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The fast fashion vs environment debate: Consumers' level of awareness, feelings, and behaviour towards sustainability within the fast-fashion sector

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the level of knowledge (cognition), attitudes, and behaviour of customers toward sustainability issues in the context of fast fashion. It incorporates empirical evidence that focuses on investigating what consumers know and feel, and how they behave towards fast fashion brands in the context of sustainability, and further explores whether consumers' knowledge about fashion is not sufficient to evoke environmentally friendly purchases. To facilitate a shift towards more sustainable fashion consumption if this is desirable, providing clear information about the environmental and the social impact of products and creating strong feelings, seems to be promising. The descriptive analysis of data collected from 97 consumers reveals that although most consumers claim to be knowledgeable about sustainability-related issues, they lack precise and accurate knowledge on aspects linked to the sustainable supply chain, including fabric, materials, recycling, or re-use of fashion items. Women appear to be more knowledgeable about this topic than men, but men are willing to pay a higher price for fast fashion brands that reflect their moral values.

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Sustainability; fast fashion; sustainable consumption; purchase behaviour; consumer knowledge

Introduction

The fashion industry is the third biggest manufacturing industry in the world, after the automotive and technology industries (Zhang, Zhang, and Zhou 2021). It accounts for over 1.3 trillion dollars in the global economy and provides 300 million jobs worldwide, thus contributing significantly to economic development (McKinsey Global Fashion Index 2019). Even though it plays a crucial role in global GDP (Boston Consulting Group Annual Sustainability Report 2019 (2020)), it ranks second as the most polluting industry after the oil industry worldwide and overall, negatively affects the planet and its resources.

In the past few decades, the topic of sustainability has gained increased attention (Papasolomou-Doukakis, Krambia-Kapardis, and Katsioloudes 2005; Aguinis and Glavas 2012; Papasolomou et al. 2019; Dabas and Whang 2022) caused by growing interest in sustainability from internal and external stakeholders (Peloza and Shang 2011) and motivated by increased concerns regarding unethical and unsustainable business

practices such as production practices, the sourcing of raw materials, supply chain methods, and working conditions (McWilliams, Siegel, and Wright 2006).

In general, the fashion industry has been criticised for being slow in recognizing and responding to the need for sustainability (McNeil and Moore 2015), despite the emergence and growth of sustainable options in other markets (Luchs et al. 2011). Non-government organisations (NGOs) campaign to inform consumers of what constitutes unsustainable practice, such as allegations of garment worker exploitation, the environmental impact of low-cost clothing, and high levels of production (Allwood et al. 2006). However, the successful implementation of sustainability is feasible only through the adoption of a holistic approach, one that encourages cross-sectoral partnership and engages all stakeholders, especially consumers, into the effort via various initiatives (see Van Tulder et al. 2016; Van Tulder and Keen 2018). Tourky et al. (2020) suggest that sustainability activities reflect a proactive agenda on behalf of businesses that demonstrates responsibility towards their stakeholders. However, such initiatives often focus on certain stakeholders and exclude others of a more primary nature.

Despite the fact that sustainability seems to be high on the research agenda in many industries including the fashion industry (Bong Ko and Jin 2017; Su et al. 2019; Mukendi et al. 2020) research specifically on sustainability and consumer attitudes and behaviour in the fast fashion sector has been relatively scarce. Moreover, several studies reported no relationship between sustainable fashion consumption and sustainable fashion knowledge (Khare and Sadachar, 2017), while others reported a positive (Chi et al., 2019) or even negative relationship (Sadachar et al., 2016). Hence, these mixed results call for expansion of research in this area.

To shed further light on these topics and resolve research gaps as specified above, the present study aims to investigate the level of knowledge (cognition), attitudes, and behaviours of customers towards sustainability issues in the context of fast fashion within the Cypriot market. Although Cyprus has shown progress in terms of some of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as reducing poverty, safeguarding good health and high tertiary educational standards, it continues to rank low among the EU countries (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/cyprus>. Accessed 09/10/2022). Regarding the environment, Cyprus' performance is below the EU average in most SDGs characterised by serious challenges primarily regarding sustainable agriculture, clean water, and sanitation. The 2nd voluntary national review (VNR) carried out in 2021 revealed that Cyprus continues to lack behind with respect to affordable and clean energy, responsible consumption and production and climate action: 'Cyprus is facing significant challenges regarding responsible consumption and production. Remaining significant challenges pertain to the generation and recycling rate of waste with severe deficit in achieving the national targets deriving from EU legislation.' (Republic of Cyprus Second Voluntary National Review – Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2021), p. 80). These challenges have been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic which halted socio-economic and environmental progress, and the highest influx of migrants in the EU with the number of asylum applications rising to 8746 in 2019 compared to the EU average of 1411 applications (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282512021_VNR_Report_Cyprus.pdf).

Thus, building on the evidence generated from the 2021 VNR study carried out in Cyprus, as a first objective, this research sought to explore the degree of customer awareness and perceptions held by consumers regarding sustainability within the fast fashion sector. Secondly, to understand consumer behaviour regarding sustainability and fast fashion products, and finally, examine the feelings of consumers toward fast fashion products and sustainability issues.

This paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review pertaining to the fashion industry and its relation to sustainability is presented, with an emphasis on the fast fashion sector and consumer behaviour within this sector. The methodology and the chosen techniques to achieve the research goal follow. The findings of this research are presented and discussed, concluding with managerial implications, research limitations, and avenues for further research.

Literature review

Fashion industry and sustainability

According to the European Parliament (2020) the fashion industry is among the biggest pollutants in the world primarily due to mass production techniques and practices that are used to meet high consumer demand and achieve high profit margins (McNeil and Moore 2015). The increasing consumption levels and high consumer demand have led fashion businesses to adopt technological advancements in mass production, which, however, can overtake natural resources (Niinimäki et al. 2020). Turker and Altuntas (2014) also emphasize the impact of the extended fashion supply chain and the heavy environmental burden that it causes due to increased transportation costs, and the need to provide orders to consumers as fast as possible. A further consideration, perhaps for another paper, is the growth in third world sweat shops and almost a type of forced labour admittedly for local suppliers but aided, abetted, and encouraged by the never-ending need for profits by well-known multinational brands and corporations. Bhardwaj and Fairhurst (2010) argue that it is the pressure to respond to the heightened customer demand for fashion at low prices without jeopardizing profit margins that led companies to the relocation of the apparel production to developing countries which resulted in the emergence of the fast-fashion industry and its imminent sweatshop implications (Adams 2002) that led to the degradation of people and their impoverishment, which is almost a type of slave labour. Sweatshop labour in impoverished countries is widely regarded as a paradigm case of wrongful exploitation (Berkey 2021) and the appalling sweatshop working conditions in many developing countries have raised public scrutiny forcing key stakeholders such as international buyers, readymade garment industry (RMG) factory owners, government, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) to play an active role towards improving the overall factory working conditions and protecting worker rights (Mansumi and Rahman 2018). These multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) have been fuelled by increased public scrutiny and legal pressure (Shamir 2011). Another factor that has been stipulated by Lindenmeier et al. (2017) as one that could be hampering the use of sweatshops is the degradation of people and their continued impoverishment which causes heightened consumer guilt, which can potentially increase the market share of fair-trade products and bring a favourable change in the marketing system's output.

The main challenge for the fashion industry today is the development and adoption of more sustainable strategies towards the stakeholders, the communities in which production takes place, and nature itself. Firms must accept and address their social and environmental footprints, and the planet's capacity to withstand the impact of their actions and regenerate (Antonini and Larrinaga 2017; Bebbington and Unerman 2018; Schaltegger and Burritt 2018). There is a strong interrelationship between these challenges and corporate sustainability, which in turn emerges from the conventional concept of corporate social responsibility (Hörisch, Freeman, and Schaltegger 2014, p. 341). According to Salvioni and Gennari (2016) corporate sustainability encompasses those practices that relate stakeholder interdependence to issues of management, economic and socio-environmental responsibility, financial performance, and access to resources and consensus. Baughn, Bodie, and McIntosh (2007) and Roszkowska-Menkes and Aluchna (2018) argue that the increased pressure from governmental institutions and markets enforces sustainability adoption for legal compliance reasons. The emerging need for sustainability is supported by the international efforts towards a circular fashion economy, with the European Commission being committed to supporting a more sustainable industry aimed at transforming the sector, especially since it is one of the most polluting industries globally (European Commission 2021). In March 2020, the Commission adopted a new Circular Economy Action Plan, which constitutes one of the main building blocks of the European Green Deal, and it is essentially Europe's new agenda for sustainable growth. The new Action Plan aims at enforcing new measures along the entire life cycle of products (Ly and Tan 2021) including textiles, and in doing that move closer to a green future whilst aiming at strengthening business competitiveness, environmental protection, and giving new rights to consumers and production workers Pedersen, Gwozdz, and Hvass (2018) stipulate that achieving these goals depends on bringing closer together internal and external stakeholders.

The fast fashion sector and its impact on the environment

There has been a notable growing trend within the fashion industry to offer clothes at affordable prices. The concept of fast fashion relates to making fashion accessible to people in their everyday lives and emerged in the early 2000s following the aggressive business behaviour of international retailers such as Zara and H&M that focused on making a quick turnover of trendy products to a predominantly youthful market. The rise of fast fashion has meant that consumers even those belonging to low socio-economic clusters are able to 'regularly consume and discard fashionable clothing' (Bruce and Daly 2006; Buckley and Clark 2012).

Fast fashion producers and their retail operations are investing in manufacturing practices and buying processes that encourage mass production. Fernie and Sparks (2014) described the fast fashion industry as an industry that is characterised by short life cycle products, instability, volatility, and low predictability, with manufacturers focusing on maximising their profits and capitalising on the fast pace of market consumption (Christopher, Lowson, and Peck 2004). The fast fashion model is predominantly a fast response system that, by its very nature, promotes disposability (Fletcher 2008) focusing on standardised prototyping, mass customization and mass production capabilities, techniques, work practices and processes, and creating effective shipping procedures

and finished products that can be quickly sold in global markets (Aspers and Skov 2006). Thus, this fast-fashion model is based on a highly responsive supply chain (Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz 2015) that can deliver the latest fashion trends at lower prices albeit accompanying detrimental social and environmental outcomes.

Turker and Altuntas (2014) argue that the industry's processes and structure are closely related to some of its unique elements, such as the 'shortened lead-times, fast inventory turnovers and high-order fulfilment rates of their products for customer demand'. Its highly competitive structure puts pressure on costs and has an everchanging and impressively fast rate of new products offered to capture the latest trends. The drive to meet high consumer demand has led the sector to adopt a business model that aims to offer similar styles inspired by high-end fashion shows at a much lower cost, in a shorter time and by using lower quality materials. With increased consumer demand, retailers have been encouraged to offer more fashion collections; notably, from 2000 to 2011 the number of collections released in the European apparel industry had grown from 2 to 5, while in some cases, retailers such as Zara offered as many as 24 collections per year (European Parliament 2021). These conditions require the industry to demonstrate a high degree of flexibility combined with the drum beat of production efficiency (Tokatli and Kızılgün 2009), however in order to maintain high levels of responsiveness this generates various ethical, employment, and environmental concerns (Turker and Altuntas 2014).

Today, the fashion industry disposes large quantities of waste with a catastrophic impact on the environment (Zhang, Zhang, and Zhou 2021) and is allegedly the second largest industrial polluter in the world (Vehmas et al. 2018). The notion of sustainability within the fast fashion sector refers to products with sustainable characteristics such as using organic and biodegradable fabrics, following zero waste methods, being plastic-free, and adopting the circular economy framework. Following international pressure, fast fashion businesses are gradually engaging in green practices, and textile manufacturing companies increase renewable resources and energy (Ly and Tan 2021; Papadopoulou, Papasolomou, and Thrassou 2022). In fact, some UK high street fashion retailers that have incorporated sustainability within their marketing campaigns. For example, Marks & Spencer (M&S) promote their Plan A commitment (McDonagh and Prothero 2014), which rewards consumers who donate their unwanted garments to Oxfam with an M&S voucher. H&M offers a voucher for clothes recycled instore and Zara encourages recycling without a reward (Papadopoulou, Papasolomou, and Thrassou 2022). These fashion retailer recycling initiatives have nonetheless been scrutinised as tokenistic, particularly since the focus is to encourage more consumption which further fuels the cycle of production and disposal (Gould 2017).

Consumer behaviour in the fashion industry

Being a multifaceted and interdisciplinary concept, several authors have studied the relationship between environmental sustainability and consumer behaviour (Cervellon, Wernerfelt, and Choi 2012; Aprile and Punzo 2022). Motivated by its unique nature, researchers often adopt wide and diverse theories and measures to explore it. In fact, over the years, various academic frameworks have been used by researchers to investigate consumer behaviour.

Schiffman and Kanuk (2007) described consumer behaviour as the behaviour that consumers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services. The affect, behaviour, and cognition (ABC) model of attitudes of Ray (1973) and Solomon (1996), also known as the tripartite model of attitudes and emerged from Yale University Communication and Attitude Program in the 1950s and 60s (Augoustinos, Walker, and Donaghue 2014), has been widely adopted by researchers to understand consumer behaviour within different sectors (Hu et al. 2021). The model compares consumers' cognitive ('knowing/belief') and affective ('feeling') judgments toward products with the degree of consumer's involvement ('high/low') during the personal behavioural process to recommend products, because attitudes ('doing') toward a product are not simply explained in one dimension. It has thus been considered as a useful means for studying the relationship between sustainability and fast fashion in the context of consumer behaviour.

According to Ho et al. (2019) in the standard learning hierarchy, when consumers (e.g., Eastern consumers) place emphasis on the function, price, and availability of high-involvement 'knowing' products, their recommendation process follows a Beliefs-Affect-Behaviour sequence. In the experiential hierarchy, consumers (e.g., Western consumers) act based on emotional reactions ('feeling'). This perspective focuses on the idea regarding intangible product attributes (e.g., aesthetic and brand) to shape consumers' attitude toward a product. Even though the ABC model has largely lost its ground in social psychology since the 1990s because it is widely understood that behaviour should not be subsumed under attitude and instead considered as separate (Sutton and Douglas 2020), there is evidence to support its usefulness in exploring consumer behaviour. Using the ABC model, this research will seek to unravel if consumers' knowledge, feelings, and beliefs towards sustainability can impact their purchase decisions of fashion products with sustainability traits.

Bhamra, Lilley, and Tang (2011) stipulate that traditional economic theories do not take into consideration the emotional component of consumer purchase decision-making instead they emphasize economic stimuli. A branch of microeconomics suggests that consumer theory shows how individuals make choices, subject to how much income they have available to spend and the prices of goods and services, with price and income being the two most significant variables that affect consumer purchase decision-making (Hands 2010). Based on this perspective, we can suggest that even though consumers' increased levels of awareness regarding environmental problems may motivate them to select fashion products that have sustainable features, for example, made of biodegradable fabrics, the products' high prices may discourage them from buying them.

It could be argued that consumers are often misled as to what underpins sustainability and without guidance on the implications of production for sustainability (Phipps et al. 2012; Prothero et al. 2011) consumers will continue to passively purchase low-priced fashion. Given that some fashion retailers launch 24 new collections annually (Gould 2017), marketing seems to contribute to fashion unsustainability as opposed to providing practical solutions. Dühr et al. (2021) suggest that consumers' knowledge about products such as food items if not sufficient will evoke environmentally considerate purchase choices. To facilitate a shift towards more sustainable consumption (Yates 2009), fashion retailers need to provide understandable information about the environmental impact of products in accessible and effective ways. Most research has considered how consumers view ethical debates within the fashion industry, such as the

exploitation of garment workers and child labour, and how they impact their consumption behaviour (Ritch and Schröder 2012; Phipps et al. 2012; Ritch 2019). Other research studies have considered worker conditions and environmental concerns in the context of sustainability (McNeil and Moore 2015; Jung and Jin 2016), and the ways in which these concerns impact consumption patterns. However, there is little understanding of how and why consumers bypass ethical concerns and instead of adopting a more sustainable fashion consumption they retain previous habits that do not necessarily reflect their personal values, or indeed whether such values seriously impact behaviour in any way.

In 2018, the average Cypriot household spent approximately 150 euros more on clothes than the average European household (Euratex 2022). Despite the pandemic lockdown, average spending in consumer goods per transaction was 17% higher when compared to the preceding period and the corresponding period in 2019, indicating that during the pandemic Cypriot consumers were performing fewer but larger purchases (KPMG, 2021).

The overarching aim of the empirical study was to investigate the level of knowledge (cognition), attitudes, and behaviours of customers towards sustainability issues in the context of fast fashion within the Cypriot market. Thus, the three key research questions that underlie this inquiry are

RQ1: 'To what degree are consumers knowledgeable regarding sustainability issues when buying fast fashion brands?' (Cognition component – ABC Model).

RQ2: 'How do consumers feel towards sustainability issues relating to fast fashion brands?' (Affective component – ABC Model).

RQ 3: 'What behaviours do consumers exhibit when purchasing fast fashion brands?' (Behaviour component – ABC Model).

Research methods

Sample and data collection

In an effort to obtain a peripheral view of the level of awareness of the consumers of the fast fashion industry in Cyprus, an exploratory study was carried out. Ninety-seven participants were selected employing the snowball sampling method. A questionnaire was sent to different online communities living in Cyprus, and data collection lasted ten days. Bradley (1993) postulates that snowball sampling is indicative of subjective research, gives access to participants with similar lifestyles and ideology (Berger and Luckmann 1966), and has been used by other similar studies exploring ethical consumption (Schröder and McEachern 2004; Szmigin, Carrigan, and McEachern 2009). According to Collis and Hussey (2009) non-random samples are utilized when generalization is not an aim, and (Kupers 2000) states that the significance of this technique is that the participants are involved in framing the research through targeting a particular network of participants with similar lifestyles, outlooks, and professions and therefore share a mutual perspective.

The questionnaire was created with the support of 'Survey Monkey' and was distributed through online social media platforms such as Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, Email, and Instagram. The questionnaire used was adopted from Zhang, Zhang, and Zhou (2021) and questions were designed based on five-step Likert scales (Saunders et al. 2015), analysing data descriptively.

Findings and discussion

Most respondents were women (65%) as opposed to (34%) who were male. Previous studies for example, Hwang and Choi (2017) and Obermiller and Isaac (2018), identified that women, especially within the age of 18–34 years, are knowledgeable regarding issues relating to sustainability perhaps more so than men. A study carried out by Brough et al. (2016) indicated that there is a close perceived link between sustainability and femininity that may explain the reason why men are possibly less likely to engage in eco-friendly behaviours. The average age of participants was 25 years old, and most of them (85%) are Generation Z (18–26), whilst 12% Generation X and 3% Baby Boomers. Men spend less than 10% of their budget in fast fashion purchases, whereas 35% of women revealed that they spend above 30% of their budget in fast fashion consumption. The study's findings are in line with the current literature since women have been found to be more involved with fashion than men (Goldsmith and Clark 2008; Horton 2018), liable to spend more money on fashion (Johnson and Attman 2009), and more likely to go shopping for leisure (Bakewell and Mitchell 2003).

Consumers' level of awareness (cognition component)

Consumer demand for sustainable fashion depends on knowledge and understanding of the multiple issues that affect sustainability (Moisander, Markkula, and Eraranta 2010). The study's findings indicate some consumers' sustainability concerns arising from unethical business practices adopted by the fashion sector that impact the society and the environment.

Figure 1 represents the results of three questions (Q7, Q8, and Q9) that were used to directly explore consumers knowledge and awareness regarding fast fashion industry unsustainable practices.

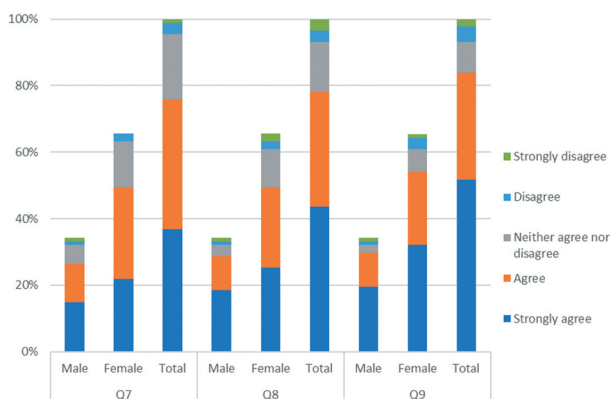


Figure 1. Consumers' level of awareness (cognition component).

- Q7: *I am aware of social equity issues in the fast fashion industry worldwide, such as working conditions of factory workers and fair trade.*
- Q8: *I am aware of child labour and unethical issues in the global fast fashion industry.*
- Q9: *I am aware of environmental issues in the fast fashion industry such as waste and air pollution caused by excessive production of garments and mass production.*

Most of the respondents (75%) are aware and understand the social and environmental impact that the sector's business practices have on society such as fair-trade violations, child labour, and increased pollution. Moreover, the knowledge content of consumers' responses has a 'general' nature and when asked to switch to a more specific focus on fashion, it becomes evident that they lack precise knowledge. For example, one would expect that consumers who claimed to have a strong knowledge of sustainability issues in fashion would have an accurate knowledge of aspects linked to the sustainable supply chain such as fabrics and materials. But consumers perceived cotton to be the most eco-friendly fabric, whereas the most eco-friendly fabric is modal.

Cypriot consumers have a general vision of the fashion industry and its impact on sustainability and when it comes to making actual purchase choices, their lack of precise knowledge and understanding does not reinforce their values. This inconsistency advocates for the building of strong knowledge of sustainable fashion among consumers. In their study that involved experiential learning, Armstrong et al. (2016) suggested that by providing consumers with an understanding that mass-produced fast fashion is not the only business model that can be adopted and that there are alternatives such as smaller and service-oriented retail models, consumers can gain heightened awareness of both the barriers and benefits associated with reduced consumption. The Cypriot consumers relied on the retailer to communicate the ethical status of fashion garments. This is an important finding because it depicts that consumers depend upon the retailer to source and label ethical products. This growing need to strengthen consumer knowledge regarding sustainability can potentially allow retailers to innovate, through packaging, distribution, and sourcing (Prothero and Fitchett 2000).

Consumers' feelings (emotional component)

Questions 16 and 17 mainly focused on the negative feelings of respondents and emphasized on the negative industry impact towards sustainability.

- Q16: *I feel disgusted when I learn how much waste and pollution are generated by fast fashion industry.*
- Q17: *I feel angry when I learn about labor slavery and child labor in fast fashion global*

Q18 and Q19, on the other hand, investigated positive feelings and aimed to search for a positive stimulus in sustainability.

- Q18: *I feel interested in a fashion brand that engages in promoting sustainability.*
- Q19: *I feel good with myself when I buy from sustainable fashion brands that engage in promoting sustainability.*

As illustrated in Figure 2, most consumers (80%) indicated strong negative feelings when they learn how much waste and pollution is generated by the fast fashion industry. More women (44%) than men (29%) have strong negative feelings about the impact that the fashion industry has on both society and environment. Respondents appeared to be more concerned regarding child labour issues than the environmental impact of the industry.

Both gender groups share strong negative feelings regarding practices that impact the society such as the use of child labour or unfair labour relations. Overall, Cypriot consumers (70%) have strong positive feelings when they buy a sustainable fashion brand and 80% of consumers state that they develop a strong interest in a brand that engages in sustainability and consequently, develop an intention to buy it. When consumers buy sustainable fashion brands, they tend to feel happy and good with themselves.

These findings align with Gazzola et al. (2020) who stipulate that consumer tastes are shifting, and more are becoming interested in purchasing environmentally friendly products and with Sawers, Bolster, and Bastawrous (2021) who found that customers are more worried about unethical behaviour and place a high value on sustainability; nonetheless, these emotions do not always translate into action, particularly when it comes to fashionable products, as also seen next whilst analysing consumers' actions.

Consumers' actions (behavioural dimension)

Although consumer involvement with ethical issues evokes a wide array of commitments (Cherrier 2007), it can be agreed that ethical consumption implies the avoidance of practices that are detrimental either to other people, to animals or to the environment (Follows and Jobber 1999). People increasingly recognize sustainability and ethics-related aspects of consumption (Carrigan and de Pelsmacker 2009).

Even though Cypriot consumers share strong feelings and attitudes towards the need for sustainable fashion practices, some choose to engage in purchase behaviours that are contradictory to their personal values, with only a small portion of respondents willing to pay a higher price for sustainable fashion products; a finding misaligned with an earlier study carried out by Shen et al. (2012). Low prices are often reflected in the garments' quality, and along with the continuously changing cycle of new fashion styles encourage disposability (Harris, Roby, and Dibb 2016), which in turn leads to concerns for

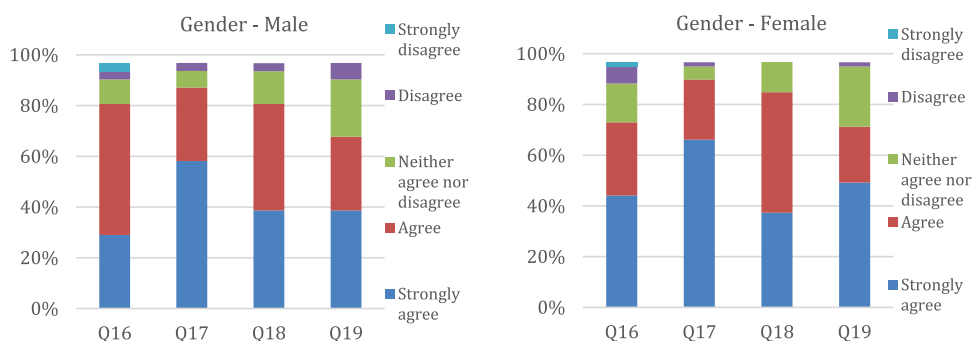


Figure 2. Consumers' Feelings (Emotional Component).

overconsumption within a throwaway society (Krystallis et al. 2012). Consequently, marketing encourages more frequent impulse consumption with low price strategies, limited stock availability and an over emphasis on price reductions and special offers, rather than a strong focus on sustainable production to support the creation of long-term value and careful use of scarce resources (McDonagh and Prothero 2014).

The study further on specifically revealed that only 20%–30% of fashion purchases made by Cypriot consumers are sustainable. Consumers tend to opt for the appropriate ‘alternative’ choices if these are affordable and available, which is in line with the literature (Carrigan and de Pelsmacker 2009). Even though most of the consumers studied claim to be interested in sustainable brands, they are only willing to pay an extra 20% for them. The participants appear to be price conscious since they sought out lower priced fashion goods, confirming findings by Ross and Harradine (2009) and Moisander, Markkula, and Eraranta (2010). Thus, participants felt restricted financially in applying sustainability principles to fashion consumption. It is evident that financial considerations were of concern for the participants which explains the trend followed by several fashion retailers which is to seek to attract consumers with inexpensive fashion (Barnes and Lea-greenwood 2006; Morgan and Birtwistle 2009).

Interestingly, men tend to buy more fashion brands that are sustainable than women and are also willing to spend more money to do so. Women though tend to spend a higher proportion of their budget in fast fashion purchases aimed at satisfying primarily social and self-esteem needs, as also posited by Brough et al. (2016), Hwang and Choi (2017), Obermiller and Isaac (2018); and Zhang, Zhang, and Zhou (2021). Although consumption is an activity, we often engage in to meet certain needs, as society has evolved, it is used to define social status, power, and class, engaging in conspicuous consumption a term coined by Thorstein Veblen (1899) in his seminal work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Managerial implications

The findings of this study have revealed that consumers lack precise information about how materials, fabrics, and other key components of fashion products impact the environment and the society; yet those consumers who *do* have general knowledge about sustainability and unethical business practices, are still not motivated enough to consume sustainably resulting in the attitude-behaviour gap, as also postulated by Oskamp et al. (1991), Scott and Willits (1994), Mainieri et al. (1997), Nordlund and Garvill (2002), Bamberg (2003), Hiller Connell and Kozar (2012a,b), and Pereira-Moliner et al. (2021).

The environmental impact of the fashion industry has become increasingly detrimental due, in part, to consumer demand for new fashion (O’Cass 2004), reduction in fashion product prices (Morgan and Birtwistle 2009), and low production costs achieved through production processes based in developing countries with their dubious employment practices (Jones et al. 2005). With very few exceptions, fashion retailers have been slow to respond in offering consumers’ fashions that promise not to exploit either people or the environment (Ritch and Schröder 2012). Whether this would be believed or seen as greenwashing is debatable. The concept of ‘ethical fashion’ has been advocated strongly by London Fashion Week through the inclusion of Estethica, where designers adhere to sustainability principles (British Fashion Council 2010). However, this relates mostly to designer or luxury fashion, where the main

barrier of access for consumers is affordability. Thus, to enable access to sustainable fashion requires high street retailers embracing sustainable principles (Gashi 2010).

Retailers claiming to engage in sustainability must develop products that are correctly labelled and give adequate information about their products that is not only comprehensible but also credible and useful. This will consequently improve consumers' accuracy in evaluating the environmental friendliness of fashion products should they desire to do so. The findings suggest that the adoption of environmental sustainability labels by fashion retailers, a practice adopted by other sectors such as the food sector (Aprile and Punzo 2022), should be pursued and combined with effective information policies across the sector aimed at increasing consumer awareness. Although today several fashion companies have introduced new sustainability initiatives which challenge the conventional business models within the industry introducing various take-back, resell, reuse, and recycle programmes (e.g., Marks & Spencer, Patagonia, Levi's, Bestseller, and H&M) (Pedersen, Gwozdz, and Hvass 2018), more corporations need to follow their lead and make a pledge toward sustainability values and goals. A pledge, however, which must be backed by actions of the appropriate nature. Further, consumers who claim to be environmentally or sustainability oriented should take steps to ensure their behaviour corresponds to these laudable goals.

Understanding consumer behaviour toward fashion in the context of sustainability is undoubtedly fraught with difficulties and complications. It is the complex nature of the relationship between sustainability and fashion which fashion retailers must understand to change consumer mindsets, organisational practices, and marketing strategies to create an environment that is conducive towards sustainability. In fact, complexity has been identified as prohibiting ethical consumption (McCallum 2008), and consequently the ever-increasing levels of fashion consumption foster a shameful situation whereby neither retailers nor consumers have as yet implemented sustainability principles to a significant degree (Ritch and Schröder 2012).

Although this study provides some preliminary insights, it is not without limitations. The study relied on country-specific data thus limiting the study in generalising the results, however future studies could employ larger and more diverse samples. Moreover, this exploratory in nature study carried out a descriptive analysis, but further research utilising probability sampling or even a mixed-method approach will unquestionably result in stronger findings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Dr Ioanna Papasolomou is a Professor of the Department of Management (School of Business Administration) at the University of Nicosia in Cyprus. She is a certified Chartered Marketer of the UK Chartered Institute of Marketing. Professor Papasolomou acted as a conference host for several international conferences and contributed papers to international conferences and journals (e.g., the Journal of Marketing Management, Marketing Intelligence and Planning, Journal of Brand Management, Journal of Product and Brand Management, and the Journal of Marketing

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