

The Benefits of Teaching Sustainability in Fashion to Study Abroad Students

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Abstract

In more than 15 years of teaching in Study Abroad, I have had the chance of addressing many valuable subjects in my business classes. The perspective of a business class can be very helpful in understanding many of the challenges and opportunities in contemporary society.

From social media to financial markets, from ethics to marketing, conversations in class can be broad-ranging and engaging, allowing students to reflect on their own habits and patterns of behavior. Starting from our personal experience is often helpful, and even more so during a term abroad.

Study Abroad is in fact a “journey to oneself”, and personal reflections can be extremely fruitful in terms of processing new information and connecting it to a new everyday routine. Just like in Italian language classes, it’s important to maintain the conversation on a practical level so that students can “put to work” their new found information almost the same day in which it has been acquired. As students adjust to life in Florence, they need to rebuild their own routine, sometimes in an even more conscious and informed manner.

This is definitely the case with one of my favorite classes: Sustainability in the Fashion Industry. In this short article, I’d like to take the opportunity to discuss some of the unique dynamics that I have experienced while teaching this class at ISI Florence.

Keywords: fashion, sustainability, study abroad

Teaching Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

I am fortunate to say that this class has always had high enrollment numbers. I’ve had the opportunity to hold the class with many engaged and interested students who were keen to learn more about sustainability

in the context of the fashion industry.

In class I try to make sure that students are able to develop a personal understanding of the subject, thereby letting them focus on the ideas of sustainability at a simple, practical level. I often make the case for this by suggesting a different notion of sustainability, one that I can personally connect to because of my background in music. I tell students how my personal understanding of the topic comes from connecting sustainability to the “sustain” pedal of the grand piano. When you hit the “sustain” pedal, the notes you play last just a little longer and their sound endures and resonates louder. This is actually the same notion of sustainability that I like to discuss in class, as sustainable companies are those which carry out practices that increase the chances of them “enduring” and becoming more future-proof.

Within the general ecosystem, on one hand, the fashion industry is very appealing and exciting. Many students are drawn to it, and see themselves pursuing a career in this field. In many respects, fashion is increasingly embracing diversity and is becoming a leader in terms of inclusiveness, not only through collection design, but also through committed company cultures.

On the other hand, fashion is among the most polluting business sectors in the world, second only to fossil fuels. In class we examine how this industry can be made more sustainable by exploring three lines of accountability: one focused on supply chain management, one linked to collection design and one associated with consumer behavior. Ideally, by navigating these three perspectives, students first identify the macro-level issues and then slowly and steadily switch the focus to themselves, realizing that change can start from ourselves, before demanding it of others.

To become more aware of our own behaviors, aside from the more traditional case studies, I encourage students to approach the subject experientially. Among others, here below are some of the activities that can support our in-class discussions.

- **“Country of Origin Analysis”**. In some cases, looking at labels and noticing the origin of manufacturing of our garments can be the only traceable information regarding a company’s supply chain. Following up on this, I sometimes ask students to notice how often they wear the same clothing item, so as to realize the sustainability of their own shopping habits.
- **“Sustainable Fabrics”**. Noticing the textiles used in our garments and learning how to tell fabrics apart is an important element of thoughtful fashion consumption. We visit leather stores and artisanal workshops to learn more about the history and value of fabrics associated with Florentine history.
- **“Family-run Made in Italy”**. Learning more about family-run businesses that create heritage products with a very low production volume. We also look into other sustainable businesses in fashion that try to meet sustainability by tackling a social or environmental cause, yet still managing to keep the organization financially stable.

All in all, the idea is that the subject needs to be experienced “behind the scenes” of retail stores, to really be able to understand the impact of our shopping decisions. In many cases, this awareness comes from understanding that information is much more the result of an emotional experience than of a simply cognitive one.

As an instructor, I like to help students to become curious and inquisitive; yet, at the same time, it’s important not to become overly skeptical over a company’s motives. At the end of each term, I always like to finish off the course on a positive note, trying to make sure that the information students have gained can make a meaningful difference in the course of their lives.

So, what is it that an instructor can do, to inspire students beyond the four walls of the classroom?

I've realized that two ideas are worth exploring during our classes so that students are able to bring the subject to life, inside and outside of school. I'm going to consider these ideas further in the next section of the paper.

Some Ideas to Bring Fashion Sustainability to Life

Sustainable transition is a massive challenge; on a personal level, it requires the following two sets of behavior.

- First, it is important to pursue a long-term mindset. When addressing such important challenges, we need to change our perception of time. As we make changes to our life, and we ideally help other customers to become more aware of the impact of their fashion habits, we can't expect things to take place overnight.
- The second element has to do with character. Influencing other people to be more sustainable in their daily lives requires us to develop leadership skills. In order to inspire change, we need to be optimists. Without a healthy dose of optimism, there is no way we can make sustainability a long-term successful career challenge and bring long-lasting change.

Apart from this, there are two other ideas that have inspired the creation of the course curriculum to make sure that our lecture hours revolve around ideas that will stand the test of time.

Fashion and Culture

Fashion is to be understood in terms of culture, as a language of communication to convey our unique sense of identity, or to show our belonging to a common and shared identity. In this sense, our fashion purchasing choices can become more aligned with our values and sense of self. Seeing fashion as a more profound communication language can

help us be better aware of our purchases and ideally more resilient to weekly fads and trends. In some cases, this can lead us to pursue “quieter” outlooks in fashion, connected to understating appearance. This kind of approach is also embodied by many Italian fashion brands. Developing this more profound connection to our wardrobe can help us to consume less and invest in higher-quality garments. By doing this we can increase our clothing’s lifespan. During the course we delve into many cultural and business dimensions of fashion, thereby providing students with a more in-depth understanding of how fashion trends work, and how helpful it can be to understand their origin.

While abroad, students have an opportunity to reflect on this as they respond to the Italian way of life and its customs, in fashion and beyond.

Assess Impact and Redefine Metrics

The other big idea that is discussed in class has to do with re-defining our metrics. How is it that we value status? How is it that we value success? How is it that we value influence?

In traditional business, the common answer to all three questions is “profitability”.

That is how sustainability can be challenging. We cannot measure success, status, or influence just in terms of revenue and profits.

We need to re-design our metrics to actually understand what really matters. This is not only valuable in terms of how we are measuring our company performance, but also in terms of how we’re promoting change. In many areas of sustainability, both environmental and labor, we don’t spend enough time understanding what we need to measure. We often need to re-define our own idea of success so that we can better measure it through something that really matters. By placing more attention on this notion, we can better assess the impact of our sustainable initiatives to actually assess if our ideas are just going to “look good” in sustainability reports or if instead they are going to make a meaningful difference towards our stakeholders.

As students are able to reflect on their personal goals and ambitions,

as they experience life away from home, they can identify a new way to assess the success of their study abroad experience, aside from traditional metrics.

Conclusions

In this short paper, my intent was to discuss some of the wonderful opportunities that the classes in Sustainable fashion have offered. This is a subject which provides instructors with some responsibilities, given the challenges posed by overconsumption and landfill waste. At the same time, the subject does not have to be bleak and discouraging; on the contrary, there are a lot of solutions that need to be found, and more than ever, the job market is seeking brilliant minds to address them.

I truly believe that study abroad students have the opportunity to acquire some “special powers”. These come from experiencing a new foreign culture and getting to see things with unbiased and curious eyes. Furthermore, they can re-establish habits and patterns to deal with a new stimulating environment. These positive outcomes can further benefit from a reflection on fashion consumption. We would like to think that some of the new positive habits that are established during their life in Florence may be hard to break, even after returning home.

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