



Communication of Fashion Sustainability in the USSR and Modern Russia: What Does the Young Generation Know About Ecological and Social Agendas in Fashion?

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Abstract. Fashion sustainability is promoted and is slowly developing in modern Russia; however, this concept used to be popular back in the USSR under the notion of “saving”. The research objectives are: 1) to give an overview of social and ecological practices in the USSR and modern Russia; 2) to determine the current awareness of youth about fashion sustainability, and (3) to define what actions young Russians take to follow this trend. For these purposes an online survey was conducted between October and December, 2022 among Russian students. It showed that the respondents do know some of the practices of fashion sustainability, even without following fashion trends in general, and they practise them; however, their priorities, while buying clothing, are price, quality and comfort. To conclude, the communication of social and eco-agendas in fashion should be enhanced in Russia, brands should prioritise Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Conscious consumption and ethical attitudes to fashion should be encouraged and maintained at all levels, including businesses (brands, mass markets, etc.), Non Profit Organisations (NPOs), bloggers or influencers on social media, educational initiatives, and cultural and historical events (fashion shows, museums, etc.). The broader the coverage of the issue from different perspectives, the more engaged consumers will become.

Keywords: Fashion Communication · Sustainability · Conscious Consumption · Eco-Fashion · Ethical Fashion · CSR

1 Introduction

Sustainable fashion is a wide terrain which has numerous definitions. The term “sustainability” can be defined as the ability of the system to be maintained at a certain level, where people, the planet and profit can coexist in harmony without compromising one another. A business can be considered sustainable if it is targeted to make a positive environmental, social, and economic impact [1]. This is also known as the “Triple Bottom Line” (TBL) of sustainability [2] with the addition of culture to these three components [3]. Consequently, sustainable fashion (SF) is a wide notion including both

environmental and social (ethical) issues. SF should include both eco-fashion and ethical fashion, which promotes a decent attitude to people who are engaged in the fashion industry and consumers to whom fashion is directed [4, 5]. Mora et al. (2014) focus on the importance of immaterial contents which should promote inclusivity, equality and other ethical values [6]. “Sustainable imagery should combine the principles of equality, fairness, and humanity” [7, p. 241]. In general, sustainability is becoming one of the main trends within our society and “online communication is crucial to influence customers and to deliver sustainable purchase behaviour” [8, p. 188]. According to Brydges et al. (2022), “a robust understanding of sustainability should be participatory and a practice-based approach that further outlines actionable tasks and is linked to consumer centered strategies rather than calling on brands for static definitions of sustainability” [9, p. 367]

Nowadays, the three Rs principle (reduce, reuse, and recycle) [10] is commonly known and closely connected with the concept of CSR which cannot be underestimated. Researchers discuss what is more important: business ethics and profit maximisation or corporate social mission. Those companies which are oriented primarily towards financial gain are more concerned about their image and reputation in communication with stakeholders [11, 12]. However, companies which prioritise ethical issues in building their business strategies (CSR) succeed more in having loyal customers and expanding stakeholders in the long term. Studies show that it is important for businesses to implement sustainable initiatives, especially in market-sensitive industries [13]. According to Clarke and Clegg (2000), “sustainability is becoming a key business imperative, as the eternal search for domination over nature is replaced by the challenge of achieving environmental balance” [14, p. 46]. Li et al. (2014) emphasize the beneficial relationships between CSR and fast fashion supply chains [15].

There is not enough literature about SF in Russia. Therefore, the objectives of this research are threefold: (1) to trace how the communicative practices of conscious consumption have changed from the time of the USSR to the present Russia, on the basis of verbal artifacts (posters, texts, websites, etc.), brand policies, and different projects and initiatives; (2) to understand whether young Russians are aware of the fashion sustainability agenda, and (3) how they estimate their involvement in eco initiatives.

2 Environmentalism and the Economic Spirit of the USSR: An Overview

Although sustainability is slowly becoming a trend in modern Russia, it was widely practised in the USSR, especially after World War II due to its devastating effects, poverty, and scarce resources. According to Brain (2010), “environmentalism survived – and even thrived – in Stalin’s Soviet Union” [16, p. 93].

The statement “The economy must be economical; this is a requirement of the time” became the slogan that was voiced at the XXVI Congress by Brezhnev [17]. This idea permeated many posters of that time, both visually and verbally, and encouraged people to save natural resources such as water, electricity, etc. Figure 1 shows the poster printed in 1981 in the USSR on the topic of cost control. A strong hand of a person is depicted, with a sharp movement lowering a chopper switch with the slogan “For economy and

frugality!” Mismanagement, Extravagance, Losses and Waste scatter from a huge spark. This Soviet poster has the following piece of poem: “In labour, learn to be thrifty. Join the fight for savings! [18]” Fig. 2 depicts the poster that says: “Save electricity”, demonstrating a man who is obviously doing the opposite. He is criticised by the words: “Do not save it in this way unless you want to become broke” [19]. Figure 3 shows the poster from 1944, and belongs to the wartime promotion of saving electricity: “Everybody at home should remember to save light since limiting is the policy of war and it helps the front” [20]. Figure 4 [21] is dedicated to saving water. “Take care of everything that our motherland is rich in”– this slogan was used in all spheres of life [22]. In times of scarcity, saving was not just a norm but a way of life: the three Rs were implemented everywhere.



Fig. 1. For economy and frugality



Fig. 2. Save electricity

“Reuse” was a popular concept of Soviet times: every woman knew how to sew, knit and the approach to different fabrics and materials which corresponded to modern DIY slogan. Knitted items were easily modified and turned into new combinations (upcycling and downcycling).

The Russian fashion magazine, *Marie Claire* [23], points out a number of Soviet habits which are popular nowadays and bear the name of sustainability. First, the phenomenon of sharing things or renting, starting from dishes and large household appliances and ending in communal apartments and car-sharing which appeared back in 1956 in Moscow and was called “Rent a car without a driver”. Second, waste sorting: pioneers were encouraged to gather paper for its recycling. There were also points for collecting glass bottles for recycling. In addition, vending machines which supplied shared glasses for water or soda were used. Next, the analogue to second hand shops were “*komissionka*”: an exclusively state-owned shop with two groups of goods: ordinary things and scarce items, which citizens brought from business trips from abroad, or from exclusive stores.



Fig. 3. Save electricity (light)



Fig. 4. Save water

People went to food stores with their own bags, in most cases reusable string bags (*avoska*) due to the lack of disposable plastic bags. The word “*avoska*” comes from the Russian adverb “*avos*”, which means some expectations “what if” or “perhaps”. The term appeared during the time of deficits of consumer goods in the USSR. In 1970, a popular Soviet comedian, Arkady Raikin presented the bag to the audience with the words: “And this is a what-iffie. What if I found something to buy...”. *The avoska* was a representative cultural phenomenon of Soviet routine and could be traced in Soviet films such as “Diamond Arm” (1969). The origin of this bag goes back to Czechoslovakia in 1920. Usually blind people wove string bags at the enterprises of the All-Union Society of the Blind in the USSR. The standard string bag is woven in 14 rows of 24 cells and can withstand the maximum load of 70 kg. [24]. With the popularisation of plastic bags, *avoskas* gradually fell into disuse, but recent environmental trends in support of banning plastic bags have revived them [25].

3 Overview of Current Russian Brands, Projects and Other Initiatives Promoting Fashion Sustainability

3.1 Brands’ Sustainability

Below are presented some current Russian brands which communicate SF.

Love Republic, the Russian brand, founded in 2009, offers program Love Republic 2.0. “Give your clothes a new life”. The brand points out that recycling and philanthropy are one of the many ways to achieve the goals towards a sustainable future by collecting old clothes and bringing them to their stores [26].

The **Alena Akhmadullina** brand, founded in 2001, in St. Petersburg [27] does not communicate directly the concept of sustainability on its website; however, indirect communication of conscious consumption can be traced in four major aspects: 1) the materials used in the collections are predominantly natural fabrics, or modern mixed materials of high quality and increased durability; 2) the colours look natural (mostly

green, pastels, and blue); 3) tailoring (product customization); and 4) digital clothing during the Covid-19 pandemic [28].

BOYARI, the apple leather Russian-French designer brand, which started a “fruit revolution” in April 2021, at the Mercedes Benz Fashion Week Russia with the clothing collection made from apple leather and other eco-materials. The brand follows the principles of slow, premium, and SF. It is supported by the Russian Presidential Fund for Cultural Initiatives and is the leader of the Association for the Development of Sustainable Fashion in Russia, which consists of more than 100 member organisations [29].

Renovadress is an upcycling laboratory in Novosibirsk. The brand specialises in sewing clothes and bags from donated old jeans [30].

3.2 Projects (Clothes)

There are different projects which are involved in the three Rs principle. For instance, **Veshchevorot (Clothes Recycling)** is a social entrepreneurial project [31]. **Spasibo (Thank You)**, based in St. Petersburg (2010), develops a charitable and environmental sector, creating a system for the circulation of unwanted clothing [32]. **Nichego Novogo (Nothing New)** is the resale and digital clothing platform about a new culture of consumption dedicated to exploring the fashion industry in search of breakthrough technologies, useful services, and responsible brands and companies. [33]. **Voskresenie (Resurrection)** is a charitable fund initiated by the Russian Orthodox Church [34]. The Russian affiliation of **Fashion Revolution** is a part of the global project, established by Carry Somers and Orsola de Castro as a result of the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013, which is organised to unite local designers, communities, and activists who are driven by a sustainable future in fashion [35].

3.3 Art and Cultural Projects

The Museum of Holes and Patches is located in Uchma, Yaroslavl region. The material basis of the exposition is the clothing and everyday life of local fishermen and peasants. The museum has a philosophical vision of the hole. Holes and attempts to patch them are about our whole life: about medicine and nature, about human relationships, losses and discoveries. A hole should not be perceived as something negative, since it allows a beam of light to go through. The exposition describes not the poverty and difficulties of the village people, but their ability to appreciate what they have [36].

There have been a number of **fashion shows** with the use of trash as a way to communicate fashion sustainability. One example is a fashion show in Novosibirsk on 5 June, 2019 which featured 40 collections of dresses made of plastic cups, and a robot suit made of foil, paper, and cardboard [37]. Another example is a fashion show at the Artmuz Museum of Contemporary Art on 14 January, 2022. All the outfits were made from waste accumulated in the city over the holiday weekend. During the parade of each fashion model, the presenter announced the name of the street where the garbage was collected to create her outfit [38]. The main task of the creator in fashion shows in the style of “trashion” is to rethink garbage in the image of high fashion and to create values for old things.

3.4 Marketplaces

Lamoda – an online shopping platform which launched the sale of clothing items in 2020, with care for the planet (Lamoda Planet) selling items which correspond to the principles of sustainable development according to six categories: 1) recycle and innovations; 2) eco-composition; 3) items with care for animals; 4) vegan goods; 5) brands saving the planet; and 6) goods to help the needy [39].

3.5 University Initiatives

Universities in Russia have started to promote and discuss the issues of fashion sustainability with academics and students. For example, in 2020, there was an online conference on “**Sustainable Fashion 2020: the Swedish experience**”, which was organised in cooperation between the HSE Art and Design Faculty in Moscow and the Swedish Embassy, including Swedish practical and academic experts [40].

Another initiative was from 5 June to 5 July, 2022 Clothing Repair Practices at GES-2: Cultural Reflection with the Community **Mendit Research Lab**. Mendit Research Lab is a community of fashion researchers and anyone who is interested in fashion and conscious consumption that includes, in particular, mending—the transformation of clothes with the help of all kinds of repairs and customization [41].

4 Methodology

A mixed research method is used: secondary data, case studies and an online survey. The qualitative part of the research was conducted to investigate what the youth know about practices of fashion sustainability in Russia (open-ended questions in the survey), the importance of SF to young people and what they do to maintain sustainability. The qualitative part of research is also presented by the overview of case studies of contemporary Russian brands and Soviet practices regarding the issue of sustainability. The quantitative part includes the estimation of the number of young Russians who know fashion social and eco-initiatives in general, and those who are engaged in this fashion agenda.

The online survey is designed for young Russians (generation Z) chosen randomly from different universities and departments. The online survey was launched on 20 October and was active for two months until 20 December, 2022. The main aim of the online questionnaire presented on Google is to realise whether the young generation is aware of social and ecological initiatives undertaken in Russia. The survey consists of 12 research questions and seven sociodemographic questions about their gender, age, major, university, level of education, city and financial status. Seven research questions have multiple options and five are open ended questions designed for this survey to get individual responses in order to estimate the youth’s involvement: (1) What do you do with your used clothes? (2) Where do you redirect them to? (Specify places, funds, organisations or projects). (3) What stores and recycle points do you use for used clothes? (4) What social and ecological initiatives in fashion can you name? (5) What brands, market places or influencers do you follow on social networks? The research

hypothesis is that young people in Russia are generally aware of ecological and ethical issues promoted by brands but conscious consumption is not the first priority for them. The level of fashion sustainability awareness influences directly the three R principle.

5 Results

The online poll gathered 267 responses from Russian students from Moscow (40%), Nizhny Novgorod (23%), Magnitogorsk (28%), less than 10% from St. Petersburg, Voronezh, Chita, Smolensk, Perm, and some other cities. The respondents are mainly undergraduates (aged 18–23 years old, 75% under the age of 20) and mostly female (72%). The majority are students from the HSE University, Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Pushkin Institute of the Russian Language and the Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod. Most students major in social sciences and humanities: Economics and Business, Economics and Politics, Asian Studies, International Relations, Social Studies, Pedagogics, Philology, and Design of Architectural Environment and Construction.

The results show that the young generation is generally aware of some projects in SF (58%) but struggle to specify them. 14% have not heard about brand CSR projects and the rest find the question difficult to answer (28%). They seem to be informed about Russian and foreign brands' initiatives concerning the issue discussed (for instance, respondents mention specific eco-programs of different foreign brands: Gucci, Adidas, Nike, Converse, Levi's, Calzedonia, Uniqlo, Lush, H&M, Zara, and local brands: Love Republic, Zarina, Befree, Gloria Jeans, Tvoe, etc. including marketplaces: Avito and LaModa and some projects: Veshchevorot (Clothes Recycling), Spasibo (Thank You) and Voskresenie (Resurrection). In total, 42% of students managed to name eco-friendly brands and initiatives, proving the fact that communication of fashion sustainability is visible and influential but not engaging enough.

Around 46% of young Russians do not usually follow fashion trends buying clothes to their taste. 10% do not follow fashion at all buying clothes only when they need to. 35% of respondents follow fashion trends periodically, and 9% consider themselves to be completely immersed in fashion (Fig. 5). 38% of respondents are subscribed to different brands correspondingly, the rest do not read brands' accounts on social networks or find it difficult to specify them. They are subscribed to foreign brands such as Zara, Nike, Adidas, Dior, Gucci, Prada etc., and Russian ones (Tvoe, Gloria Jeans, Zarina), market place platforms (such as Ozon, Wildberries etc.), fashion magazines (Vogue and Elle).

The majority of respondents consider their degree of immersion in the eco-agenda to be average. Generally, respondents consider themselves to be not immersed in the eco-agenda. The overwhelming majority of respondents (63%) claim that they have heard about environmental and social projects of the brands that they use even without following fashion trends. All in all, they are aware of recycling programs, charity organisations and other initiatives. According to strategic communication principles, brands can become conduits of the values of sustainable development. Those brands which promote CSR are becoming memorable and can be named even by non-active consumers.

As for donation practices, 32% of respondents do not donate used clothes and 31% find it difficult to answer the question. Those who donate clothes (37%), give them to

The level of awareness about fashion trends, %.

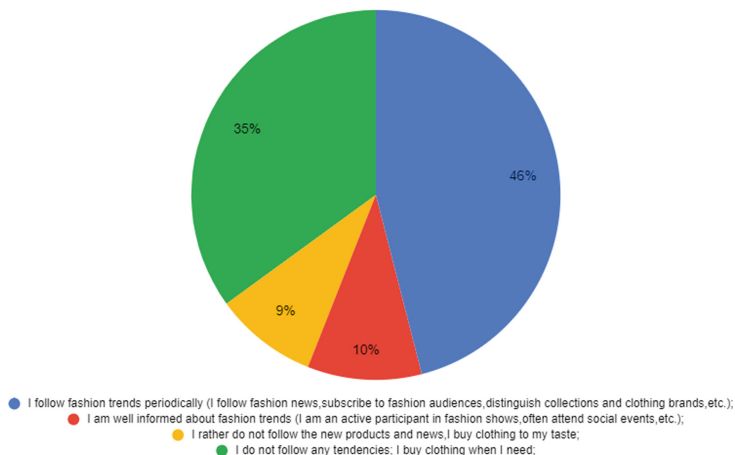


Fig. 5. The level of awareness about fashion trends, Choose the answer option that can best characterise you, %.

churches, religious institutions, charity foundations, or relatives and friends who are connected with the above mentioned organizations (Table 1).

Young Russians prefer to donate to charitable foundations, religious institutions, orphanages and other needy people (30%). Only 3% use special containers, recycle points in the city. 3% of respondents give clothing to family and 1% to friends who are connected with charities (Table 1). In general, the respondents showed their concern about needy people and consciously redirect used clothes. Nevertheless, according to the results of research, the culture of sustainable consumption is not integrated into society so well since 32% of respondents do not donate things or give clothes away. Although recycling and resale platforms are not numerous or very popular among the respondents (0.5%), they have prospects for rapid development.

The respondents were presented with the question: Which types of social and ecological initiatives provided by brand are you familiar with? The question contained different options. 65% of respondents are informed about recycling and reuse projects in fashion. 30% of respondents know about projects dedicated to the protection and care for animals and projects promoting eco materials. 7% are not familiar with any type of initiatives from the brands they use. 5% have heard about all the types of initiatives including recycling design, inclusive projects, gender equality etc.

The respondents were asked to prioritise quality, comfort, price affordability and sustainability goals promotion. 21% of respondents confirm the importance of brands' sustainable goals promotion as an influential factor while choosing clothes; however, the primary importance was quality (56%), comfort (53%) and price (29%).

Table 1. If you donate things or give clothing to those in need, specify to whom and where do you donate (an open ended question, %)

If you donate things or give clothing to those in need, specify to whom and where do you donate (an open ended question, %)	Answers, %
No answer, difficult to answer	31
I do not donate things or give clothes away	32
I give to hospitals	1
I give clothing to my friends who are connected with charities	1
I sell on Avito (an online marketplace)	0.5
I give to animal shelters	0.5
I give things to relatives	3
I give away clothes personally for someone in need	6
I give to orphanages	7
I give to religious institutions	8
I give to clothing stores	1
I use special containers, recycle points in the city	3
I give to charitable foundations	9

6 Discussion

The Soviet sustainable practices under the name “saving” presents a wide range of initiatives which are popular and essential nowadays. However, there is an obvious shift from forced economy, due to the devastating post war situation, to conscious economy as a result of ecological and social issues. Real life practices in the Soviet Union were implemented everywhere at all social levels of life (starting from families and kindergartens, proceeding with schools, and following up with work places). Self-restraint was considered as necessity and commonness, an ordinary thing not to lament about.

Current trends in Russia in SF show a large variety of sustainable initiatives and practices, though Russia is far from the leading position in this issue. Despite this, innovations are being used successfully, for example, the luxury brand, BOYARI is the first Russian manufacturer of apple leather clothing. Sustainable practices include different social projects, projects to communicate about the problems of fashion sustainability, such as Russian affiliation with Fashion Revolution, art projects such as a Museum of Holes and Patches, fashion shows, market places, and educational initiatives such as conferences and workshops. The more communication channels and diverse practices are involved to serve the purpose of CSR and sustainability promotion, the more people are aware of this problem and, consequently, the more engaged they become.

The results of the online survey prove that the issue of sustainability is being tackled in Russia gradually with some achievements and have high prospects for future development. Young Russians are mostly aware of different initiatives launched by brands at

home and abroad or charitable institutions connected with used clothes. However, they undertake only a few sustainable practices themselves.

The study confirms the problem of a gap between awareness of sustainable initiatives and real engagement in them. This attitude-behavior gap refers to the clash between positive consumer attitudes towards sustainability and inaction or unsustainable behaviour in purchasing [42-46]. Despite the fact that consumers support and share the ideas of SF, they are not ready to spend more money on SF clothes [47-51] or do anything. This conundrum is called the Fashion Paradox [48, 52, 53].

Sjölander and Norstedt (2021) offer numerous managerial actions in order for managers to successfully address this attitude-behavior gap, for example, “managers should focus on developing an internal culture that incorporates concern for the environment, and long-term environmental strategies should be developed and influenced by corporate culture” [54, p. 53]. Moreover, a *holistic green marketing approach* [55, 56] is recommended which can incorporate both internal, strategic, and tactical perspectives.

Riesgo et al. (2022) claim that to circumvent the price obstacle and encourage consumers to buy SF clothing, the burden of price for SF should be shifted from consumers to companies, which in its turn should receive compensation from the government for sustainable practices, for example, in terms of tax reduction. For study purposes they also recommend differentiating consumers into different clusters: Sustainability Rejecters, Sustainability Neutrals, Sustainability Believers and Sustainability Enthusiasts [51].

Not only purchasing behaviour is important; after-purchasing practices are crucial too such as long-term usage, recycling, upcycling or downcycling, and redirecting clothing to others. The fact that young Russian people redirect their used clothes to different charity funds shows their altruistic behaviour to help those in need and it is an example of after-purchasing SF.

7 Limitations

The study has a number of limitations. First, not all Russian cities are represented. Consequently, a wider map of respondents would be beneficial. Second, most of the youth who took part in the survey are from Moscow. Their awareness of fashion sustainability might be higher than those from other cities. Then, the data collection period was limited to two months. The data collection method was an online survey implemented in Google Forms. We assume that the respondents answered honestly, as the poll is anonymous and does not influence their personal values. Another issue is that there might be a gender bias since more females took part in the survey; however, we tried to design the questions to be gender neutral. The majority of the respondents are from Humanitarian fields of studies. Finally, the survey showed that most respondents feel financially secure and estimate the material income of their families as enough for buying clothing, cars, and household appliances (67%); and enough for buying new cars and houses (25%). This financial stability might have an impact on grading their priorities while buying a new piece of clothing or awareness about brand initiatives concerning sustainability.

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

This research can be the basis for a more in-depth study of SF issues in Russia in general and Russian consumer purchasing and after-purchasing behaviours and practices. Further research should focus on how the attitude-behaviour gap can be bridged. Several steps should be worked out on how to engage Russian youth more in social and ecological agendas in fashion, in educational institutions, and in extracurricular activities, through advertisements, the personal experiences of influencers, and other projects. To reach a greater level of engagement, the problem should become more visible and embrace different networks of agents.

According to Manzini (2022), fashion should communicate and advance sustainable qualities. He adds that “fashion, in its maieutic function, should enable new practices of caring with the focus on relational role, being a promoter for the creation of networks of people capable of operating as transition agents” [57, p. 465]. The network of businesses, academic institutions, opinion influencers, customers and other stakeholders is crucial in developing sustainable consciousness.

This research might be of interest to fashion practitioners and fashion academics. The responses about fashion sustainability can present special value in understanding the world’s picture of the youth’s attitude towards this issue.

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