

# The Key Stella McCartney Sustainable Success in the Fashion Industry Over Other Fashion Luxury Brands

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## INTRODUCTION

Fashion is one of the most polluting industries for the environment during the last decades. According to the UNFCCC, the fashion industry in 2024 took about 10% of the total global carbon emissions (United Nations, 2018). This pollution arises within all the processes of production. As it takes 10,000 liters of water to produce a single pair of jeans (Textile Industry Responsible for 20% of Global Water Pollution, n.d.), 20% of the industrial water pollution comes from the fashion industry (Charpail, 2022). For instance, becoming a sustainable company in the fashion industry has started to become a key important factor as climate change significantly worsens. At the same time, as the population has become more environmentally conscious over time, the demand for sustainable companies has increased.

Stella McCartney is a well-known luxury brand for chic and vegetal innovative fashion designs, founded in 2001 with their 50/50 collection (British Fashion Council, n.d.). Since its inception, Stella McCartney has been committed to environmental activism and eco-friendly manufacturing practices across all stages of production and distribution. As an individual and brand, Stella has been using her influence on the fashion industry and society to create widespread consensus and activism on climate-change and sustainability. Consequently, in 2017 the brand received the “Special Recognition Award For Innovation at the Fashion Awards” for its efforts on making a positive environmental impact in the fashion industry (British Fashion Council, n.d.).

The following essay will answer the research question, “**To what extent Stella McCartney sustainable fashion initiatives enhance their competitive advantage over other global luxury fashion brands?**”, exploring how their sustainable fashion initiatives have enhanced their competitive advantage by looking closely at its growth and positioning compared to its competitors over the years.

### Research Question

To what extent Stella McCartney sustainable fashion initiatives enhance their competitive advantage over other luxury fashion brands?

## METHODOLOGY

### Sources

This essay will mainly rely on using secondary sources to evaluate to what extent Stella McCartney sustainable fashion initiatives enhance their competitive advantage over other global luxury fashion brands. Since there will be no use of primary resources, there will be a surfeit use of secondary sources. Firstly, my research will be principally based on qualitative data, such as business articles and academic thesis such as “Sustainability in luxury fashion - Case: Stella McCartney” by Jeremias Sipari, this will enable me to have a wider analysis and context; as well, I will be using newsletter articles and reports such as “Stella McCartney on Building a More Sustainable Fashion Industry in 2023” by Vogue, and official Stella McCartney company website information. However, the research will be using quantitative data too such as annual reports from Stella McCartney from “GOV.UK”.

These resources provide valuable information for the research, however it is important to understand that secondary data may be biased by the author’s or company’s perspective, and thus may not be reliable and may affect the results of the exploration. Although, I will make the effort to provide trustworthy information for achieving valuable and qualitative research.

### Theories & Tools

To answer this research question, the data collected from the secondary resources will be analyzed using specific qualitative business tools. These tools include the Carroll’s sustainability pyramid, Porter’s 5 Forces model, 3 P’s of sustainability, and Positioning map.

“The Carol sustainability pyramid” is an ethical tool which enables a firm to identify four factors into their ethics and CSR, these are legal, economic, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities (Carroll, 2016); this tool will enable me to analyze the responsibility of Stella McCartney in society as an influential brand. Secondly, Porter's 5 Forces” framework will allow Stella McCartney to obtain competitive advantage by establishing the principal competitive forces in the market (Gratton, 2024). The “3 P’s of sustainability” will allow Stella McCartney to measure its financial, environmental and social sustainability performance (Kenton, 2024). Positioning map will allow Stella McCartney to differentiate its products from its direct competitors in the luxury fashion industry. Despite the fact that worthy insights can be acquired from these analysis tools, it's indispensable to have knowledge of their limitations. The Porter's 5 may not always be workable for large businesses since the analysis can only focus on one market segment at the time. The Carroll sustainability pyramid can prioritize profits over ethics, not take in consideration the interdependence of corporate social responsibility levels. In the 3 P’s of Sustainability, environmental and social factors are difficult to quantify, which makes it difficult to measure it accurately. Furthermore, the positioning map only takes into account 2 variables, and the customer's perception which can be subjective (Product Positioning Map: Product Management & Operations Explained, n.d.).

Theories and tools that are from the Business and Management syllabus are from Units 4.2 and 5.1. Theories from outside the syllabus will also be taken into consideration during the research, such as “The Porter's 5 Forces”.

### **Sustainability in the Fashion Industry**

In the present, sustainability has become a key factor for businesses as consumers become aware of the environmental footprint the industry generates. Despite this awareness, the fashion industry in 2023 generated about 97 million tons of textile waste (Royal Waste, 2023), primarily due to the increasing predominance of the fast fashion model. The fast fashion model principally focuses on the quick and inexpensive manufacturing of clothes in order to keep up with rapid fashion trends. Although this model meets the demands of customers, it disregards environmental and social consequences.

Consumers often associate many well-known fashion brands, such as Zara, with the fast fashion model; however, luxury brands are not often associated with this model due to their higher prices, quality, and lower environmental impact. Even if luxury brands often have more sustainable models than fast fashion, there is still a problem with luxury fashion, which is the use of animal skins and non eco-friendly materials. Furthermore, the rise of overconsumption of fashion has raised the percentage of clothes thrown away as fashion trends rapidly pass; as a result, an average person buys 53 clothes per year, four times what it was in the early 2000’s (Horvath, 2024); this data reinforces the importance of sustainable fashion in the industry as there is a rising demand for luxury yet sustainable clothing.

### **Sustainability in Stella Mccartney**

This present problem of non-eco-friendly fashion and overconsumption has been a key factor in Stella McCartney’s moral and ethical choices about sustainability, as it has become something the designer and the brand have been advocating. The brand has not been using animal skins in their products for more than 20 years (Nast, 2021); instead, they have developed technologically innovative eco-friendly materials for their products. In 2021, its autumn collection was 80% made up of eco-friendly materials (Freenman, 2021). In 2018, they presented their present most well known purse, the “Falabella bag” , which is made up with plan based, plastic green and fully recyclable material (LUISAVIAROMA, 2023). Apart, Stella McCartney has developed circular economy initiatives by allowing customers to return their products once they have finished using them in order to take them back into fiber and make other clothes with it. According to Anna Winthour, “It was impossible for fashion to think of luxury and sustainability in the same breath before Stella changed that” (Freenman, 2021).

Moreover, the brand has been involved in plenty of environmental campings, such as their 2021 campaign “#StellaAutumn21”, which encouraged consumers to adopt ecological practices and stop using animal skin products. They have also been involved in the diffusion of a petition together with the Human Society International to conclude the breeding of animals for four (BAJEKAL, 2023).

### **Carroll’s Sustainability Pyramid**

The Carroll’s sustainability pyramid is a qualitative business tool which enables firms with a structured framework for CRS over 4 responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic (Rose, 2024). In Stella McCartney’s case,

making a positive environmental and social impact has become their top priority. Employing the tool will outline Stella McCartney's company 4 responsibility in society.



**Image 1 from: Rose, A. (2024, June 17). Carroll's CSR Pyramid Principles and Examples- Lythouse. Lythouse.)**

Firstly, the most crucial factor of the Carroll's pyramid in Stella McCartney is the Ethical responsibility. As stated, one key focus that Stella McCartney has been prioritizing, is the use of sustainable and eco-friendly materials. On the company's website "Stella's World - Sustainability" (Stella McCartney, 2023) page, a list of materials they make use in their products and packaging such as organic cotton and Soltas, have been listed. These materials do not include blended fibers and fur or animal skin, as the company has not been using it for more than 20 years; they provide as much as possible information about their product. This is an essential part of Stella McCartney as a brand as their innovative sustainability initiatives are what they're known for and by not making use of harmful products for the environment, making use of products that have been certified by the highest standards of sustainability worldwide and implementing circular economy in their products, has provided them many benefits. Principally within gen Z, where the greater percentage of customers are in search for sustainable and ethical responsible brands due to their climate change awareness (Ali, 2024). In this way, allowing Stella McCartney to have a greater competitive advantage against other luxury fashion brands which lower environmental and ethical initiatives.

Legal responsibility takes into account factors such as the respect for the laws and regulations as a fundamental aspect of CSR. As mentioned in their website "Social responsibility & Human Rights" page, Stella McCartney has been constantly committed to human rights respect by being a member "Ethical Trading Initiatives" since 2012 and follow the "UN principles on Business and Human Rights", in order to secure fair treatments and conditions are being practiced in their supply chains. Internally, they have been implementing policies and requirements for their suppliers to follow in relation to CRS based on the International Labour Organization (Stella McCartney, 2023); in addition they have been reporting an annual "Modern Slavery Statement", which is a legal document required for business since 2015 according to the section 54 of the "UK Modern Slavery Act 2015" and the "California Transparency in Supply Chain Act of 2010". All this background ensures that Stella McCartney is being legally responsible by correctly following laws and regulations which prioritize the internal and external employee's fair treatment and respect, reporting transparently all of their legal movements publicly in their website. This provides Stella McCartney with a competitive advantage over most luxury brands in where 63% of them supply from companies that do not pay the minimum living wage to their workers (Rauturier, 2023); this includes brands such as Off-White, Tom Ford and Alexander Wang, who have a low score on respecting human rights and exploiting their workers.

Another element that is not required but desired by the society and takes an important place in Stella McCartney it's the Philanthropic responsibilities. This is how Stella McCartney has been "contributing to make a positive impact in the environment and everyone who they depend on and the ones who depend on them" (Stella McCartney, 2023). Even if the most known responsibility of Stella McCartney is the environment, we can't leave aside the social responsibility they have been working on. Firstly, they have been engaging with plenty of campaigns and commitments such as "Fashion for Climate" and "Humane Society International" which support environmental and social responsibility.

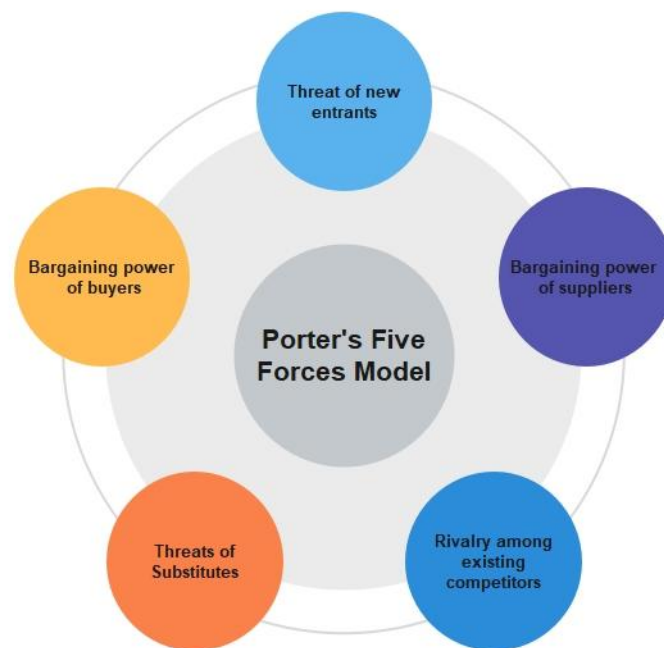
Finally, one of the most important factors of the pyramid it's the economical responsibilities. This means that Stella McCartney has become a profitable company over the time it has been operating. Through the annual reports published by "GOV.UK" the public has access to Stella McCartney's financial data from 2017 to 2022. With reference to the Annual reports of the years 2018, 2020 and 2022, the financials of Stella McCartney have shown that the company has

not been profitable since 2018. In 2017 the company had a profit of £7 million. However, in 2018 the company started to have losses of £10 million, consequently, in the year of the pandemic 2019 the company had a loss of £33 million, and finally in 2022 a loss of £10 million. The company was already not profitable after 2018; moreover, with the pandemic this financial situation was shown with a higher negative impact on their profitability, but it has shown to slowly recuperate from it. Unfortunately, this gives the company a financial competitive disadvantage over other luxury brands that do not have high sustainable initiatives but seem to be more profitable.

However, it is crucial to take into account how exactly they have provided the company with competitive advantage from other luxury fashion brands. When analyzing all of these factors and comparing them from Stella McCartney to others. We can identify differences on how Stella McCartney is at advantage in terms of their role to society and environment by not involving scandals related to this, but at disadvantage on profitable terms. However, it's important to know that brands like Vivienne Westwood have already taken sustainable initiatives and seem to be more profitable and popular than Stella McCartney (Luxiders, 2023).

**Porter’s 5 Forces**

The Porter’s 5 Forces framework is a qualitative strategic analysis tool that helps businesses to assess competitiveness of an industry by analyzing 5 factors. These 5 factors are: threat of new entrants, bargaining power of buyers, threats of substitutes, bargaining power of suppliers and the rivalry among existing competitors.



(Image 2 from: Porter’s Five Forces Analysis Definition and Examples. (n.d.). Edrawsoft. <https://www.edrawmind.com/article/porters-five-forces-analysis-definition-and-examples.html>)

**Threat of new entrants**

With an average annual growth rate of 11.68% , fashion is one of the fastest-growing and largest industries of the present (Zhou, 2022). However, in the luxury fashion market the threat for new entrants is low, in result there is lower competition, nevertheless sustainability is not common. Stella McCartney's key focus since its beginnings has been becoming a sustainable luxury brand. This provides the brand with a “Unique Selling Proposition” in a market where most luxury brands with influence like Stella McCartney do not give as much importance to sustainable initiatives since they prefer to focus on brand image first. Instead it has become popular within small brands, which do not present any threat to Stella McCartney since they already are an established fashion brand in the sustainable fashion brands.

**Bargaining power of suppliers**

Suppliers are one of the main forces for fashion brand’s in order to manufacture. These are the ones who drive up the cost of the products they offer, which influences a decrease in the profits the luxury brands will have because of the elevated costs of raw materials. Many suppliers of luxury brands are involved in labor exploitation and evasion of human rights of their workers in order to reduce their production costs. However, Stella McCartney is committed to ensuring that their suppliers respect the human rights and well-being of their workers. As a result, they have published policies and codes which protect the workers from being labor exploited or violated from its human rights that their suppliers need to follow in order to work with them. As this topic has become of more knowledge within consumers,

the initiatives taken by Stella McCartney have provided them a competitive advantage over other luxury brands which are known for supplying labor exploiting companies.

**Rivalry among existing competitors**

Stella McCartney experiences advantages and disadvantages associated with their “luxury brand” label. By having this label, Stella McCartney is in constant competition with other luxury fashion brands such as Dior. Founded in 1946, Dior has grown in the fashion market as a luxury brand becoming one of the most popular ones. (The editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Starting 55 years earlier than Stella McCartney has enabled Dior to gain more experience and develop a stronger reputation among generations. However, Dior is recognised as one of the least social and environmental sustainable luxury brands (Briggs, 2024), Stella McCartney gains competitive advantage over them by being aware of sustainable initiatives.

**Threats of Substitutes**

Fashion is in constant change and evolution as new trends appear. Stella McCartney presents chic and minimalist designs in their products, a characteristic that is trending in the present fashion. However, they can’t ensure that this minimalist style will keep trending in the future. Stella McCartney is still a new brand in the fashion industry, it has shown its commitments to adapt their chic style to the fashion trends over time, this provides them an advantage over other luxury brands as consumers are always seeking to buy the clothes of the newest trends. This adaptability to fashion trends together with their sustainability enhances their competitive advantage among gen Z and millennials consumers who are looking for the latest fashion trends but still aware of climate change by looking to eco-friendly brands.

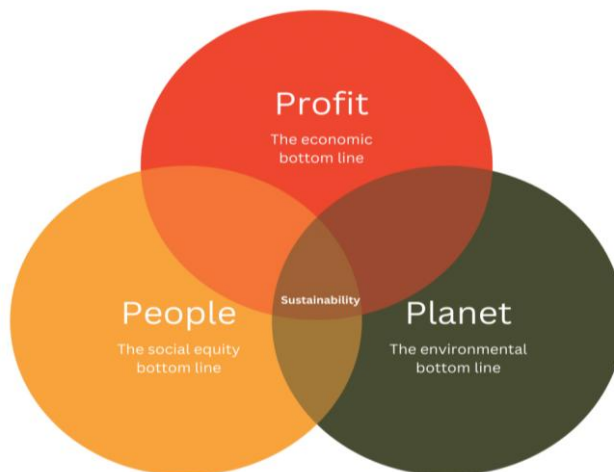
**Bargaining power of buyers**

Customers have a significant role in the fashion industry. Stella McCartney is at a disadvantage in this factor when comparing it to other luxury brands such as Dior, which can be evaluated by the company’s sales revenue. In the year 2022 Stella McCartney profit for the year was of £40 million, whereas Dior had a sales revenue of €79,184 millions (Christian Dior SE, 2022), this partially indicates that Stella McCartney is in a big disadvantage regarding consumers in a more financial way; however Stella McCartney has made more efforts to create a stronger customer base by being the first partner of Google Cloud (Halliday, 2019) in order to communicate more with their consumers via online, enhancing their customer engagement, connection and gaining greater feedback.

As “Porter’s 5 Forces” indicate, Stella McCartney is at a disadvantage over other luxury fashion brands such as Dior in terms of finance and sales. However, their commitment to sustainability enables Stella McCartney with a competitive advantage within gen Z and millennials, who prefer sustainable brands due to their consciousness about climate change and labor exploitation in the fashion industry, gaining more customer loyalty over these niche markets.

**The 3 P’s of Sustainability**

The 3 P’s of sustainability is a quantitative business tool which relies on 3 factors that are: People, enables companies to manage and identify the key factors it has on society.; Planet, helps to identify how the company’s movements have affected the environment; and Profit refers to the finance that surrounds the company (Inchainge, n.d.). According to a study by Forbes, 93% of consumers expect more social, local and environmental sustainability by brands (Petro, 2019); that’s why analyzing Stella McCartney sustainability by this tool will be of vast importance.



**(Image 3 from: Inchainge. (2022, September 21). The 3Ps series: People - Inchainge. Inchainge. <https://inchainge.com/knowledge/sustainability/the-3ps-series-people/>)**

“People ” is a factor that Stella McCartney always prioritizes in their sustainability initiatives, whether it is about their clients or employees. “We want to have a positive impact on everyone we depend on and for those who depend on us in return. We understand that, as a business, we have a responsibility to respect human rights” (Stella McCartney, 2024), as illustrated by the quote, one of the top priorities of Stella McCartney is to create a positive impact on the the people, respecting their Human Rights; and as stated before, this sustainable social initiatives by Stella on respecting human rights, something that is not common within luxury fashion brands, provides them with a competitive advantage by not being involved in labor exploitation scandals as brands like Dior (Le Monde, 2024), a factor that could damage their brand image.

With Stella McCartney being recognized as the most sustainable brand of the luxury fashion industry, their “Planet” sustainability importance has become their main USP over other luxury brands. As stated in “The Carroll’s sustainability pyramid” analysis, the brand has shown an incredible effort about environmental sustainability. They have partnered with international organizations and campaigns that protect the environment, such as “Fashion for Climate ”. They have committed to use eco-friendly materials such as organic cotton. Otherwise, brands such as Coach, have shown to not take environmental sustainable initiatives, which affected their brand image in 2021 when a user posted in Tiktok how the brand was burning unsold items (Dellato, 2022), showing the brand negative environmental impacts and generating controversy.

Profit does not take as much importance since Stella McCartney is more focused on environmental and social sustainability initiatives rather than focusing on their financial competitive advantage over other luxury fashion brands.

In 2022, Stella McCartney had a gross profit of £36 millions (GOV.UK, n.d), whereas Dior had a gross profit of €54,196 millions (Christian Dior SE, 2022). Through this feature we can conclude that Stella McCartney has not shown to be the more profitable company in comparison to other luxury brands such as Dior. However, this has not stopped them from continuing prioritizing their sustainable initiatives, even if this means that they will get lower profits or smaller market size.

### Positioning Map

A positioning map is a tool which enables companies to see their positions over its competitors in their market. This tool will show the market position of Stella McCartney over its principal competitors; in this case analyzing the factors of sustainability and price.



(Image 4 from: Stella McCartney Brand and Merchandising report. (2023, February 28). Issuu. [https://issuu.com/jasminerobinson1/docs/jasmine\\_robinson\\_-\\_stella\\_mccartney\\_brand\\_report](https://issuu.com/jasminerobinson1/docs/jasmine_robinson_-_stella_mccartney_brand_report) )

As visualized, Stella McCartney's leadership in the sustainable fashion industry is remarkable, where the brand was classified as the most sustainable one among luxury brands. This provides them with a competitive advantage, particularly in a time where customers are in constant search of sustainable brands due to their environmental and social

awareness. Stella McCartney ethical practices and eco-friendly initiatives have set the brand apart from other well-known luxury brands such as Gucci and Alexander McQUEEN, which are positioned lower on sustainability, enabling Stella McCartney building a loyal customer base among customers of younger demographics such as gen Z and millennials. While Maggie Marinly is not too far away in sustainability, Stella McCartney brand recognition and reputation in the fashion industry provides them an edge that Maggie Marinly does not have, which means the brand does not present competition. By having a lower cost from other luxury brands they're market reachment is wider by being more accessible than other luxury brands.

The map highlights the predominant sustainability leading position Stella McCartney has, but it does not take into account financial metrics, which are crucial factors when evaluating competitive advantage.

Overall, Stella McCatney presents to be a leader on sustainability in the fashion industry, apart from having lower prices from other luxury brands, and attaining in enhancing their customer engagement over younger generations. However, their financial performance affected by Covid-19, does not seem to be providing them with a competitive advantage and it is not included in the positioning map which is a limitation, making the analysis subjective.

### CONCLUSION

Concluding, this essay has aimed to answer the research question : To what extent Stella McCartney sustainable fashion initiatives enhance their competitive advantage over other luxury fashion brands? Through various tools and theories such as Carroll's pyramid, Porter's 5 forces, the 3 P's of sustainability, and the Positioning map.

Each section of the essay provided me with arguments in favor and against the research question. However, I had limitations during it. Firstly, the most limiting fact is that Stella McCartney is part of LVMH, so it was difficult to find the separated financial statements of the company.

According to Porter's 5 forces analysis, Stella McCartney has a competitive advantage by being a sustainable company in the luxury industry, but it must continue its road to develop its market leadership. The company has been able to dominate the sustainable fashion luxury industry because of small competition from new entrants in the sustainable fashion market and by not having any scandals as other competitors, which enhances their brand image.

As shown in "The Carroll's sustainability pyramid", Stella Mccartney has shown high commitment to the environment and society as a luxury brand, allowing them to have a USP and competitive advantage with younger generations. However, they do not show a healthy profitability by having millions in losses, nevertheless they have shown to slowly recuperate.

In "Planet, People, Profit" we can identify that Stella McCartney's main focuses are "Planet". As analyzed there, the sustainable initiatives by Stella McCartney have provided them with a competitive advantage by not damaging their brand image on environmental or labor exploitation scandals, unlike brands like Dior and Armani. However Profit is an important factor since without finance a company can't survive, Stella McCartney has shown its commitments and is slowly recuperating from its economy.

Finally, through the positioning map analysis, we can conclude that Stella McCartney shows greater commitments over its sustainable initiatives which are highly recognized over the luxury fashion industry. Being named as the more sustainable fashion luxury company without competition of their size, which enables them with competitive advantage over younger consumers.

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