

## **Sustainable concept in fashion retail: A systematic literature review**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the importance of integrating environmental, social, and economic sustainability into business strategies and operations to generate a positive impact on society. In the context of branding and marketing, this means developing authentic narratives that promote sustainable practices, enhance the brand's reputation, and foster a deeper connection with consumers who are increasingly attentive to ethical responsibility and transparency. Alignment with the SDGs becomes a competitive advantage in market positioning. Luxury is no longer confined to the privileged few. It is increasingly being democratized, redefined through shifts in consumer values, technological innovation, and socio-cultural change. Contemporary luxury embraces experiences over possessions, sustainability over excess, and personalization over standardization. This evolution challenges traditional notions of status and exclusivity, prompting brands to navigate a complex landscape where authenticity, ethical production, and emotional resonance become as important as heritage and craftsmanship. Socio-cultural dynamics, the evolution of consumption, and the growing attention to sustainability and personal experience are redefining the traditional codes of luxury, making it more accessible, experiential, and value-based. In recent years, a flow of research has developed focused on the role of social media platforms in redefining the experience of luxury, influencing brands, offers, and consumer perceptions through dynamics such as co-creation in communities, key word (eWOM), perceptions of exclusivity, and purchasing impulse phenomena – mechanisms explored by studies such as Godey et al. (2016), Schivinski et al. (2024), and Chen et al. (2025). Despite the growing focus on sustainability in business strategies, the academic literature highlights a significant gap in understanding how social sustainability influences consumer perceptions, purchasing decisions, and loyalty. Most studies focus on

environmental initiatives, leaving social implications in the background, often treated marginally or integrated into generic theoretical frameworks. This fragmentation limits the possibility of developing specific conceptual models and operational tools for sustainable marketing and branding. Therefore, there is a need to delve deeper into how businesses can incorporate social sustainability into their brand strategies, evaluating its impact on both competitive positioning and long-term relationships with consumers. This gap makes it difficult to extract meaningful information and develop a cohesive understanding of the industry. To fill this gap, the paper systematically synthesizes available literature on the brand's social sustainability domain and consumer behavior by examining 250 papers published between 2020 and 2025. The systematic thematic analysis uncovers five key themes: sustainable fashion, luxury fashion, retail fashion, fast fashion, and online fashion. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the social sustainability of the brand in the luxury fashion sector and guides future research, ultimately promoting responsible, ethical, and inclusive business practices in this sector.

*Keywords: sustainability, retail, fashion, review*

## **Introduction**

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015; Raman et al., 2023) provide a comprehensive framework for achieving sustainable development by combining environmental, social, and economic components, with the social dimension standing out among these goals (Schroeder et al., 2018) and acquiring increasing importance for luxury brands. Much of the literature discusses sustainability as a whole, without fully understanding its complex character (Nagendra et al., 2024; Alwani et al., 2025) and its specificities in relation to brand social sustainability, particularly in terms of customer perception and interpretation. While previous research reveals that sustainability has become an essential factor in consumer choice (Claudy et al., 2014; Wang & Wu, 2016; Walsh & Dodds, 2017; Rahman et al., 2019), and it has been subject of extensive study in numerous business disciplines, with a focus on marketing (Sander et al., 2021; Belz & Peattie, 2013; Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014), and has evidenced the importance of consistent communication in overcoming sustainability-related difficulties such as customer distrust (Henninger et al., 2016) and promoting a positive customer brand perception, however, highly focused research in which consumers value socially sustainable luxury branding is still limited despite its relevance. The literature displays a clear research gap regarding the multidimensionality of sustainability. According to Catlin et al. (2017), luxury shoppers in particular are becoming increasingly

aware of the ethical and social implications of their purchasing decisions, raising concerns not only about price but also about personal responsibility for the social and environmental impacts. Existing research suggests that social sustainability can enhance competitive advantage, particularly when effectively conveyed through branding and marketing initiatives (Tarabashkina et al., 2020). However, the complexities of this process in the luxury market are still partially analysed, and specifically, research has not directly investigated how social sustainability affects luxury brand identity, despite growing recognition that sustainability-related messaging is crucial to customer trust and brand credibility. This distinction is particularly significant considering the increased importance of customer connection through digital platforms.

As a result, the study has two main objectives. First, by engaging in the current literature status on sustainability in luxury and fashion, it aims to specifically analyse the social sustainability specificities. To that purpose, the research focuses on six globally known luxury. To address this methodological gap. The literature review conducted for this research used a systematic approach, screening 250 publications and narrowing down to 28 key studies after a thorough review. Building on these findings, the study provides a comprehensive conceptual model that situates social sustainability at the nexus of luxury branding and digital interaction. The section concludes with the proposal of future research paths aimed at further deepening this relevant field of study. The different themes are examined in depth in order to understand the multiple implications of social media for luxury businesses and then organized into a holistic model that summarizes their overall role.

## **2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The study is based on a systematic literature review aimed at addressing a specific research issue in the field of sustainability applied to the luxury fashion sector. This approach enables us to provide a rigorous and in-depth synthesis of the existing knowledge, highlighting the main conceptual and empirical gaps that characterize this niche market and, consequently, outlining guidelines for future studies (Petticrew and Roberts, 2008; Crossan and Apaydin, 2010). *Table 1* is a structured guide aimed at ensuring objectivity, systematicity, and transparency in the analysis process, helping to strengthen the overall reliability and robustness of the review (Tranfield et al., 2003).

### *2.1. PRISMA method*

The study adopts the PRISMA 2020 approach (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), which represents the reference model for reporting systematic

reviews and meta-analyses. The PRISMA 2020 model provides a flowchart divided into four main phases — *identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion* — that guide the systematic review process (Moher et al., 2009, 2010; Page et al., 2021). This approach is widely adopted in numerous disciplinary fields to conduct systematic reviews of the literature (Tremmel et al., 2017; Canto et al., 2021; Abdelmeguid et al., 2022).

### 2.1.1 Identification.

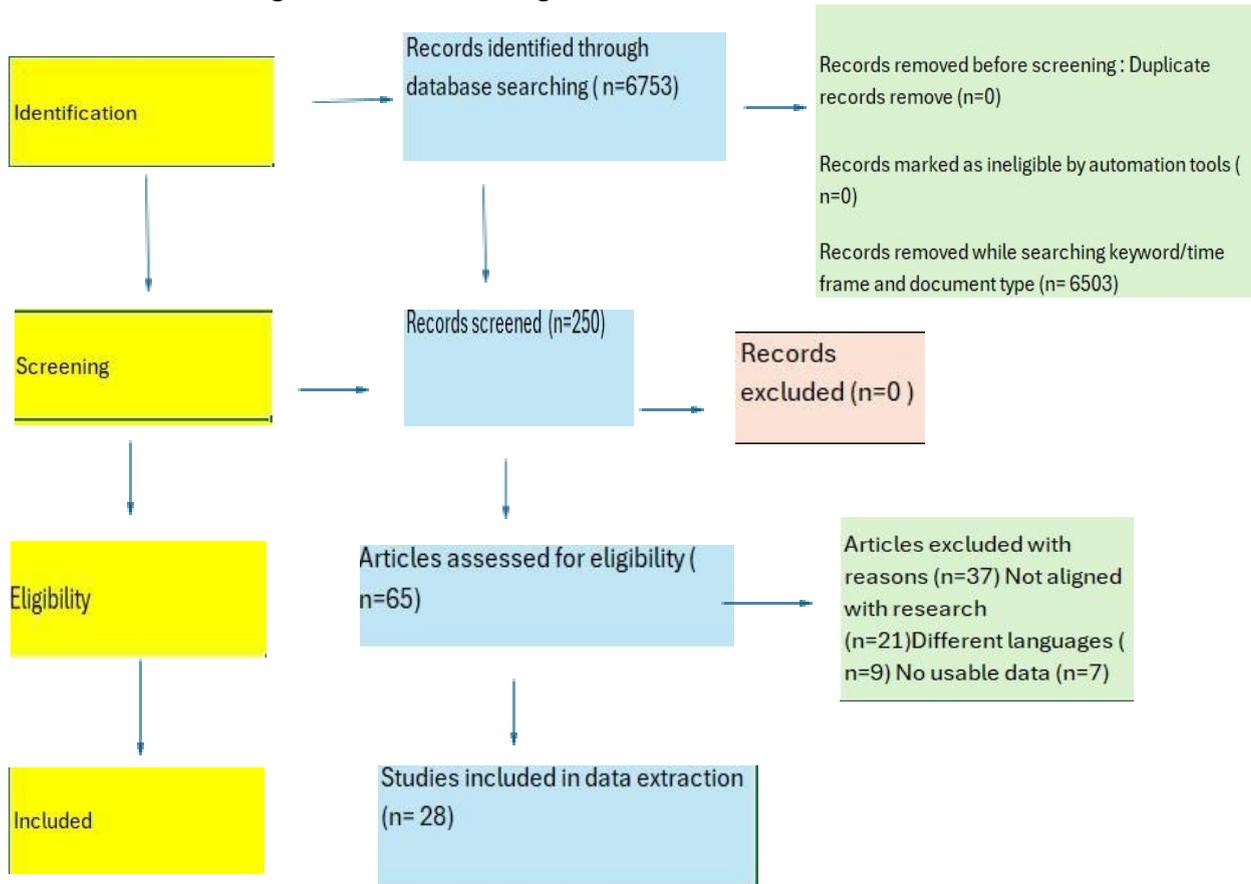
Tab. 1 graphically illustrates these four steps, highlighting in detail the procedures under the PRISMA protocol.

Table 1 Review protocol

Step	Description
Research question	How does the literature approach the fashion luxury industry in the sustainability ?
Population targeted	Papers related to niche sustainability concerning the fashion industry
Search strategy	Databases : Scopus Search terms a: "sustainability" "sustainable", "sustain" "fashion"
Inclusion and Exclusion criteria	Timeframe: June 2000-January 2025 Document type: peer-reviewed journal articles, proceeding papers, review articles. Area- Niche market strategy related to fashion. Align with the study Language- English Other industries
Data tabulation	Coding categories: subject area, document type, year, terminology, citation, aim, marketing approach, type of study, methodological procedures, geographical scope of the analysis, concept of niche strategy, characteristics/factors of niche market, main findings, limitations, future agenda
Data analysis	Content and sentiment analysis
Expected results	Overview of the literature on the fashion and sustainability Analysis of papers Future research agenda

The process of collecting materials was started, defining the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the articles collaboratively. To this end, reference was made to Scopus, one of the largest scientific databases, which indexes numerous academic journals (Aghaei Chadegani et al., 2013) was utilized to find relevant documents for this research. The selection criteria included articles published in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and review contributions, chosen with the aim of offering an exhaustive and diverse overview of the topics covered, so as to support the achievement of research objectives. Articles were identified using the keywords “sustainability”, “sustainable”, “sustain”, and “fashion”. The search carried out in the database returned a total of 6,753 scientific contributions.

Fig.1 Prisma Flow Diagram



The period considered covers over twenty years of evolution of the sustainability and fashion sector, allowing us to analyze in depth relevant trends, transformations, and developments. This time frame allows us to examine a large and diversified corpus of literature, useful for obtaining insights into multiple dimensions of the sector. By limiting the selection to articles, conference proceedings, book chapters, and review articles, submissions were identified. Subsequently, by applying the keywords “sustainability” and “fashion”, the number of documents identified was reduced to 250.

### 2.1.2 Screening.

At this stage, the selected document types included articles published in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and review articles. In this first selection, articles of any kind were not excluded.

### 2.1.3 Eligibility.

As a result, 65 records were identified for suitability assessment. However, 37 of these were excluded from the dataset for several reasons: not relevant to the study (n = 21), unusable data (n = 7) and linguistic non-compliance, limited to English-language documents only (n = 9).

#### 2.1.4 Included.

In the last step, following the rigorous selection process, 28 studies deemed suitable for inclusion in the review were identified, consistent with the general objectives of the research.

### 3| Synthesis, Focus, and New Hypothesis

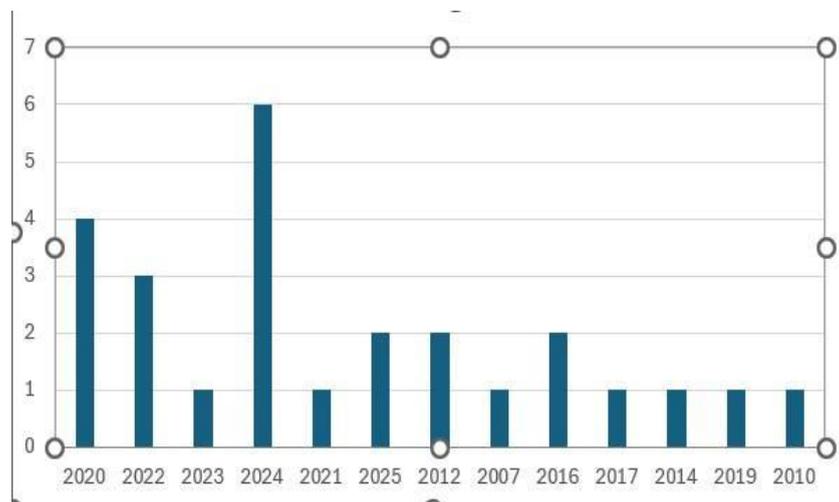
#### 3.1 Use of sustainability in sustainable fashion studies

Table 2 illustrates the adoption of sustainability strategies in the fashion sector, analyzing different dimensions of the phenomenon. The literature reviewed favours the themes of sustainability and technological advances, emphasising the growing interest of researchers in future and conceptually innovative approaches.

#### 3.2 Evolution of fashion luxury studies in sustainability

The selected publications and the time distribution cover the period from June 2000 to January 2025, Fig.2 .This graph is an overview of the publication of models over the period considered, highlighting the dynamics of research and academic production year by year. The greatest number of production was in 2024, but it started in 2020.

Fig.2 Published Year



Source(s): Authors' own creation

#### 3.3 Distribution and evolution of research papers

The summary of selected publications and distributions of papers published between 2000 and January 2025 is shown in Figure 2. This chart provides an overview of editorial patterns

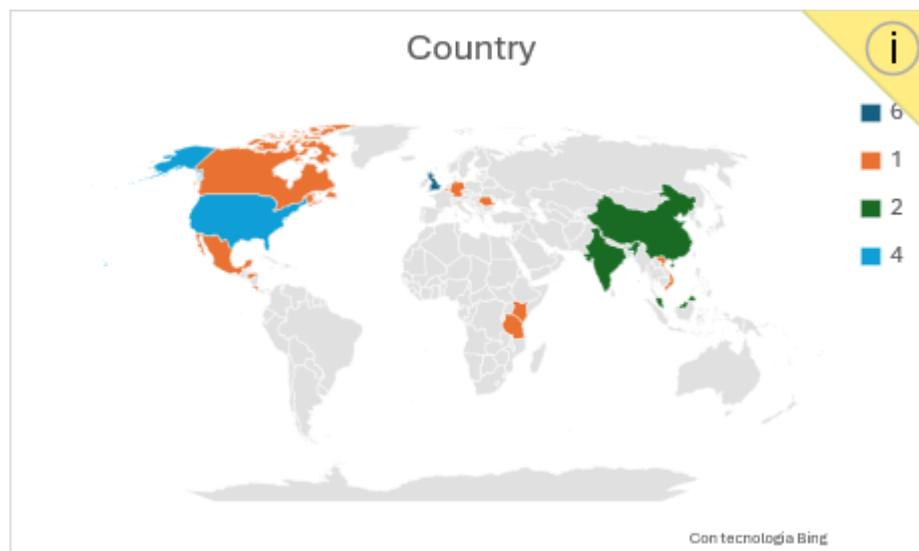
during the designated period and sheds light on the dynamics of academic research or production in each year. The largest number of articles was published between 2000 and 2024. No articles were published in 2000, and they started from 2007.

### 3.4 Field of study

Research has been developed in different subject areas, with a prevalence in the field of business and economics. The Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management published more papers on fashion and sustainability. Most of the journals were focused on marketing aspects of sustainability

### 3.5 Geographical focus of research papers

Although the United Kingdom (6) is the main reference context, India, the United States, Europe, and Italy are also recording a progressive increase in publications regarding sustainability in fashion



Source(s): Authors' own creation

The analysis, based on cross-tabulations, allowed us to examine the annual distribution of citations in academic journals from 2000 onwards.

The term sustainability is commonly used in different fields, especially textile, supply chain, apparel, fashion, tourism, etc. (Yuetal.,2021).

Sustainable fashion researchers, as well as those involved in retail businesses and fashion technologies, frequently use terms such as sustainability to express specific concepts. In particular, in the textile and clothing sector, the use of the term sustainable is recurrent.

Table 1: Declination of Fashion in Literature Review

Major Focus	Studies	Journal
Retail Fashion	(Conlon J., et al., 2020)	Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management
Sustainable Fashion	(Frei R., et al., 2020)	Business Strategy and the Environment
Online Fashion	- Pereira A.M., et al., 2020) - (Stevenson A.B., et al., 2024)	Decision Support Systems Logistics
Sustainable Fashion	(Sinha P. et al., 2023)	Benchmarking
Sustainable Fashion	(Kovacs I., 2021)	Polish Journal of Management Studies
Online Fashion	(Sinha P.;2024)	Technology Analysis and Strategic Management
Sustainable Fashion	(Palomo-Lovin N., 2020)	Fashion, Style, and Popular Culture
Luxury Fashion	(Aleem A.,2024)	Spanish Journal of Marketing - ESIC
Sustainable Fashion	( Nilmini Bhagya K.P., et al., 2025)	Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management
Luxury Fashion	( Quintal V. et al., 2024)	Journal of Global Fashion Marketing

Retail Fashion	(Zaidi A.A., et al., 2024)	Research Journal of Textile and Apparel
Online Fashion	(Marriott J., et al., 2025)	Transportation Research Part E: Logistics and Transportation Review
Sustainable Fashion	(Owusu-Wiredu P., 2024)	Corporate Governance and Sustainability Review
Retail Fashion	(Cocquyt A.; 2020)	Business Strategy and the Environment
Retail Fashion	(Jones, P., 2014)	Social Responsibility Journal
Retail Fashion	(Anthony A.K.;2017)	Fashion, Style and Popular Culture
Retail Fashion	(Beh L.-S, et al., 2016)	Supply Chain Management
Sustainable Fashion	(Nayak R. et al., 2019)	Journal of Cleaner Production

#### 4. Conclusion

This study explores the role of sustainability in the world of fashion in promoting sustainable performance by examining 28 selected articles. The analysis highlights that sustainability is dynamic and essential for improving organisational reputation and fostering innovation. The findings indicate growing interest among researchers and academics in the intersection of innovation and sustainable performance, with the highest number of publications observed in 2024. Some studies within the sample used a systematic literature review approach, others incorporated various methodologies, including quantitative methods using structural equation modeling (SEM), qualitative approaches, and mixed-method designs. The insights generated by this study can help academics, policymakers, and regulatory bodies integrate leadership principles into long-term sustainability strategies

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