

Consumer Perception of Sustainable Fashion Products: Buying Behaviour, Awareness, and Barriers

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Abstract

The global fashion industry has emerged as one of the most resource-intensive and environmentally impactful sectors, contributing significantly to carbon emissions, water consumption, and textile waste. In response, sustainable fashion has gained prominence as an alternative paradigm that integrates environmental protection, ethical labour practices, and responsible consumption. This paper examines consumer perception of sustainable fashion with a focus on awareness, buying behaviour, and barriers to adoption, particularly in the context of developing countries such as India. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks including the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, the study highlights the complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, social, and economic factors influencing consumer decisions. The findings reveal that although consumer awareness and positive attitudes toward sustainable fashion are increasing, actual purchasing behaviour remains limited due to the persistent attitude-behaviour gap. Key barriers include high product costs, limited availability, lack of trust due to greenwashing, and deeply ingrained fast fashion consumption habits. The study also emphasizes the role of marketing, government policies, and rural traditional practices in shaping sustainable consumption patterns. Notably, rural communities demonstrate implicit sustainability through practices such as reuse and reliance on natural fibres, presenting opportunities for integrating traditional knowledge with modern sustainable frameworks. The paper concludes that promoting sustainable fashion requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving policy support, industry innovation, consumer education, and improved market accessibility. Bridging the gap between awareness and behaviour is essential to achieve long-term sustainability goals and transition sustainable fashion from a niche concept to a mainstream practice.

Keywords: Sustainable fashion, consumer perception, buying behaviour, awareness, barriers, sustainability.

1. Introduction

The global fashion industry has undergone a profound transformation over the past few decades, driven by the forces of globalization, rapid technological advancement, and continuously evolving consumer preferences. The integration of global supply chains, advancements in manufacturing technologies, and the rise of digital marketing have significantly accelerated production and consumption patterns within the industry. As a result, fashion has become more accessible, affordable, and trend-driven than ever before. However, this rapid growth and expansion have come at a substantial environmental and social cost, raising serious concerns about the long-term sustainability of the sector. The fashion industry is now recognized as one of the most resource-intensive and polluting industries worldwide. It is responsible for significant greenhouse gas emissions, contributing approximately 8–10% of global carbon emissions, which exacerbates climate change and environmental degradation (Niinimäki et al., 2020; UNEP, 2022). In addition to its carbon footprint, the industry is a major consumer of water, particularly in processes such as cotton cultivation, dyeing, and finishing, which require enormous quantities of freshwater. It is estimated that the textile sector consumes billions of cubic meters of water annually, leading to water scarcity in many regions and contamination of water bodies due to the discharge of untreated chemicals and dyes (Fletcher, 2014; FAO, 2023). Furthermore, the industry generates massive amounts of textile waste, with millions of tons of clothing ending up in landfills each year, thereby contributing to soil pollution and resource depletion (Niinimäki, 2020).

A key driver of these environmental challenges is the emergence and rapid expansion of fast fashion, a business model characterized by high-speed production cycles, frequent introduction of new styles, and low-cost garments designed for short-term use. Fast fashion encourages consumers to purchase clothing more frequently and discard it after limited use, thereby fostering a culture of overconsumption and disposability. This model not only increases waste generation but also places immense pressure on natural resources and labour systems. Moreover, fast fashion has been associated with unethical labour practices, including low wages, poor working conditions, and lack of social security for workers, particularly in developing countries where production is often outsourced (Joy et al., 2019; McNeill & Moore, 2015). In response to these pressing environmental and social concerns, the concept of sustainable fashion has emerged as a transformative alternative aimed at promoting responsible production and consumption practices. Sustainable fashion seeks to balance economic growth with environmental protection and social equity by integrating sustainability principles across the entire lifecycle of a product. This includes the use of eco-friendly and biodegradable materials, adoption of energy-efficient and low-impact production processes, promotion of ethical labour practices, and implementation of circular economy strategies such as recycling, reuse, and upcycling (Fletcher, 2014; Niinimäki, 2020). The shift from a linear “take–make–dispose” model to a circular and regenerative system is central to the sustainable fashion paradigm. Despite the increasing visibility of sustainability issues and growing consumer awareness, the adoption of sustainable fashion products remains relatively limited. This paradox reflects a significant gap between consumer attitudes and actual behaviour, commonly referred to as the attitude-behaviour gap. While many consumers express concern for environmental sustainability and ethical production, these concerns do not consistently translate into purchasing decisions. Several factors contribute to this gap, including higher prices of sustainable products, limited availability, lack of reliable information, and scepticism regarding sustainability claims due to greenwashing practices (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Kumar et al., 2021). Consumer perception plays a pivotal role in shaping this dynamic, as it influences how individuals interpret and evaluate sustainable fashion products. Perception is a complex construct shaped by a combination of cognitive, emotional, and social factors. Environmental awareness, personal values, cultural norms, and socio-economic conditions all contribute to how consumers perceive sustainability and its importance in their purchasing decisions. For instance, consumers with higher levels of environmental consciousness are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward sustainable fashion; however, their purchasing behaviour may still be constrained by economic limitations and accessibility issues (Stern, 2020; UNEP, 2022).

In developing countries such as India, the dynamics of consumer perception are further influenced by structural and socio-economic factors, including income disparities, varying levels of education, and significant urban–rural differences. Urban consumers tend to have greater exposure to sustainability concepts through education and digital media, leading to higher awareness and relatively greater adoption of sustainable products. In contrast, rural consumers often have limited exposure to formal sustainability discourse but engage in practices that inherently align with sustainability principles. These include the reuse and repair of garments, reliance on natural fibres, and preference for locally produced textiles. Such practices reflect a traditional, resource-efficient lifestyle that embodies the core principles of sustainable fashion, even though they are not explicitly recognized as such (FAO, 2023; Ministry of Textiles, 2023).

This duality presents both a challenge and an opportunity. On one hand, the lack of formal awareness limits the scalability and recognition of sustainable practices in rural areas. On the other hand, the existence of traditional sustainable behaviours provides a strong foundation for promoting sustainable fashion adoption through targeted awareness programs and policy interventions. Bridging the gap between traditional practices and modern sustainability concepts can play a crucial role in achieving inclusive and sustainable development. Given this context, it becomes essential to examine consumer perception of sustainable fashion in a comprehensive manner, taking into account awareness levels, buying behaviour, and barriers to adoption. Understanding these factors is critical for designing effective strategies that can promote sustainable consumption patterns and support the transition toward a more sustainable fashion industry. This study aims to contribute to this understanding by analysing consumer perception within both urban and rural contexts, thereby providing insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers working in the field of sustainable development.

2. Concept of Sustainable Fashion

Sustainable fashion represents a holistic and transformative approach to the design, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal of clothing, footwear, and accessories, with the objective of minimizing environmental impact while ensuring social equity and economic viability. Unlike conventional fashion systems that operate on a linear “take–make–dispose” model, sustainable fashion adopts a circular and regenerative framework that emphasizes resource efficiency, waste

reduction, and long-term sustainability (Niinimäki, 2020; UNEP, 2022). This paradigm shift reflects a growing recognition that the traditional fashion industry is unsustainable in its current form and requires systemic change across the entire value chain.

At its core, sustainable fashion integrates three interrelated dimensions—environmental, social, and economic sustainability—each of which plays a critical role in shaping responsible production and consumption patterns. From an environmental perspective, sustainable fashion seeks to significantly reduce the ecological footprint of textile and apparel production. The conventional textile industry is highly resource-intensive, consuming large quantities of water, energy, and raw materials while generating substantial pollution. Processes such as cotton cultivation, dyeing, and finishing are particularly water-intensive and often involve the use of hazardous chemicals that contaminate water bodies and harm ecosystems (Fletcher, 2014; FAO, 2023). In response, sustainable fashion promotes the use of organic and natural fibres such as organic cotton, hemp, bamboo, and linen, which require fewer chemical inputs and less water. Additionally, eco-friendly production techniques, including natural dyeing, closed-loop water systems, and low-impact manufacturing processes, are increasingly being adopted to reduce environmental damage. Another critical environmental aspect of sustainable fashion is the reduction of waste through circular economy principles. The fashion industry generates enormous amounts of textile waste due to overproduction and short product life cycles, with a significant portion ending up in landfills or incinerators (Niinimäki, 2020). Sustainable fashion addresses this issue by promoting recycling, upcycling, and reuse of garments, thereby extending product life cycles and reducing the demand for virgin resources. The concept of circularity also includes designing products for durability, reparability, and recyclability, ensuring that materials remain in use for as long as possible. This shift from a linear to a circular model is essential for achieving long-term environmental sustainability and reducing the industry's overall ecological footprint. From a social perspective, sustainable fashion emphasizes ethical labour practices and the protection of workers' rights across the supply chain. The conventional fashion industry has often been associated with exploitative labour conditions, particularly in developing countries where production is outsourced to reduce costs. Issues such as low wages, unsafe working environments, excessive working hours, and child labour have been widely documented (Joy et al., 2019). Sustainable fashion seeks to address these challenges by ensuring fair wages, safe and healthy working conditions, and respect for human rights. It also promotes gender equality and empowerment, particularly for women who constitute a significant portion of the textile workforce. By prioritizing ethical production, sustainable fashion contributes to social justice and improves the livelihoods of workers and artisans.

The economic dimension of sustainable fashion is equally important, as it focuses on creating long-term value and supporting inclusive growth. Unlike fast fashion, which prioritizes short-term profits and mass production, sustainable fashion encourages responsible consumption and investment in high-quality, durable products. It supports local economies and small-scale producers, particularly in developing countries where traditional textile industries play a crucial role in employment generation. In India, for example, practices such as handloom weaving, khadi production, and natural dyeing have historically embodied the principles of sustainability. These systems are characterized by low energy consumption, minimal environmental impact, and strong cultural significance (Ministry of Textiles, 2023; FICCI, 2023). By integrating these traditional practices with modern design, technology, and market access, sustainable fashion can contribute to rural development, poverty reduction, and preservation of cultural heritage. Furthermore, sustainable fashion is closely linked with the concept of slow fashion, which advocates mindful consumption and production. Slow fashion encourages consumers to prioritize quality over quantity, invest in durable and timeless clothing, and reduce unnecessary consumption. This approach challenges the fast fashion culture of frequent purchasing and disposal, promoting instead a more conscious and responsible lifestyle (Fletcher, 2014). By encouraging consumers to value longevity and sustainability, slow fashion plays a critical role in reducing environmental impact and fostering sustainable consumption patterns. Another important aspect of sustainable fashion is its lifecycle approach, which considers the environmental and social impacts of a product at every stage—from raw material extraction to final disposal. This includes sustainable sourcing of materials, eco-friendly production processes, efficient distribution systems, responsible consumer use, and environmentally safe disposal methods. By addressing each stage of the lifecycle, sustainable fashion ensures a comprehensive and integrated approach to sustainability, rather than focusing on isolated aspects of production or consumption (Niinimäki, 2020).

In recent years, technological innovation has also played a significant role in advancing sustainable fashion. Developments such as biodegradable fabrics, recycled fibers, digital design technologies, and blockchain-based supply chain transparency have enhanced the ability of the industry to adopt sustainable practices. These innovations not only reduce environmental impact but also improve efficiency and traceability, enabling consumers to make more informed choices (UNEP, 2022). However, the adoption of such technologies remains uneven, particularly in developing countries where access to resources and infrastructure may be limited.

In the Indian context, sustainable fashion presents a unique opportunity to bridge traditional knowledge systems with modern sustainability frameworks. Rural communities have long practiced sustainable consumption through reuse, repair, and reliance on locally available resources. However, these practices are often undervalued and lack formal recognition in the mainstream fashion industry. By promoting awareness, strengthening market linkages, and providing institutional support, these traditional systems can be revitalized and integrated into the global sustainable fashion movement. This not only enhances environmental sustainability but also supports rural livelihoods and empowers marginalized communities.

In conclusion, sustainable fashion represents a multi-dimensional and evolving concept that seeks to transform the fashion industry into a more responsible and resilient system. By integrating environmental protection, social equity, and economic sustainability, it addresses the critical challenges posed by conventional fashion systems. As global awareness of sustainability continues to grow, sustainable fashion is expected to play a central role in shaping the future of the apparel industry. However, achieving this transition requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, industry stakeholders, and consumers to overcome existing barriers and promote widespread adoption of sustainable practices.

3. Consumer Perception of Sustainable Fashion

Consumer perception is a critical determinant of purchasing behaviour, as it reflects how individuals interpret, evaluate, and respond to products based on their knowledge, beliefs, prior experiences, and socio-cultural context. In the domain of sustainable fashion, consumer perception becomes particularly complex because it extends beyond conventional product attributes such as price, quality, and design to include intangible dimensions such as environmental impact, ethical production, and social responsibility. As a result, consumers are required to process both functional and moral considerations when forming perceptions about sustainable fashion products.

From a cognitive perspective, consumer perception is shaped by the level of knowledge and awareness individuals possess regarding sustainability issues. Consumers who are well-informed about environmental degradation, climate change, and ethical labour practices tend to evaluate sustainable fashion more positively, as they associate it with ecological preservation and social welfare (Kumar et al., 2021; Niinimäki, 2020). These consumers are more likely to recognize the long-term benefits of sustainable products, such as durability, reduced environmental impact, and improved quality. However, the extent of this cognitive evaluation often depends on the availability of accurate and reliable information, as misinformation and lack of transparency can significantly distort consumer perception.

In addition to cognitive factors, emotional and psychological dimensions play a crucial role in shaping consumer perception of sustainable fashion. Many consumers experience a sense of moral satisfaction, pride, and personal responsibility when purchasing eco-friendly products, as such actions align with their ethical values and environmental concerns. This emotional engagement can act as a strong motivator for sustainable consumption, reinforcing positive attitudes toward sustainable fashion (Stern, 2020). However, emotional motivation alone is often insufficient to drive consistent purchasing behaviour, particularly when economic or practical constraints are present.

Social and cultural influences further shape consumer perception by defining norms, values, and expectations related to consumption behaviour. In collectivist societies such as India, social approval, peer influence, and cultural traditions play a significant role in determining consumer attitudes toward sustainable fashion. For instance, practices such as reusing garments, wearing handloom fabrics, and valuing durability are culturally embedded behaviours that align with sustainability principles. At the same time, increasing urbanization and exposure to global fashion trends have led to a growing preference for fast fashion, especially among younger consumers. This creates a dynamic tension between traditional sustainable practices and modern consumption patterns (FICCI, 2023; KPMG India, 2022). Theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into understanding the underlying mechanisms of consumer perception and behaviour. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) proposed by Ajzen (1991) is widely used to explain sustainable consumption patterns. According to this theory, consumer behaviour is influenced by three key factors: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In the context of sustainable fashion, attitudes refer to the individual's positive or negative evaluation of eco-friendly products, subjective norms represent social pressures or expectations, and perceived behavioural control reflects the individual's ability to perform the behaviour, considering factors such as affordability and accessibility. Even when consumers hold positive attitudes toward sustainable fashion, low perceived behavioural control—due to high prices or limited availability—can significantly reduce the likelihood of actual purchase.

Similarly, the Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) theory developed by Stern (2020) explains how personal values and beliefs translate into pro-environmental behaviour. According to this framework, individuals with strong ecological values develop beliefs about environmental responsibility, which in turn activate personal norms that guide behaviour. In the context of sustainable fashion, consumers who prioritize environmental protection and social justice are more likely to develop favourable perceptions and intentions toward sustainable products. However, the translation of these values into actual behaviour is often moderated by external constraints such as economic limitations and market accessibility.

Another important aspect of consumer perception in sustainable fashion is the evaluation of perceived value, which includes functional, emotional, social, and economic dimensions. Consumers often perceive sustainable fashion as high-quality, durable, and environmentally friendly, which enhances its functional and emotional value. At the same time, purchasing sustainable products can provide social value by signalling ethical responsibility and environmental consciousness. However, these positive perceptions are often counterbalanced by the perception of higher prices and limited variety, which reduces the overall perceived value for many consumers (Kumar et al., 2021).

Despite the generally positive perception of sustainable fashion, a significant attitude–behaviour gap persists, representing one of the most critical challenges in this domain. This gap refers to the discrepancy between consumers expressed concern for sustainability and their actual purchasing behaviour. While many consumers claim to prefer eco-friendly products, their buying decisions are often driven by convenience, affordability, and habitual behaviour associated with fast fashion (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Factors such as high product costs, lack of availability, limited trust in sustainability claims, and insufficient knowledge about certifications contribute to this gap. Additionally, deeply ingrained consumption habits and the appeal of trendy, low-cost fashion further hinder the adoption of sustainable alternatives.

In the Indian context, consumer perception of sustainable fashion is characterized by significant heterogeneity across different socio-economic groups. Urban consumers, who have greater access to information and higher levels of education, tend to exhibit more awareness and relatively favourable perceptions of sustainable fashion. They are also more influenced by global trends, social media, and brand communication. In contrast, rural consumers often practice sustainability through traditional behaviours such as reuse, repair, and reliance on natural materials, but they may not explicitly associate these practices with the concept of sustainable fashion. This indicates that while the principles of sustainability are inherently present in rural lifestyles, there is a lack of conceptual awareness and market integration (FAO, 2023; Ministry of Textiles, 2023).

Furthermore, emerging trends such as conscious consumerism, ethical branding, and increased demand for transparency are gradually reshaping consumer perception of sustainable fashion. Consumers are becoming more interested in understanding the origin of products, the conditions under which they are produced, and their overall environmental impact. Digital platforms and social media have played a significant role in facilitating this shift by providing information, influencing attitudes, and creating communities around sustainable living (UNEP, 2022).

In conclusion, consumer perception of sustainable fashion is shaped by a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, social, and economic factors. While awareness and positive attitudes toward sustainability are increasing, actual behaviour remains constrained by practical barriers and structural limitations. The integration of theoretical frameworks such as TPB and VBN provides a deeper understanding of these dynamics, highlighting the importance of addressing both internal motivations and external constraints. Bridging the gap between perception and behaviour is essential for promoting sustainable fashion adoption and achieving long-term sustainability goals.

4. Consumer Awareness of Sustainable Fashion

Consumer awareness is widely recognized as a foundational determinant of sustainable consumption behaviour, as it shapes how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to environmentally and socially responsible products. In the context of sustainable fashion, awareness extends beyond mere familiarity with the term; it encompasses an in-depth understanding of the environmental, ethical, and socio-economic implications associated with clothing production and consumption. Over the past decade, consumer awareness of sustainable fashion has increased significantly across the globe, driven by heightened concerns about climate change, environmental degradation, and unethical labour practices within the fashion industry (UNEP, 2022; Niinimäki, 2020).

One of the most influential drivers of this growing awareness has been the rapid expansion of digital media and communication technologies. Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have emerged as powerful tools for disseminating information about sustainable fashion, enabling consumers to access content related to eco-friendly products, ethical brands, and responsible consumption practices. Influencers, environmental activists, and fashion bloggers actively promote concepts such as slow fashion, minimalism, thrift culture, and circular economy practices, thereby shaping consumer attitudes and increasing awareness, particularly among younger demographics (KPMG India, 2022). These platforms not only provide information but also create communities that encourage dialogue and engagement around sustainability issues.

In addition to digital media, environmental campaigns and global sustainability movements have played a crucial role in enhancing consumer awareness. Initiatives focused on climate action, waste reduction, and responsible consumption have highlighted the environmental impact of industries such as fashion, encouraging individuals to reconsider their consumption patterns. Educational institutions have also contributed significantly by integrating sustainability concepts into curricula, conducting workshops, and promoting research in areas such as eco-friendly textiles and sustainable design. Such initiatives help build a deeper understanding of sustainability among students and future consumers, thereby fostering long-term behavioural change (FAO, 2023).

Despite this overall increase in awareness, significant disparities exist across different demographic and socio-economic groups. Urban consumers generally exhibit higher levels of awareness due to better access to education, digital platforms, and global information networks. They are more likely to be exposed to sustainability concepts, recognize eco-labels and certifications, and actively seek information about ethical and environmentally friendly products. In contrast, awareness levels in rural and semi-urban areas tend to be lower in formal terms. However, this does not necessarily imply the absence of sustainable practices. Rural communities often engage in behaviours such as reusing garments, repairing clothing, and utilizing natural fibres, which inherently align with sustainability principles. These practices reflect an implicit form of awareness rooted in tradition and necessity rather than formal knowledge or conceptual understanding (Ministry of Textiles, 2023). This distinction between explicit and implicit awareness is particularly important in the Indian context. While urban consumers may consciously associate their choices with sustainability, rural consumers often practice sustainability as part of their daily lives without labelling it as such. This gap highlights the need for targeted awareness strategies that bridge traditional knowledge systems with modern sustainability concepts, enabling rural populations to recognize the value of their practices and integrate them into broader sustainable fashion frameworks.

Another critical aspect of consumer awareness is the source and credibility of information. Consumers rely on multiple channels, including digital media, educational institutions, government initiatives, and brand communication, to gain knowledge about sustainable fashion. While digital platforms offer accessibility and reach, they also pose challenges related to misinformation and superficial understanding. The presence of greenwashing, where brands falsely claim sustainability, further complicates consumer awareness by creating confusion and reducing trust. As a result, consumers may struggle to differentiate between genuinely sustainable products and those marketed as such without substantial evidence (Niinimäki, 2020; UNEP, 2022).

A key issue associated with consumer awareness is the persistent awareness–behaviour gap, also referred to as the knowledge–action gap. Although awareness of sustainability issues has increased, it does not consistently translate into actual purchasing behaviour. Many consumers express concern about environmental degradation and ethical production, yet continue to purchase fast fashion products due to factors such as affordability, convenience, and habit (McNeill & Moore, 2015). High prices of sustainable products remain one of the most significant barriers, particularly in developing countries where a large segment of the population is price-sensitive. Additionally, limited availability of sustainable fashion products, especially in smaller towns and rural areas, restricts consumer choice and accessibility. Trust also plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between awareness and behaviour. Consumers are often sceptical about sustainability claims made by brands, particularly in the absence of standardized certifications and transparent information. This lack of trust reduces the effectiveness of awareness in influencing purchasing decisions, as consumers may hesitate to invest in products that they are not confident are genuinely sustainable (Kumar et al., 2021). Furthermore, deeply ingrained consumption habits associated with fast fashion, such as frequent purchasing and preference for low-cost trendy clothing, further weaken the impact of awareness on behaviour. In the Indian context, consumer awareness of sustainable fashion is at a transitional stage, characterized by increasing recognition in urban areas and emerging interest in semi-urban regions, while remaining largely implicit in rural communities. Government initiatives promoting handloom, khadi, and eco-friendly textiles have contributed to raising awareness, although these efforts are often not explicitly linked to the broader concept of sustainable fashion. Institutions such as Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), self-help groups (SHGs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have the potential to play a significant role in enhancing awareness at the grassroots level by conducting training programs, workshops, and community-based interventions.

Moreover, the role of behavioural interventions in strengthening awareness cannot be overlooked. Awareness alone is insufficient to drive sustainable consumption unless it is accompanied by enabling conditions such as affordability, accessibility, and trust. Behavioural nudges, incentives, and social campaigns can help translate awareness into action by making sustainable choices more convenient and appealing to consumers (UNEP, 2022). For instance, promoting second-hand clothing, encouraging repair and reuse, and highlighting the long-term benefits of durable products can influence consumer behaviour in a positive direction.

In conclusion, consumer awareness of sustainable fashion has grown considerably in recent years due to digitalization, environmental advocacy, and institutional efforts. However, significant disparities persist across different socio-economic groups, and the presence of an awareness-behaviour gap limits the effectiveness of this awareness in driving actual consumption patterns. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive approach that combines awareness creation with structural and behavioural interventions. Bridging the gap between knowledge and action is essential for promoting sustainable fashion adoption and achieving long-term sustainability goals, particularly in diverse and developing contexts such as India.

5. Buying Behaviour of Consumers

Consumer buying behaviour in sustainable fashion is a complex decision-making process influenced by economic, psychological, social, and product-related factors. Unlike conventional fashion consumption, where decisions are largely driven by price and trends, sustainable fashion requires consumers to consider additional aspects such as environmental impact, ethical production, and long-term value. This makes purchasing decisions more nuanced and often more challenging.

From an economic perspective, price remains one of the most significant determinants of consumer behaviour. Sustainable fashion products are typically more expensive than conventional alternatives due to higher production costs associated with eco-friendly materials and ethical labour practices. This price premium makes them less accessible, particularly in developing countries like India, where a large segment of consumers is highly price-sensitive (Kumar et al., 2021; Niinimäki, 2020). Even consumers who are environmentally conscious may hesitate to purchase sustainable products if they perceive them as unaffordable or not offering sufficient value for money.

Psychological factors also play a crucial role in shaping buying behaviour. Habitual consumption patterns associated with fast fashion create resistance to change, as consumers are accustomed to purchasing low-cost and trendy clothing frequently. This habit is reinforced by convenience and constant exposure to new fashion trends. Additionally, some consumers perceive sustainable fashion as involving trade-offs in terms of style, variety, or trendiness, which can further discourage adoption, especially among younger consumers (Joy et al., 2019; McNeill & Moore, 2015). Trust is another important psychological factor, as scepticism regarding sustainability claims and concerns about greenwashing can reduce consumers' willingness to purchase sustainable products (Niinimäki, 2020).

Social influences significantly impact consumer buying behaviour, particularly in collectivist societies like India. Peer influence, family values, and social norms shape attitudes toward consumption, while social media and influencers play an increasingly important role in promoting sustainable lifestyles. At the same time, prevailing fashion trends and brand consciousness can reinforce fast fashion consumption, creating conflicting influences on consumer choices (KPMG India, 2022).

Product-related attributes such as quality, durability, design, and availability also affect purchasing decisions. Sustainable fashion is often associated with higher quality and longer lifespan, which can enhance its perceived value. However, limited availability and the perception of restricted variety or less fashionable designs can act as barriers to adoption. These challenges are particularly evident in rural and semi-urban areas, where access to sustainable fashion products is limited (FAO, 2023).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. While consumers may hold positive attitudes toward sustainable fashion and be influenced by social norms, their actual behaviour is often constrained by low perceived behavioural control, particularly due to high prices and limited accessibility. This explains the gap between intention and actual purchase behaviour.

In the Indian context, consumer behaviour reflects a mix of traditional practices and modern influences. Urban consumers show increasing awareness and interest in sustainable fashion but remain influenced by price and trends, while rural consumers often practice sustainability through reuse and reliance on natural materials, though without formal recognition of these practices as sustainable (FAO, 2023).

In conclusion, consumer buying behaviour in sustainable fashion is shaped by a combination of economic constraints, psychological tendencies, social influences, and product attributes. While positive attitudes toward sustainability are increasing, actual adoption remains limited due to affordability, accessibility, and habitual consumption patterns. Addressing these factors is essential for promoting sustainable fashion adoption and bridging the gap between intention and behaviour.

6. Barriers to Sustainable Fashion Adoption

Despite the growing awareness and positive attitudes toward sustainable fashion, its widespread adoption remains limited due to a range of interconnected barriers. These barriers operate at multiple levels—economic, informational, psychological, structural, and socio-cultural—collectively constraining the transition from intention to actual behaviour. Understanding these constraints is essential for designing effective strategies to promote sustainable consumption, particularly in developing countries such as India where affordability and accessibility play a critical role.

One of the most significant barriers to sustainable fashion adoption is economic in nature. Sustainable fashion products are generally priced higher than conventional alternatives due to the use of organic materials, ethical labour practices, and environmentally responsible production processes. These factors increase production costs, making sustainable products less affordable for a large segment of consumers. In price-sensitive markets like India, where consumers often prioritize cost over ethical considerations, this price premium becomes a major deterrent (Kumar et al., 2021; Niinimäki, 2020). Even consumers who are environmentally aware may not be willing or able to pay higher prices, highlighting the gap between willingness and actual purchasing behaviour.

In addition to economic constraints, informational barriers significantly affect consumer adoption. Many consumers lack clear and reliable information about what constitutes sustainable fashion, making it difficult to differentiate between genuinely sustainable products and those marketed as such. The absence of standardized labelling and certification systems further complicates this issue. Moreover, the prevalence of **greenwashing**, where companies exaggerate or falsely claim environmental benefits, undermines consumer trust and creates scepticism toward sustainability claims (UNEP, 2022; Niinimäki, 2020). This lack of transparency reduces consumer confidence and discourages investment in sustainable products.

Psychological barriers also play a crucial role in limiting adoption. Consumer behaviour is often shaped by deeply ingrained habits, particularly those associated with fast fashion. The convenience, affordability, and variety offered by fast fashion have conditioned consumers to prioritize immediate gratification over long-term sustainability. Breaking these habitual consumption patterns requires significant behavioural change, which is often difficult to achieve. Additionally, consumers may perceive sustainable fashion as involving trade-offs, such as limited style options or reduced trendiness, which further discourages adoption (McNeill & Moore, 2015). The perceived effort required to search for and evaluate sustainable products can also act as a barrier, especially when compared to the convenience of fast fashion.

Structural barriers related to availability and accessibility further constrain the adoption of sustainable fashion. Sustainable products are often limited to niche markets, urban retail spaces, or online platforms, making them less accessible to consumers in rural and semi-urban areas. The lack of widespread distribution channels and limited product variety reduce consumer choice and convenience, thereby discouraging adoption (FAO, 2023). In many cases, even interested consumers are unable to purchase sustainable products due to their limited availability in local markets.

Socio-cultural factors also influence consumer behaviour and act as barriers to sustainable fashion adoption. In many developing countries, including India, consumption patterns are strongly influenced by social norms, cultural values, and economic priorities. For a large segment of the population, affordability and functionality take precedence over environmental considerations. Sustainable fashion is often perceived as a niche or premium category, associated with higher income groups, which limits its broader acceptance. At the same time, increasing exposure to global fashion trends and social media has reinforced fast fashion consumption, particularly among younger consumers, creating a conflict between sustainability and trend-driven behaviour (FICCI, 2023; KPMG India, 2022).

Another important barrier is the lack of institutional support and policy enforcement. While governments have introduced initiatives to promote sustainable practices, the absence of strong regulatory frameworks, standardized certifications, and effective monitoring mechanisms limits their impact. Without clear guidelines and incentives, both producers and consumers may lack the motivation to adopt sustainable practices. Additionally, limited awareness programs and inadequate outreach in rural areas further restrict the diffusion of sustainable fashion concepts.

These barriers are not isolated but highly interrelated, creating a complex system of constraints. For instance, high prices (economic barrier) combined with limited availability (structural barrier) reduce perceived behavioural control, as explained by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Similarly, lack of information

(informational barrier) contributes to distrust (psychological barrier), further discouraging adoption. This interconnectedness highlights the need for a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach to address these challenges.

In the Indian context, these barriers are particularly pronounced due to socio-economic diversity and regional disparities. However, the presence of traditional sustainable practices in rural areas offers a unique opportunity to overcome these challenges. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern market systems, improving awareness, and strengthening institutional support, it is possible to promote sustainable fashion adoption more effectively.

In conclusion, the adoption of sustainable fashion is hindered by a combination of economic, informational, psychological, structural, and socio-cultural barriers. Among these, high cost, lack of trust, limited availability, and entrenched consumption habits are the most critical challenges. Addressing these barriers requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, industry stakeholders, and consumers to create an enabling environment that supports sustainable production and consumption. Only through such integrated interventions can the transition toward sustainable fashion be accelerated and sustained in the long term.

7. Role of Marketing and Communication

Marketing and communication play a crucial role in shaping consumer perception, awareness, and ultimately the buying behaviour associated with sustainable fashion. Since sustainable fashion involves complex attributes such as environmental impact, ethical sourcing, and lifecycle considerations, effective communication becomes essential not only for promoting products but also for educating consumers and building trust. Unlike conventional fashion marketing, which primarily focuses on aesthetics and trends, sustainable fashion marketing must emphasize transparency, credibility, and value-based messaging.

One of the key strategies in sustainable fashion marketing is transparent communication, which involves providing clear and verifiable information about product attributes, sourcing, and production processes. Consumers increasingly demand authenticity and accountability from brands, particularly in the context of sustainability. The use of eco-labels, certifications, and traceability systems helps reduce information asymmetry and enhances consumer trust. However, the effectiveness of such tools depends on consumer awareness and understanding of these certifications (Niinimäki, 2020; UNEP, 2022).

Another important aspect of marketing is storytelling, which connects consumers emotionally with sustainable products. Narratives highlighting the journey of a product—from raw material sourcing to final production—can create a sense of authenticity and ethical engagement. For example, emphasizing the role of artisans, traditional craftsmanship, and eco-friendly practices can enhance perceived value and encourage consumers to support sustainable fashion. This approach is particularly relevant in countries like India, where cultural heritage and handloom traditions can be effectively integrated into marketing strategies (FICCI, 2023). The rise of digital marketing and social media has significantly transformed the communication landscape for sustainable fashion. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and e-commerce websites enable brands to reach a wider audience and engage consumers through interactive and visually appealing content. Influencers and content creators play a pivotal role in shaping consumer attitudes by promoting sustainable lifestyles and products. Their endorsements act as social proof, influencing purchasing decisions, especially among younger consumers (KPMG India, 2022). Digital platforms also facilitate consumer education by providing information about sustainability concepts, thereby bridging the knowledge gap.

Despite these opportunities, sustainable fashion marketing faces several challenges. One of the most critical issues is greenwashing, where brands make exaggerated or misleading claims about the sustainability of their products. Such practices undermine consumer trust and reduce the credibility of sustainability communication. Additionally, the complexity of sustainability-related information can make it difficult for consumers to fully understand product attributes, leading to confusion or disengagement. Information overload and lack of standardized communication frameworks further limit the effectiveness of marketing efforts (UNEP, 2022).

In the Indian context, marketing strategies for sustainable fashion must be tailored to diverse consumer segments. While urban consumers respond well to digital campaigns and global sustainability narratives, rural and semi-urban consumers require localized and culturally relevant communication approaches. Integrating regional languages, traditional values, and community-based outreach programs can enhance the effectiveness of communication in these areas. Institutions such as self-help groups (SHGs) and extension services can also play a role in disseminating information and promoting sustainable practices at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, marketing strategies can be aligned with behavioural theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour by influencing attitudes, reinforcing social norms, and enhancing perceived behavioural control. For instance, highlighting the long-term benefits of sustainable products can improve attitudes, while influencer campaigns can strengthen social norms, and affordable product lines can enhance perceived accessibility (Ajzen, 1991).

In conclusion, marketing and communication are essential drivers of sustainable fashion adoption, as they influence consumer perception, awareness, and trust. Strategies such as transparent labelling, storytelling, and digital engagement offer significant potential to promote sustainable consumption. However, challenges such as greenwashing and information complexity must be addressed to ensure credibility and effectiveness. A balanced and context-specific approach, particularly in diverse markets like India, is necessary to maximize the impact of marketing efforts in advancing sustainable fashion.

8. Role of Government and Policy

Government intervention plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable fashion by addressing market failures, creating awareness, and providing an enabling environment for both producers and consumers. Given the complex nature of sustainability—which encompasses environmental protection, social equity, and economic development—policy support becomes essential to facilitate the transition from conventional to sustainable fashion systems. Market forces alone are often insufficient to drive this transformation, particularly in developing economies where affordability and accessibility remain key challenges.

One of the primary roles of government is to provide financial incentives and subsidies that encourage sustainable production practices. Sustainable fashion often involves higher production costs due to the use of eco-friendly materials and ethical labour standards. Government support in the form of subsidies, tax benefits, and financial assistance can help reduce these costs, making sustainable products more competitive and accessible in the market (Niinimäki, 2020). Additionally, incentives for adopting clean technologies and waste management systems can further promote environmentally responsible production.

Another critical area of intervention is awareness generation and education. Governments can play a significant role in increasing consumer awareness through national campaigns, educational programs, and integration of sustainability concepts into school and university curricula. Such initiatives help build long-term behavioural change and encourage responsible consumption patterns. In rural areas, awareness programs can be particularly impactful when delivered through extension systems, community organizations, and local institutions (FAO, 2023).

Regulatory frameworks are also essential for ensuring transparency and accountability within the fashion industry. The establishment of standardized eco-labels, certification systems, and guidelines for sustainable production can help consumers make informed choices and reduce the risk of greenwashing. Strong enforcement of labor laws and environmental regulations ensures that sustainability claims are credible and that ethical standards are maintained across the supply chain (UNEP, 2022).

In the Indian context, several government initiatives indirectly support sustainable fashion. Programs promoting handloom, khadi, and traditional textiles not only preserve cultural heritage but also align with sustainability principles due to their low environmental impact and decentralized production systems. Campaigns such as “Vocal for Local” and support for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) encourage local production and consumption, thereby reducing the carbon footprint associated with long-distance supply chains (FICCI, 2023; Ministry of Textiles, 2023).

Furthermore, institutions such as Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), self-help groups (SHGs), and rural development agencies play a vital role in implementing government policies at the grassroots level. These institutions facilitate skill development, capacity building, and entrepreneurship, particularly among women and rural communities. By linking traditional knowledge with modern market opportunities, they contribute to both sustainability and livelihood generation.

However, challenges remain in the effective implementation of policies. Issues such as lack of coordination among agencies, limited awareness among beneficiaries, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms often reduce the impact of government initiatives. Therefore, a more integrated and inclusive policy approach is required, combining regulatory measures, financial support, and awareness programs to promote sustainable fashion adoption.

In conclusion, government and policy interventions are essential for creating an enabling ecosystem for sustainable fashion. By addressing economic, informational, and structural barriers, and by supporting both producers and consumers, governments can accelerate the transition toward a more sustainable and inclusive fashion industry.

9. Sustainable Fashion in Rural Context

The rural context presents a unique and often underexplored dimension of sustainable fashion, as many traditional practices inherently align with the principles of sustainability. Unlike urban settings where sustainable fashion is often perceived as a modern concept, rural communities have historically practiced forms of sustainable production and consumption driven by necessity, resource constraints, and cultural traditions. These practices include the use of natural fibres, reuse and repair of garments, and reliance on locally produced textiles, all of which contribute to resource efficiency and waste minimization (FAO, 2023).

Traditional textile systems in rural areas, such as handloom weaving, handicrafts, and natural dyeing, are inherently sustainable due to their low energy requirements and minimal environmental impact. These systems not only preserve cultural heritage but also provide employment opportunities, particularly for women and marginalized communities. In India, for instance, handloom and khadi sectors play a significant role in rural livelihoods while promoting eco-friendly production practices (Ministry of Textiles, 2023).

However, despite these inherent strengths, rural sustainable practices face several challenges. The increasing penetration of fast fashion and mass-produced garments has led to a shift in consumer preferences, particularly among younger generations. Additionally, lack of awareness about the concept of sustainable fashion, limited access to markets, and low-income levels constrain the growth and sustainability of traditional textile practices. Artisans and weavers often struggle with inadequate financial support, lack of modern design inputs, and limited market linkages, which reduce their competitiveness against industrial products (FICCI, 2023).

At the same time, rural areas offer significant opportunities for promoting sustainable fashion through the integration of traditional knowledge with modern systems. Strengthening market linkages through digital platforms, promoting geographical indication (GI) products, and encouraging value addition can enhance the economic viability of rural textile sectors. Institutions such as SHGs, NGOs, and extension services can play a crucial role in capacity building, skill development, and awareness generation.

Moreover, recognizing and formalizing traditional sustainable practices can help bridge the gap between implicit and explicit sustainability. By providing institutional support, financial assistance, and access to markets, rural communities can be empowered to contribute more effectively to the sustainable fashion movement. This not only promotes environmental sustainability but also supports inclusive development and poverty reduction.

In conclusion, the rural context represents both a challenge and an opportunity for sustainable fashion. While traditional practices provide a strong foundation for sustainability, their integration with modern systems is essential for ensuring long-term viability and scalability.

12. Conclusion

The transition toward sustainable fashion is both an environmental necessity and a socio-economic opportunity in the contemporary global context. This study highlights that while consumer awareness and positive attitudes toward sustainable fashion are gradually increasing, actual purchasing behaviour remains constrained by a combination of economic, psychological, and structural barriers. The persistence of the attitude-behaviour gap underscores the complexity of consumer decision-making and indicates that awareness alone is insufficient to drive meaningful change (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Kumar et al., 2021).

Economic factors, particularly high product costs and affordability constraints, continue to be the most significant barriers, especially in developing countries such as India. At the same time, issues related to greenwashing, lack of standardized certification systems, and limited product availability undermine consumer trust and accessibility. Psychological factors, including habitual consumption patterns and preference for fast fashion, further complicate the adoption of sustainable alternatives (Niinimäki, 2020; UNEP, 2022). The study also emphasizes the importance of theoretical frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Value-Belief-Norm theory in understanding consumer behaviour. These frameworks highlight that while attitudes and social norms may be favourable, perceived behavioural control—shaped by affordability and accessibility—plays a decisive role in determining actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Stern, 2020).

From a policy and practical perspective, a multi-stakeholder approach is essential to promote sustainable fashion. Governments must strengthen regulatory frameworks, provide financial incentives, and enhance awareness programs. Industry stakeholders need to focus on affordability, transparency, and innovation, while leveraging digital platforms to engage consumers. At the same time, consumer education and behavioural interventions are necessary to encourage responsible consumption patterns. Importantly, the rural context offers valuable insights and opportunities for sustainable fashion development. Traditional practices in rural areas already embody sustainability principles, and their integration with modern systems can contribute to environmental conservation, livelihood generation, and cultural preservation. Strengthening institutional support and market linkages can further enhance the role of rural communities in the sustainable fashion ecosystem (FAO, 2023; Ministry of Textiles, 2023).

In conclusion, achieving widespread adoption of sustainable fashion requires a systemic and coordinated effort that addresses both demand-side and supply-side challenges. Bridging the gap between awareness and behaviour will be critical for ensuring long-term sustainability. Future strategies must focus on inclusivity, affordability, and scalability to make sustainable fashion a mainstream practice rather than a niche alternative.

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