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Sustainability and Consumer Behaviour in the Fast Fashion Industry: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT: The fast fashion industry, driven by its ability to provide consumers with affordable, trendy clothing at a rapid pace, has grown exponentially, creating significant environmental and societal challenges, making sustainability a pressing concern. While sustainability has garnered attention in consumer behaviour research in the fashion industry, a comprehensive review of its role in consumer behaviour within the fast fashion industry (FFI) remains scarce. This systematic literature review addresses this gap by examining how sustainability is studied in consumer behaviour research within the FFI, both as a driver or response of consumer behaviour. A total of 77 articles were finalised for the review. A descriptive analysis was performed to examine the research trends and methods, journal representation, theoretical framework, geographical and demographic scope; then a content analysis was conducted. The study finds a notable increase in publications since 2020. We identified various drivers of sustainable consumer behaviour, among which the most explored were sustainable product attributes, brand sustainability strategies, CSR efforts, personal values, sustainability awareness, and attitudes towards sustainable fashion. The response explored in the sample included consumers' purchase intentions towards sustainable clothing options and consumers' disposal practices. This review identifies several research gaps suggesting the need for further research into male consumers' attitudes, and generational and cross-cultural differences; the use of diverse theoretical frameworks and mixed research methods is also suggested. Our study provides practitioners with several suggestions that include development of sustainable marketing strategies and policies to promote sustainable practices through education and awareness campaigns.

Keywords: Sustainability, Fast Fashion, Consumer Behaviour, Literature Review

Introduction

In recent years, the global fashion industry, ranked as the third largest manufacturing sector worldwide, has seen an unprecedented surge in both supply and demand, particularly in the fast fashion segment. Joy et al. (2012) defines fast fashion as low-priced clothing collections that replicates current luxury fashion trends. Fast fashion has revolutionized the fashion world (Mcneill & Moore, 2015) with its ability to offer consumers rapid access to the latest runway-inspired designs at incredibly affordable prices (Joy et al., 2012). However, this seemingly boundless realm of cheap, chic fashion conceals a darker reality: the detrimental impact it has on the environment and society (Turker & Altuntas, 2014). This industry has faced criticism for environmental issues, labour standards violation, and more recently, its failure to protect garment workers widespread retail closures, layoffs and furloughs, mandatory factory shutdowns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, 2021). Fast fashion encourages overconsumption and mindless disposal (Park et al., 2017) creating environmental problems and significant challenges for

sustainability.

The idea of sustainability has started capturing the interest of consumers, policymakers, and retailers in the fashion industry, in response to the criticism surrounding the fast fashion industry (McNeill & Venter, 2019). The work of numerous environmental and labour rights activist organisations and academic works on fashion sustainability have paved way for this realisation (Holgar, 2022). Furthermore, the media coverage of environmental and social issues has been increasing (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018), creating awareness about these issues. While the importance of sustainability in the fashion industry is reflected in consumer behaviour research, there remains a notable gap in comprehensive literature reviews studying the role of sustainability in FFI from a consumer behaviour perspective. This paper systematically reviews and evaluates studies on sustainability and consumer behaviour in the fashion industry, aiming to identify research gaps, suggest future directions and practical implications.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper was a systematic literature review of academic articles. A systematic review aims to gather and synthesize all relevant empirical evidence to answer specific research questions, employing rigorous methods to minimize bias (Moher et al., 2009). Despite previous research on this topic, there was a notable lack of comprehensive literature review, highlighting the need for a synthesis of existing knowledge and identification of research gaps. The review process followed a three-stage approach: Planning, Conducting, and Reporting (Transfield et al., 2003). During the planning stage, the need and objectives were defined, and a search strategy was developed, using Scopus as the primary database for English-language peer-reviewed articles up to 2022. Relevant keywords were selected to guide the search effectively. In the conducting stage, an initial sample of 180 articles was generated, with 31 articles excluded after reviewing titles and abstracts. The remaining 149 articles were thoroughly analysed, leading to the categorization of articles into supply side - which studied topics on production, supply chain etc, - and demand side - which focused on consumer behaviour and the influence of marketing strategies on consumer behaviour. The focus of the study being on consumer perspectives, supply-side articles were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 77 articles.

Findings

The evolution of publications on sustainability in the FFI from the consumer perspective has seen a significant increase, particularly since 2020, highlighting the growing relevance of this topic. These 77 articles span 37 journals, with 80% of them appearing in journals related to sustainability, business ethics, CSR, fashion, and consumer studies. The remaining 20% encompass diverse fields, reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of this research. Most articles (95%) feature empirical studies, while a minority (5%) are conceptual papers. Geographically, the articles cover a wide range of countries, with the U.S. having the highest representation, followed by China, the UK, and India. Several other countries are also included, and some studies have a cross-continental focus. In terms of demographics, most articles have a higher representation of female participants, with some exclusively focusing on females. The

age groups studied include Generation Z (1997-2012), Millennials (1981-1996), and Generation X (1965-1980), with a major emphasis on Generation Z, aligning with the target audience of the FFI. Sixty per cent of the articles explicitly made reference to specific theories to build their framework, with the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Grounded Theory being the most frequently utilized. Regarding analysis methods, 62% employ quantitative approaches, 29% use qualitative methods, and 9% adopt mixed methods, demonstrating the diversity of analytical techniques used in this research.

Our main goal in the content analysis was to investigate the relationship between sustainability and consumer behaviour in the FFI research. We first analysed whether sustainability related factors acted as a driving force shaping consumers' choices (drivers); then we studied sustainability related acts by fast fashion customers (responses). Our analysis revealed that 44 papers explored sustainability aspects present in both the drivers and responses, indicating that sustainability played a dual role as both a driving force and an action of consumer behaviour. Furthermore, 18 articles focused on sustainability solely as a driver for consumer behaviour, influencing consumers' choices and preferences. On the other hand, 11 articles examined sustainability solely as an action of consumer behaviour, reflecting on sustainable practices by fast fashion customers. Several sustainability related drivers were identified in the review, which were categorised into marketing mix, individual influences, group influences and situational influences (Blackwell et al., 2006). The drivers especially included sustainable marketing mix (such as sustainable and ethical product attributes, sustainability positioning strategies and CSR efforts of brands), individual influences (such as consumers' personal values, level of sustainability awareness and attitude towards sustainable and ethical fashion) and group influences (such as socio-cultural norms, reference groups and family influences). Similarly, responses related to sustainability were divided into pre-purchase and post-purchase behaviour to study different stages in the consumer decision-making process. The pre purchase behaviour included consumers' attitudes, perceptions, and purchase intentions towards an extensive array of sustainable and ethically produced clothing options. Sustainable post purchase behaviour included consumers' disposal practices, willingness to recycle clothes and participate in community mending programs.

Discussion

There are several noteworthy areas for future research in the realm of sustainability and consumer behaviour in the FFI. Firstly, exploring male consumers' attitudes and behaviours in sustainable fashion could provide insights into gender-specific dynamics. Additionally, investigating how older consumer segments engage with sustainability and whether generational differences impact attitudes and behaviours is vital. The results showed that there is a lack of variety on research approaches and methods such as multi theoretical approaches, qualitative methods, mixed methods, and comparative studies. Future researchers could benefit from studying these gaps. Examining sustainability-related drivers of consumer behaviour, underexplored areas in marketing mix, such as the impact of brands' eco-friendly initiatives and the role of greenwashing practices requires further attention. Investigating these aspects can provide valuable insights for brands seeking genuine sustainability and credibility in the eyes of

environmentally conscious consumers. Additionally, exploring less studied individual influences, like wardrobe research and experiential learning workshops, could help guide consumers toward more sustainable lifestyles. Group influences on sustainable consumer behaviour remain relatively overlooked but hold significant potential. Culture plays a crucial role in shaping values, beliefs, norms, and attitudes, all of which influence behaviour. As societies become more diverse, understanding how cultural factors interact with sustainability considerations is increasingly important. Future research should delve into cultural influences, examining how cultural backgrounds, traditions, and societal values affect consumers' perceptions and motivations regarding sustainability and their preferences for sustainable products. Examining sustainability-related consumer responses, pre-purchase behaviours such as consumers' sustainable and actual purchase behaviour has been widely studied, whereas purchase intention towards second-hand clothing and thrift store shopping has not received the required attention, given their alignment with sustainable fashion practices. Exploring potential barriers and motivations associated with these behaviours, as well as investigating the role of marketing strategies and societal norms in shaping consumer perceptions towards these sustainable practices, could provide valuable insights. Sustainable consumer behaviour extends beyond the act of making sustainable purchases and encompasses post-purchase behaviours, including practices related to product disposal. Future research should explore post-purchase behaviours more extensively. Furthermore, individual factors, such as personal values and environmental attitudes, play a substantial role in influencing consumers' sustainable pre and post purchase behaviour, emphasizing the need to study the influence of marketing mix and group influences on sustainable consumer behaviour.

Conclusion and implications

This review provides useful information regarding sustainability and consumer behaviour in the FFI. The results of the review provide various noteworthy areas for future research in this domain as mentioned above. This study also provides useful practical contributions to marketers, managers, and policymakers. It helps marketing practitioners in understanding how sustainability acts as a driver influencing consumer purchasing decision, and how they can use sustainability to drive consumer behaviour. The findings also suggest marketers in tailoring marketing strategies, product offerings, and policies to accommodate gender-specific dynamics, generational differences, and cross-cultural differences. To stimulate responsible consumer behaviour, marketers can focus on educating consumers about the sustainability aspects of their product through transparent and informative marketing campaigns that highlight eco-friendly product attributes, ethical sourcing, and the brand's commitment to social and environmental responsibility. Brands could also engage consumers in sustainability initiatives such as recycling programs. Furthermore, this study also helps policymakers in crafting targeted strategies, promoting consumer education, implementing effective regulations, and driving sustainability initiatives in the FFI. Examining the impact of education and awareness campaigns on encouraging sustainable consumption practices could yield practical implications for both policymakers and fashion brands seeking to enhance their sustainability efforts.

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