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Towards sustainable fashion retail stores

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## **Abstract**

The concept of sustainable retail stores is slowly gaining acceptance. In part this is due to the different approaches and practices evident in the market positioning of stores, from minimal designs in discount stores to highly designed flagship stores. The aim of this research is to explore the potential for sustainability in fashion interior retail design in the Thai fashion market and the use of alternative sustainable materials.

This developmental paper introduces the problem of design practice processes and the opportunities for sustainable fashion retail interior design. An important aspect of sustainable fashion retailing arises from the sector's seasonal fashion retail interior decoration trends. Where designers use materials for short-term store fit-outs and displays, they must consider ease of transportation, installation, functionality and distinctiveness to attract the consumer's attention. Measuring the key elements of shop equipment in terms of their impact of materials on the fashion retail environment should be based on its complete life cycle.

The second objective of the paper is to understand the key issues in the relationship between retail brands and designers and to identify barriers to the implementation of sustainable design practices. This will require an understanding of retail brand identity to inform the selection of appropriate materials that will contribute to a sustainable fashion retail environment. The third objective is to identify the market opportunity for sustainable fashion retail design that could benefit the brand and consumer with new experiences drawing on an awareness of global environmental problems and specifically those in Thailand.

**Key words:** Retail fashion, Design Sustainability, Materials, Consumption

## **Literature Review**

Retail designers need to work with marketing experts to focus the store's identity and relationship to the brand. Yet, designer choice of material in realizing these objectives can compromise the natural environment, traditional or cultural backgrounds and transportation systems: many materials are imported from other countries in order to stay competitive (Suwannaboon 2019). Further, both retailers and designers need to consider the wider environmental impact of the choice of site, conformance with local planning restraints, effect on local trade, and to evaluate noise, traffic and congestion issues that may arise from their location (Mesher 2010).

One emerging opportunity is to increase brand value by improving the brand's sustainability profile. New sustainable materials, for example bio-based, smart, and recycled materials are now in demand (Manzini, 1989). The use of new technologies can also contribute to retailer sustainability by reducing the store's material footprint while extending instore atmospherics and consumer experience. Thus, the challenge for designers is to make the shop look visually

interesting using multiple techniques and new materials to stimulate interactivity and reduce waste (Turk 2018).

However, retailers need to carefully evaluate the creative contribution of sustainable materials and take effective steps not to impact on future developments (Canada Business Network, 2017). It is argued that store designers should pay more attention to consumer lifestyles as well as the environmental impact of each stage of production, use and managed disposal associated with fast fashion. This will allow for both the direct and indirect impacts to be considered in their designs. In terms of the interior environment of store, it is difficult to find research that relates sustainability to buyer attitudes towards an environmentally responsible retail environment (Hyllegard et al.2006) and limited sustainable choice is a major barrier to consumers in purchasing products (e.g. Hassan et al. 2016; Connell 2010; Shaw et al., 2006). Meanwhile, lack of investment or finance fails to deal with growing environmental concerns about a sustainable design process and industry (Longo 2012). Consequently, this research will examine sustainable retailing in the context of design practices, retail brand management and consumer attitudes to sustainability.

## **Methodology**

The project will use a circular economy theoretical framework to store design and assess the barriers and opportunities arising from a gap in knowledge in fashion businesses about sustainable retail stores. It will offer guidelines for sustainable material design concepts that integrate knowledge about sustainable materials and their marketing potential. It is anticipated that the research will lead to a sustainability design agenda that will lead to its widespread use in interior fashion retail environment.

This study takes a multiple case study approach to fashion retail in Thailand. The case studies will compare shop designs and the use of sustainable materials in their interior environment, their design briefs and implementation of the designs (Yin 2009). A pilot project was undertaken using observations of different types of department stores in the main shopping area in Bangkok to find examples of sustainable retail stores. The main body of the research will use multiple case studies that will involve the selection of retailers according to the theoretical literature and the research objectives.

Within Bangkok department stores, similar to European shopping malls, there are many branded stores which can be classified in three groups. These are high market luxury brand, mid-class market the multiple brand and domestic designer brands. The methods will be triangulated using observations by taking photos of the visual retail environment, which with field notes will contribute to an understanding of the fashion retail cycle and its impact on material usage. The second method will be interviews with retail managers, interior designers, architects, developers and suppliers. The interviews will use a mix of open questions and closed questions to obtain different points of view on designer experience. To understand integrated sustainable design approaches and the relationship between the fashion cycle of design and the brand identity, it is necessary to interview the fashion retail professionals who have appropriate experience and who can explain the design process, programming, schematic design, design development and contract documents. This includes the organization of space merchandising and product display for example showcase, window display and position of merchandising for it to become sustainable. The third method will be an analysis of documents to support the views or arguments about the design brief and the process of implementing the sustainable

design. Documents will include reports, creative briefs, project plans and specifications (Fitzgerald 2012).

### **Pilot project**

The pilot research used observations to examine branded, luxury and designer store sectors. The observations were made in three department stores focused on the exterior structure and interior environment such as the window display, communication design, store front, entrance, fixture, fitting and also the display lighting. Using a second method, interviews were undertaken with five retail practitioners. Retail development managers are important to understand the overall of the retail progress because they control the project budget, develop relationships with stakeholders and maintain the building. Thus, they are able to choose the designers, architecture and contribute to a strong brand image. In the first stage they pass the brief to the department store manager which the retailer needs to find a store interior designer to support their own brand. Next, the retail interior designer narrow down the barriers between the brand identity and the choice of the material in the store design.

The department stores have many multiple retail brands. The luxury brands demonstrate strong identities, iconicity and effective use of colour. Their window displays and Visual Merchandising were highly valued in these brands where a strong identity was utilized to create guidelines for the window installations. Generally, fashion shops take reference from premium fashion brands in term of both clothing collections and interiors. They are frequently changed to evolve with consumer expectations and because of the high level of activity, the interior finish becomes easily tired and dated. The interiors are varied, using materials, lighting and graphics to create illusions.

The findings demonstrate the complexity of the fashion retail sector, the exterior and interior of the store design is important to represent the brand identity create the attention, interest and action. The pilot observation helps to understand the different type of visual merchandising in a retail space especially the exterior structure which forms the consumers first impression of the shop. Some shops adopted the use of high quality expensive material, some fittings and fixture are demountable which allows the store greater flexibility to re-use it again. Thus, the interviews helped the pilot research to explore the key elements of the retail design progress and determine the gaps between the choice of sustainable material and the demands of the brand.

The next stage of the research will focus on the interior structure in detail within the fashion store environment, such as fixtures, fittings, interior components, displays, installations and furniture. Stores will be selected by brand in three groups; luxury brand, high street brand or affordable brand and Thai designer brand. Firstly, findings from documentaries and journals will be used to find out which brands have a sustainability concept as one of their main concerns. Next, how the brand represents the concept of sustainability in the interior design of the store environment. The primary research will include interviewing leading professionals within the fashion industry from a variety of different design practices to find out information about facts of barriers to sustainability, attitudes and opinions of the interviewees including, the interviews of material suppliers from the Green Architecture Fair 2019, in Bangkok. The main project will help to understand the responsibility of interviewees and see the different points of view between retailer, interior designer or architect and the supplier to fill the gap in knowledge of sustainable retailing.

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