

Investigating Sustainable Consumer Behavior in the Fashion Industry

By Nikunj Bhimsaria, Patrick Nguyen Burden, Chia Wen Cheng, Erica Pinto

Sustainability in the fashion and apparel industry has been an evolving concern as many advocates have pointed at the industry for adversely contributing to climate and labor impacts, inciting many stakeholders across the ecosystem to change their behaviors, from brands focusing on lowering their carbon emissions to policymakers issuing workforce protection regulations. At the center of the industry are end consumers who account for most of the industry's environmental footprint, especially with the rise of ultra-fast fashion trends that exacerbate the frequency at which consumers purchase and dispose of new items, many of which are developed with little concern for people or the environment. Therefore, in conducting a behavioral systems analysis, we intend to understand how to encourage the most prominent fast fashion shoppers—young urban women between the ages of 16-35 who make frequent online purchases from fast fashion brands—to consider sustainable alternatives or make a more responsible brand choice at the point of purchase. To address this, we examined existing driving forces that motivate these consumers to make sustainable choices as well as restraining forces that have largely obstructed the adoption of such behaviors by interrogating the interactions and degree of influence stakeholders across the ecosystem have on one another, keeping the consumer at the center of these relationships. While there are several driving forces that have made eco-consciousness in shopping more prevalent across consumers and the industry, we found that many of them stand in tension with restraining forces rooted in limited affordability, availability, education, and shopper optionality at the point of purchase—where a behavioral intervention stands best to incite change.

We identified ten key driving forces that motivate consumers to make more sustainable decisions while shopping for clothing. There are many internal considerations that might drive individual consumers, such as the inability to make frequent purchases due to affordability or convenience, the desire to own high-quality, durable clothing, increasing awareness of climate change and its impacts, or being an eco-conscious consumer. Being an eco-conscious consumer is also a social group force, for an individual may feel the pressure to be conscious by their peers. Between individuals and unsustainable clothing brands themselves, consumers are often skeptical of greenwashing from fast fashion brands and feel guilt and empathy for garment workers experiencing poor working conditions. On the other hand, consumers are also becoming more interested in and aware of the availability of sustainable options at a macro level, whether that be from new, rental, or second-hand companies; this is also true for their impacts relative to other options via ratings and certifications created by agencies or NGOs.

Furthermore, we identified twenty one restraining forces that hinder consumers from making more sustainable decisions while shopping for clothing. For this report, we focus on the ten most critical forces at play; for the full list, visit our *Driving and Restraining Forces Template*. First, an individual may have a limited understanding of the impacts of their shopping choices, assume their other sustainable lifestyle choices offset their shopping habits, or have resistance to change their habits due to status quo bias. Even though there are sustainability ratings and certifications to verify sustainable options, individuals are often unaware of them. At a group level, influencers and fashion brands themselves play a role by exposing consumers to frequent content and advertisements for clothing; sometimes this is for truly unsustainable clothing, or sometimes it is greenwashing to lead consumers to perceive their clothing is a good choice. Also, individual consumers are part of the greater population at large, which often leads them to believe their individual actions have a very limited impact. Finally, there are larger contextual factors at play in addition to these individual and group-level forces: the economics of affordable clothing options between companies and consumers, consumers perceiving sustainable options as always more expensive, complexity a variety of stakeholders brings to the ability to discern differences in environmental impact between clothing choices, and general apathy towards sustainability as a whole.

The forces outlined above were prioritized based on their level of impact on consumer behavior and the feasibility of designing behavioral interventions to affect their influence on consumers. So, while the convenience of ordering clothes from big-brand e-commerce websites is a factor in the prevalence of fast fashion, it does not figure in our priority list since designing a behavioral intervention to change that is difficult. Following is a more detailed discussion of our considerations:

Individual - At the individual level, like a lot of other non-sustainable behaviors, purchasing decisions related to apparel are driven by adherence to routine purchasing habits and a limited understanding of fashion's environmental/social impacts.

Even for consumers who are conscious of fast fashion's impact, it can be difficult to cut through the plethora of sustainability certifications and ratings that are used by brands themselves or advocacy organizations. Lastly, individuals can sometimes be mired in 'sustainability math' and try to rationalize their decisions by thinking of sustainable choices in other aspects of daily life. A lot of the aforementioned behaviors can be addressed through educating consumers, both on the impact of fast fashion on society and trust-worthy certifications/ratings. Education can take multiple forms, be it a marketing campaign or improved sustainability labels (adopted by brands/industry). Ultimately, nudges can be designed to improve behavior incrementally.

Group - At the group level, we prioritized forces that expose large sections of the population to either misinformation or fast fashion-friendly purchasing habits, leading to consumers moving away from taking on individual responsibility for decision-making. Nowadays, influencers are incentivized to constantly promote new brands or apparel trends. In a bid to emulate their

icons and belong, consumers tend to follow the advice given by their chosen influencer or promoter. Brands contribute to the adoption of fast fashion by not only promoting frequent purchasing but also greenwashing their offerings as sustainable (either through blatant misinformation or by obfuscating the meaning of ratings). The result is that consumers tend to blame large brands or prominent influencers for their purchasing habits instead of assuming personal responsibility. We believe behavioral interventions to change these forces are feasible since there have been increasing examples of successful campaigns against misinformation and holding brands accountable for their advertising. Additionally, there is a growing section of influencers utilizing their position to promote sustainable behaviors.

Macro - Lastly, there are societal factors at play such as the general apathy towards sustainability, the perception of higher associated costs with sustainable living/purchasing, and the complexity of differentiating between products when viewed through the lens of sustainability. While these forces are admittedly harder to address compared to individual or group-level forces, the impact of (positive) change is consequently outsized. Our interviews revealed instances where advocacy groups have been successful with campaigns that have led to the general public caring more about sustainability and their impact on the planet, which in turn drove our decision to include such forces in our priority list.

In conclusion, our investigation into the purchasing behaviors of our target user has unveiled a complex interplay between driving forces and restraining forces. These multifaceted factors, rooted in individual, group, and macro levels, underscore the importance of strategic intervention design within the constraints of limited time and resources. Identifying forces with high feasibility and those capable of yielding significant impacts becomes pivotal. High feasibility ensures that desired changes are more likely to materialize, while high impact ensures that these changes ripple through the network, optimizing resource utilization for sustainable transformation. Nevertheless, this complexity gives rise to several inherent tensions among the forces we've examined. The clash between peer pressure and the desire to exhibit personal fashion taste versus eco-consciousness reflects the limitations imposed by the current information landscape and brand offerings. A similar tension arises from the challenge of maintaining a wardrobe of budget-friendly items while demanding high quality, given the scarcity of such options. Additionally, consumers are exposed to the risk of falling victim to greenwashing when showing brand loyalty, leading to skepticism about sustainability claims and limiting purchase choices due to the asymmetric information shared by both consumers and companies. This tension also connects to the broader issue of consumers' self-awareness regarding their commitment to sustainable shopping practices and the lack of due diligence in researching products labeled as "sustainable." These tensions highlight the need for carefully tailored interventions to effectively address these complexities while giving us confidence that balance can be achieved among dynamic stakeholders.