

# SLOW FASHION IN THE SPORTS APPAREL INDUSTRY

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## **ABSTRACT**

Overconsumption of natural resources is a vicious circle as we harvest more from nature than it can replace at its natural pace. This overconsumption is a result of the consumer society's insatiable need for new products, which, in turn, has a number of negative effects on the environment and society. This paper addresses the designer's responsibility to find sustainable solutions, as approximately 80% of the environmental impact of products is determined during the design phase. One method used to reduce consumption is the theory of slow fashion. Few studies have been done on this subject related to the sports industry. The research question is, therefore, as follows: How can the theory of slow fashion influence designers to make sports apparel more sustainable? The methods used were three case studies and an in-depth interview. The case studies were carried out in three different contexts. These were the companies Patagonia, Inc., Norrøna AS and Plusminusnoll Outdoor AB. The results of this research show that applying this theory in all three companies could potentially improve their products. This paper can contribute to a better understanding of slow fashion and inspire designers, businesses and consumers to lessen their consumption and improve social conditions.

*Keywords: Slow fashion, sports apparel, the designer's role, social and environmental sustainability*

## 1 OVERUSE OF RESOURCES

This paper discusses what a responsible economy can be. Economic growth is often the strongest driving force in companies. By moving their production to low-cost countries, they thereby increase the pressure on human and natural resources, their products are sold more cheaply and they contribute to increased consumption in Western countries [1]. According to the *Living Planet Report 2014*, we are using resources equivalent to one and a half globe [2]. This means that we are using resources that take longer than a year to regenerate. The same report shows that if we continue at our current pace, our consumption will be equal to three planets in 2050. From these figures, the need to take action against this overuse is clear. However, this is a complex task, and this paper addresses only a small part of the problem, concentrating on sports apparel. The sport apparel industry has major challenges concerning sustainability because the use of harmful chemicals and high consumption of energy and water in the production process [3]. Some companies takes this more seriously than others, in terms of material selection, free mending of used garments and recycling.

## 2 BACKGROUND: SPORTSWEAR SALES

Sales of sports apparel show a rising curve, and, according to a global market survey by Lucintel, this growth will reach a value of 125 billion dollars in 2017 [4]. This also applies to Norway, where sales have seen a large increase over the last 20 years [5]. Companies usually focus on rapid production and increased sales. Economic growth has long been their driving force and, thus, has laid the foundation for a social and environmental exploitation of labour and materials in a market that demands more and more [6]. Trends change rapidly and create insatiable needs for many people [1]. This has resulted in many cheap products of poor quality, as consumers in many cases replace their apparel regularly. This phenomenon is called 'fast fashion', which has major negative effects on the environment [1]. A counter reaction to this is 'slow fashion', which takes its inspiration from the 'slow food movement' [3].

Slow fashion is about raising awareness about production, working conditions, communities and ecosystems [1]. This ensures a healthy rhythm between natural resources, production and consumption. Slow fashion is a complex theory introduced by Fletcher in 2007 [7]. The difference

between fast and slow fashion is not just about speed. They represent different worldviews where business models, values and processes have fundamental differences [8]. Previous research on the slow fashion theory by Jung and Jin found five factors in slow fashion [3]. These are equity, authenticity, functionality, localism and exclusivity. Equity involves working conditions, fair trade and living wages. The cited authors defined authenticity as tailored products, small-scale production and preservation of traditional handcraft techniques. Their definition of function addresses durability, timeless design and multifunctional use. Further, they propose the factor of local production to create valuable associations, using local labour and materials. They defined the last factor of exclusivity as rare or unique products that can be used to build identities. In the research discussed in this paper, these five factors of slow fashion were examined in three different manufacturers of sports apparel. This was done to investigate whether slow fashion theory, or elements of it, is used by these firms in their social and environmental operations. Similar research was not found in a literature search. The research question is, therefore, as follows: How can the theory of slow fashion influence designers to make sports apparel more sustainable? The hypothesis is based on an assertion from Jung and Jin's article, that the business model of slow fashion is only suitable for small and medium-sized businesses [3].

### 3 METHODS: CASE STUDY AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW

The methods used to address the research question were a case study method and an in-depth interview [9, 10]. The purpose of this was to understand if the three different manufacturers of sports clothing are applying the theory of slow fashion. Case study was chosen as a method to build an understanding of the theory and investigate whether it is relevant to these three companies [9]. The topic was investigated in three contexts in order to test if the theory can be used in various business models. These contexts were Patagonia Inc., Norrøna AS. and Plusminusnoll Outdoor AB. These are, respectively, representative of large, medium and small businesses. An in-depth interview with industrial designer Kjersti Kviseth was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the theory and to get her views on the sports apparel industry. She has 10 years of experience as a former environmental manager for the office chair manufacturer HÅG, and she is an expert on textiles and sustainability. The data collection in the case study was done through document analysis of websites, lectures, articles and earlier interviews – to understand the past and current practice of the companies [9]. The embedded units in the cases were the five factors in slow fashion, based on previous research [6]. These were analysed by using pattern matching. This examined to what extent the embedded units were coincident with the various contexts and considered whether these companies' approaches need to be revised based on the document analysis's findings [9].

### 4 RESULTS

This section presents the findings on the different factors of slow fashion in relation to the three different contexts. The factors analysed were equity, authenticity, functionality, localism and exclusivity.

#### 4.1 Case Study 1: Patagonia

The context of the first case study was Patagonia. 'What is a responsible economy? It's one that cultivates healthy communities, to create meaningful work, and takes from the earth only what it can replenish. It's one where all the indicators are currently going in the wrong direction' [11]. This quotation was taken from Patagonia's website, which shows that it wants to take responsibility and that the company acknowledges the problems related to the industry in which it operates. Patagonia appears extremely quality conscious. It sets strict requirements for materials, as they must be durable and have functional features to fit the users' needs [11]. The company encourages customers to buy less by partnering with eBay to sell used clothing [12] and by communicating messages through billboard slogans such as 'Don't buy this jacket', where they encouraged customers to repair their old jacket instead of buying a new one (see Figure 1) [13]. It also has the largest repair service in the United States [14]. Further, on its websites, Patagonia.com reveals that it is actively working to improve the daily lives of its factory employees [11]. It shows transparency in details of its challenges and previous mistakes. It does this by engaging independent third parties to verify quality in their textile mills and sewing factories [15]. The company admits that providing living wages at its factories is a major challenge, with which it has a long way to go. In this study, Patagonia emerged as honest

and passionate, with a huge commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR). Through ‘The Footprint Chronicles’, it shows the story behind each product it sells and, thereby, gives consumers an opportunity to make conscious choices [11]. Patagonia has eight factories in the United States, but stresses that it is not a ‘Made in America Brand’. The company states, however, that it believes in long-term environmental benefits by producing locally but that this possibility is prevented by two short-term factors. These are the extensive measures necessary to change company logistics, and the statistic that only 2% of carbon emissions occur during transportation from factory to store [11]. Patagonia showed in these results that it has many good initiatives and can serve as a good example for other businesses. However, it is still far from perfect. The following quote from the company’s owner and founder, Yvon Chouinard, confirms this.

*‘Patagonia will never be completely socially responsible. It will never make a totally sustainable non-damaging product. But it is committed to trying’ [12].*

**DON'T BUY THIS JACKET**

**COMMON THREADS INITIATIVE**

**REDUCE**  
 WE make useful gear that lasts a long time  
 YOU don't buy what you don't need

**REPAIR**  
 WE help you repair your Patagonia gear  
 YOU pledge to fix what's broken

**REUSE**  
 WE help find a home for Patagonia gear you no longer need  
 YOU sell or pass it on\*

**RECYCLE**  
 WE will take back your Patagonia gear that is worn out  
 YOU pledge to keep your stuff out of the landfill and incinerator

**REIMAGINE**  
 TOGETHER we reimagine a world where we take only what nature can replace

**patagonia**

Figure 1. Patagonia advertisement from the Friday, 25 November, 2011 edition of The New York Times

Patagonia did not satisfy all the embedded units of slow fashion, but they matched the function factor quite well. It also showed many good measures in relation to equity as compared to many other businesses their size [15]. However, only a small percentage of their products are locally produced. Authenticity and exclusivity were also untouched.

#### 4.2 Case study 2: Norrøna

The context for the second case study was Norrøna. In a videoconference from The Norwegian Centre for Design and Architecture, Norrøna’s chief executive officer, Jørgen Jørgensen, stated that quality is the entire company’s foundation [15]. Jørgensen also argued that family businesses, such as Norrøna, often make decisions based on a long-term perspective, as they have traditions and visions for the future of a more personal nature. Norrøna has repaired products for over 85 years, and it encourages customers to take care of its products. The embedded units of function, therefore, fit Norrøna well. Regarding local production, it responded by mail that the company used to produce items in Europe but moved production to Asia as the volume and time pressures increased. They also justified this by stating that they did not get the quality they wanted in Europe. The majority of its production is now in China. Norrøna only gives away supplier lists upon request. In Norway, only two of the 10 largest

suppliers of sports apparel operate with open supplier lists [16]. Compared with Patagonia's 'Footprint Chronicles' Norrøna has potential for improvement in this area. It admitted further that it is not as good in CSR as Patagonia, since Norrøna, among other major challenges, struggles with overtime [15]. It is now working actively to prevent this by smoothing out production throughout the year. It wants to prevent a build-up of pressure on workers before the winter and summer seasons by improved planning and information. It also has some products constantly in production to guarantee work for employees throughout the year. Norrøna can be perceived as internationally exclusive, with the Nordic ø in its name and the logo of Birkebeiner [17]. Norrøna matches the embedded unit of function and, to a certain extent, exclusivity. The company has potential to improve in equity and local production. The embedded unit of authenticity was not noted in its policies.

### **4.3 Case study 3: Plusminusnoll**

The third case study's context was Plusminusnoll. It operates with small-scale production in the European Union (EU) [18]. Wages, working hours and conditions, therefore, are regulated by the EU, which gives the company an opportunity to control its production processes to ensure good quality products. Plusminusnoll has a different business model than what is customary in this industry. The company wants to focus on the product itself rather than just lower costs more effectively. Quality clothing with a focus on the end user is its goal [18]. It produces products only on a pre-order basis, as they do not want to contribute to impulse shopping and sales items. It takes six months before a customer gets the product because the company wants to stimulate people to plan their purchases based on actual needs. This model also leads to less time pressure in production. Plusminusnoll sells products directly to the customer and, thereby, cuts out expensive distributors. Since it does not have expenses related to warehouse spaces, it can spend more on quality materials, in addition to making cheaper products. Plusminusnoll's products, to some extent, can also appear exclusive, since they do not exist in large quantities. The fact that customers have to wait long before they get the products also makes them more exclusive. Based on these findings, clearly Plusminusnoll largely corresponds with most of the embedded units. It ensures good working conditions and, thereby, equity; it makes quality products and fulfils the criteria for function and it is exclusive. However, it does not make customised products or produce in Sweden, as the factors of localism and authenticity demanded.

## **5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS IN TERMS OF THE INTERVIEW**

In the interview, Kjersti Kviseth confirmed that many examples exist of positive initiatives in the sports industry today [14]. She believes that no direct examples can be found of companies using slow fashion consciously but that Patagonia is doing this quite extensively. Kviseth points out that the factor of quality is actively used by many businesses. Factors such as tailored products are currently less relevant, but she thinks that these will become more common in the future, as she envisions new business models and ways to design for slow fashion. These views fit with the findings in the three company contexts, since all the companies had good values and practices around the factor of function, while none customised their products. The issue of local production has proven to be complex and difficult. Kjersti believes that this transformation could be easier for smaller companies, such as Norrøna and Plusminusnoll. This does not mean that larger firms such as Patagonia should not move production closer to their main offices, as she thinks it questionable what deeper insights and influence are possible with factories at large distances [1]. Kviseth confirmed this in the interview, and she think it is strange that Patagonia does not believe in local production. She added, however, that the production of sports garments requires high levels of competence and technology and that companies cannot just take over disused factories. She sees room for further discussion about whether local production can provide valuable associations for brands and warrant higher prices, which can be a major factor in the debate over what a responsible economy might be, showing how much a jacket actually should cost.

The case study showed that Patagonia is an important contributor in the sports apparel business, since they dare to ask many of the important questions about working conditions, consumerism and environmental effects. However, the company's policies do not match all the embedded units and, therefore, it cannot be used as a clear example of slow fashion [14]. Parallels can be found between Patagonia and Norrøna, as they both focus mainly on making good quality products that have the least possible environmental impact [15]. Nevertheless, the case study showed that Norrøna has some challenges in relation to equity, and it is failing to communicate as clearly its commitment to lower

consumption as Patagonia is. Norrøna, therefore, has room for improvement in terms of the slow fashion theory. Plusminusnoll matches many of the embedded units quite well, and it is consequently the best example of slow fashion of these three firms.

### 5.1 Audit of the theory

Based on the case studies, function was clearly the most relevant factor in the various contexts studied. This factor is about a lasting and versatile use of products. In this context, the term might seem vague, as it often is associated with how well a product functions in practice and not with how durable a product when compared by service, repairs or timeless design. A new proposed designation of the term is ‘longevity’. This term reflects the factor’s full purpose and not only parts of it (see Figure 2 for an illustration of the new proposal).



Figure 2. Shows a visualisation of slow fashion in revised form

### 5.2 The designer's role

Kviseth underlined the importance of the designer’s role, especially when the designer has the authority to take decisions [14]. She alleged further that teaching sustainability has been completely diluted in design education in Norway today [14]. This is a critical point since designers have great opportunities to contribute to a more sustainable society, when approximately 80% of products’ environmental impacts are determined in the design process [19]. For this reason, teaching about these consequences is of fundamental importance in design education. Designers can work as an essential teammate in the process since they have an entire toolbox with them to contribute innovative ideas that can make a significant difference [14]. In the textile industry today, the process from sketch to finished product might only take three weeks. This often results in the manufacturers copying each other’s designs, as this makes things go much faster. However, the result is often homogeneous products of poor quality [1]. This is also evident in sports clothing, as many products are quite similar to each other. By spending a longer time in each stage, designers can get a much greater opportunity to design distinctive identities and characteristics into products. This again gives the end users much greater choice, finding their true identity and increasing the chance that the product will be used for longer.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In this study, the theory of slow fashion was applied in three different contexts to examine how designers can make sports apparel more sustainable. This is a complex task, which was further studied with an in-depth interview to get a better understanding of the topic. Apart from this interview, this paper reports primarily on one designer’s encounter with this complexity.

This study strengthens the hypothesis that slow fashion can be implemented more easily by small businesses. Whether or not larger companies could also benefit in adopting slow fashion is still open to debate, since Patagonia has successfully incorporated many of the theory’s factors [15]. Based on this research, the results show that the manufacturers studied do not use slow fashion deliberately, but

the concept may become more highly relevant in the future [6, 14]. This paper can contribute to improving the understanding of slow fashion and can serve as an inspiration to designers and companies who seek to contribute to their businesses' better social and environmental sustainability. The theory of slow fashion can influence designers to make more sustainable sports apparel by revealing the larger picture of nature and the world as a whole. All aspects are interconnected and influence each other. By considering all the factors in slow fashion when products are developed, designers can contribute to significant advantages for nature, companies, employees and end users. This is not an easy process – requiring new business models – but it is essential to answering today's challenges.

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