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REVIEW

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A Review on the Sustenance of Fashion Businesses during COVID-19: Impacts on Women Workers

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the fashion industry, focusing on how it has affected women workers. It aims to analyse the current state of the fashion business, highlighting the challenges faced due to economic difficulties, including factory closures and reduced consumer preferences.

Methodology/Design: Employing a qualitative content analysis approach, the study reviews relevant literature centred on the sustainability and relevance of fashion businesses during the pandemic. The study utilises an interpretive framework to gather insights into women's experiences in the industry, incorporating data from various sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the situation.

Findings: The findings reveal that political apathy, characterised by vote buying, election rigging, and electoral violence, has a significant negative impact on good governance and sustainable development in Zamfara State. The study demonstrates that many women, who represent a substantial portion of both producers and consumers in the fashion sector, have experienced a decline in their standard of living as a direct result of these challenges.

Practical and Social Implications: The study outlines policies and programs to ensure fashion firms' sustainability in the wake of the pandemic. It emphasizes the need for concerted efforts to support affected female employees. It suggests that businesses not yet focused on sustainability should seize this opportunity to adapt and thrive amid changing consumer preferences.

Originality: The paper contributes to the existing literature by providing a focused analysis of the intersection of fashion sustainability and gender issues during a global crisis. It highlights the unique challenges faced by women workers in the fashion industry while proposing actionable strategies for recovery and growth in a post-pandemic landscape.

Keywords

Fashion industry, textile, clothing, sustainability, COVID-19, women workers

1 | INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry is a multibillion-dollar global enterprise devoted to the production and marketing of clothing and related accessories. Fashion, defined by Drew (1992) and Rouse (1999), represents styles prevalent during specific periods, encompassing clothing, housing, and accessories, particularly textiles. Pearsall (2002) extends this definition to include all types of textile fabrics and industrial furnishings. Fashion plays a critical role in daily life and economic development. Sarpong et al. (2011) emphasise the industry's responsibility to manufacture and sell clothing, one of humanity's three basic needs, meeting

fundamental requirements and contributing to global commerce and employment. Fashion businesses generate revenue, meet clothing demands, and contribute significantly to socio-economic development, particularly in developing nations (Abdulla, 2020). The 21st century has redefined the fashion industry through globalization, influencing how fashion products are manufactured and marketed. For example, Jarnow and Dickerson (1997) and Hines (2001) identify globalization as a force expanding international manufacturing, delivery, and sales of fashion goods. Dickerson (1999) highlights the transition of fashion businesses into a global economy where designers, producers, and marketers operate across continents (Abdulla, 2020).

Empirical evidence points to the migration of labour-intensive fashion production from developed to developing nations. Countries like China, India, Bangladesh, and Indonesia export textiles and clothing to global markets, generating foreign exchange and playing a vital role in socio-economic development (Jones, 1998; Bheda et al., 2003). Despite its labour-intensive nature, the fashion industry remains a critical pillar for revenue generation and livelihood sustenance (IMF, 2020). The fashion industry has grown to an estimated global worth of \$3 trillion, outranking many major industries (Haqqi, 2020). Despite high profits and low production costs, the industry faces challenges such as fluctuating demand and market dynamics. Statista Research (2024) forecasts the global apparel market value to grow from \$1.5 trillion in 2020 to \$2.25 trillion by 2025, emphasizing the escalating global demand for fashion. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented challenges. Reports by UNICEF (2020) and Leitheiser et al. (2020) highlight the pandemic's global impact, including increased mortality rates, lockdowns, and disrupted manufacturing and retail sectors. Research by Teodoro & Rodriguez (2020) and ILO (2020a) points to reduced foreign direct investment, factory shutdowns, and rising unemployment. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), vital to the fashion industry, face severe impacts, with many anticipating debt or closure (Russell, 2020; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has affected women disproportionately in the fashion industry, which heavily relies on female labour. Women workers face increased vulnerabilities due to factory closures, layoffs, and the precarious nature of employment in SMEs. Studies by Oakes (2020) and the Clean Clothes Campaign (2020) underscore the significant challenges for women, including financial instability and limited access to support systems. Despite these challenges, the sustainability and relevance of fashion businesses in the COVID-19 era are critical. This necessitates efforts to adapt to market dynamics, ensure ethical practices, and prioritise the welfare of workers, particularly women. As the paper emphasises, sustainable operations and policies are essential for the long-term viability of the fashion industry in a post-pandemic world.

2 | METHODOLOGY

The paper employs the qualitative content analysis approach to analyse literature contents for effective interpretation. This methodology has been reported by Mayring (2000), Krippendorff (2004) and Kuckartz (2019) with varying procedures. Based on the relevant steps outlined in the literature, this study modified and adopted the three phases by Elo et al. (2014) to answer the purpose of the study by reviewing relevant literature centred on the sustenance and relevance of fashion businesses during COVID-19, and with a focus on the female gender. These phases include data collection, organisation and results reporting. In this methodological approach, the issue of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability amongst others. The credibility of the study was ensured by conducting a thorough literature review from credible sources, and the transferability was established by providing a detailed

description of the study methodology. The dependability was achieved by ensuring consistency in the analysis process. The confirmability was established by providing an audit trail of the study.

In the first phase, *data collection*, the appropriate data or literature i.e. research papers, reports, and information from websites amongst others was selected based on the purpose of the study. It is important to note that relevant literatures were sourced from scholarly databases such as Scopus, and Google Scholar, focusing on the sustenance and relevance of fashion businesses during COVID-19. Key reports from international organisations such as the sustainable apparel coalition, and the International Labour Organisation amongst others were also selected to provide comprehensive insights into the study's purpose. The information from the gathered data is read thoroughly to obtain the right context for effective categorisation into appropriate themes.

In the second phase, *organisation*, after systematic reading and extrapolation of a body of texts and symbolic matters from the literature reviewed, the appropriate literature and information are categorised into relevant themes based on their context. Based on this, four key themes i.e. impact of COVID-19 on the fashion industry, gender dynamics in the fashion sector, sustainability in the fashion business and pathways to recovery, were identified and organised for critical analysis of findings. The study adhered to ethical considerations by ensuring that all sources of literature reviewed were properly cited and credited to their respective authors.

In the final phase, *results reporting*, the relevant findings from the gathered information are thoroughly discussed to provide great insights into the themes. These led to the conclusion reached in the study for readers. Also, all literature used and cited were recorded and accounted for in this study.

3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study presents the results to reflect the relevance of fashion entrepreneurs amidst the impact of Covid-19. The analysis of key areas includes the impact of COVID-19 on the fashion industry, gender dynamics in the fashion sector, sustainability in the fashion business and pathways to recovery.

3.1 | The Impact of COVID-19 on the Fashion Industry

Given the unprecedented changing scenes, characterised by the global pandemic of COVID-19, most industry players across multidisciplinary sectors looked at innovative ways and measures to bounce back into full productivity after the economic turmoil the pandemic had on various industry sectors. In this light, a report by BOF, McKinsey & Company (2021) reported on the current state of fashion in the year 2021. Findings showed that fashion executives prepared for various scenarios and therefore, looked forward to a speedy global recovery. It further revealed that the state of fashion businesses was characterised by growing pressure on performance, together with the dynamic shift in consumer behaviours, coupled with the increasing demand for digitalisation. Furthermore, per the index on global fashion businesses coupled with changes in market capitalisation, their findings observed a 93% decline in economic margins for fashion businesses at the end of 2020. The study by Dekhne et al. (2020) indicates that the year 2020 saw a myriad of fashion businesses recording rather low economic margins, which have compelled business leaders to look out for innovative ways to stay profitable while still engaging in their core operations. The study also observed key disruptions in most fashion businesses concerning retailers in the fashion business, thereby causing several businesses to make rather tough decisions regarding various factors such as Return on Investment (ROI) and increasing omnichannel services. Such factors are key survival areas to be considered in fashion businesses. It is evident from

the ongoing submissions that indeed there has been a shift in the current state of fashion businesses due to the emergence of COVID-19. Thus, the current state of fashion businesses vis-à-vis their operations is experiencing changes that stakeholders seek to adapt to and maintain their relevance.

It is imperative to note that business survival is dependent on external factors, which according to Ogundele and Opeifa (2004), help visualise the analyses of business growth. It thus goes to iterate that the survival and growth of fashion businesses, in the long run, determine the future of companies. This is why the empirical evidence established that the emergence of COVID-19 as an external factor caused noticeable changes such as shifting consumer behaviours that call the fashion businesses to institute digitalisation in their businesses to enable consumers to patronise their fashion products via online platforms, especially when most countries have instituted partial and total lockdowns (UNICEF, 2020) as a way of curbing the spread of COVID-19. As evidenced above, it is clear that there was increasing pressure on performance regarding fashion businesses because most fashion businesses were experiencing shutdowns and low margins (ILO, 2020a). Such a status quo of fashion businesses remains a burden for all players in this sector. The exposition of Amed and Berg (2023) and Gerstell et al. (2020), revealed that fashion businesses concerning the Beauty and Cosmetic segment remained comparatively insulated from the changing scenes of the global COVID-19 pandemic, thereby offering consumers a comforting revitalisation in challenging times. To this effect, it could be inferred from the ongoing that, fashion businesses in the Beauty and Cosmetic segment had an opportunity to effectively align with the ever-changing category and regional opportunities regardless of the unfavourable era of COVID-19 that inhibits the growth of businesses.

In a study by Barrie (2021), 86% of garment manufacturers experienced a noticeable drop in sales, which affected a lot of livelihoods. Buttressing the foregoing, Leitheiser et al. (2020) affirmed that garment manufacturers and other fashion businesses across the Asian region were in a state of demand-side difficulties. Due to the financial turmoil of consumers as a result of COVID-19, most consumers resorted to either terminating or suspending orders for garment businesses across Asian countries. Furthermore, some consumers who invoked force majeure clauses within their contracts resulted in the delay or cancellation of payments and orders from garment manufacturers and fashion businesses. This according to Guilbert et al. (2020) resulted in the current state of public outcry by fashion businesses, garment associations, fashion workers, consumers and other stakeholders. Subsequently, another study by Aung et al. (2020) indicated that the state of the massive decline in demand, compelled many fashion businesses, typically garment manufacturers, to fight for survival. These happenings pushed most fashion businesses to temporarily or permanently shut down their operations.

As evidenced by Friedman (2020), the state of fashion businesses across the globe seems to have been blurred with a myriad of crises, thereby impeding the survival of many companies. More so, several fashion businesses across the globe are faced with incomparable challenges posed by what they described as “the biggest global public health crisis in generations”. Hence, most fashion businesses found it difficult to make clothes and as such, were compelled to stay at home amidst job insecurity and health concerns. These occurrences resulted in a loss of appetite for buying clothes.

Likewise, a study by BOF, McKinsey & Company (2020) revealed that currently, fashion retail businesses and corporate offices as well as the global fashion supply chains are in a state of devastation, which implies that most fashion businesses would find it quite difficult to survive due to the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, the findings indicate a noticeable collapse in the revenue of most fashion businesses across the globe due to a massive economic shakeout impacted by the global crisis of COVID-19. To this

effect, the researchers observed that fashion businesses in Europe and the US: including Neiman Marcus & Crew in the US and Debenhams in the UK that had combined yearly proceeds of US\$50 billion indicated signs for bankruptcy and reorganisation via government-supported insolvency processes.

Figure 1 explains the state of fashion businesses in 2021 scenarios and monthly sales expectations for fashion, apparel and luxury in 2020 vs 2019. As evidenced in Figure 1, BOF, McKinsey & Company (2020) envisaged the China market to recover by the end of December 2020 while it was expected that Europe and the United States would take longer. Subsequently, for the luxury sector, the European retail businesses had been a major backbone and fuel of growth. However, researchers envisaged a potential 40% to 50% fall as of December 2020, because Chinese tourists might have preferred to stay in their homeland without travelling. As Chinese tourists, in particular, continued to stay at home, sales in the European luxury sector were predicted to fall even further, by 40% to 50% by the end of 2020. Nonetheless, the situation is predicted to be similar for the U.S. till the resumption of international travel to normalcy.

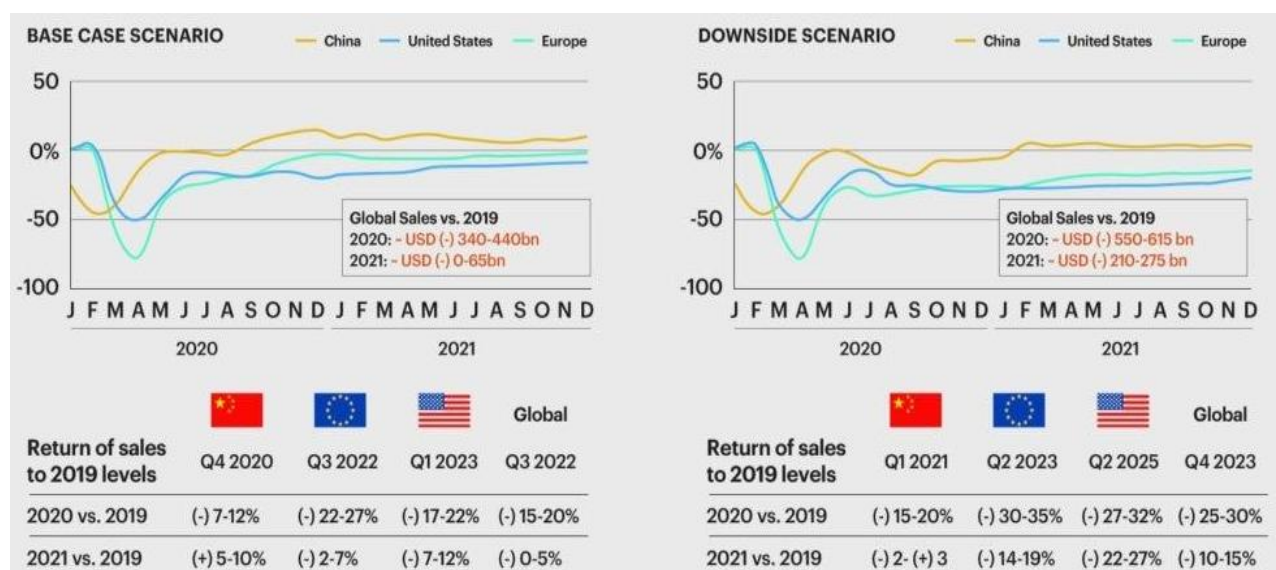


Figure 1. The State of Fashion Businesses 2021 Scenarios: Monthly Sales Expectation for Fashion, Apparel and Luxury 2020 Vs 2019
Source: BOF, McKinsey & Company (2020)

The submissions herein on the state of fashion businesses in the era of COVID-19 reveal a myriad of issues and uncomfortable factors as evidenced empirically thereby, impeding the full realisation of fashion businesses worldwide and the totality of the fashion industry. Making substantial inferences, fashion business players admitted to the changes they faced because of the economic turmoil fuelled by the emergence of COVID-19. To this effect, businesses resorted to innovative ways to remain relevant and sustain their profitability and solvency. However, the current state of fashion businesses is characterised by growing pressure on the capacity and performance of fashion companies coupled with shifting behaviours of consumers, especially those who are unable to buy clothes or have rather lost appetite for purchasing clothes, hence affecting the sales and profitability of fashion businesses. This further resulted in a 93% decline in profits for most fashion businesses, triggered by the noticeable disruptions in fashion businesses, thereby compelling fashion businesses to make tough decisions regarding their Return on Investment (ROI). However, in the changing scenes of COVID-19, fashion businesses in the Beauty and Cosmetic segment appear to be rather insulated from the great turmoil of the global pandemic. As such, there is a higher tendency and comforting thought of the segment revitalising at a faster rate.

Notwithstanding, Asian fashion businesses/garment manufacturers were faced with demand-side difficulties, hence compelled most of the businesses to shut down, a situation that aggravated the current crisis and devastation within fashion businesses, resulting in economic collapse with worse situations of notable fashion companies in the Europe and U.S.A, declaring a state of bankruptcy with reliance on government-supported solvency processes. Regardless of current trends in fashion businesses across the globe, empirical findings herein envisage a rather quick recovery for China with a longer recovery rate for Europe and the U.S.A. The general outlook of fashion businesses in the era of COVID-19 is not a thing to write home about, hence the need for all stakeholders to find sustainable measures to ensure the relevance of fashion businesses during and after COVID-19.

3.2| Gender Dynamics in the Fashion Sector

According to Oakes (2020), although women make up most of the makers and consumers of clothing, the fashion industry and businesses serve as a yardstick upon which gender bias has festered since its inception. According to the findings, approximately one (1) out of six (6) people employed in the fashion industry are female workers; likewise, 80% of garment workers constitute women. Regardless of the statistical roles of women in the fashion industry, the author further points out that throughout the supply chain, few women occupy positions of power within the factory system of the fashion industry.

As evidenced in the study by Bain (2018), women constitute the lower ranks of the US fashion industry. However, research by Pike (2016) rather opined that out of 50 major fashion businesses just seven (7) were run by women. As seen in the submissions herein, even though Oakes believed that the majority of garment workers constitute women, the fashion businesses run in the lower ranks of the US have few representations of the female gender as owners of fashion businesses. It is clear here, that regardless of the immense contribution of women in the supply chain and consumer section of the fashion industry, there are issues of misrepresentation of women in the fashion industry. Pike (2016) makes a critical observation in the fashion industry of the United Kingdom where she reveals that female designers continue to be in the minority. Implicit in the researcher's findings, regardless of the advocacy for gender impartiality on the catwalk, female designers are still in the minority behind the scenes.

In the exposition of Fashion Revolution (2015), the garment industry, since its inception, has been one of the industries dominated by women. To this effect, it was observed that over 70% of garment workers in China are women while women in the Bangladesh garment industry make up 85% with 90% share in Cambodia. Accordingly, in Bangladesh Textile and Clothing industry, the socio-economic development of women is intertwined with their conditions of work such as decent pay and working under dignified conditions coupled with basic work security. Although women in the Textile and Clothing industry constitute a larger percentage, Devnath (2013) observed that most garment workers in the Global South do not have such privileges. Thus, even though these women produce for most of the well-known and lucrative fashion businesses across the globe, women in the Textile and Clothing sector in South Global appear to be working for poverty wages, under awful conditions coupled with excessive amounts of overtime. Fashion Revolution (2015) in collaboration with Devnath (2013) establishes that the fashion business in Bangladesh (2nd largest exporter of clothes globally) is characterised by poor minimum wage for garment workers, especially women. Thus, with a minimum wage of 5,300 taka (£45/€62) per month, women are unable to cover their basic needs which are estimated at around 8,900 (£75/€104). Subsequently, most of these garment workers are compelled to work overtime between 60 and 140 hours per week, which makes them susceptible to being cheated of overtime pay. Further to that, health and safety protocols are mostly neglected with denial of breaks and abuses of the women.

Consequently, a study by Rahman (2018) on the global fashion industry affirmed that the industry is worth about US\$2.4 trillion (or \$2,400 billion) and is the world's 7th largest economy, employing about 60 to 75 million people around with three-quarters constituting women. This goes to buttress earlier empirical findings that established that women constitute a larger percentage of the Textile and Clothing industry coupled with its associated fashion businesses. From another angle, Avila (2015) indicates that although women account for a larger share of workers in the Textile and Clothing manufacturing sector, there are still misrepresentations in the actual fashion businesses run across the globe in that, women are underrepresented in terms of leadership positions across the sector. Specifically, Avila's findings explain that the number of the female gender topping the 15 largest mass-market fashion/apparel businesses on the Fortune 500 list is nil. These 15 fashion/apparel businesses comprise Nike, VF (parent company of Jansport, North Face, 7 For All Mankind and more), PVH (parent company of Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger, Kenneth Cole, Michael Kors and more), Ralph Lauren, Hanesbrands, Coach, Levi Strauss, Fossil Group (parent company of Emporio Armani, Michael Kors, Marc Jacobs and more), Under Armour, Carter's (parent company of OshKosh B'gosh), Wolverine World Wide (parent company of Keds, Hush Puppies, Sperry and more), Guess, Skechers U.S.A., G-III Apparel Group (parent company of Guess, Calvin Klein, Nine West and more) and Columbia Sportswear.

Rahman (2018) accedes to Avila's findings that in terms of the higher-end fashion industry, most fashion businesses are still directed by male designers. This goes to affirm and reiterates the study of Pike (2016) where they concluded that out of the 371 designers topping the 313 brands at the world's four main fashion weeks, only 40.2% comprised the female gender. Making substantial extrapolations from the empirical evidence above, the fashion industry has been one of the oldest sectors, highly ranked as the 7th largest economy of many nations. More so, it is obvious that the industry is dominated by the female gender in terms of Textile and Clothing manufacturing in South Global or Asian countries.

Indeed, women constitute a larger percentage of garment workers with an estimated share of 80%. Nonetheless, they are underrepresented when it comes to running most of the actual fashion businesses/brands across the globe. Subsequently, 80% of women workers in the Textile and Clothing sector are faced with a myriad of harsh working conditions such as poor wages, abuses, unfavourable working conditions, and denial of breaks among other conditions that inhibit the growth of their livelihood. It is rather unfortunate that these women who produce clothes for the top fashion brands across the globe are subjected to these harsh working conditions in countries such as Bangladesh (2nd largest exporter of clothes globally), China, Cambodia, India, etc. Because a larger share of fashion consumption/purchasing is obtained from women, they have little or no say when it comes to decision-making at the corporate level since most of these fashion businesses/brands are helmed by the male gender. This status quo is worrying and raised a lot of concerns regarding gender equality in the fashion industry. More so, empirical evidence recognizes the fact that there are more male designers as compared to their female counterparts. These statistics are made evident especially when there is a minority of female designers in the world's top four fashion weeks in New York, London, Paris, and Milan.

Hence, the gender distribution in the Textile and Clothing sector is more tilted toward women coupled with harsh working conditions, whereas there exists a minor percentage of women in the actual fashion businesses/brands that are highly recognised across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the fashion industry, as evidenced by both empirical and experiential evidence. Uddin (2020) study on the fashion industry demonstrates that the pandemic has had a sudden impact on the production networks of fashion businesses worldwide (Gallegos, 2021). Furthermore, the financial

distress among fashion businesses is due to the cancellation of fashion weeks, closure of stores, lay-offs, and unsold inventory (Pike, 2016).

This situation has resulted in many fashion businesses defaulting on payments for garments that have already been manufactured or shipped. As a result, the textile and garment sector has been greatly affected, with women, who already face poor working conditions, being disproportionately impacted (Devnath, 2013; Fashion Revolution, 2015). Anner (2020) and Chua (2020) found that garment manufacturers have suffered billions of losses. Although some fashion businesses, such as retailers, have received government wage subsidies, Brydges and Hanlon (2020) noted that most businesses still cannot pay their garment workers. This leaves vulnerable workers in an even more precarious situation, according to the findings. In light of the above findings, it is evident that the global fashion industry has been significantly impacted by COVID-19. However, gender ranking has become increasingly important for most industries, including the fashion industry. The ILO (2020b) notes that because women account for around 80% of the fashion/garment sector workforce, the sector's effects of the global pandemic would disproportionately affect women.

This is a crucial issue, as Brydges et al. (2020) assert that the increasing economic distress that is crippling fashion businesses is exacerbating the long-standing humanitarian crisis underlying much of the fashion industry. A study conducted by Stoelker (2020) on the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on women in the fashion, the business revealed, that women across the globe to date, have continuously been the key manufacturers of fashion and textiles and this, according to Allison Pfungst (adviser and administrator of the Undergraduate Fashion Studies Programme) implies that women must carry out their job roles in the industry in addition to child-rearing. Hence, the cancellation of fashion shows, and closure of retail businesses and stores led to many of these women getting laid off. The resultant effect here is that it affects their children and livelihood as well, making it impossible to take care of their families. Per the ongoing submissions, it is without a doubt that a larger share of workers in the retail business and garment business are women who are tasked with hands-on manufacturing processes, selling and merchandising. As such the laying off of these women implies a lack of profitability for the fashion businesses and possibly renders most of the business insolvent. This affects their economic stability, purchasing power and the totality of their socio-economic lives, children and family.

Consequently, Meyer et al. (2020) conducted a study on the impacts of COVID-19 on women in Ethiopia's ready-made fashion and garment industry. The researchers, having sampled 3,896 women workers in the industry, revealed that about 52% complained of food insecurity. Because of the global pandemic on the fashion business leading to laid-off workers, women are burdened with the ability to afford food as the researchers' study proved that most of the affected women had not had enough food for days. Also, this adds up to the folding up of their businesses due to the low purchasing power of fashion consumers. These occurrences render the Ethiopian fashion business desolate. More so, their study indicated that the hiring of female workers in Ethiopia's fashion and garment industry had been changed (reduced) dramatically due to a sharp decline in fashion/clothing demand that has characterised the era of COVID-19.

The International Labour Organisation, ILO (2020b) reported on the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on the fashion/garment sector. It was revealed that due to the abrupt disruption in the global fashion chain and shutdowns of many fashion businesses, most women workers are still owed substantial amounts of wages for already completed work. A report on the ready-made fashion business in Dhaka confirmed that most women are unable to afford necessities such as food, rent money and medical

expenses for their children and families (Intern ShowT, 2020). Because women are vulnerable and highly represented in the fashion/garment sector, they are most impacted by the dwindling state of most fashion businesses across the globe.

More so, before COVID-19, women had financial independence due to their job roles in the industry however, the emergence of the global pandemic coupled with the loss of jobs has become problematic for women as they have lost their purchasing and bargaining power together with their inability to fend for their children and household. This is dire not only on their job loss but on the economic freedoms they used to enjoy hence, heightening the severity of their situation further.

Making substantial extrapolations from the empirical findings above, it is evident that fashion businesses have been adversely gripped by the unprecedented changing scenes of the global pandemic. Thus, COVID-19 continues to impact the optimum and efficient operations of the fashion business and the effect is highly felt by the female gender in that, most of the workers in the global fashion industry constitute approximately 80% women. It has been evidenced from experiential studies that, the laying off of workers in the industry has subsequently affected the livelihood of women thereby, making them unable to cater to their children and families. In addition, issues of food insecurity border on the well-being of the affected women. It is shown that due to the impact of the pandemic on fashion businesses, women in Bangladesh which happens to be the clothing factory for the world, are unable to afford enough food and as such, are forced to starve for days. This situation is very dire especially when other studies reviewed herein accentuate that affected women are unable to afford necessities such as food, rent money and medical expenses for their children and household. The resultant effect is intense poverty and hunger bedevilling these affected women. Other studies reviewed explain that the devastating effect of the global pandemic on fashion businesses has led to changes and a decline in the employment rate of female workers due to an abrupt reduction in demand by consumers, with the little opting for online shopping because of lockdowns instituted by various governments, as part of the measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19. Finally, it has been evinced that the impact of the pandemic on fashion businesses implies that women no longer have purchasing and bargaining power due to the loss of jobs, hence impeding their financial freedoms and hindering the overall growth of their socio-economic livelihood. The foregoing raises concerns for all stakeholders to make concerted efforts to ensure a more sustainable fashion industry that ensures the relevance of these businesses in an era of COVID-19. This is of paramount interest to assuage the suffering of the affected women in the global fashion business.

Owing to the myriads of benefits derived from the global fashion industry, it is imperative to ensure the sustainability and relevance of fashion businesses, to alleviate the suffering of workers in the sector concerning women, due to their vulnerability and a larger share in the sector. It thus goes to iterate that issues bothering how sustainable fashion businesses can be in an era of COVID-19 must be addressed and reviewed.

3.3| Sustainability in the Fashion Business

According to the Green Strategy (2020) as cited in the work of Brydges et al. (2020) explain that, "Sustainability in the fashion business infers clothing, shoes and accessories that are produced, sold and utilised in the most sustainable way as possible while taking into consideration both environmental and socio-economic aspects." In practicality as quoted above, this points toward continuous and concerted efforts to improve all phases of the fashion product's life cycle, starting from the design, raw material production, manufacturing, transport, storage, marketing and final sale, through to its use, reuse, repair,

remake and recycling of the product and its components. It thus goes to iterate that regardless of the unprecedentedly changing scenes of COVID-19 on fashion businesses, it is significant to ensure the sustainability of all fashion businesses by putting feasible measures in place throughout the stages of production, sales and usage of fashion products (Karthik and Gopalakrishnan, 2014). Thus, there is a need to ensure that fashion businesses are still relevant and sustainable during COVID-19. In light of the foregoing, this paper further reviews measures worth undertaking to ensure that fashion businesses remain relevant and sustainable under the changing scenes of COVID-19. This further raises questions on 'HOW?'. Thus, what measures can be put in place to ensure that fashion businesses are sustainable in an era of COVID-19?

According to Brydges et al. (2020), fashion businesses are reconsidering design processes to stay relevant and ensure sustainable business in an era of COVID-19. In this light, their investigation revealed that some dominant players such as the Council of Fashion Designers of America, the British Fashion Council, and a group facilitated by Business of Fashion under the mantle of Rewiring Fashion, have contended that the global pandemic offers fashion businesses the prospects to renovate the industry thereby, propelling an entirely new and rather slower fashion system. This according to studies by Holgate (2020) would mean that fashion businesses would now be established upon lesser fashion weeks, trends, seasons and collections. Inferring from these authors, these design ideologies are targeted at supporting new fashion purchasing and consumption behaviours which ensures a decline in the dependency of fashion businesses on discounting. Nonetheless, even though these measures appear feasible to ensure that fashion businesses are sustainable and relevant, it is crucial to ensure that all stakeholders are brought on board to join in the discussions and decision-making process. This would also necessitate an equal representation of gender in the discourse. As evidenced by empirical data in this paper, women appear to have little say in the decision-making process even though they constitute a larger share of fashion production and consumption. These measures would further ensure that the concerns of women are also factored into the decision-making to alleviate issues that border on their job roles in the industry. In supporting this sustainable measure in the design process for the overall sustainability of the fashion business, Friedman (2020) also avows that highly influential fast fashion and high-street brands coupled with as are smaller and independent fashion design businesses that are also impacted by COVID-19 ought to be brought on board in the decision making. These steps are taken with the view of ensuring the sustainability of design processes of fashion businesses in an era of COVID-19 to ensure that the women workforce secure their employment in the industry.

A recent study by Shamsi (2024) highlights the significant impact of the global pandemic on the garment manufacturing industry, particularly on women's workforce in countries such as Bangladesh, China, India, Cambodia, and Ethiopia. The cancellation of orders and delayed payments have devastated the industry, leaving many workers in financial distress. However, campaigns such as 'Pay-Up' have compelled top fashion brands such as H&M, Zara, Nike, and Ralph Lauren to effect full payment of about US\$15 billion of orders already manufactured before the pandemic. This could potentially allow textile and garment workers, particularly women, to call back laid-off workers and settle outstanding wages, improving their livelihoods and regaining their purchasing and bargaining power.

The pandemic has also led to a decline in demand and a higher unemployment rate for women in the Asian region, posing dire financial risks to the socio-economic lives of the affected women workforce. This situation has also threatened the effectiveness of sustainability programs that had already been initiated. Therefore, ensuring sustainable fashion businesses requires access to economic and skills

development for women workers who are disproportionately impacted by the hazardous nature of production work.

The global pandemic has significantly impacted the garment manufacturing industry, particularly on women's workforce in the Asian region. While campaigns such as 'Pay-Up' have provided some relief, sustainable fashion businesses require access to economic and skills development to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on women workers. According to Brydges et al. (2020), the fashion retail industry had already been experiencing changes due to the increasing use of digital technologies and online shopping before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic has accelerated this trend, as partial and total lockdowns have forced consumers to shift towards online shopping. In order for fashion businesses, especially in the retail sector, to remain sustainable in the current era of the pandemic, they must embrace digitalisation and retailing platforms that encourage online shopping.

By embracing digitalisation through new technologies and retailing platforms, fashion businesses can create an enabling environment that allows them to thrive and become sustainable, regardless of the unprecedented changes brought about by the pandemic. This would increase the production and supply of garments to fashion brands and retail stores, potentially allowing laid-off garment workers, who are predominantly women, to be called back into the workforce and regain their financial independence. In a report by Martinez-Pardo et al. (2020), some measures were detailed to ensure the sustainability of fashion businesses in an era of COVID-19. Evidence in the report indicates that for fashion businesses to be sustainable to assuage the effect of the pandemic on the women workforce, businesses ought to relook at short-term, medium-term and long-term sustainability initiatives.

The sustainability of fashion businesses during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic is of utmost importance. According to the report by Martinez-Pardo et al. (2020), short-term sustainability initiatives require fashion businesses to protect their business and critical assets such as human and financial capital while maintaining a cordial supply chain relationship. The report advocates the avoidance of terminating completed orders to prevent the closure of factories and businesses and reduce the impacts on the women workforce, who are the majority of the laid-off workers. Businesses must also maintain vital social and environmental programs by prioritising the safety and health of the women workforce and environmental data collection. For long-term sustainability, fashion businesses must reassess all pertinent decisions and actions taken during the crisis, revise decisions on purchasing or termination of orders, manage extra inventory and engage in 3-season merchandising while strengthening the supply chain. They must invest in innovative strategic business models that adopt new methods in environmental, digital and transparency to sustain their businesses in the future. The report suggests that fashion businesses should embrace end-to-end digitisation detailing consumer pathways coupled with enabled Artificial Intelligence, data-driven decision-making, and better transparency for consumers and other stakeholders.

The study conducted by Brydges et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of embracing digitalisation and retailing platforms in fashion businesses to enhance online shopping, increase sales, and ensure continuity of orders, thereby providing garment workers (most of whom are women, 80%) with continuous economic stability and alleviating the financial stress faced by women in the garment sector. To ensure the long-term sustainability of fashion businesses, it is crucial to leverage technology, data, and digitisation. The dwindled state of the fashion industry due to COVID-19 has been a major concern for all stakeholders, as it has had a significant impact on workers in the sector, particularly women, affecting their socio-economic livelihood. To address this issue, fashion businesses need to embrace and

adapt to design changes that promote a slow fashion system, with a lower dependency rate on discounts and fewer fashion weeks, trends, and seasons to align with the new purchasing and consumption behaviours of customers. Furthermore, the sustainability of fashion businesses requires the provision of economic skills and development for the women workforce, who account for about 80% of workers in the sector, particularly in garment manufacturing businesses. The 'Pay-Up' campaign, which compels fashion brands to effect payments on orders that have already been completed by the garment manufacturers, is an effective sustainability initiative for fashion businesses, as the cancellation of orders has led to mass lay-offs of workers in the garment manufacturing sector, with women accounting for 80%.

3.4| Pathways to Recovery

In addition to the above measures, it is crucial for fashion businesses, especially retail businesses, to embrace digitalisation, as there has been a noticeable shift in consumer preferences towards online shopping due to COVID-19. The relevance of fashion businesses now lies in effective technologies and retail platforms that support online shopping. Empirically, evidenced initiatives have been formulated to ensure the continued sustainability of fashion businesses in the era of COVID-19, ranging from short-term to long-term measures (Table 1). These measures are geared towards addressing the financial distress impacting the women workforce in the industry, who constitute a large share of production and consumption but are also the most vulnerable, with little or no say in decision-making processes.

Table 1. Summary of Short-Term, Medium-Term and Long-Term Sustainable Initiatives

Short-Term	Medium-Term	Long-Term
Protecting business and critical assets (human capital, financial capital, good relationship in the supply chain)	Reassess decisions taken under crisis	Leverage on enhanced technologies, data and digitalisation
Prioritising the protection, health and safety of the women workforce	Revise decisions taken on purchasing and termination of orders in the midst of a crisis	End-to-end digitisation detailing consumer pathways
Promote key environmental programmes	Effective marketing restructures and reinforces the trust of customers/consumers	Artificial Intelligence Data-driven decision making
	Engage in a 3-season merchandising to manage excess inventory	Better transparency for consumers and other stakeholders
	Collaborative measures to strengthen the supply chain	

4 | IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study on the impact of COVID-19 on the fashion industry, particularly concerning women workers, have significant social and practical implications. Socially, the research highlights the vulnerabilities faced by women in the fashion sector, who constitute a large portion of both producers and consumers. The decline in their standard of living underscores the need for targeted support systems and policies that address gender-specific challenges within the industry. By emphasizing

the importance of traditional and contemporary designs, the study advocates for a greater appreciation of cultural narratives, which can foster community identity and resilience during crises.

Practically, the study's findings suggest that fashion businesses must adapt to changing consumer preferences and market dynamics accelerated by the pandemic. This includes embracing digital transformation to enhance accessibility and engagement with consumers. The recommendations for stakeholders to collaborate on educational programs and marketing campaigns aim to promote sustainable practices and ensure that artisans are aware of the historical significance of their designs. By implementing these strategies, fashion businesses can not only survive but thrive in a post-pandemic landscape, ultimately contributing to the economic recovery and sustainability of the industry while empowering women workers.

5 | CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STUDIES

The current state of fashion businesses in the era of COVID-19 is that many have experienced economic turmoil, resulting in the shutdown of factories and the closure of fashion businesses. This has pushed workers, especially women, into great financial distress, thereby affecting their socio-economic lives, children, and households. However, stakeholders in the industry are looking for ways to incorporate sustainability to ensure the industry's growth and improved livelihood for women. Women account for 80% of the garment manufacturing sector, but male fashion designers are higher than female counterparts in top fashion brands and businesses. This is evident in the top four fashion weeks globally, with more male designers. The impact factors of COVID-19 on fashion businesses, specifically from women's perspective, are significant financial distress and job loss, which have affected the socio-economic lives of women, children, and households. Many fashion businesses have experienced economic turmoil resulting in the shutdown of factories and the closure of other fashion businesses at the bottom line. The sustainability of fashion businesses in the era of COVID-19 is crucial to ensure their growth and improved livelihood for women. The pandemic presents prospects for fashion businesses to grow and remain sustainable while building concerted efforts. Hence, fashion businesses yet to rank sustainability must employ this era to transition, to gain a competitive advantage in a rather revamping economy with newer consumer preferences. Inferring from the evidence in this review paper, the integration and agility of fashion businesses would further necessitate collaboration and standardization in the global fashion supply chain.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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