

## A SUSTAINABLE STRATEGY FRAMEWORK FOR INDEPENDENT FASHION DESIGNER BRANDS

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**Abstract.** This study is to contribute to how independent designer fashion brands can promote sustainable design to support environmental sustainability and the circular economy and in doing so define sustainable strategies. The aim is to understand how design leaders and other team members of independent fashion designer brands understand the concept of sustainable fashion, how they recognize sustainable fashion ideals within circular economy practices, what opportunities and challenges they encounter and how they respond to them in the process. Through in-depth interviews with 15 experts working in independent fashion designer brands, this study will provide theoretical input into the field of independent fashion designer brands by revealing how independent fashion designers balance creativity, business and sustainability in small-scale operations. The study analyses independent fashion designers' perceptions of sustainability and proposes an actionable strategic framework to help small-scale brands position themselves in the sustainable economy.

**Keywords:** *Independent designer, fashion brands, sustainable strategies, designers' perceptions.*

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### 1. Introduction

The fashion industry has recently been recognized for its wide and far-reaching impact on social and environmental issues (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020). Global clothing consumption has increased to 6,200 tonnes per year and is expected to reach 102 million tonnes in 2023 (GFA & BCG, 2017). Textiles are harmful to all aspects of production due to the use of water, materials, chemicals and energy in the manufacturing process, which contain many chemicals (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020). In addition, due to the fashion industry's heavy use of water, untreated wastewater from the manufacturing process that flows into groundwater and the large amount of carbon dioxide that is produced which damages the ecosystem (UNEP, 2023), the fashion industry's carbon emissions will increase by 50 per cent by 2030 if no action is taken (GFA & BCG, 2023). Therefore, for the fashion industry to reduce the damage to the environment and ecosystems, it is mentioned in the report (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017) that the sustainability of the fashion industry can be developed through design innovations, material recycling and changes in the business model, which will lead to a circular economy.

In recent years, the fashion industry has faced a critical turning point, with fashion cycles showing an accelerated trend and fast fashion and ultra-fast fashion models dominating the market. However, this business model, which is based on mass production and rapid obsolescence, has revealed its unsustainable nature under the

realities of increasingly depleted natural resources (Steffen *et al.*, 2015). In stark contrast, small businesses such as independent fashion designer brands can effectively avoid overproduction and over-consumption through scale control and their business philosophy and product characteristics reflect a positive pursuit of social equity and inclusiveness (Charter *et al.*, 2024). In China, independent fashion designer brands are led by the designers themselves in terms of design style and business direction, with independent and innovative design styles as the spirit of design and their positioning is not a mass consumer group, through the positioning of the group of diversified and personalised consumer needs for the brand to add additional innovative value (Qiao, 2015). Therefore, the essence of independent fashion designer brands is reflected in uniqueness and authenticity. Firstly, it exists as an authentic and unique form of creation that directly reflects the designer's aesthetics and will to innovate. Secondly, it is a method of production that often results in superior craftsmanship in clothing and accessories. The study points out that the practitioners of such mono-brands are usually both designers and managers, with a particular focus on maintaining artistic ownership and financial autonomy, a duality that cannot be replicated in the system of large-scale corporate operations (Tuite, 2019).

Fletcher (2014) proposes two models: first is a 'technological improvement' model, in which existing products and processes are optimized to alleviate the industry's environmental problems; secondly is a 'system reconstruction' model, which emphasizes deeper changes in all aspects of the brand's operations, from the design philosophy to the entire brand operation. The other is the 'system reconstruction' model, which emphasizes deep changes from design philosophy to all aspects of brand operation, including comprehensive innovation in design thinking, business model and cultural behaviour, which provides the basis for this study to explore how independent fashion designer brands can promote circular economy through sustainable design. In addition, sustainable strategies still face many challenges due to small scale and limited resources. Firstly, the core competitiveness of independent fashion designer brands lies in creativity and sustainable design should become the core concept of the brands. Fletcher (2014) suggests that sustainable fashion design should follow the principle of 'slow fashion', which emphasises the quality, durability and recyclability of the materials and products, rather than the rapid updating and iteration, such as the use of design methods such as detachable, deconstructed or zero-waste tailoring techniques (Fletcher, 2008), to achieve the goal of sustainable design. The design of sustainable fashion is based on the principle of 'slow fashion', which emphasises the quality, durability and recyclability of materials and products, rather than their rapid renewal, for example by adopting design methods such as detachable, deconstructed or zero-waste tailoring techniques (Fletcher, 2008), to minimise waste in the design process. Secondly, as independent fashion designer brands cannot usually manage large-scale supply chains, localised production can be an essential strategy for brands to reduce their carbon emissions by experimenting with small batch, localised production methods to reduce transport emissions and increase transparency in the supply chain (Akter *et al.*, 2020). Finally, brands can enhance their connection with consumers through transparency in communication, e.g. brand backstories, such as showcasing sustainable material sources, production processes and recycling programmes, can be used to enhance the brand narrative and increase the awareness of sustainability between consumers and the brand (Joy *et al.*, 2012).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. *Circular economy concept in fashion*

The Apparel Sector Transformation Programme (WRAP, 2016), launched in Europe in 2016, proposes a systematic strategy for the development of a circular economy centred on the promotion of a holistic transformation of the industry's ecology through the six pillars of product life cycle extension, technological innovation drive, business model innovation, application of renewable materials, waste minimization and raw material substitution. Research has shown that the sustainability of the textile and fashion industry is greatly enhanced when environmentally friendly measures are systematically implemented by companies at all stages of the apparel supply chain (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). About 95 per cent of the textile waste currently disposed of is recyclable value. This under-utilized resource is showing its commercial potential as the public becomes more environmentally aware (WRAP, 2022) and an increasing number of fashion companies have recognized that circular economy concepts can both reduce their environmental footprint and create new profit growth (Moorhouse & Moorhouse, 2017).

### 2.2. *Role and challenges among independent fashion designer brands*

In the contemporary fashion ecosystem, while large corporations (McKinsey & Company, 2023) still dominate the market landscape, smaller, independent designer labels stand out in terms of their sustainable practices. These micro- and small designer-led businesses are pioneering the design, production and consumption patterns of sustainable apparel through innovative practices (Fletcher & Grose, 2012), which, according to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2023), contribute to 23 per cent of sustainable material innovations despite representing only 8 per cent of the industry. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2023), these firms contribute 23% of sustainable material innovations, although they represent only 8% of the industry's size. In addition, according to the British Fashion Council (BFC) (2018), the designer fashion industry is dominated by micro and small businesses, which are widely recognized for their innovation and industry impact. Research has shown that designer-led micro business companies are building business development pathways different from conventional models, providing an essential frame of reference for the whole industry's transition to sustainability (Eckert *et al.*, 2022).

Compared to large brands, independent fashion designer brands demonstrate a multi-dimensional system of capabilities: the ability to respond to change, to explore, to adapt, to seize opportunities and to take risks, as well as the ability to network, to communicate to multiple audiences, to build teams and to manage relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. The competitive advantage of independent fashion designer brands stems largely from their unique agility, which is manifested in many ways: the ability to adapt quickly to market changes, lean and flexible organizational structures, autonomous and controlled production facilities and deep collaboration with supply chain partners. Together, these attributes enhance a brand's resilience in a crisis, enabling it adapt its strategy and maintain stable production to adjust its strategy and maintain stable production (Charter *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, this agility not only enhances supply chain resilience, but also drives innovation. Due to the high degree of synergy between design, pattern making and production, independent brands can realize

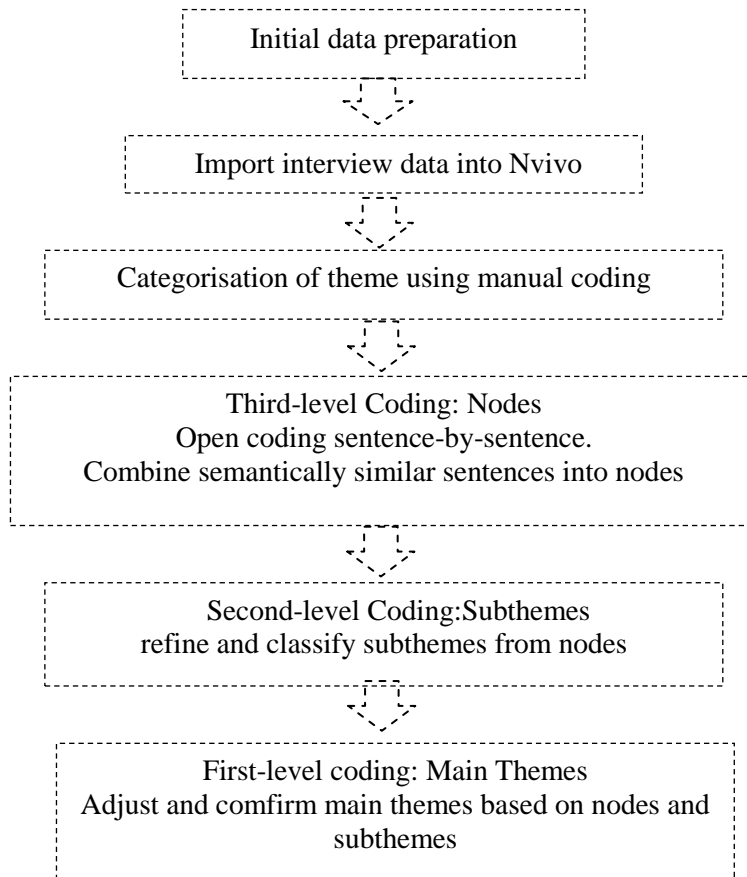
a relatively ‘fast design-fast prototype-fast production’ process, thus increasing their competitiveness in the market. Research has shown that small-scale, highly flexible production models perform particularly well during epidemics, with many independent brands being able to quickly switch to epidemic-proofing, whereas larger companies relying on globalized supply chains face greater challenges (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Fletcher, 2022). In addition, it has been shown that, in the case of handmade and small-scale production, designers have gained a wealth of direct experience through craft-orientated creations (e.g. hand-printing, sample making) in their studios. At the same time, their close co-operation with small local workshops and micro-factories enables them to flexibly adapt their production processes (Charter *et al.*, 2024).

In independent fashion designer brands, designers are often multi-taskers, shaping the creative soul of the brand as well as being the core decision makers of the business operations. This dual role makes it necessary for designers to possess both artistic creativity and business management skills and to coordinate brand strategy, production management and marketing operations while grasping the aesthetics of design (Karra, 2008; Mills, 2011; Ott, 2012). Independent fashion designer brands play a vital role in promoting the sustainable development of the fashion industry, but due to their size, they also face many challenges in terms of capital, supply chain and technology. The ‘entrepreneurs’ independent designer labels see small fashion companies and more minor production scales as promising alternatives to the transition from fast fashion to more sustainable fashion. At the same time, however, they to realize the limitations that sustainable professions bring to fashion practice (Murzyn-Kupisz *et al.*, 2023). Familiar challenges in developing independent fashion designer brands include: 1) financial constraints: the prohibitive cost of sustainable materials and production, 2) supply chain challenges: the limitations of establishing a stable and ethical supply network and 3) barriers to digitization and innovative production methods. Studies have shown that independent fashion designer brands often have limited capital and have high costs for taking on sustainable materials and production methods, for example, eco-friendly materials such as organic cotton, recycled polyester and bio-based fabrics can be 30-50% more expensive compared to traditional synthetic fibre (Textile Exchange, 2022). Secondly, independent brands often rely on small suppliers or local factories to collaborate with them, but some of these partners may lack of the capacity for sustainable production; for example, many small processors are unable to provide traceable organic cotton or low-pollution dyeing and finishing techniques, resulting in brands being limited in terms of supply chain transparency (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). As a result, sustainable fashion involves not only material choices, but also technological innovations such as 3D design, zero-waste tailoring and recycling systems. Hence, the ability of independent brands to have sufficient funds to invest in advanced technologies is also something to consider (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

### 3. Method

Depending on the stage of growth and development, independent fashion designer brands have unique characteristics and different challenges (Karra, 2008). This study adopted a qualitative method with 15 independent fashion designer brands, such as brand managers, designers and sellers. These interviews were conducted both online and face-to-face in Beijing, China, between July 2024 and April 2025, to investigate the

participants' visions, values, capabilities and business models regarding sustainable fashion. This research was analysed more accurately through a qualitative approach, which transcribed and analysed data using NVivo 14 software and nodes were created. As shown in Figure 1 (Chen *et al.*, 2025), the data were manually coded at three levels to identify the interview data content.



**Figure 1.** Data analysis process flowchart  
**Source:** Chen *et al.* (2025)

In order to ensure the rigor of the study, the process strictly enforces the following norms: audio-recorded interviews after obtaining informed consent; systematic processing of the data and establishment of a representative node system using NVivo 14; classification of nodes based on the core questions and finally a comprehensive analysis of node correlations and potential patterns. This standardized process takes into account the authenticity of the original data and the systematic nature of the analysis and ensures the traceability of the study.

#### 4. Results

Based on the results of the interviews, the design leaders and other team members of the independent fashion designer brands were asked about their understanding of the concept of sustainable fashion, sustainable practices and what challenges they encountered in the process. The study results will be used to derive a new framework

for sustainable strategies for independent fashion designer brands. Table 1 shows the demographics of the Interviewees.

**Table 1.** Demographics of interviewees

No.	Expertise area	Years of experience
I1	Fashion designer	Over 12 years of design experience
I2	Fashion designer	Over 10 years of design experience
I3	Fashion designer	Over 10 years of design experience
I4	Fashion brand manager	Over 15 years of design and management experience
I5	Fashion brand manager and fashion designer	Over 15 years of design and management experience
I6	Fashion designer	10 years of design experience
I7	Fashion designer	Over 12 years of design experience
I8	Fashion brand manager and seller	Over 10 years of management experience
I9	Fashion brand manager	Over 10 years of management experience
I10	Fashion brand manager and seller	Over 12 years of management experience
I11	Fashion designer	10 years of design experience
I12	Fashion brand manager and seller	Over 15 years of management experience
I13	Fashion brand manager and fashion designer	8 years of design and management experience
I14	Fashion brand manager and seller	Over 10 years of management experience
I15	Fashion brand manager	18 years of management experience

**Table 2.** Construction of brand sustainability concepts

<b>Construction of sustainable concepts and brand position</b>	<b>The link between brand narratives and sustainable values</b>	Most brands have put forward the theory of ‘sustainable brand identity, i.e., an emotional connection that increases consumer loyalty to eco-friendly products and makes sustainability a central part of the brand story. Two interviewees (I1&I3) said, <i>‘The brand believes that fashion is not a fast fashion product, rather a good piece of clothing can become a collector’s item and then a mirror of your life. In different situations and states of life, one would choose different clothes to express oneself’</i> .
	<b>Classic Design and Slow Fashion</b>	According to interview reposes that <i>‘The brand is based on a minimalist and light retro style, with a preference for basic grey and white colours, as well as low saturation colours and some rich variations in line structure’</i> . In addition, they stated that <i>‘Our brand believes that fashion is a part of everyone’s life and that one is main purposes of fashion to optimise and demonstrate the ability to shape expression and to build a good relationship between people’s lives and their social environment. We believe that fashion is a part of everyone’s life. On this basis and at the same time the pursuit of useful design, including the appearance of the shape in line with the human body movement and comfort needs. Of course, we also pay attention to the environmental protection of raw materials and wear life, that is, the life cycle of wearing apparel’</i> . On the other side, some of them agreed that <i>“at the same time, this ‘slow fashion’ mode, although reducing the consumption of resources, also faces the challenge of the market demand for ‘freshness’”</i> .

	<p><b>Sources of inspiration and cultural value orientation</b></p>	<p>According to the interviewees, some designers draw inspiration from nature or traditional culture, by using plant dyes or non-heritage crafts. This practice not only reduces the reliance on synthetic materials but also gives the product cultural sustainability.</p>
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As shown in Table 2, independent fashion designer brands demonstrate brand integration through values when constructing the concept of sustainability and these brands commonly adopt the theory of sustainable brand identity, which integrates the idea of sustainability and environmental protection with the brand context. This integration of sustainability and cultural values creates a unique brand differentiation, as can be seen in the results in Table 2.

**Table 3.** Design process

<p><b>Design Process: Techniques and Materials</b></p>	<p><b>Material innovation and recycling</b></p>	<p>The result shows that 95 per cent of respondents believe in the importance of material innovation and recycling for a brand's sustainability. 'In the link of production, the brand will also give priority to materials that can be reused and recycled, for example, based on the I2 and I11 reposes that <i>'precious metal after the production, if there is a waste material produced, then it can also be recycled, because the metal it is like a chain of business like this, by recycling the material and then re-processing'</i>. In addition, 'in the design and production process, fabric selection will be preferred to organic cotton, recycled polyester, Tencel and other environmentally friendly materials, to reduce pollution and waste to the environment. In addition, they agreed that <i>"In the production process, the brand also has its kind of environmentally certified factories to control water consumption and reduce the use of hazardous chemicals to improve energy efficiency"</i>.</p>
	<p><b>Digital technology applications</b></p>	<p>Some brands have significantly reduced the waste of physical samples through 3D modelling and virtual samples. According to respondents <i>"using software like CLO and 3D modelling can help to save a lot of energy consumption, such as the sample above the loss of fabric and then there is every time to adjust the sample will cause a lot of waste, because people who do apparel know that the sample is basically unlikely to be shaped at one time, so in the process of repeated debugging will produce a lot of waste, so if you use this digital form to show it, you can avoid this problem"</i>. In addition, there are also respondents believe that: <i>'3D modelling process, it is to a large extent is actually narrowed to the uncertainty of the design, in for the traditional design involves the jewellery design of the raw and production, thus reducing some of the uncertainty, then in this design process it can be done in a sustainable development'</i>.</p>
	<p><b>Zero-waste tailoring and versatile design</b></p>	<p>According to the interviewee: <i>'In the design process through deconstructionism, such as asymmetrical cutting or industrial sense of pleating and the use of three-dimensional cutting and CAD like platemaking combination of traditional artisanal art and digital collision. It also uses a combination of three-dimensional tailoring and computerised patternmaking to cut complex pleats using a zero-waste algorithm'</i>.</p>

As Table 3 shows, independent fashion designer brands demonstrate significant technological innovation in the design process, with 95% of respondents believing that

material innovation and recycling are essential to brand sustainability. At the same time, the cost pressures associated with small batch production models have made it challenging for brands to adopt environmentally friendly materials and technologies, reflecting the tension between ideals and practice.

Table 4 shows that supply chain management for independent fashion designer brands is characterised by transparency and localisation. Most brands want to build trust between consumers and brands by disclosing data on fabric sourcing and production carbon emissions. In addition, while localised production has become an important strategy to reduce carbon footprints, small batch production also creates difficulties for brands in terms of limited sourcing scale as well as material selection and bargaining power, making it difficult for them to access the same sustainable resources as large corporations. These reflect the structural challenges that independent brands need to face to drive systemic change.

**Table 4.** Brand supply chain and location management

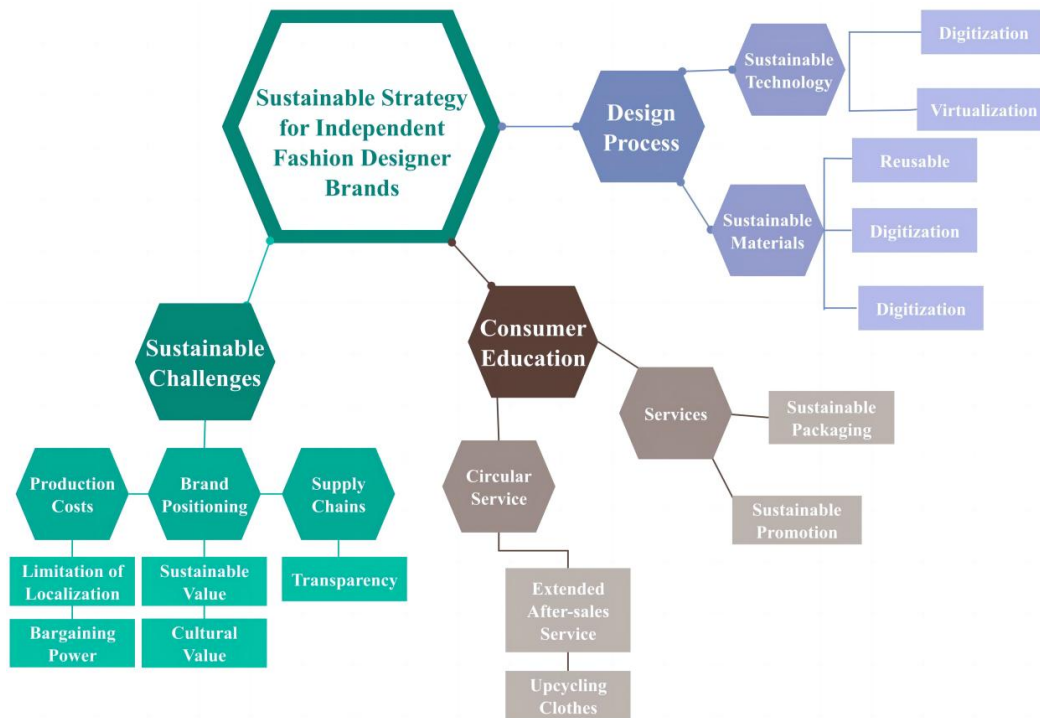
<b>Supply Chains: Transparency, Localisation and the Small Volume Dilemma</b>	<b>Transparency in the supply chain</b>	Some brands believe that “ <i>they should disclose data on the origin of fabrics and carbon emissions from production</i> ”. Respondents believe that “ <i>the supply chain should be transparent and shared with customers, including where the fabrics are made, which process is open to the consumer and what the cotton is made of, whether it is recycled cotton and which units contain eco-labels and qualifications</i> ”. In addition, “ <i>the brand also cares as much as possible about the environmental attributes of the product, such as whether the product uses chemicals, pesticides and synthetics, as well as how much carbon dioxide is consumed in the manufacturing process of the product and whether the consumption is below industry standards</i> ”.
	<b>Advantages and limitations of localised production</b>	Some of these brands see local collaboration to reduce transport carbon emissions. I8 and I9 reposes that “ <i>One aspect that can reflect sustainability can be in localisation, as a local independent designer brand in China, by choosing some local factories to reduce the carbon dioxide that may be emitted through transportation on the way back and forth as well as controlling the cost, etc</i> ”.
	<b>Bargaining power for small batch production</b>	Independent fashion designer brands also face the challenge of bargaining for smaller quantities. I15 stated that “ <i>some large-scale fashion groups have more choice in choosing sustainable materials, but for designer brands, the cost of the product is higher, so they can only use the best or most environmentally friendly materials within their means</i> ”.

**Table 5.** Sustainability and consumer education

<b>Consumer education and circular model innovation</b>	<b>Sustainable Packaging and Marketing</b>	Some brands enhance their eco-friendly image through sustainable means such as 100% recycled pulp packaging and plant-able hang tags made from flower seeds. I9 and I11 reposes that “ <i>although the brands are not very big, they still do what they can to make their customers more aware of sustainability in fashion by promoting the brand to reuse clothes or recycle clothes that customers do not want</i> ”. Most of them agreed that “ <i>sometimes when the sustainability of the brand will also be publicised through the promotion of the way to do some shows or some promotional things, usually there will be some left over in the production process of the fabric or rag head and other materials, through the use of these rags to re-do a new product to be placed on the brand to promote the use of the time, it is just a prop, but it also reflects our brand of the sustainable spirit. It is just a prop, but it also reflects the sustainable spirit of our brand</i> ”.
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	<b>Circular service concept</b>	According to the respondents, 'Brands try to extend their after-sales service for customers, such as helping to modify products that don't fit properly or are worn out and also helping to redesign old clothes and clothes that customers don't want to wear, in order to increase the life of the product by making their clothes last longer.'
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Table 5 shows that in terms of consumer interaction, independent fashion designer brands are promoting sustainability awareness through a variety of innovative ways, which are designed in small but effective ways to strengthen the brand image. These practices also prove that a truly sustainable transition requires not only product innovation, but also a fundamental change in consumer culture.



**Figure 2.** A proposed sustainable strategy framework for independent fashion designer brands

Based on the in-depth data analysis of 15 interview sessions, a systematic sustainability strategy framework (Figure 2) was constructed, which consists of five key dimensions: brand positioning and values, design technology innovation, supply chain optimisation, consumer interaction and systemic challenges. This framework reveals the multi-dimensional nature of sustainable practices, with brand position determining design direction, technological innovation empowering the supply chain and consumer education closing the loop. Future breakthroughs lie in digital innovation to reduce production costs, build resilient supply chain networks and transform cultural values into sustainable values.

## 5. Discussion

This study explores how independent fashion designer brands build a sustainable strategic framework and analyze their practical paths and challenges in the dimensions of brand positioning, design innovation, supply chain management and consumer

education. By revealing the sustainable development model of small-scale fashion enterprises, the study provides sustainable transformation solutions for the fashion industry. Interview results showed that some independent fashion designer brands build sustainable value identities through the brand's backstory and integrate sustainable values into the product life cycle, which is following finding of Joy et al. (2012). The link between brand positioning and sustainable values is emphasized in the strategy framework for independent fashion designer brands. This strategy is in line with Fletcher's (2014) idea of 'slow fashion', which is to enhance consumer loyalty through emotional connection. At the same time, brands also need to balance artistic viability with commerciality, as shown in the interview results, where brands extend the product lifecycle through vintage simplicity, black and white, grey and low saturation colour palettes and variations of details on simple silhouettes. Rather than adopting a rapid iterative approach, brands respond to the market's pressure for 'freshness' is through product design innovations, such as seasonal prints. In addition, based on the interview results, some designers compensate for the potential lack of appeal of 'slow fashion' by drawing inspiration from nature or traditional culture, such as using plant dyeing or non-legacy crafts.

Independent design brands demonstrate innovation in terms of technological innovation and material recycling in the design process, a finding that is highly consistent with Jalil and Shaharuddin (2020a). According to the results, in terms of material selection, designers prefer organic cotton, recycled polyester, tencel and other eco-friendly materials to reduce pollution and waste to the environment and use recyclable materials for metal fittings as much as possible, which shows that the brands attach importance to sustainable design and take responsibility for environmental protection. However, it also reflects a difficulty faced by independent fashion designer brands, as small batch production can lead to high procurement costs for environmentally friendly materials, making it challenging for brands to find a balance between innovative design and actual expenses. In terms of technological innovation, 3D modelling technology has significantly reduced the waste of physical samples, making the design adjustment process more environmentally friendly and efficient which the finding agrees well with Jalil and Shaharuddin (2019a). According to interviewees, using CAD technology to produce samples reduces fabric wastage and improves design certainty, thus reducing the error rate in the design process and these approaches reduce resource consumption at source. In addition, the concept of 'zero-waste tailoring' is put into practice in tailoring techniques, where three-dimensional tailoring, computer-aided design and innovative algorithms improve fabric utilisation and combined with deconstructivity techniques, demonstrate both innovation and sustainability in design which is the following finding of Jalil and Shaharuddin (2020b).

According to the interview results, brands' sustainable practices in the supply chain are in the areas of transparency and localisation. Some brands believe that they should disclose data on fabric sources and production carbon emissions, which not only allows consumers to know more about their products but also allows brands to monitor their products more effectively. While disclosure of information increases a brand's sustainability, higher costs and operational pressures create corresponding challenges for brands. In addition, localised production, as an important strategy to reduce carbon footprints, not only reduces the distance and pollution generated during transportation but also allows for better monitoring of production conditions and quality. Results showed that brands can cultivate consumers' sustainability awareness in many ways

which is in line with the finding of Jalil and shaharuddin (2019a). Findings show that brands are enhancing their sustainable image through sustainable packaging, such as using biodegradable materials for packaging and plantable hang tags. More importantly, many brands have begun exploring multiple recycling service models, such as extending after-sales service, giving product modification services, redesigning old clothes, etc. These behaviors include consumers in the product lifecycle management and influence consumers' awareness of sustainability through practical actions. The practice of independent fashion designer brands reveals the core contradiction between the ideal of sustainability and commercial reality: the balance between freedom of innovation and cost control, small-scale features and commercialization effects and sustainable costs and profitability constitutes the challenge that independent fashion designer brands need to face nowadays.

The framework presents the key dimensions and their intrinsic linkages for implementing sustainable strategies for independent fashion designer brands, showing two core elements through value creation and reality constraints which is the following finding of Fletcher (2014). When independent fashion designer brands promote sustainable strategies, their initiatives can be clearly categorized into two types: those that are already practically feasible and can be effectively implemented as innovative strategies and those that are still in the exploratory stage due to cost or structural issues and that have the potential, but have not yet fully achieved a balance between business and sustainability. This distinction not only reflects the maturity of current industry practice, but also reveals possible directions for future optimization.

At the level of value creation, brand positioning serves as the strategy's cornerstone and the brand's sustainable identity is constructed through the integration of cultural values. This identity is embodied in the strategic framework in three aspects. Firstly, the design process emphasizes the integration of sustainable materials and digital technology, which not only ensures the expression of sustainable creativity but also improves the efficiency of the design process. This integration not only meets the environmental requirements, but also reduces the resource consumption of traditional processes through technological means, resulting in a replicable and innovative model. Secondly, the production process reduces the carbon footprint through energy optimization and localization. By adopting renewable energy sources and localized manufacturing, independent brands are effectively reducing their carbon footprint while enhancing the responsiveness of their supply chain. Due to the small scale of production, localization strategies are particularly suitable for such brands, reducing logistics costs and increasing control over the production chain. Thirdly, the consumer side fosters the habit of recycled consumption through service innovations, such as sustainable packaging and upgrading of used clothes. It not only strengthens the brand's environmental image, but also accurately reaches the customer base with sustainable consumption awareness, forming a differentiated competitiveness. It is worth emphasizing that the application of virtualization technology throughout the full process of design, display and sales provides a dual solution for independent fashion designer brands to operate in a sustainable and cost-controllable way.

The level of realistic constraints reveals the challenges that independent brands need to face. Cost control becomes the primary issue for the ideal sustainable solution, as evidenced by the following. Firstly, sustainable material premiums make brands less price-competitive; the cost of eco-friendly fabrics (e.g. bio-based fibers or high-tech recycled materials) is often much higher than traditional options, which puts indie

brands at a pricing disadvantage and makes it difficult for them to compete with the fast fashion giants. Despite the growth of consumer interest in sustainable products, price sensitivity continues to limit market penetration; Secondly, small batch production leads to a lack of bargaining power and independent brands lack negotiating power in the supply chain due to limited order sizes, making it difficult for them to obtain discounts on materials or preferential supply, which further pushes up production costs and lastly, localized production, while it can reduce carbon emissions, can sacrifice supply chain resilience. These constraints reflect the need for brands to sacrifice some of their commercial expansion space when investing limited resources in sustainable practices.

Independent designer brands need to break through existing bottlenecks through technological innovation, collaborative models and policy support. For example, exploring new business models (e.g., clothing rental subscriptions or membership services) may help spread the high costs of sustainable practices. Policy support (e.g., government subsidies or tax incentives for eco-friendly materials) is also critical to alleviating the financial pressure on brands. Ultimately, the success of a sustainable strategy will depend on a brand's ability to find a dynamic balance between technical feasibility, commercial returns and consumer education. Independent designer brands are expected to be pioneers in this space due to their flexibility and creativity, but their long-term growth will still depend on broader ecosystem collaboration. The framework provides a referenceable value direction for the future of brands to realize the symbiosis of sustainability and commercial value.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study constructs a sustainable strategy framework for independent fashion designer brands, systematically integrating key dimensions such as brand positioning, technological innovation, supply chain optimization and consumer education. Through in-depth interviews with 15 independent fashion designer brands, innovative practices and challenges faced by the brands in sustainable fashion was derived. It has been found. Independent fashion designer brands also offer practical value to the sustainable development of the fashion industry through their unique brand values and flexible business models. Firstly, in terms of brand philosophy, brand designers as well as managers integrate the concept of sustainability into the brand's DNA. The connection between brand and consumer is redefined through classic and straightforward design and the brand narrative of the sustainability concept. These conceptual innovations include enhancing the significance of the product lifecycle, controlling the rate of product renewal and drawing sustainable inspiration from traditional cultures, not only respond to the brand's sustainability, but also enhance the brand's uniqueness. Secondly, innovation in the product design process is significant. In terms of materials, the choice of eco-friendly and recycled materials reflects the brand's emphasis on sustainability; and technological innovations have effectively reduced waste and increased material utilisation in the design process. Thirdly, while supply chain management remains a challenge for brands, transparency and localisation of the supply chain provide effective sustainable practices. Finally, brands are fostering consumer awareness of sustainability through innovations such as sustainable packaging and used-clothing transformation services, a participatory model that extends product lifecycles and redefines the sustainable relationship between brands and consumers. In summary, with the

development of a theoretical strategy framework for this study, independent fashion designer brands demonstrate the possibilities of sustainable practices by following the strategy and its components. The results show that true sustainability requires the co-development of design concepts, production technologies, supply chain management and consumer culture. Although independent fashion designer brands still need to face many challenges, with technological advances and increased consumer awareness, independent fashion designer brands play an even more critical role in the future sustainable fashion ecosystem. The value of this study lies in revealing the systemic character of sustainable transformation. Brand positioning determines the choice of materials, material characteristics influence production processes and technologies and production models constrain the space for service innovation. This close relationship requires brands to adopt holistic thinking. In future practice, how to reduce the marginal cost of each link through digital tools and how to translate cultural narratives into sustainable value will be key points to validate 'framework's effectiveness.

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