



## Understanding conversion barriers: Why fashion students hesitate to adopt sustainable fashion

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### Abstract

The fashion industry's ongoing sustainability crisis highlights the need to better understand how young consumers make their choices, especially fashion students, who represent both the future of the industry and an active part of its consumer base. Despite being highly aware of environmental challenges, many students still struggle to translate that awareness into actual purchases of sustainable clothing. This study explores why fashion students hesitate to adopt sustainable fashion and what factors can help turn awareness into meaningful action. Building on concepts of eco-design and lifecycle thinking, and informed by research on digital influence and knowledge sharing (Vassalo et al., 2024), it examines how awareness, affordability, style preferences, and online engagement shape purchasing behaviour. Through a mixed-methods approach combining surveys and focus groups, the findings reveal that price sensitivity, fast-changing trends, limited product options, and scepticism about sustainability claims remain major barriers. On the other hand, clear communication, hands-on learning, and stronger digital literacy significantly increase the likelihood of students choosing sustainable options, supporting earlier work on the importance of sustainability education in fashion programmes (Murzyn-Kupisz & Hołuj, 2021)<sup>[4]</sup>. Overall, while fashion students show genuine concern for the planet, their buying decisions are still shaped by affordability, accessibility, and trust. The study offers valuable insights for educators and fashion brands aiming to bridge the gap between awareness and action, helping to build a more conscious and responsible fashion community.

**Keywords:** Sustainable fashion, fashion students, consumer behaviour, purchase intention, attitude-behaviour gap

### Introduction

The sustainability challenge in the fashion industry has become a critical issue for both researchers and practitioners. As one of the largest contributors to global carbon emissions, accounting for nearly 10%, and a major source of textile waste, fashion's current linear production and consumption model poses significant environmental threats (Niinimäki et al., 2020)<sup>[5]</sup>. In response, the sustainable fashion movement has gained importance, focusing on ethical production, responsible sourcing, and circular economy principles. Despite increasing awareness, however, consumer participation remains inconsistent, highlighting the enduring "attitude-behaviour gap" (McNeill & Moore, 2015)<sup>[3]</sup>.

Fashion students represent an essential demographic in understanding this gap. Positioned as both future professionals and current consumers, they possess a theoretical understanding of sustainability yet often face practical and emotional barriers when applying these values to their own purchasing decisions. This study investigates the underlying reasons behind their hesitation to buy sustainable fashion and identifies pathways that can foster behavioural conversion. The findings aim to contribute to educational and industry frameworks that promote sustainable consumption through accessibility, trust, and meaningful engagement.

### Literature Review

1. "Sustainable Fashion Strategies: A Study Applied to the Development of Clothing Product" -Larissa Aparecida Wachholz & Eliane Pinheiro – Mix Sustentável (UFSC / ResearchGate listing)

### Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in sustainable product development, eco-design, and lifecycle thinking as applied to clothing design. It situates fashion within the broader discussion of ethical and slow fashion movements.

### Methodology

The authors conducted a systematized exploratory bibliographic review, synthesizing existing qualitative research.

### Research Gaps

They identify a lack of empirical research on how sustainable strategies are practically implemented in clothing product development. The paper also notes the limited testing of these strategies' actual environmental effectiveness.

2. "Sustainability in the Fashion Industry in Relation to Consumption in a Digital Age" -Adriana Lopes Vassalo, Célio G. Marques, João T. Simões, Maria M. Fernandes, and Susana Domingos – Sustainability (MDPI), 2024

### Theoretical Framework

The study integrates sustainability and circular economy perspectives with consumer behaviour theories, particularly in the context of digital transformation. Key constructs include Environmental Concern (EC), Knowledge of Sustainable Fashion Practices (KSFP), Adaptation to Digital Evolution (ADE), and Intention to Buy Sustainable Fashion.

## **Methodology**

A quantitative consumer survey was conducted using structural equation modelling and moderation analysis to test the roles of KSFP and ADE.

## **Research Gaps**

The authors highlight that research combining sustainable fashion, consumer behaviour, and digital evolution remains limited. They also note sample and generational constraints, calling for more cross-contextual and comparative studies.

### **3. “From Awareness to Action: Understanding Consumers’ Sustainable Fashion Products Purchase Behaviour”- Journal of Management & Sustainability Research (JMSR)**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This review synthesizes studies grounded in behavioural theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior and value-belief frameworks. It maps key determinants of sustainable fashion purchases, including attitudes, knowledge, perceived behavioural control, social norms, and price sensitivity.

## **Methodology**

The paper presents a systematic literature review of empirical studies focusing on the determinants of sustainable fashion purchasing.

## **Research Gaps**

The authors identify a disconnect between awareness and action, noting that few studies provide longitudinal or experimental evidence on interventions that effectively change consumer behaviour. They also point out the lack of research addressing context-specific factors such as product type and market environment.

### **4. “Comprehending the Consumer Behavior toward Sustainable Apparel”- MDPI Sustainability**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The study applies constructs from consumer behaviour-attitude, knowledge, perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms, within a sustainability framework, to explore apparel purchase decisions.

## **Methodology**

Depending on the specific publication, the paper adopts either a survey-based empirical approach or a systematic review methodology.

## **Research Gaps**

The authors emphasize the need for more cross-national studies and recommend connecting self-reported attitudes with actual post-purchase behaviour data to better understand real-world decision-making.

### **5. “Sustainable Fashion: Conceptualization, Purchase Determinants, and Willingness to Pay More”- By Paulo Botelho Pires et al. - Administrative Sciences (MDPI)**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws from literature on consumer willingness to pay and sustainable consumption. It links environmental concern and perceived product attributes to consumers’ readiness to pay a premium for sustainable apparel.

## **Methodology**

A quantitative empirical study was conducted using surveys and statistical modelling to identify key purchase determinants and willingness-to-pay factors.

## **Research Gaps**

The authors observe that willingness to pay varies significantly across product categories and consumer segments. They call for more research that examines these differences by product type and

## **Methodology**

To understand why fashion students hesitate to buy sustainable fashion, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining the clarity of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative insights. This blend allowed the study to capture both what students think and how they feel about sustainable consumption, creating a more complete picture of their behaviour.

### **1. Quantitative Phase**

The first phase involved an online survey conducted among 120 undergraduate and postgraduate students from the Fashion Design and Textile Design departments at NIFT Bengaluru. The questionnaire aimed to explore students’ awareness, buying habits, perceived challenges, and motivating factors related to sustainable fashion.

The survey contained 20 carefully designed items, adapted from existing frameworks on sustainable consumer behaviour (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Joy & Peña, 2017)<sup>[2, 3]</sup>. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A few demographic questions were also included to understand how factors such as academic level, gender, and age might influence attitudes and purchasing intent.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify general trends and highlight patterns in awareness, motivation, and actual purchase behaviour. Cross-tabulation helped compare responses between undergraduate and postgraduate students, while correlation analysis explored how awareness levels related to purchasing frequency.

### **2. Qualitative Phase**

To gain deeper insights, the study also included two focus group discussions (FGDs) with eight participants each, selected to reflect a mix of perspectives across gender, year of study, and exposure to sustainability topics. These sessions provided a space for open and honest conversations about what sustainability means to them, how they perceive sustainable brands, and what stops them from buying such products.

Each focus group lasted about one hour and followed a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility while keeping discussions focused on themes such as brand trust, affordability, trend pressure, and digital influence. The conversations were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed, helping identify recurring ideas and emotions.

Themes like awareness versus action, price sensitivity, trust in sustainability claims, and the desire for authenticity emerged strongly. By combining the numbers from the survey with the voices from the focus groups, the study developed a nuanced understanding of how fashion students think about sustainable fashion, not just as a concept, but as a personal choice.

## Results and Discussions

### 1. Quantitative Findings

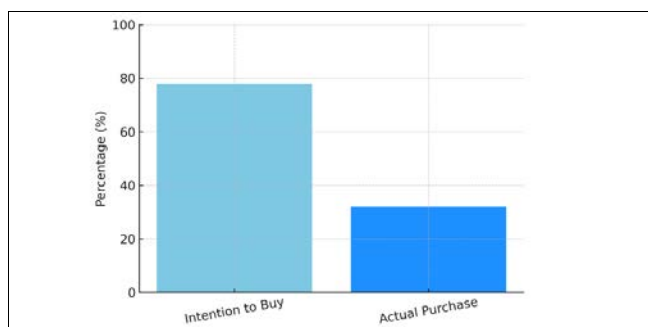
**Table 1:** Key Factors Influencing Sustainable Fashion Adoption among Fashion Students (N = 120)

Barrier / Motivator	% of Respondents
High price compared to fast fashion	68
Limited availability / variety	52
Scepticism about brand claims (“greenwashing”)	46
Aesthetic limitations (lack of trendiness)	39
Lack of peer influence or social proof	35
Increased awareness after academic exposure	58
Desire for hands-on learning (sustainable projects)	61

The quantitative data provided a clear overview of the major factors influencing students’ decisions regarding sustainable fashion consumption. As shown in Table 1, affordability emerged as the most significant barrier, with 68% of respondents indicating that higher prices compared to fast fashion discouraged them from purchasing sustainable products. Limited availability (52%) and scepticism toward brand sustainability claims (46%) were also noted as key deterrents. Additionally, 39% of students felt that sustainable options lacked trend relevance, while 35% expressed that a lack of peer influence or visible social validation hindered their interest.

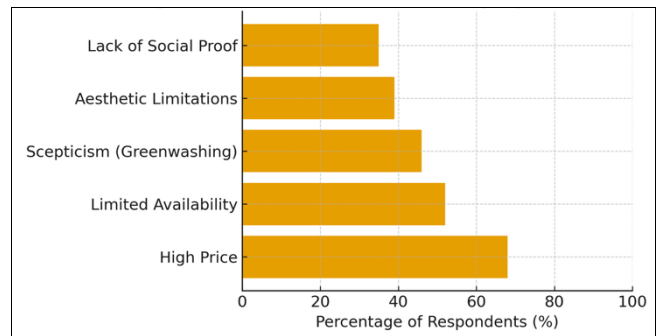
On a positive note, 58% of respondents reported that academic exposure had improved their awareness of sustainability, and 61% mentioned that participating in hands-on sustainable design projects enhanced their motivation to engage in ethical consumption.

These findings highlight a consistent value–action gap: while students recognise the importance of sustainability, their purchasing behaviour remains guided by aesthetic preferences, affordability, and social cues. This observation aligns with Joy and Peña’s (2017) [2] assertion that fashion identity and self-expression often take precedence over environmental responsibility.



**Fig 1:** Intention vs. Actual Purchase of Sustainable Fashion among Students

This chart highlights the gap between students’ intent and action, while 78% express interest in buying sustainable fashion, only 32% have made such purchases. The contrast underscores the persistence of the attitude–behaviour gap among informed consumers.



**Fig 2:** Perceived Barriers to Buying Sustainable

The horizontal bar chart reveals affordability, limited availability, and scepticism toward brand claims as major deterrents. These findings emphasize how structural and psychological barriers jointly restrict sustainable consumption.

### 2. Qualitative Insights

Insights from the focus group discussions provided emotional and contextual depth to the quantitative results. Participants frequently described sustainability as “the right thing to do,” yet admitted that emotional connection and design appeal strongly influenced their choices. Sustainable garments were often perceived as “beautiful in principle but not in design,” revealing a creative disconnect between ethics and aesthetics.

Students also expressed distrust toward vague sustainability claims, echoing concerns about greenwashing. They emphasized that authenticity, storytelling, and visible brand commitment were essential to inspire confidence. A recurring theme was the desire for more accessible and relatable forms of sustainable fashion, garments that balance ethics with individuality and style.

These responses reinforce the notion that for young, design-oriented consumers, sustainability must be experienced as aesthetic relevance rather than solely an ethical obligation.

### Discussion

The combined findings suggest that while awareness of sustainability among fashion students is relatively high, the conversion from awareness to actual purchase remains weak. Affordability and aesthetic desirability emerged as the two most influential factors in driving purchasing intent. The price sensitivity of students, who are often operating within limited budgets, was a recurring theme across both datasets.

Equally important is the aesthetic gap, the perception that sustainable fashion does not align with current trends or self-expression needs. This tension between identity and ethics resonates with Joy and Peña’s (2017) [2] observation that consumers prioritize fissionability even when they hold pro-environmental attitudes.

Encouragingly, the study found that transparency in communication and hands-on educational exposure significantly enhance trust and motivation. Participants who had engaged in sustainability-focused coursework or projects demonstrated a stronger intent to adopt sustainable practices, both as designers and as consumers. This supports Murzyn-Kupisz and Hołuj’s (2021) [4] argument that embedding sustainability into

creative pedagogy fosters not only awareness but also behavioural change.

In summary, these results reveal that bridging the attitude–behaviour gap requires more than awareness; it demands emotional engagement, design relevance, and accessibility. Sustainable fashion education must therefore evolve from theoretical instruction to experiential learning, where students can see, feel, and co-create sustainability as part of their design identity.

This study set out to understand why fashion students, despite being aware of sustainability and its urgency, often hesitate to buy sustainable fashion for themselves. What emerged was not a lack of care or concern, but a deeper conflict between ideals and lived realities. Students spoke passionately about sustainability as a value, yet their purchasing choices were shaped by price, design appeal, and peer influence, all factors that define how fashion is experienced in everyday life.

### Conclusion

The findings reveal that awareness alone is not enough. Many students know what sustainability means, but still struggle to connect that knowledge to their personal wardrobes. High prices and limited access were practical challenges, but emotional and aesthetic factors proved equally influential. Sustainable fashion was often described as meaningful but “not stylish enough,” highlighting a tension between doing good and looking good.

However, the study also showed clear signs of optimism. Students who engaged in sustainability projects or saw real examples of ethical design felt more inspired to make conscious choices. This suggests that when sustainability is experienced, not just taught, it becomes relatable and desirable.

For educators, this means that sustainability education should move beyond theory and into tangible, creative practice. Allowing students to experiment with eco-friendly materials, collaborate with local artisans, or co-create responsible design collections can make sustainability part of their design DNA.

For brands, the message is equally clear: young consumers respond to honesty, creativity, and authenticity. Making sustainable fashion more affordable, more expressive, and more transparent can turn awareness into genuine engagement.

Ultimately, this study reminds us that change in fashion begins with understanding people, their desires, habits, and hopes. When sustainability becomes not just a responsibility but a form of self-expression, it transforms from an abstract ideal into something personal, wearable, and lasting.

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