

Received: 11 November 2022 Accepted: 15 March, 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/rr.v8i2.32>

## The Impact of HIGG Index on Consumer confidence in sustainable apparel Industry

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### Abstract

*Fashion Industry is a second largest industry which pollutes environment. Consumers are the primary focus for any business organization and changing trends in consumer purchasing decisions significantly impact organizational procedures of supply and product manufacturing. Increasing awareness among consumers regarding environmental sustainability has created a need for companies to remain environmentally sustainable. The apparel industry is such a sector where pollution due to harmful chemicals and animal skin causes a lot of pollution. The use of the HIGG index helps them maintain their sustainability standards. The research will focus on the effectiveness of the HIGG index in consumer purchasing decisions and gaining buyers' confidence.*

**Keywords:** Higg index, consumers, apparel industry, sustainability, purchasing behaviour.

### Introduction

#### Background of the Study

Due to the ongoing effect of pollution caused by several industries, especially the apparel industry, it is necessary to diagnose its impact on customer retention and how environmental degradation caused by the organizations is affecting consumer retention. Textile industries use the HIGG index to maintain environmental standards. The citizens are becoming more aware of the policies used by the companies, and being transparent about their actions makes them more dependable. In this context, the research will focus on the effect of the HIGG index on gaining the customers' confidence and the index's effectiveness in attracting more consumers, leading to better productivity and scope for long-term development.

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### ***Research Rationale***

Toprak & Anis (2017) pointed out that the apparel industry releases chemicals and high water and energy consumption, thereby degrading the environment. Consequently, the Quality Management System (ISO 9000), developed in 1987, has forced industrialists to reduce environmental destruction. It is necessary to remain environmentally sustainable in a present business context and follow ethical practices in business to attract consumers. New age customers rely on organizations that give back to society and take care of their environment. The HIGG index is the possible measure through which industries are responsible for making decisions regarding their use of raw materials that are environmentally viable. The apparel industry is responsible for the pollution from hazardous chemicals that pollute the environment. HIGG index certification attracts more customers. Conscious consumers will attach themselves to responsible organizations. Consumers have also become more aware of purchasing sustainable products and strengthened transparency in the production process to make a purchasing decision (Hur & Cassidy, 2019). In this regard, Luo *et al.* (2021) mentioned that the HIGG Index developed by Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) generally helps the textile and apparel industry maintain environmental protection standards, thereby increasing customers' confidence in sustainable shopping. Thus, the present research would explore the impact of the HIGG Index on attaining consumer confidence in the sustainable apparel industry.

### ***Research Aims***

The present study explores the impact of the HIGG Index on consumer confidence in the sustainable apparel industry.

### ***Research Question***

The research questions that to be answered by the research are:

- What are the sustainability issues created by the apparel industry in India?
- What is the usage of the HIGG Index to fulfill the sustainability standards in the apparel industry in India?
- What is the impact of the HIGG Index to gain customer confidence in the sustainable apparel industry?
- What is the recommendation for organizations to improve sustainability practices based on HIGG Index?

### ***Significance of the study***

The study is significant concerning present conditions where the competition in the market is tough, and the consumer requirements are changing reasonably. The new generation customers are more aware of the environmental issues and try to engage themselves with reliable

organizations in terms of ecological policies practiced in their manufacturing and selling process. Due to the increased pollution level, it has become necessary to remain focused on environmental safeguarding policies to gain consumer confidence. Using the HIGG index to measure environmental sustainability policies and attract consumers is relevant to research in the present context.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Concept of Sustainable Apparel industry***

In the view of Okur & Saricam (2019), the concept of sustainability in apparel is related to manufacturing, logistics, the motivation behind consumers' attitudes and behaviour regarding sustainable apparel consumption. According to Shen et al. (2017), implementing a sustainable supply chain in the textile and clothing industry has become a common practice which includes sustainable performance evaluation, sustainable investment, product strategy, corporate social responsibility, and environmental management system adoption. In the view of Baier, Rausch, and Wagner (2020), sustainable consumer behaviours are compelling organizations to become more ecologically and socially sustainable, and it has become significant in the clothing and footwear industry. Using recycling (returning used clothes), discounts on buying sustainable products, using bio-based materials, and using sustainability level indicators are attractive means of attaining sustainability. Tey, Brindal, and Dibba (2018) argued that consumers are ready to pay a high price for sustainable products and have a tangible value attached to the premium price.

### ***Sustainability Challenges created by the Apparel industry***

According to Holtström, Bjellerup, and Eriksson (2019), for sustainable development in the apparel industry, long-term growth in the business model is necessary where strategic changes in design, development, reuse, repair, and recycling are the primary aspects that need to be considered. Considerable challenges exist for attaining a sustainable business model related to technological issues and consumer preferences. In the view of Sun (2018), the luxury apparel industry faces challenges related to capitalism, and also luxury is an extravaganza that contradicts the concept of socially and economically responsible business. Fast fashion industries are producing mass products where overconsumption may be related to unbalanced sustainable measures, as stated by the author. Moreover, Koksal et al. (2017) speaks about sustainability challenges faced and created by the suppliers at the social level. Change in the apparel industry trends can make an issue in achieving sustainable development. In the view of Gardas, Raut, and Narkhede (2018), the lack of effective governmental policies and poor infrastructure is why India's Textile and Apparel industry is facing critical challenges in sustainable development.

### ***Overview of HIGG Index***

HIGG Index is a self-assessment tool used by retailers, manufacturers, and brands that empowers them to identify their performance regarding sustainable business concerning social

and environmental issues and locate areas where they can improve (Yudina,2017). According to Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC), no textile and footwear industry can produce products that cause unnecessary environmental damage, support communities, and add social value through a positive impact on consumers (Coalition,2018).

### ***Benefits of using the HIGG Index in the Apparel industry***

In the view of Yudina (2017), using the HIGG index help organizations to compare their activities with other organizations who follow similar assessment tools, which creates an area of improvement. Staying in a competitive environment will motivate the organizations to create transparency to attract more consumers. In the view of Lou & Cao (2018), the HIGG index issued by Sustainable Apparel Coalition is used to build a standardized performance measurement for apparel or footwear products. In the view of Blissick et al. (2017), designing a standardized method to measure sustainable practices in the apparel industry, the HIGG index was designed. In the view of Okur & Saricam (2019), consumers are more inclined towards buying sustainable products. Still, knowledge regarding environmental conditions and sustainable practices in business plays a crucial role in consumers' purchasing decisions in the case of apparel purchasing. According to Khare and Varshneya (2017), organic clothing purchase and green clothing knowledge influence environment-conscious Indian youth, and the HIGG index will help maintain the standards of environmental practices.

### ***Impact of HIGG Index on consumer confidence for purchasing decision***

According to Prakash & Pathak (2017), eco-friendly packaging is mainly supported by developing nations like India due to personal norms, environmental awareness, or willingness to pay. Having a HIGG index will help the apparel industry maintain its standards in producing environment-friendly products and implementing sustainable design and production strategies. In the view of Kautish, Paul & Sharma (2019), environmental consciousness and recycling intentions play a moderating effect in green purchase behaviour. It will impact buying apparel, and companies following environmental sustainability norms will be more approachable to the population. The HIGG Index will positively impact business where maintaining standards will be more accessible, and companies can support the cause of environmental and social sustainability. Kumar, Prakash, and Kumar (2021) argued about growing environmental consciousness in the Indian population and approaching environmentally sustainable fashion. In the view of Taufique and Vaithianathan (2018), ecologically conscious consumer behaviour is prevalent among urban Indian youth, and it will impact the buying decisions in the Apparel industry.

### ***Research Objectives***

The research objectives are:

- To explore the sustainability issues created by the apparel industry in India

- To critically assess the use of HIGG Index for fulfilling sustainability standards in the apparel industry in India
- To analyze the impact of the HIGG Index on gaining consumer confidence in the sustainable apparel industry in India
- To offer suitable recommendations to organizations for improving sustainability practices based on HIGG Index

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Research Philosophy***

Saunders et al. (2015) pointed out that research philosophy is a system of beliefs and assumptions regarding knowledge development. The three types of research philosophies are positivism, interpretivism, and realism, which influence decision-making. Here, the researcher has opted for positivism philosophy. It is essential to analyze the impact of the HIGG index on increasing customers' confidence in purchasing products from the apparel industry based on facts to get unbiased results. The researcher has also framed research questions to analyze the data for gathering accurate knowledge. The researcher has rejected interpretivism as a mere interpretation of the research participants would not provide accurate data (Zefeiti *et al.*, 2015).

### ***Research Approach***

Research approaches are of two types, namely inductive and deductive. The deductive approach utilizes literature and theories that guide the researcher to gather data and test it. On the contrary, inductive is a bottom-up approach in which researchers collect data for developing new theory (Zefeiti *et al.*, 2015). Here, the researcher has opted for a deductive approach as literature review has helped the researcher formulate ideas on the usage of the HIGG Index and the concept that consumer behaviour depends on sustainability measures in the apparel industry. It helps to form the objectives based on which data is collected in the next chapter. The researcher has not opted for an inductive approach because the research cannot suggest a new theory at the end of the research.

### ***Data collection***

Jogulu and Pansiri (2011) have significantly emphasized choosing appropriate methods for fulfilling research objectives and goals. This can be done by selecting pertinent data that can help in addressing the research problem. Data can be gathered through quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative research helps in collecting data that can be presented statistically. It helps in better analyzing the relationship between variables. Qualitative research, on the other hand, helps to gather detailed and non-numerical data (Zefeiti & Mohamad, 2015). In this research, the researcher has opted for mixed methods in which both qualitative and quantitative data have been obtained. As pointed out by Creswell and Clark (2007), mixed helps in

comprehensive understanding by evaluating the relationship between Higg index (first variable) and consumer confidence (second variable) and also obtained clear perception on its benefits.

The researcher has opted for primary data to understand how the Higg index increases customers' confidence in purchasing clothes in India. As Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) mentioned, primary data is always updated, which improves the reliability and validity of the data. So, the researcher has gathered primary data.

### ***Research Strategy***

A research strategy is the action plan used for conducting the research, starting from executing, planning and monitoring. Since the researcher would gather primary data that would be quantitative and qualitative, the researcher has selected survey and interview. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) mentioned that survey is associated with a deductive approach and helps in structured observation. Here, the researcher has used a study to obtain an in-depth understanding of the impact of the HIGG index on gaining customers' confidence in the apparel industry. So, a questionnaire incorporating 10 questions has been created. Further, an interview has been carried out to analyze the research subject and enhance the validity of the data gathered through a survey.

### ***Sample population***

The random sampling process is used to select an individual that is equal for all (Sharma, 2017). It gives a generalized unbiased result. A group of 450 customers and four 4 senior employees from the Apparel industry are taken in the sample.

### ***Data Analysis***

The responses of the survey have been analyzed with graphs and charts. The responses of the interview have been studied through thematic analysis.

### ***Ethical consideration***

It is foremost vital regarding research work that focuses on the safety and security of respondents' personal information. A high possibility is privileged that the outcome of a study impacts negatively on the personal life. Hence, the researcher must comply with the data protection acts' norms to safeguard people's life from the outcome of the study. The researcher ensures that the result can only be accessible by the respondents and the researcher. The data is securely kept in a pen drive with proper encryption.

## **Qualitative Data**

### ***Thematic analysis of qualitative data***

### ***Sustainability practices in an organization***

Korkmaz (2019) stated that increasing awareness regarding animal rights and protecting endangered species had reduced the demand for leather jackets or shoes made from animal skin.

During his interview, one of the top-level employees mentioned that they are against the use of animal skin as it is against laws and cruel (*Referred to the Appendix*). In Desore and Narula's (2018) view, the textile industry is responsible for a large amount of environmental pollution, starting from fibre production to fabric finishing. Also, de Oliveira Neto et al. (2017) argued that cleaner production would reduce the use of raw materials that may lead to sustainable practices in textile industries. From the senior executive officer of the famous apparel industry, the interview results show that they are practicing cleaner productions in their company (*Referred to the Appendix*).

### ***Consumer inclination towards environment-friendly products***

Moreover, Rahman, Fung, and Kharb (2021) argued that consumers are inclined towards sustainable practices where less water usage, less energy usage, air quality, worker safety, and no use of animal skin are considered metrics that influence buying behaviours. Awareness among consumers is mentioned by the qualitative research when the manager of a reputed apparel industry spoke about the effect of increasing awareness in the youth population is catching their attention (*Referred to the Appendix*). According to Yang & Dong (2017), a balance is necessary for cost and sustainable product manufacturing organizations. More awareness will result in higher profits for sustainable products in the apparel industry. Ozek (2017) suggests that the availability of relevant information will increase fashion consumer awareness about sustainable buying, and they must focus on consumers for sustainable supply.

### ***Ethical buying and use of animal skin in apparel industries***

According to Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2020), ethical buying and luxury purchase are contradictory. Still, the millennials are more concerned than older generations and trying to find alternatives for the future sustainability of luxury products. The reply from the interview also speaks about the same kind of interest among the youth (*Referred to the Appendix*). According to Lockwood (2018), animal cruelty laws are inadequate while animal hoarding cases are concerned, and the action takes place when serious harm is caused to animals and people. In view of Sivaram & Barik (2019), leather industries produce toxic solid waste materials, of which 15 to 20 percent is due to the use of animal skin as raw materials.

## **Interpretation**

From the above data and empirical evidence collected from existing literature, it can be said that sustainability concerning the environment and society is the predominant factor for attracting consumers. According to Koksai et al. (2017), challenges are faced by several organizations to maintain sustainable practices due to social issues and changing trends of consumers. For increased brand value and consumer retention, sustainable practices like green consumption, eco-friendly measures, and recycling are some of the significant ways through which textile industries can remain ethically and socially dependable. Luo *et al.* (2021) argued that the HIGG index is a

measure through which textile industries can improve their performance, and the consumers will feel more confident in buying the products. According to the HIGG index designed by SAC, it can be said that it serves as a self-assessment tool for organizations that helps them in better understanding and developing their policies for long-term development. In the view of Todeschini et al. (2017), there is rising awareness about social sustainability among fashion consumers. In this regard, it is necessary to mention that consumers are increasingly becoming aware of the practices and their necessity to remain practical and relevant for the consumers. The research evidence shows that consumers and specifically the youth population are more aware of environmental practices as they are against harmful practices towards animals or be it us of non-renewable substances. Kumar, Prakash & Kumar (2021) states that awareness about sustainable environmental practices is growing among Indian youth. The growing awareness of the citizens forces organizations to follow the social and ethical approach in business, and the consumers are even ready to pay more for sustainable products.

On the other hand, it is observed that an adequate size of the population is aware of environmental issues, but some are still not aware of the practices. The cultural background, information, and price play a vital role in consumer purchasing decisions. For making sustainable growth, creating more awareness is necessary. Yudina (2017) speaks about the advantages of HIGG and its drawbacks as the detailed data is not revealed to the public. The reason for the score and the issues are not known to consumers, which hampers transparency. The challenges observed in the usage of the HIGG index is that the data is not revealed to the public, and they are not aware of the issues that are affecting the environment. Only a score is not enough predictor of measures taken by an organization in sustainable development for better understanding and renewable usage of resources. Transparency from the organizational side will have a more significant impact on consumer buying decisions.

In the view of Sun (2018), luxury apparel is facing challenges where social responsibility contradicts the concept of extravaganza in buying luxury clothes. The concept of the fashion industry has to contradict thoughts with sustainability where extravaganza is the main criteria, whereas sustainability is related to a controlled approach. In fast fashion, huge consumption volumes are sometimes compelling organizations to move out from sustainable practices. But the issues can be addressed when consumption rates can be controlled and the recycling of products is encouraged. Moreover, Prakash & Pathak (2017) suggested that eco-friendly packaging is growing in popularity among youth in India. In the present business, packaging also plays a vital issue, and consumers prefer less use of plastic when goods are considered. Also, apparel must be free from harmful chemicals as they are against environmental practices. From the different perspectives, it can be said that the changing trend in consumer behaviour and the condition of the environment is the leading cause why organizations need to be more aware of their operations. The footwear sector uses animal products where leather is the prime raw material, and the use of animal skin for fancy wardrobe is still considered fashionable. In view, Baier,



Rausch & Wagner (2020) argues that change in consumer behaviour and growing awareness are compelling organizations to become socially and ethically more sustainable. But the mindset is changing, and people are progressing, so are the industries where sustainability is an essential organizational practice and not a choice.

## **Conclusion**

From the above research, it can be concluded that the growing demand for sustainable business practices from consumers is creating the necessity for organizations to remain ethically and socially as well as environmentally sustainable. In the case of sustainability practices by the organizations, the HIGG index plays a crucial role where they can utilize the inputs from other organizations and re-assess their practices and policies in the organization. HIGG index serves as a self-assessment tool that motivates industries to improve their organizational culture in sustainable development. Transparency from the organization side will influence more buyers to involve themselves in purchasing from that particular company to a greater extent.

## **Recommendation**

The recommendations that can be made for the organizational purpose are as follows:

- Design and implement policies that are reliable enough to support environmental practices in an organization.
- Say no to hazardous chemicals and renewable energy sources in apparel industries affecting the ecological balance.
- Offer more information regarding sustainable environmental practices to consumers and involve them in the process of long-term development.
- Evaluate the HIGG index factors and try to improve on areas that are creating issues for sustainable development
- Use the customer feedback as a predictor of future goals and improvise on the strategies and use of technology for sustainable development.

## ***Research Limitation***

The research is conducted by considering only the apparel sector and its consumers, where the sample size is only 450. Quantitative data for primary research will give a generalized approach, but increasing the sample size can yield better results from a limited number of research participants. Also, the secondary data collection process can help in dealing with budget and operational logistics.

## ***Future scope of the study***

The research will help the apparel industry to identify consumer reactions and their demands

concerning sustainability practices. It will help them in analyzing the role of the HIGG index and its effectiveness in gaining customer confidence for the textile and footwear business.

### ***Annexure***

#### **Interview 1**

##### **1. What are the methods used in your company for sustainable development?**

We use recycling, an eco-friendly approach for sustainable development and long-term growth.

##### **2. Do you think the HIGG index has a positive impact on customer retention and gaining confidence?**

Yes, I think so because it motivates us to maintain our standards and inspire conscious customers to buy our products.

##### **3. Do you think that consumers are more inclined towards organizations that are environmentally and socially sustainable?**

The younger generation is aware of environmental hazards and expects transparency from organizations in this regard.

##### **4. What are your views regarding the use of animal products in footwear and clothes?**

We do not sell such products and have rules against such use.

#### **Interview 2**

##### **1. What are the methods used in your company for sustainable development?**

Green revolution and carbon-free environment are the ways of sustainability measurement in our organization to overcome pollution caused by textile industries.

##### **2. Do you think the HIGG index has a positive impact on customer retention and gaining confidence?**

HIGG index helps in developing a standard way of sustainable development.

##### **3. Do you think that consumers are more inclined towards organizations that are environmentally and socially sustainable?**

The population is aware of environmental hazards, but more knowledge is necessary as per my view.

##### **4. What are your views regarding the use of animal products in footwear and clothes?**

Fashion industries are somewhere not following the norms despite government policies. It should be dealt with strict laws.

#### **Interview 3**

**1. What are the methods used in your company for sustainable development?**

We prefer less use of chemicals and eco-friendly measures of packaging.

**2. Do you think the HIGG index has a positive impact on customer retention and gaining confidence?**

Yes, it is good, but consumers are not aware of these practices, and the index does not reveal any data to the public.

**3. Do you think that consumers are more inclined towards organizations that are environmentally and socially sustainable?**

Consciousness is increasing, and competition as well where consumers will move towards more ethical companies.

**4. What are your views regarding the use of animal products in footwear and clothes?**

I think it is very unethical and we never use this in our company.

**Interview 4**

**1. What are the methods used in your company for sustainable development?**

Reducing the use of plastic, non-renewable energy, hazardous chemicals and make cleaner production.

**2. Do you think the HIGG index has a positive impact on customer retention and gaining confidence?**

It has helped in collaborating with other organizations and know about their self-assessment tools.

**3. Do you think that consumers are more inclined towards organizations that are environmentally and socially sustainable?**

Consumers are inclined towards environment-friendly products.

**4. What are your views regarding the use of animal products in footwear and clothes?**

It is cruel, and we have strict laws against such criminal activities.

**Appendix 1: Interview**

**Interview 1**

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Yes, it is good, but consumers are not aware of these practices, and the index does not reveal any data to the public.

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Consciousness is increasing, and competition as well where consumers will move towards more ethical companies.

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I think it is very unethical and we never use this in our company.

**Interview 4**

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Reducing the use of plastic, non –renewable energy, hazardous chemicals and make cleaner production.

**2. Do you think the HIGG index has a positive impact on customer retention and gaining confidence?**

It has helped in collaborating with other organizations and know about their self-assessment tools.

**3. Do you think that consumers are more inclined towards organizations that are environmentally and socially sustainable?**

Consumers are inclined towards environment-friendly products.

**4. What are your views regarding the use of animal products in footwear and clothes?**

It is cruel, and we have strict laws against such criminal activities.

**Appendix 2**

**Survey questions**

**1. What are essential features that affect buying decision of apparels?**

<i>Options</i>	<i>Count of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Total number of respondents</i>
Fibre-composition	100	22	450
Handmade	250	55	450
Price	50	11	450
Trade-policy	50	11	450

**2. How often do you check how and where the apparels are made?**

Options	Count of respondents	Percentage	Total number of respondents
Never	50	11	450
Rarely	50	11	450
Sometimes	100	22	450
Frequently	200	44	450
Always	50	11	450

**3. Do you pay attention to the HIGG index and scores?**

Options	Count of respondents	Percentage	Total number of respondents
Yes	350	77.77	450
No	100	22.22	450

**4. Are you willing to pay more in companies where the HIGG index is higher?**

Options	Count of respondents	Percentage	Total number of respondents
Yes	250	55.55	450
No	200	44.44	450

**5. Does sustainable environmental practices of business matters when buying clothes and footwear?**

Options	Count of respondents	Percentage	Total number of respondents
Yes	300	66.66	450
No	150	33.33	450

**6. If interested to pay more, what percentage more are you willing to pay?**

Increase in percentage of the price	Count of respondents	Percentage	Total number of respondents
10	200	44.44	450
20	150	33.33	450
40	50	11.11	450

### 7. Are you aware of the environmental hazards taking place due to the Apparel industry specifically?

Options	Count of respondents	Percentage	Total number of respondents
Yes	200	44.44	450
No	250	55.55	450

### 8. What are the convenient ways of handling environmental sustainability in the Apparel industry?

Methods of sustainable development	Count of respondents	Percentage	Total number of respondents
Recycle	200	44.44	450
Limited usage	100	55.55	450
Eco-friendly packaging	100	22.22	450
Using absorbents	50	11.11	450

### 9. What are the challenges for sustainable development?

Challenges	Count of respondents	Percentage	Total number of respondents
Lack of governmental policies	50	11.11	450
Technology	200	44.44	450
Overconsumption	100	22.22	450
Budget	100	22.22	450

### 10. What is your opinion about the credibility of the HIGG index?

Options	Count of respondents	Percentage	Total number of respondents
Poor	50	11.11	450
Not so good	50	11.11	450
Good	100	22.22	450
Very good	200	44.44	450

Excellent

50

11.11

450

### Interview Questionnaire

1. What are the methods used in your company for sustainable development?
2. Do you think the HIGG index has a positive impact on customer retention and gaining confidence?
3. Do you think that consumers are more inclined towards organizations that are environmentally and socially sustainable?
4. What are your views regarding the use of animal products in footwear and clothes?



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