

Chapter 7

The Consumer in the Fashion Industry: An Empirical Study to Understand if It Is Sustainable

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ABSTRACT

The production and consumption of textile products worldwide generate severe environmental impacts as well as economic and social repercussions. Companies are embarking on a new path towards sustainable production and consumption patterns to respond to increasingly environmentally conscious consumers. This study aims to investigate the characteristics of a sustainable consumer in the fashion industry and their level of awareness regarding sustainability at the time of purchase. To this end, a questionnaire was developed to analyse consumer behaviour in the fashion sector, while various statistical techniques were used to analyse the data. The results show that a cluster of consumers can be defined as sustainable, and that socio-demographic variables and price influence the purchase of sustainable products. Sustainability knowledge is also crucial for adopting sustainable consumption behaviour.

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INTRODUCTION

The production and consumption of textile products worldwide generate high environmental impacts related to water consumption, energy consumption and air emissions, and economic and social repercussions (Sinha et al., 2023). The production of textile products is continuously increasing with products that have an increasingly shorter life cycle. This production model aimed at the overproduction and overconsumption of clothing products is known as fast fashion (Yang et al., 2017). According to this logic, consumers buy lower quality and cheaper clothing to keep up with the fashion of the moment. This model has several critical points related to resource consumption and waste management. To respond to increasing environmentally and socially aware consumers, several companies are embarking on a new path towards sustainable production models (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2019).

Sustainable fashion can be defined as ‘clothing that incorporates one or more aspects of social and environmental sustainability’ (Su et al., 2019, p. 1141). It is, therefore, based on fair trade principles, anti-exploitation and the use of materials that do not cause harm to the environment, as pointed out by (Goworek et al., 2012; Su & Chang, 2018). From a consumer perspective, sustainable fashion has been presented as a response to the overconsumption of clothing products. This perspective aims to address the socio-environmental issues that characterise the industry, including pollution, energy conservation, fair trade principles and exploitation-free labour (Diddi et al., 2019; L. McNeill & Venter, 2019; Su et al., 2019). Fashion represents a key sector for the circular transition at the European level. The industry comprises more than 160,000 companies with a workforce of 1.5 million people and a turnover of EUR 162 billion (EURATEX, 2020). Clothing in Europe generates over 57 million tonnes of waste per year (European Environmental Agency, 2020). European policies, particularly the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles, encourage the development of sustainable production and consumption patterns. They also position Europe as a forerunner of sustainable and circular value chains.

One of the critical points on which the sustainable fashion sector is developing at the European level concerns traceability and transparency of information along the production chain. This combines the production of sustainable products that at the same time respect ethical principles related to the welfare of workers further essential point is upstream in the production chain (Mukherjee, 2015). The use of sustainable raw materials that derive from renewable sources significantly reduces the environmental impacts related to the production of clothing materials (Cimatti et al., 2017). Technological innovation is also fundamental in the sector as through the use of new production techniques and technologies, production processes are more optimised and have a lower environmental impact (Nayak et al., 2020; Papahristou & Bilalis, 2017).

Consumers across Europe are becoming increasingly involved in the consumption of sustainable fashion products. Driven by the awareness of environmental issues and stimulated by new fashions triggered by sustainability, the consumption of sustainable fashion products is continuously growing (Mukendi et al., 2020). Sustainability issues and the circular economy are now familiar themes for consumers. Their knowledge towards sustainable consumption of clothing products does not justify an awareness of their behaviour (Busalim et al., 2022). Several studies in the literature explore consumer behaviour in sustainable fashion, as illustrated by studies such as that of (Jacobs et al., 2018) and (Koszewska, 2016). Still, no studies investigate the gap between consumers’ attitudes towards sustainable consumption and their purchasing behavior towards sustainable products. Against this background, this study aims to examine the characteristics of a sustainable consumer in the fashion industry and their level of awareness in terms of sustainability at the time of purchase.

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