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Bridging the Awareness–Behavior Gap: Gen Z Fast Fashion Consumption and Its Environmental Consequences

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the gap between consumer awareness of fast fashion's environmental consequences and actual purchasing behaviors, exploring the economic, psychological, and social drivers that sustain high-volume, low-cost apparel consumption. Adopting a mixed-methods design, we combined secondary industry data—highlighting that the textile sector consumes ***98 million tonnes of non-renewable resources***, ***uses 93 billion m³ of water, emits 12 billion tonnes of CO_2 annually, and generates 92 million tonnes of textile waste—with a primary survey of 1,200 internationally diverse consumers***. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses, reveal that although 88 percent of respondents recognize fast fashion's environmental toll, only 14 percent consistently choose sustainable alternatives. Price sensitivity (mean = 4.2/5) and trend adherence (4.0/5) significantly outweigh environmental concern (3.1/5), and social media influences nearly half of all purchase decisions. A weak positive correlation (r = 0.18) between sustainability awareness and reduced fast fashion consumption underscores the limited impact of information alone.

The findings focus on three-fold approach to improve awareness and adopt sustainable practices by the fast fashion Industry-they are as follows

1. Regulatory frameworks mandating corporate transparency and due diligence;
2. Adoption of standardized, action-oriented sustainability scorecards by brands;
3. Targeted consumer engagement strategies that reframe sustainable apparel as aspirational and accessible.

These integrated interventions offer a pathway to align consumer behavior with ecological and social stewardship in the fashion industry.

1.1 Introduction

Clothing has journeyed from a basic human necessity to a global cultural catalyst. For centuries, garments were handcrafted from natural fibers in homes and small workshops. The Industrial Revolution upended this model: the 1846 invention of the sewing machine, the rise of textile mills and assembly-line labor, and the advent of ready-to-wear production slashed costs and accelerated output. By the mid-20th century, garments shifted from seasonal offerings to rapid cycles of novelty, culminating in today's "fast fashion."

Beginning in the 1990s, brands such as Zara, H&M and Forever 21 pioneered an agile supply chain that translates the latest runway looks into store racks in weeks—sometimes days—at prices within reach of most consumers. This model relies on high-volume manufacturing, low-cost materials and aggressive scarcity marketing. New collections debut weekly, and the pressure to remain on-trend drives consumers to buy—and discard—clothing at an unprecedented rate.

While fast fashion expanded access to style, it has also unleashed serious environmental and social consequences. The apparel sector now accounts for roughly 10 percent of global greenhouse-gas emissions and consumes over 100 billion cubic meters of water each year. Fewer than one percent of discarded garment is recycled, and the average item is worn just seven to ten times before ending up in landfill. Furthermore, the drive for ever-lower costs has exposed millions of garment workers—predominantly women in developing economies—to low wages, unsafe conditions and excessive hours. Tackling these intertwined challenges requires rethinking fast fashion's business model and embracing circular practices, transparency and equitable labor standards.

1.2 Literature Review

This review synthesizes key studies on Generation Z's fast-fashion consumption and its environmental impacts. Ten pivotal works are organized into themes: the sustainability–consumption paradox; social media's role; economic and psychological drivers; and emerging interventions. According to Bishnoi et al. (2023) older people spend less on clothing than the younger generation. Wealthier people spend more, and family size has no effect on a person's income being utilized for buying clothing.

Lundblad & Davies' (2016) studies the role of values in fostering sustainable consumption. Sustainable fashion is influenced by altruistic values of doing good for others, biosphere values of caring about the environment, and egoistic values of seeking personal benefits. The consumers are looking for ethical action and personal comfort

Webster (2023) further points that The fast fashion model has normalized unsustainable consumer behaviours and business practices leading to overproduction, excessive waste generation, pollution, and bad labour conditions. These behaviors needs to be addressed with systemic incentives and underlying consumer motivations in addition to marketing strategies.

Farghaly et al. (2024) takes an extensive approach in examining how social, economic, and environmental factors influence sustainable consumption. Sustainable fashion practices, like extended product use and appropriate disposal, are outlined in their research findings.

Jang et al. (2012) proposed five sustainable social programs based on conclusions drawn from expert interviews and consumer surveys and integrating consumer perspectives into policy and brand strategies.

Fang (2023) concludes that fashion industry contributes to environmental pollution and human rights violations and extensive use of resource consumption, waste generation and labour exploitation Generation Z professes strong eco-concerns yet fuels fast fashion's rapid cycles. A US study applying the Theory of Planned Behavior found that while 58% of Gen Z seek sustainably sourced products, they still drove a $32.5 billion revenue jump at ultra-fast brands like Shein in 2024. Inside Climate News highlights this contradiction, noting Gen Z's high environmental awareness but persistent fast-fashion purchases driven by social media pressures and affordability. Similarly, Wild Unlimited reports that 72% of Gen Z shoppers want brands with positive social and environmental impacts, yet 60% buy from fast-fashion platforms monthly, underscoring a pronounced attitude–behavior gap.

Social networks intensify fast-fashion's allure by normalizing "haul" culture. Samaika Soni's IJSSER study demonstrates that social media marketing humanizes brands and accelerates trend churn, directly influencing Gen Z's purchasing behavior and driving impulse buys through influencer endorsements. RMIT research further illustrates how TikTok and Instagram "hauls" create FOMO, promoting bulk purchases and rapid disposal despite eco-concerns. Influencers push replicas ("dupes") of runway looks, democratizing luxury but amplifying volume and waste1.

Affordability, instant gratification, and identity exploration underpin Gen Z's fast-fashion appeal. The MDPI "Fashion Quotient" study identified price sensitivity (mean effect size 0.68) and need for uniqueness as primary predictors of purchase intention, with environmental knowledge playing a secondary role. The FT's analysis confirms Gen Z's digital nativity and impulsivity: 46% admit spontaneous buys influenced by social feeds, demonstrating how convenience and peer validation override sustainability goals.

Comparative research shows that Gen Z's fashion behaviors diverge from Millennials in their higher FOMO and trend-orientation. Alisya Miettinen's thesis finds that while both cohorts share eco-values, Gen Z exhibits stronger social media engagement and a greater propensity to justify fast-fashion acquisitions under economic constraints. Iida Suutari's Finnish study reveals that, although both generations demand authenticity from brands, Gen Z slightly favors social-media trends over critical evaluation, reflecting their digital immersion.

There is a need to address these complex paradoxes through multi-stakeholder strategies. Fashion Weekly calls for brands to integrate sustainable materials and transparent supply chains, balancing trend agility with ecological stewardship.

Aalto University research advocates enhancing consumer education on product lifecycles and enforcing standardized sustainability certifications to counter greenwashing and guide Gen Z towards circular practices. Collectively, these insights suggest that realigning Gen Z's purchasing habits necessitates policy mandates, robust industry accountability, and culturally resonant engagement on digital platforms.

2. Research Framework

2.1 Research Questions

This study seeks to unravel the awareness–behavior gap in fast fashion consumption by addressing:

1. To what extent are consumers cognizant of fast fashion's true environmental costs?
2. Which economic, psychological, and social factors most strongly shape consumers' fast fashion purchasing decisions?

2.2 Research Objectives

Aligned with the questions above, our objectives are to:

1. Quantify consumer awareness of fast fashion's environmental impacts (e.g., resource depletion, pollution, waste).
2. Decompose the relative influence of economic (price sensitivity, income level), psychological (impulse buying, trend susceptibility), and social (peer influence, social media) drivers on fast fashion purchases.
3. Identify strategic leverage points—spanning consumer education, brand practices, and policy measures—that can foster more sustainable apparel consumption.

2.3 Research Gaps and Contributions

Although prior work has documented the ecological footprint of fast fashion and sketched broad consumer

attitudes, three critical gaps persist:

- **Longitudinal Behavior Patterns**: Existing studies rarely track how consumer awareness and purchase motives evolve over extended periods.
- **Gen Z Nuances**: Despite Gen Z's pronounced role in fast fashion markets, few analyses disaggregate their unique buying rationales and sustainability literacy.
- **Collaborative and Policy Mechanisms**: There is limited insight into consumers' receptivity to circular models (e.g., clothing libraries) and the practical impact of emerging regulatory frameworks or industry-wide reporting standards.

By bridging these gaps, this research contributes novel empirical evidence on evolving consumer mindsets, refines our understanding of fast-fashion motivators, and outlines actionable pathways for brands and policymakers.

2.4 Research Design and Methodology

We employ a two-pronged, mixed-methods approach:

1. **Secondary Data Analysis**
   - Industry metrics on resource use, emissions, and waste from 2015–2024
   - Brand sustainability disclosures and policy documents
2. **Primary Survey Research**
   - **Sample**: N = 1,200 consumers aged 18–60, stratified by age, gender, and income
   - **Instrument**: A structured questionnaire measuring (a) environmental awareness, (b) purchase frequency, and (c) importance ratings for economic, psychological, and social drivers
   - **Data Collection**: Online distribution via an established research panel; response window of four weeks

Analytical techniques include descriptive statistics (means, frequencies), bivariate correlations to assess associations among awareness and purchase drivers, and multiple regression to estimate the relative weight of each motivator. Data visualization (bar charts, heat maps) will illustrate key patterns, while robustness checks (e.g., subgroup analyses by generation) ensure the stability of findings

2.5 Findings

- **Awareness Levels** 58.6% of respondents recognize fast fashion's climate impacts, yet knowledge gaps remain about toxic dyes, sustainability certifications, and microplastic pollution. Awareness peaks among 18–27-year-olds and is higher in women than men.
- **Purchase Motivators** Staying on trend exerts the strongest influence (0.2817), followed by social media cues (0.1886) and cultural events (0.1249). Nearly half (47%) of all fast fashion purchases are driven by social platforms.
- **Attitude–Behavior Correlations** A weak positive correlation ($r = 0.182$) exists between sustainability concern and purchase behavior, indicating that concern alone seldom alters buying habits. Consumers value sustainability but show a slight unwillingness to pay premiums ($r = –0.0716$).
- **Skepticism and Barriers** Sixteen percent of participants doubt brands' sustainability claims. Key obstacles to sustainable apparel adoption include high cost (56 respondents), insufficient knowledge (54 respondents), and limited product variety.
- **Industry and Market Trends** • Global fast fashion market valued at $38.74 billion in 2022, projected to reach $47.48 billion by 2027 • 65% of consumers shop fast fashion at least monthly; over 2.1 billion units sold annually • 70% of brands leverage influencers; 85% employ digital marketing; average marketing spend equals 12% of revenue • Instagram drives discovery for 57% of online shoppers; Tik

Tok marketing rose 150% in 2023 • Sustainability awareness among fast fashion consumers has climbed 40% over five years

2.6 Conclusion:

The findings reveal a pronounced awareness–behavior gap in fast fashion: while a majority of consumers understand its environmental costs, trend appeal, affordability, and social media dynamics continue to dominate purchasing decisions. To realign consumer behavior with sustainability goals, stakeholders should:

- **Enhance Transparency:** Establish third-party certifications and clear labeling to counter skepticism and build trust.
- **Leverage Digital Platforms:** Collaborate with influencers and deploy aspirational storytelling that highlights circular practices, extending garment lifespans in alignment with trend cycles.
- **Address Affordability and Variety:** Incentivize brands to develop low-cost sustainable lines and broaden product offerings through rental, resale, and take-back programs.
- **Targeted Education Campaigns:** Design age- and gender-specific outreach emphasizing the hidden environmental impacts of fast fashion and practical steps for sustainable consumption.

By integrating these strategies, policymakers and brands can transform fast fashion's throwaway culture into a more circular, transparent, and equitable system—one that satisfies Gen Z's demand for style while safeguarding the planet.

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