Investigating Sustainable Consumer Behavior in the Fashion Industry

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Contributing more to annual carbon emissions than all international flights and maritime shipping combined, the retail fashion and apparel industry has been often scrutinized for the adverse environmental and social impacts it has had across its value chain (The World Bank, 2019). Further exacerbated by ultra-fast fashion trends, the industry's vicious turnover of products has only further intensified consumer demand, with an estimated 50% of shoppers wanting to buy a fashion trend within the same week of discovering it (Alvarez & Marshal, 2022). This means consumers play a huge role in dictating whether upstream production choices and downstream usage of fashion products are actually made sustainably. Therefore, investigating how to encourage consumers to adopt more sustainable habits when purchasing or using new fashion items may help mitigate and have cascading effects on some of the environmental and social risks endemic to the entire industry. While existing solutions have increased consumer awareness of environmental and social risks across fashion, exploring behavioral interventions focused on shifting consumer habits to more sustainable brand purchases and decreased fashion consumption overall presents an opportunity to more effectively curb sustainability-related concerns.

Accounting for 8-10% of global carbon emissions, equivalent to 1.2 billion tonnes of CO_2, and 20% of industrial wastewater pollution, the fashion industry is projected to eventually amount to 25% of the world's carbon footprint by 2050 if current production and consumption trends persist (Leal Filho, et. al., 2022). While impacts can vary across different segments of the industry as well as across the supply chain, just over a third of the emissions associated with, for example a pair of jeans, comes from fiber and fabric production. Of the rest of the emissions, 8%

is from cutting, sewing and finishing, 16% from packaging, transport and retail, and 40% from consumer use, which includes washing and discarding (BBC, 2020). While most consumer goods have complex supply chains that make it difficult to account for all of their associated emissions, what makes the fashion industry particularly problematic is the frenetic pace of change it not only undergoes, but encourages. About 88% of major fashion brands still do not disclose their annual production volumes, obscuring the truth behind overproduction practices used to consistently introduce new styles for consumers (Fashion Transparency Index, 2023). Consequently, with each passing season, consumers are compelled into buying the latest items to stay on trend, with the average person today buying 60% more clothing than the average in 2000. But not only are they buying more in volume and in frequency–they also discard more as a result.

These customer behaviors around purchasing and disposal are influenced by a multitude of interconnected factors, making behavior change a much more complex problem. On one hand, fast fashion trends, reinforced by social media influencers and the proliferation of online shopping platforms, have encouraged consumers to prioritize vendors that can provide shorter delivery times and faster inventory turnover (Norris, 2022). Such trends have weakened traditional brand loyalty and interest in detailed product information, particularly for fast fashion shoppers. But even with sustainable-minded customers, many restraining forces such as higher price premiums, confusing and inadequate sustainability reporting, and social pressures have barred shoppers from making more sustainable choices, regardless if that is their initial intention (Wang, 2010). While product quality, previous shopping experience, personal values, and more all intersect to drive people's choices around apparel, these factors vary across demographics – young women for example, who make up a majority of fashion purchases are also the most price

sensitive, reinforcing their drive to purchase from cheaper, yet less sustainable fashion brands

(Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, changing these behaviors requires the use of interventions that

address not only the gap between customer attitudes and actions, but also create relational and

contemplative opportunities for customers to self-examine their relationship with fashion

(Leeuwis et al., 2022; White et al., 2019; Turquier et al., 2023; McEachern et al., 2020).

While there are several examples of current and proposed programs, initiatives, and

policies that promote fashion sustainability, these information-based campaigns, while important,

fall short of changing behavior. Campaigns like *#WhatsInMyClothes,* ratings like *Fashion

Transparency Index* and *Good On You,* and certifications like B Corporation all aim to bring

transparency, awareness, and education to consumers in an attempt to hold companies

accountable while influencing individual purchase decisions (B Corp; Fashion Revolution, 2023;

Made Together; van Duijn, 2020). However, a critical limitation is the ineffective dissemination

of this information they seek to inspire consumer behavior change. At the policy level, the EU's

Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) and the Fashion Act proposed in

New York, all focus on holding corporations accountable for their social and environmental

impacts (Fashion Revolution, 2023; Fashion Act, 2022), but present minimal behavioral

interventions at the consumer level. Ultimately, while campaigns, ratings, and policy all play a

role and will continue to more so in the future, the use of behavioral interventions that steer

consumers to purchasing and using their clothes more sustainably holds potential promise in

shifting consumer habits towards more environmentally – and socially – positive choices needed

to offset and eventually change the adverse impacts the pervade across the fashion industry.

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