes approximately 10% of global carbon emissions, generates substantial volumes of textile and microplastic waste, and consumes excessive amounts of water. From a social perspective, the industry is strongly associated with labor exploitation, wage inequality, unsafe working conditions, and violations of workers' rights, disproportionately affecting women in developing countries. As a response to these challenges, slow fashion emphasizes ethical production, conscious consumption, and product durability, with adoption influenced by consumers' moral awareness and self-identity. This study contributes to sustainable fashion scholarship by integrating previously fragmented ecological and social evidence into a unified synthesis, identifying key research gaps, and proposing a conceptual framework to support the transition toward slow fashion. These contributions enhance academic understanding of the interconnected environmental and social consequences of fast fashion while offering strategic insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to advance sustainability within the global fashion industry.

Keywords: Fast Fashion; Slow Fashion; Sustainability; *Systematic Literature Review (SLR)*; PRISMA

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1. Introduction

Fast fashion has been a major driver of growth in the global textile industry; however, its dominant business model—characterized by rapid production cycles, low-cost mass manufacturing, and extremely short trend turnover—has generated significant ecological and social challenges. By encouraging impulsive consumption, overproduction, and the rapid disposal of garments, fast fashion contributes substantially to excessive resource use and escalating volumes of textile waste (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020; Camacho Cusicahua et al., 2024). Moreover, the persistent pressure to maintain low prices and fast delivery schedules has intensified labor exploitation across global supply chains, particularly in developing countries where production is concentrated (Stringer et al., 2019; Aggarwal et al., 2024).

From an environmental perspective, fast fashion is associated with high carbon emissions, intensive water consumption, and widespread pollution throughout the production lifecycle (Bick et al., 2018; Niinimäki et al., 2020). The extensive use of hazardous chemicals, combined with inadequate waste-treatment infrastructure in many producing regions, has resulted in severe soil and water contamination, adversely affecting local ecosystems. Textile dyeing alone is estimated to account for up to 20% of global industrial wastewater pollution (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Furthermore, the predominance of non-biodegradable synthetic fibers exacerbates environmental degradation, as the fashion industry generates over 92 million tons of textile waste annually, with most fast fashion garments discarded in landfills after a short period of use (Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020). Although these environmental impacts have been widely documented, existing research remains fragmented, often separating ecological consequences from the structural characteristics of the fast fashion business model.

Socially, the fast fashion industry has been consistently linked to exploitative labor practices. While rapid response systems and efficient supply chains may enhance competitiveness (Biyase et al., 2021), they often do so at the expense of worker welfare. Major garment-producing countries, including Bangladesh, India, and Cambodia, employ millions of workers—predominantly women—under precarious conditions. These workers frequently receive wages below living standards, lack formal employment contracts, and have limited access to occupational health and social protection (Bick et al., 2018; ILO, 2020). Such conditions highlight the persistent social inequalities embedded within fast fashion supply networks.

In response to these environmental and social challenges, slow fashion has emerged as a promising alternative. Slow fashion emphasizes ethical production, product quality, durability, and long-term sustainability (Fletcher, 2014; McNeill & Snowdon, 2019; Domingos et al., 2022). It encourages consumers to engage more critically with clothing consumption by prioritizing transparency, ethical labor practices, and reduced environmental impact (Sung & Woo, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the vulnerabilities of the fast fashion system while simultaneously creating opportunities for transformation toward more resilient and sustainable practices, including localized production, supply chain transparency, and mindful consumption (Brydges et al., 2020). Complementary innovations, such as clothing libraries and collaborative consumption models, have also been identified as effective strategies for extending garment lifespans and reducing the demand for new production (Sandin & Peters, 2018; Camacho Cusicahua et al., 2024). Additionally, consumer values related to ethical awareness, sustainability, and animal welfare have been shown to positively influence purchase intentions toward slow fashion, particularly among younger consumers (Stringer et al., 2019).

Given the multidimensional impacts of fast fashion, a comprehensive and integrative analysis is required to fully understand its environmental and social consequences. Therefore, this study aims to systematically examine the sustainability implications of fast fashion and to explore the potential of slow fashion as a more responsible and sustainable alternative, with particular attention to the context of developing countries where fast fashion production is predominantly located.

2. Methods

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure a transparent, systematic, and replicable review process (Page et al., 2021). The SLR approach was selected because it allows for a comprehensive synthesis of existing academic evidence on the multidimensional ecological and social impacts of fast fashion while systematically exploring slow fashion as a more sustainable alternative.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using three major academic databases: Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The search strategy applied a combination of relevant keywords, including *"fast fashion," "environmental impact," "social impact," "sustainability,"* and *"slow fashion,"* connected using Boolean operators (AND/OR). To ensure contemporary relevance, the search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2024. Only articles written in English or Indonesian were considered.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria comprised studies that were published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, examined the environmental and/or social impacts of fast fashion, and discussed sustainability-oriented alternatives, including slow fashion. Conversely, articles were excluded if they focused solely on fashion trends without a sustainability perspective, had an excessively narrow geographic scope that limited generalizability, or exhibited substantial methodological weaknesses.

Screening and Selection Process

The initial database search identified 695 articles. After duplicate removal, 550 articles remained for title and abstract screening. Subsequently, 130 articles were assessed through full-text review, resulting in 45 articles that met all inclusion criteria and were selected for final analysis. Reference management and citation accuracy were supported using *Mendeleysoftware*.

The temporal distribution of the selected articles across the review period is presented in Figure 1, which illustrates the annual publication trends of studies included in this systematic review from 2014 to 2024. In addition, the overall process of article identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion is summarized in Figure 2, following the PRISMA flow diagram.

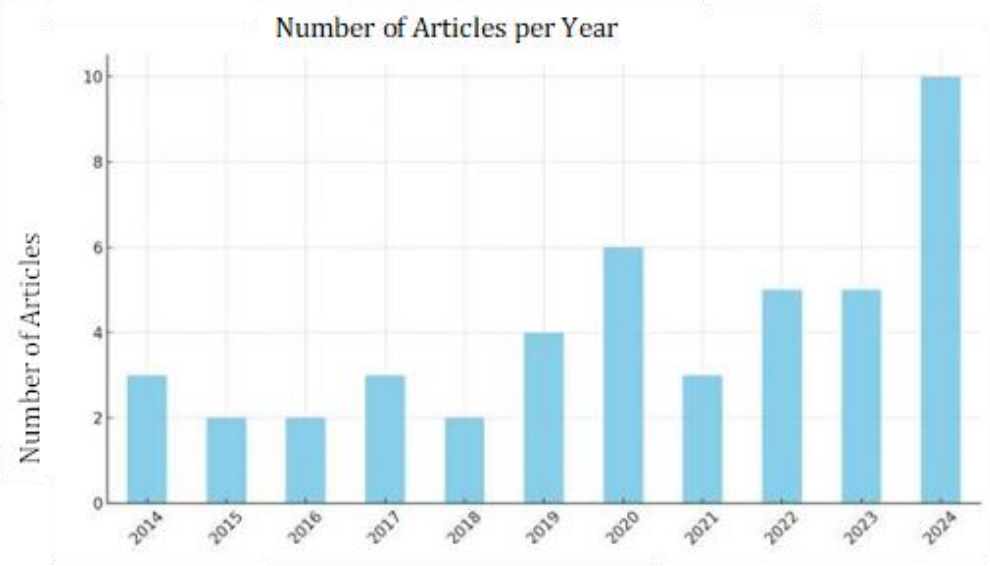

Figure 1. Annual distribution of articles included in the systematic literature review (2014–2024).

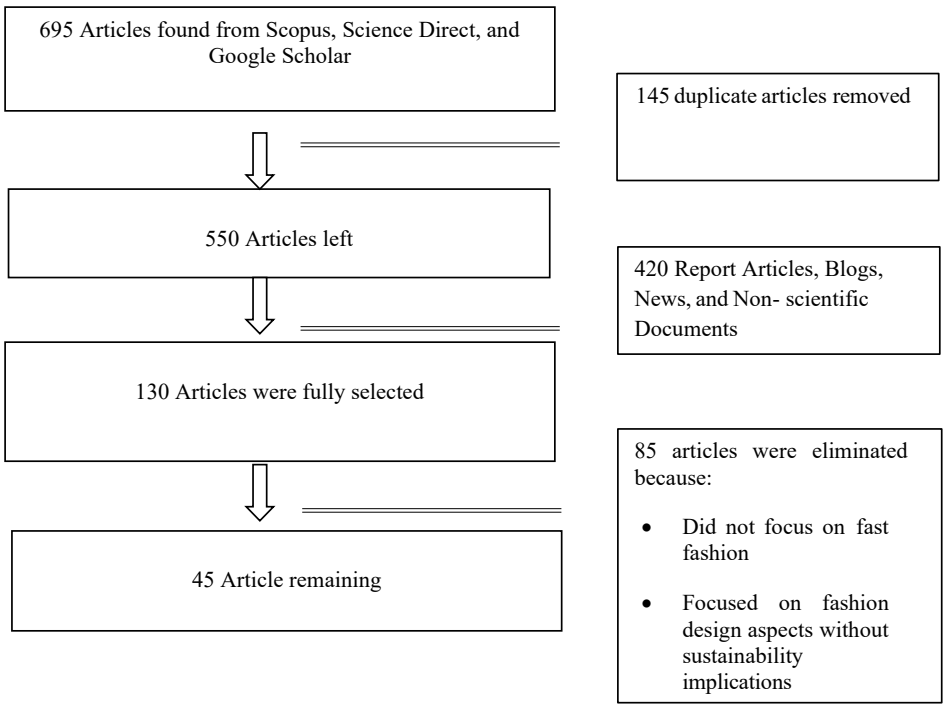

Figure 2. PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies in the systematic literature review.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The selected articles were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, supported by a structured Excel-based data extraction matrix. Key information from each study—including research focus, methodological approach, and principal findings—was systematically extracted and organized through a content-mapping process. Themes were developed through conceptual categorization, whereby recurring patterns across studies were identified and grouped into higher-level thematic domains.

To ensure consistency and reliability in the thematic structure, two researchers independently reviewed the extracted data and cross-validated the categorization before agreeing on the final themes. This process resulted in the identification of four major thematic areas: (1) ecological impacts of fast fashion, (2) social impacts of fast fashion, (3) consumer behavior and sustainability awareness, and (4) sustainability solutions and pathways toward slow fashion. Through this systematic approach, the study provides both a structured mapping of fast fashion's impacts and a conceptual foundation for understanding slow fashion as a transformative model for environmental and social sustainability.

3. Results and Discussion

Ecological Impact of Fast Fashion

The findings indicate that fast fashion production requires substantial natural resources, particularly water, during cotton cultivation and textile dyeing processes, resulting in significant water and soil pollution (Bailey et al., 2022). The industry generates more than 92 million tons of textile waste annually, with the majority disposed of in landfills and only approximately 15% recycled (Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020). Across the reviewed studies, fast fashion is consistently identified as a major contributor to environmental degradation.

Most studies emphasize the extremely high water consumption associated with textile

production, especially in cotton farming and fabric dyeing (Brewer, 2019). In addition, non-biodegradable textile waste and the release of microplastics from synthetic fibers into aquatic ecosystems represent a rapidly escalating environmental challenge (Bick et al., 2018). The discharge of untreated dye chemicals further exacerbates ecosystem degradation, particularly in developing countries where environmental regulations and waste-treatment infrastructure are often inadequate.

Several studies highlight the potential of reuse and recycling strategies to mitigate environmental impacts. Sandin and Peters (2018) demonstrate that textile recycling generally results in lower environmental burdens compared to landfill disposal; however, its effectiveness depends heavily on the substitution rate of virgin products and the efficiency of distribution logistics. Similarly, Camacho Cusicahua et al. (2024) identify greenhouse gas emissions, textile waste generation, and water pollution as the primary ecological consequences of fast fashion, largely driven by synthetic materials and inefficient production systems. Svajdova (2024) further argues that the extensive use of synthetic fibers significantly increases the industry's ecological footprint.

Microplastics derived from synthetic textiles have been detected in marine organisms, posing long-term risks to aquatic ecosystems and food chains. In parallel, the energy-intensive nature of textile manufacturing and global distribution contributes to approximately 10% of total global carbon emissions (UNEP, 2019). Despite these impacts, consumer awareness of sustainable fashion remains limited, reducing market pressure for industry transformation (Henninger et al., 2016).

Moreover, impulsive purchasing behavior, characteristic of fast fashion consumption, accelerates garment disposal after minimal use (McNeill, 2015; Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020). Mehrjoo and Pasek (2014) further note that fast fashion relies on ecologically inefficient, highly responsive supply chains that reinforce short product life cycles and intensify environmental stress.

Social Impact of Fast Fashion

From a social perspective, fast fashion is strongly associated with exploitative labor practices, particularly in developing countries. The dominant business model prioritizes low production costs and rapid turnaround times, often at the expense of workers' rights and ethical standards (Pedersen & Andersen, 2015). As noted by Jung and Jin (2014) and Domingos et al. (2022), intense production pressure frequently results in compromised workplace safety, excessive working hours, and inadequate labor protections.

The literature consistently reports inhumane working conditions within fast fashion supply chains, including wages below legal minimums, insufficient occupational health and safety measures, and limited access to social security (Bick et al., 2018; ILO, 2020). Complex and opaque supply chain structures further obscure accountability among brands, manufacturers, and consumers, widening the responsibility gap.

Aggarwal et al. (2024) reveal that garment workers in developing countries often receive only 1–2% of the final retail price, while facing hazardous working environments and unstable employment conditions. High production targets frequently trigger labor rights violations, including forced overtime and workplace harassment. High-profile tragedies such as the Rana Plaza collapse and continued reports of child labor have intensified global criticism of fast fashion business practices (Javed et al., 2024).

Consumption Patterns and Consumer Behavior

Consumer behavior plays a critical role in sustaining the fast fashion system. Cook and Yurchisin (2017) find that low prices and perceived scarcity drive impulse buying, often followed by post-purchase regret and increased return rates, placing additional strain on logistics and waste management systems. Sheiner and Lissitsa (2024) categorize consumers into three groups based on sustainability orientation: self-driven (price and style-focused), social-driven (image-oriented), and sacrifice-driven (ethics- and environment-oriented). The dominance of the first

two groups indicates that sustainability considerations remain secondary for most fast fashion consumers.

Although sustainability awareness is increasing, particularly among younger consumers, a persistent attitude–behavior gap remains (Domingos et al., 2022). Many consumers continue to prioritize affordability and trend responsiveness over ethical considerations, resulting in short garment use cycles and accelerated waste generation (Henninger et al., 2017). Even Generation Z consumers—often perceived as environmentally conscious—continue to purchase from fast fashion brands such as SHEIN despite awareness of negative impacts, driven by low prices, materialistic motivations, and digital accessibility (Sheiner & Lissitsa, 2024; Gwozdz et al., 2017; Choi et al., 2020).

Potential of Slow Fashion as a Solution

Slow fashion has emerged as a viable alternative emphasizing ethical production, product longevity, and conscious consumption. It seeks to address the value–action gap, where consumers' ethical values fail to translate into purchasing behavior (West et al., 2021). Legere and Kang (2020) demonstrate that slow fashion adoption is closely linked to self-identity and the desire to express moral and symbolic values through clothing choices.

While awareness of sustainability is growing, behavioral barriers persist (López et al., 2021). Education, transparency, and information accessibility are therefore critical to facilitating behavioral change. McNeill and Snowdon (2019) emphasize the importance of retail models that balance profitability with ethical and sustainability values, while Stringer et al. (2019) highlight the role of personal values such as self-transcendence in shaping ethical consumption.

Innovative consumption models—including clothing libraries and rental systems—have shown potential to extend product lifespans and reduce new production (Zamani et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020). However, their success depends on consumer acceptance and efficient logistical infrastructure. Slow fashion also supports local producers, living wages, and humane working conditions, offering sustainable business opportunities for small and medium enterprises (Jung & Jin, 2016).

Literature Synthesis and Research Gaps (Revised)

The synthesis of the 45 reviewed articles reveals strong consensus regarding the intertwined environmental and social harms of fast fashion. Most studies emphasize ecological impacts—such as carbon emissions, textile waste generation, and excessive water consumption—while research examining slow fashion–based solutions remains relatively limited and largely concentrated in developed-country contexts. The unequal distribution of environmental and social burdens is a recurring concern, as low- and middle-income countries disproportionately experience the negative consequences of fast fashion production and waste disposal (Bick et al., 2018).

A summary of the key findings and identified research gaps derived from the reviewed literature is presented in **Table 1**. The table synthesizes dominant research themes, major contributions, and underexplored areas across fast fashion and slow fashion studies, providing a structured overview of the current state of knowledge.

Based on the synthesis summarized in **Table 1**, several critical research gaps are identified:

- Limited empirical testing of slow fashion business models in developing-country contexts;
- Insufficient investigation into the effectiveness of sustainability labels and certifications in shaping consumer behavior;
- A lack of cross-cultural comparative studies examining worker conditions and consumer responses within slow fashion systems.

Building on these findings, a conceptual framework is proposed to illustrate the transition from the environmental and social impacts of fast fashion toward a sustainable fashion ecosystem grounded in slow fashion principles. This framework integrates key drivers, enabling factors, and transformation pathways identified in the literature and is visualized in **Figure 3**.

Table 1. Summary of key findings and research gaps identified in fast fashion and slow fashion literature.

Main Topic	Sub-topic	Author(s) (Year)	Key Findings
Ecological Impact of Fast Fashion	Environmental pollution and textile waste	Mehrjo (2014); Turker (2014); McNeill (2015); Gwozdz (2017); Zamani (2017); Niinimäki (2018); Neil (2019); Stringrer (2019); Brydges (2020); Niinimäki (2020);Baily (2022); Fang (2023); Javed (2024); Li (2024); Cusicahua(2024),	Fast fashion causes huge waste and environmental pollution through low textile production and recycling processes.
	Energy consumption and carbon emissions	Mehrjo (2014); McNeil (2015); Baily (2022); Li (2024)	Fast and mass processes in fast fashion contribute to high carbon emissions and large energy consumption.
Social Impact of Fast Fashion	Worker exploitation and poor working conditions	ILO (2020); Liu (2020)	Many fast fashion textile factories have poor working conditions and oppress workers with low wages.
	Economic inequality and business ethics	Bick (2018); Stringer (2019)	The fast fashion business model lacks ethics and exacerbates social inequality in developing countries.
Consumer Behavior & Awareness	Consumptive and impulsive behavior	Stringer(2019); Hwang (2024)	Consumers buy fast fashion impulsively because of low prices and easy access, rather than out of necessity.
	Attitude towards sustainability	Pedersen et al. (2015); Duh (2023); Busalim (2024); Teerakapibal (2024)	There is a gap between environmental awareness and action in fashion consumption.
	Consumption Patterns and Consumer Perceptions	Gwozdz (2017), Abbate (2023); Herold (2023); Busalim (2024); Švajdová (2024); Mahanty (2024); Li (2024); Sheiner (2024)	Consumers play a huge role in shaping the industry through their awareness and consumption patterns.
Slow Fashion Solution	Consumer education and awareness	Jung (2014); Jung (2016); Brewer (2019); Lagere (2020); Lopez (2021); West(2021); Farzin (2022); Domingos (2022); Švajdová (2024); Mahanty (2024)	Education is essential to drive change to environmentally conscious slow fashion consumption behavior.
	Sustainable production & distribution strategy	Jung (2014);Tuker (2014);Centobelli (2022); Wren (2022) Abbate (2023); Aggarwal (2024)	Slow fashion encourages local production, limited quantity, and efficient distribution with high ethical values.
	Digital & technology innovation	Herold (2023); Mahanty (2024); Gogh (2024)	Digital technology opens up opportunities for alternative business models such as fashion rental and recycling.

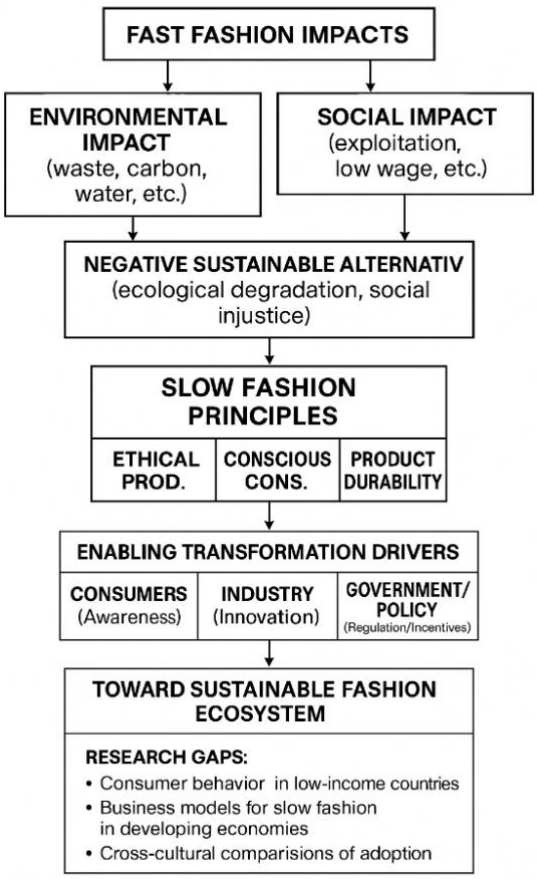

Figure 3 Conceptual framework illustrating the transition from fast fashion impacts to a sustainable fashion ecosystem through slow fashion principles and enabling transformation drivers.

Solutions and Recommendations

Achieving a sustainable fashion system requires coordinated action among consumers, industry actors, governments, and civil society.

Consumer Empowerment through Education

Educational initiatives can enhance awareness of fast fashion's ecological and social impacts and promote sustainable consumption behaviors (Henninger et al., 2017). Campaigns, wardrobe audits, and skill-based training such as garment repair can reduce impulsive consumption and extend clothing lifespans (West et al., 2021).

Government Policy and Regulatory Reforms

Governments play a crucial role by enforcing environmental regulations, labor standards, and extended producer responsibility policies (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Fiscal incentives for sustainable materials and stricter enforcement of labor rights are also essential (ILO, 2020).

Industry Transformation by Manufacturers

Manufacturers must adopt circular economy principles, including durable design, recycled materials, and demand-driven production, to reduce overproduction (Centobelli et al., 2022). Supply chain transparency remains critical to enabling ethical consumer choices (Sormin et al., 2024).

Strengthening the Slow Fashion Model

Strengthening slow fashion requires integrated collaboration among stakeholders. Supporting local artisans, leveraging digital technologies, and implementing credible eco-

labels can build consumer trust and reinforce ethical supply chains (Turker et al., 2014; Gogh et al., 2024).

4. Conclusions

This systematic literature review confirms that fast fashion exerts substantial negative environmental and social impacts, including high carbon emissions, intensive water consumption and pollution, excessive textile waste generation, and labor exploitation within global supply chains. The prevailing model of high-speed, high-volume production is fundamentally misaligned with sustainability principles and continues to exacerbate ecological degradation and social inequality.

In contrast, slow fashion emerges as a viable and strategic alternative that prioritizes product quality, ethical and localized production, and conscious consumption. By emphasizing durability, transparency, and social responsibility, slow fashion offers a pathway toward reducing environmental burdens while improving labor conditions across the fashion value chain. However, the successful transition from fast to slow fashion depends on coordinated efforts among key stakeholders.

This study highlights the critical importance of consumer education, regulatory and policy reforms, and industry-led innovation in facilitating systemic change. Cross-sector collaboration is essential to accelerate the transformation toward a fair and sustainable fashion system that aligns with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Finally, further empirical research is required to address existing knowledge gaps—particularly in developing-country contexts—and to support evidence-based policymaking and effective implementation of sustainable fashion practices.

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