



Research Article

# Towards Sustainable Fashion Consumption: An Exploratory Study of Consumer Behavior in a Developing Country

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## ABSTRACT

This article adds to the ongoing debate on the role of consumer behavior in promoting sustainability in the fashion industry. It draws its findings from a case study of the behavior of consumers from the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI). It follows a hybrid approach to qualitative thematic analysis based on 16 semi-structured interviews. The findings introduce a conceptual model illustrating the critical barriers to sustainable fashion consumption in KRI. It also presents potential mitigation strategies designed to overcome these barriers. This article offers an initial framework for researchers to examine strategies that can help business practitioners and policymakers promote sustainable fashion consumption in the region.

## KEYWORDS

Sustainable Fashion Consumption, Developing Countries, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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## 1. Introduction

“The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.” says Robert Swan (Sustainability for all, 2019). This quote highlights the significance of taking action to address threats to the future well-being of our planet. For this purpose, we turn to academic research to tackle a global business sector that continues to pose a significant threat: the fashion industry. The fashion industry is the second most polluting industry in the world, mainly due to the rise of fast fashion, the outsourcing of production processes in developing countries, and the disposable nature of such apparel (Jacometti, 2019). Responsibility for increasing the sustainability of the fashion industry is shared among three parties: government, business, and society, which includes consumers.

A large stream of literature focuses on the role of consumers in influencing the fashion industry to become more sustainable by changing their consump-

tion behavior (Hammad et al., 2019; Soyer & Dittrich, 2021). However, research within developing countries on ways that consumer behavior can enhance sustainable change within the fashion industry is very limited and non-existent with respect to the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI). Although there is evidence of efforts to follow the UN SDGs (United Nations, 2019) in this region, progress has been limited due to scarce resources (Al-Zubaidi et al., 2021).

With 35% of the population under 15 and 25% of young - middle age adults (20-34 years old; IOM, 2018), it may be possible to develop educational and promotional interventions that will reach a majority of the population and help increase preference and selection of more sustainable fashion products. This is due to many reasons, one being the immense impact of social media on sustainable behavior and the higher presence of youth on these platforms (Shutaleva et al., 2021). In addition, clothes are an integral part of the culture in KRI and therefore, an important priority for many



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consumers (Sherwani, 2021; Akoi et al., 2021).

To facilitate our analysis, we apply the SHIFT framework (White et al., 2019), which includes a theory-based, holistic framework that provides guidance on ways to increase sustainable consumption behavior and explore how it can be applied to influence the behaviors of Kurdish-Iraqi consumers. In this effort, we seek to initiate research that addresses the following research questions:

*RQ1: What discourages and prevents Kurdish-Iraqi consumers from engaging in sustainable fashion consumption behavior?*

*RQ2: How can marketers use the marketing strategies presented in the SHIFT model to change Kurdish-Iraqi consumers' behaviors towards sustainable fashion consumption?*

We plan to answer these questions through a hybrid approach to thematic analysis of 16 interviews with consumers from the KRI. This paper is organized as follows. First, it explores existing literature to define the main variables of this study, such as sustainable consumption, to find what influences sustainable consumption in developing countries, and to explain the SHIFT framework. Second, it explains in detail our method of research. Third, it presents our findings within three dimensions including 'internal' and 'external influences on sustainable consumption behavior' and the 'changing towards sustainable fashion consumption' dimension. Fourth, it discusses our findings and suggests strategies for influencing Kurdish-Iraqi consumers to shift their behavior towards sustainable fashion. Finally, it presents our conclusions, the implications of our study, the limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Sustainable Consumption

According to UN Environment Programme (2009), sustainable consumption refers to changing consumption patterns to use resources more efficiently. The overall goal of sustainable consumption is to reduce the negative impacts of our production and consumption patterns on earth and improve the quality of life (Robins & Roberts, 2000). In this study, we focus on sustainable consumption and the role of

consumers in fostering sustainable development in developing countries, as consumers are one of the most influential actors in this process.

Sustainable consumption is practiced by ethical consumers, as some scholars call them (Carrington et al., 2010). An ethical consumer is someone who seeks to purchase solutions that will not negatively impact the world (Sun, 2019). These consumers express their values through responsible purchasing behaviors (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Sun, 2019). Ethical consumers believe in their power to make a difference and view the big picture as more critical than individual transactions (Boyd, 2009). According to Stern et al. (1995), three ways consumers can behave ethically are reducing their use of energy, using energy more efficiently, and replacing products and services that have negative consequences on the environment and society with those that have positive impacts.

Many scholars have presented models for understanding the ethical consumer. A stream of research argues that cognitive progression determines ethical consumers' behavior (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008; Jain, 2018). These scholars argue that beliefs determine attitudes, which lead to intent, and intents prime behavior. Other scholars (Hemingway, 2005; De Lira & Costa, 2022) state that personal values determine sustainable/ethical behavior. Kallgren et al. (2000) and Thøgersen (2007) add social and personal norms, while Schneider et al. (2017) add anticipated pride and guilt as indicators of ethical consumption. In addition, a small stream of literature links the legacy hypothesis to sustainable behavior (Thomas et al., 2017). The hypothesis implies that as parents have children, they tend to think about the legacy they leave behind for their offspring regarding environmental quality, which influences sustainable behavior (Thomas et al., 2017). According to Erikson's (1950, chapter 4) generativity concept, the legacy hypothesis "is a developmental phase of later life associated with the desire to both leave a social legacy and provide positive guidance to others via intergenerational continuity." Moreover, situational factors such as the availability of sustainable products, price, quality, and skepticism in ethical symbols play a role in determining ethical

consumption (Nicholls & Lee, 2006; Bryla, 2016; Casais & Faria, 2021). Cho and Krasser (2011) present a different element as they argue that the degree of attention to news media content also influences ethical consumption.

Factors such as these can either enable or inhibit sustainable consumption behavior. In the following subsection, we discuss how these elements influence sustainable consumption in developing countries compared to developed countries.

### 2.2. Sustainable Consumption in Developing Countries

Developed countries, mainly European countries, are among the leaders in sustainable consumption (Wang et al., 2019). This means the factors mentioned earlier, such as beliefs, values, norms, situational factors, and media content, positively influence consumers' ethical consumption behavior. Nevertheless, the worldviews of consumers in underprivileged developing countries are likely to differ from those of affluent societies for several reasons (Bucic et al., 2012). First, consumers in many developing countries struggle to meet their basic needs, making prioritization of sustainable consumption challenging. A top priority in less affluent countries is to develop their economies (Wang et al., 2019). In addition, they face economic, social, political, and security issues that many view as more critical than environmental concerns (Iqbal & Pierson, 2017). Moreover, developing countries lack sufficient infrastructure and resources to tackle the added technical and financial challenges associated with sustainable development (Iqbal & Pierson, 2017).

The second inhibitor of sustainable consumption in developing countries is the lack of trust in governments (Karimzadeh & Abbaszadeh, 2019). One reason for this mistrust is the high rates of corruption in these countries, which is thought to diminish the rule of law and governmental effectiveness, leading to weaker regulation and less effective governance (Azmat & Samaratunge, 2009; Tanny & Al-Hossienie, 2019). This issue has eased the way for business organizations to engage in irresponsible practices, including greenwashing. Accordingly, developing country consumers tend to mistrust businesses' sustainable practices (e.g. CSR labeling; Karimzadeh and Abbaszadeh, 2019).

The third, fourth, and fifth inhibitors are the higher prices of sustainable products (Gugler & Shi, 2008), the lack of consumers' awareness about sustainable development (Wang et al., 2019), and the lack of availability of sustainable products (Joshi & Rahman, 2015). According to Ölander and Thøgersen (1995) motivation-ability-opportunity (MAO) model, the first two elements are indispensable and main antecedents of sustainable consumption behavior. This indicates that the consumer must be able to pay the price for the sustainable product/service and must have some level of knowledge about what sustainability means in order to be able to buy these products. This is because, according to Ölander and Thøgersen (1995), the ability construct also incorporates task knowledge. However, most developing countries struggle with poor socio-economic conditions that lead to unsteady incomes, which in turn tends to influence consumers to focus on short-term benefits versus costs (Azmat & Samaratunge, 2009). In addition, developing country consumers generally have limited awareness of what sustainable consumption entails (Wang et al., 2019), reducing the practice of sustainable consumption. Moreover, according to the MAO model, sustainable consumption is facilitated by the availability of sustainable products but such alternatives are generally lacking altogether or difficult to find in most developing countries (McNeill & Moore, 2015).

We next review the marketing literature in order to identify potential approaches to lessening the inhibitors noted for further empirical exploration in the KRI in order to foster more sustainable fashion consumption.

### 2.3. Promoting Sustainable Consumption through Marketing

The traditional marketing mindset views resources as ever-abundant and consistently focuses on growth (Swim et al., 2011). The new marketing mindset considers the scarcity of natural resources and seeks ways to enhance sustainable consumption (White et al., 2019). White et al. (2019) present a holistic framework, called the SHIFT model, identifying the most effective psychological factors that can help marketers increase sustainable consumer behaviors. Through the first factor, 'social influence,' White

et al. (2019) suggest encouraging and promoting public commitments to increase consumers' sense of accountability because people tend to follow socially accepted *social norms* and in-group *social identities*. In part, this strategy emphasizes changing negative perceptions of sustainable consumption by increasing views of such choices as *socially desirable*. The second factor in the SHIFT model is 'habit formation'. Most sustainable actions require repeating action, thus demanding a change in habits (Verplanken et al., 2011). Sustainable habits can be promoted through: providing incentives to change bad habits, penalties, increasing implementation intention, making sustainable products an easy option, prompts, and feedback.

The third factor in the SHIFT model is the 'individual self'. People desire to view themselves positively; thus, they tend to attack any threats to their *self-concept*. Therefore, (White et al., 2019) encourage marketers to develop a positive association between sustainable consumption behavior and self-concept. Moreover, people react to *self-interest* appeals (Paavola, 2001) and *self-efficacy*, which is the confidence that one will have an impact when engaging in an activity. Thus, marketers must communicate empowering messages to boost consumers' confidence and show them their power to make a difference (White et al., 2019). Moreover, White et al. (2019) encourage marketers to target responsive segments with tailored messages containing sustainability appeals because *individual differences* exist among all societies.

The fourth factor in the SHIFT model presents the role of 'feelings and cognition' in change towards sustainable consumption. Sustainable consumption can be promoted by influencing *negative and positive* emotions through sharing *information, knowledge, and learning*, presenting *eco-labelling* and *framing* messages strategically (e.g. communicating sustainable messages with 'duty' in collectivist cultures and 'individuality' in individualistic cultures). The final factor in the SHIFT model is 'Tangibility'. According to Griskevicius et al. (2012), people react to more tangible issues with more precise outcomes. As the outcomes of sustainable consumption behavior are abstract, White et al. (2019) propose matching temporal focus, for

example, by encouraging consumers to focus on the future benefits of sustainable consumption instead of encouraging them to focus on future generations' benefits. Moreover, the scholars advise marketers to make sustainability issues more concrete and relevant to the self and to *communicate local and proximal impacts* of sustainable consumption behavior. Consistent with this research, Chang (2012) argues that people who do not have high knowledge about sustainability issues tend to react to sustainable action calls only when the anticipated consequences of the behavior, either positive or negative, are proximal to them. Finally, White et al. (2019) suggest *encouraging the desire for the intangible*, for example, promoting the sharing economy and dematerialization.

In short, the SHIFT model presents various marketing strategies that promote sustainable consumption behavior by leveraging psychological factors. The following sections explore two central questions through a case study. First, which inhibiting factors discourage and prevent consumers in KRI from engaging in sustainable consumption behavior? Second, how can marketers use the marketing strategies presented in the SHIFT model to increase sustainable consumption among these consumers?

### 3. Method of Research

This paper focuses on sustainable consumption in Iraq, precisely the KRI, for several reasons. First, the region has already taken initiatives to follow the SDGs and diversify its economy (United Nations, 2019). However, this effort has mainly focused on the government's role in this process while disregarding the critical part that the consumers have to play in terms of their consumption behaviors. Second, KRI youth are very involved with fashion and highly value keeping up with trends (Kurdistan 24, 2016). Thus, exploring levels of awareness about the implications of their fashion consumption among these consumers could lead to several important insights into future applications of the SHIFT model to increase sustainable fashion consumption in KRI and beyond.

### 3.1. Data Collection

#### 3.1.1. Sample

In order to collect the most relevant data for answering our research questions, we used convenience sampling that prioritized certain types of consumers known to the authors and living in the KRI. Members of the convenience sample had higher levels of education. As sustainable development is not a high priority in the KRI, we believed that awareness of sustainable consumption as an alternative would more likely exist among those with higher levels of formal education. Some level of familiarity was judged important in order to compare varying perspectives on the relative importance of sustainability as a decision attribute vis a vis fashion consumption. As a result, most sample members were between the ages of 15 and 24, an age group that generally has higher levels of formal education in the KRI (KRSO, 2018). However, we also included participants above 24 to increase the potential for additional insights. In addition, we chose participants based on other varied criteria such as financial dependency or independency, work experience, and marital status. Including consumers who differ on these criteria may potentially enhance our understanding of the ways their thoughts about sustainability affects their fashion product preferences and choices. Moreover, marital status may facilitate determination of the extent to which the legacy hypothesis plays a role in Iraqi-Kurds' sustainable consumption behavior.

Twenty-three individuals were invited to participate in our research. We clearly explained the purpose of study (Maruster, 2013). Sixteen consumers agreed to participate. Four interviews took place online using real-time video. Twelve involved face-to-face interviews. Data collection took place between April, 2021 and July, 2021 (See Appendix A for interviewee profiles).

#### 3.1.2. Interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews that were based primarily on the SHIFT model (White et al., 2019) and the existing literature. In order to answer our main research question, we organized the interview into three sections. The first section focused on the participant's identity, the second on their general

consumer behavior, and the third on sustainable consumption.

Following a set of identity-related questions, we focused on participants' general consumption behaviors, including: 1) how often they shop in order to gain some insight on their potential environmental impact given their shopping frequency; 2) the first criteria they consider when shopping, particularly for fashion items; and 3) factors that could reduce their likelihood of purchasing a given product. Through these questions, we also wanted to discover specific issues that could influence these consumers' sustainable consumption behavior. We next focused on fashion, asking participants about the extent to which they follow the latest trends in this area. This discussion increased our understanding of participants' fashion awareness as well as interest and whether such factors influenced their thoughts about sustainable fashion. Fifth, we asked them about the sources they rely on for fashion-related information. This question was intended to identify sources of information that influenced participants, e.g. social media, word-of-mouth, surroundings, relatives, etc. Exploring these sources increased our understanding of potential communication channels that could be used in the future to promote sustainable fashion consumption.

The third section of the interview focused mainly on sustainable consumption. First, we explored participants' levels of sustainability knowledge in order to evaluate their ability to answer subsequent questions that were more specific. Regardless of their answer, we provided a brief definition of sustainable consumption. Then, we communicated points about the importance of sustainability and its emergence as a norm in certain countries. We next discussed the benefits of sustainability for future generations. Finally, we shared positive aspects of sustainable consumption for the participants themselves in the future. This was important because people are more likely to accept and implement sustainable behavior when the consequences of unsustainable behavior are more proximal to them (Chang, 2012). Thereafter, we asked the participants whether they would consider adopting sustainable consumption if such practices

had become an established norm in their country. This question provided insight into respondents' view of the importance of social influence and conformity in the KRI. We then requested information from respondents about a habit they have that could be contradictory to sustainable consumption in order to determine how fully participants understood the term. Our next discussion point concerned the extent to which participants trust business claims of sustainable practices in the KRI. This line of inquiry offered potential insight into factors that influence KRI consumers' trust in businesses that claim to be sustainable as well as possible approaches that might be used to increase consumer trust in the future. Finally, we asked the participants whether their views had changed regarding how they should consume after the interview. This question was designed to enable us to determine whether providing information and discussing the topic could increase their sensitivity to sustainability (please see [Appendix C](#) for a complete list of questions).

Each interview was open-ended and lasted about 20 minutes. We did not share the participants' answers with anyone to ensure their confidentiality, as advised by [Baez \(2002\)](#). Moreover, once we realized that our data was sufficient to answer our research questions and that new data did not add new value, we stopped the interview process ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#); [Given, 2015](#)). This was evident as repeated answers started to appear among the participants' answers (e.g. price, design, and quality as inhibitors for sustainable product consumption and social media as a primary source of fashion inspiration or a strong social influence). Aliases have been used to safeguard participant anonymity.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

#### 3.2.1. Familiarizing with data and data transcription

Following [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) thematic analysis process, we manually transcribed interview data immediately following collection in order to facilitate subsequent analysis ([Bailey, 2008](#)). High levels of familiarity with the data enabled discovery of emerging patterns in the data. Next, we imported the transcripts into NVivo 12 for analysis. First, we used a deductive priori coding approach ([Crabtree & Miller, 1999](#)) that

involved developing codes based on our interview questions. Later, we used the data-driven inductive approach ([Boyatzis, 1998](#)) to ensure that we were aware of all themes that might emerge and later prove useful to theory development. Thus, we used a hybrid approach of qualitative thematic analysis methods ([Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006](#)). Moreover, we followed [Tobin and Begley's \(2004\)](#) iterative reflexive approach by simultaneously reviewing existing literature and our interview results to ensure saturation of identified themes and dimensions.

#### 3.2.2. Generating initial steps

The 10 coding categories that were based on our interview questions included: shopping frequency, shopping criteria, inhibitors to shopping, influence of trends, source of inspiration, sustainability knowledge, influence of society-group, impact of habits, importance of trust, and change in point of view. We then categorized text from the interviews under one of these codes; for example, we added the statement, *"Actually, I am not that fan of fashion, so that I would say maybe three months, yeah that would be the period."* to the shopping frequency statement category. We applied a similar process to the remaining codes. Next, we reread our data during the second coding stage using a data-driven inductive coding approach. For example, we placed the following statement under a new category label titled financial independence and sustainable consumption, *"I used to go shopping a lot, to be honest, but ever since I started working, I have changed a lot, so now I would say every four months, depending on my needs."* We applied a similar process to the remaining data and developed new coding categories. This approach resulted in 15 statement categories, which we labeled as subthemes (See [Figure 1](#)).

#### 3.2.3. Searching, reviewing, and naming themes

We searched for different relationships between and among these subthemes through axial coding ([Corbin & Strauss, 2008](#)) to integrate the elements as much as possible. As a result, 7 themes emerged (see [Figure 1](#)). As [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) suggest, we reread our entire data set once again to ensure that our themes were consistent with the interview results. New thematic categories did not emerge and we concluded

with the 7 major themes. We followed Sandelowski and Leeman (2012) suggestion by labeling our themes in phrases to capture the underlying construct represented by the category label. Appendix B includes examples of quotations that support each theme. Following Tuckett (2005), we also used an iterative reflexive approach by traveling between literature and our data, further increasing identification of relationships between interview information and emerging themes. For example, we compared the SHIFT framework to our data, which enabled better integration of the statement category codes and themes critical to developing an initial exploratory framework to guide subsequent research.

#### 3.2.4. Creating dimensions

Thereafter, we searched for more relationships among the 7 themes. As suggested by Birks et al. (2009) and Vaismoradi et al. (2016), we found it necessary to combine our relevant themes into three dimensions (see Figure 1) to help us portray our findings in a storyline. The first two themes included information about factors influencing KRI consumers' general consumption behavior and how their perceptions of sustainable products can influence their sustainable consumption behavior. Therefore, we combined the themes and labeled the first dimension "Internal influences on sustainable consumption behavior." The following two themes included information about the impact of trust and social influences on sustainable consumption behavior. Thus, we combined the two themes and labeled the second dimension, "External influences on sustainable consumption behavior." Finally, the last three themes include information about the consumers' awareness of sustainable consumption, particularly fashion-related. The themes also included information about consumers' habits, potential changes in consumption intentions, and possible platforms to raise awareness of sustainable consumption among KRI. We combined the three themes and labeled our third dimension, "Changing towards sustainable fashion consumption." As a result, our dimensions are complementary, and together they provide a storyline.

#### 3.2.5. Validity and reliability

In order to increase confidence in the reliability and validity of our analysis, we shared Figure 1 with our interviewees and sought their feedback on the extent to which they perceived the subthemes, themes, and dimensions to reflect some or all of the interview information they provided (Mantere et al., 2013). Thirteen interviewees responded to our request for additional feedback and generally confirmed that the framework depicted in Figure 1 represented their interview answers and experiences.

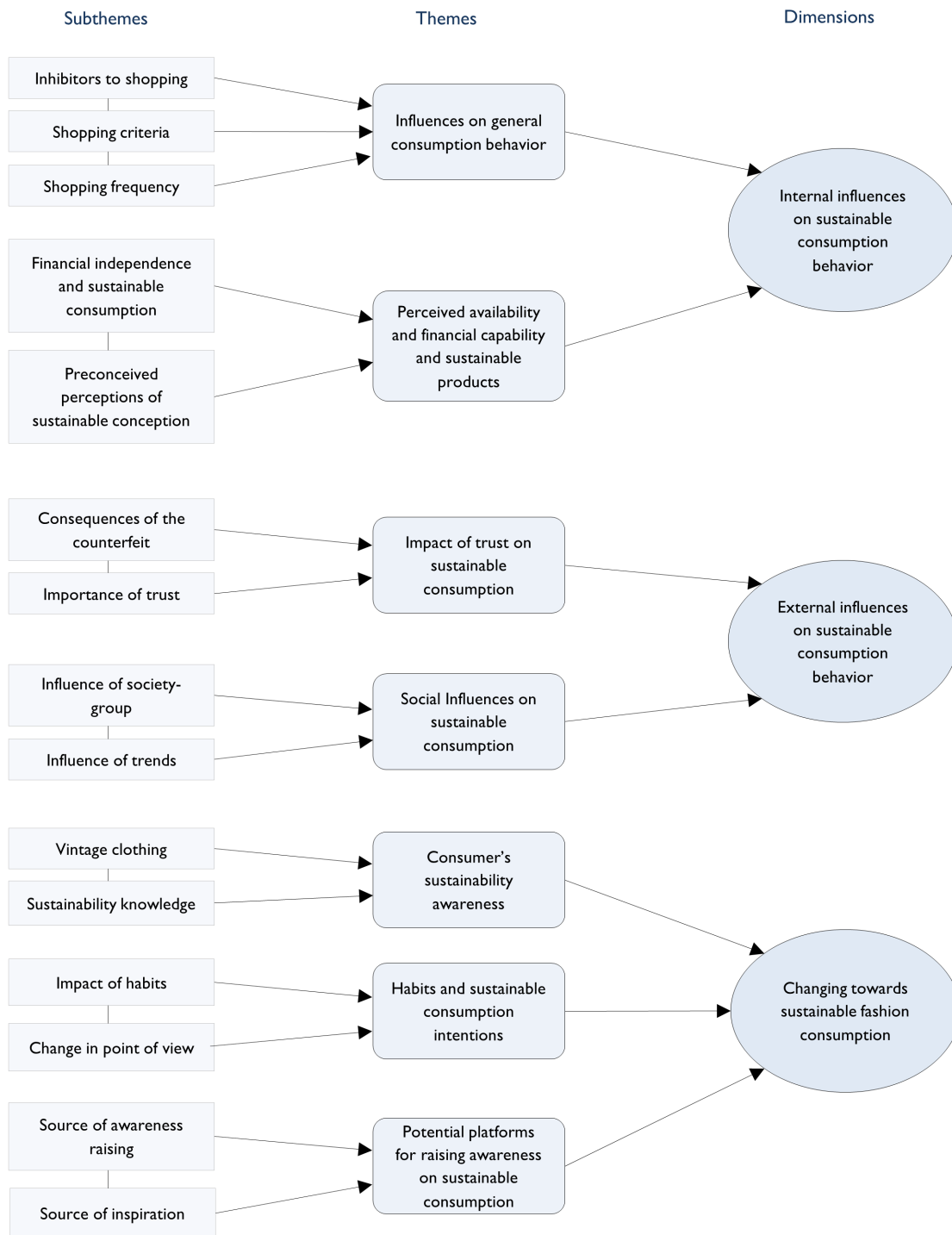
### 4. Findings

In this section, we explore our findings in order to answer our research questions and find potential theories that could emerge from our data.

#### 4.1. Internal Influences on Sustainable Consumption Behavior

Understanding KRI consumers' stance on consumption is a crucial step towards influencing their future behavior in terms of sustainable consumption. Our data reveal a very high frequency of consumption of fashion items among respondents (11 out of 16 respondents buy a fashion item at least once a month). For example, Mazar says, "About twice or three times per week. I shop a lot, I know..." Ala says, "A lot. I am a shopaholic." Nevertheless, the few participants who expressed higher levels of sustainability awareness shopped less frequently for fashion items. For example, Zara links avoiding animal harm with sustainability when she noted, "I think not harming the animals is a part of maintaining and being sustainable" and therefore, shopped less frequently as seen in the following quote, "I think twice a year if I'm buying any fashion product that I'll be using it for the rest of the year. So I'd say twice or once a year."

Acknowledging that our sample is very small and findings exploratory, no clear linkage between education level and sustainable knowledge/behavior emerged. Similarly, we do not find an obvious pattern between marital status/caring for children and sustainable behavior. For example, Ala and Amina, who state that they are responsible for children and family members, reported more frequent fashion shopping, suggesting relatively higher levels of unsustainable



**Figure 1. Data Structure**



consumption behavior than other participants.

Other factors that participant interviews suggest may influence sustainable fashion consumption behavior among KRI consumers are price, quality, design, and preconceived perceptions that these consumers have about sustainable products. Some respondents indicated that they cared about product design, while others stated that they focus on price and quality. Thus, in line with Radhi et al. (2020), price and quality emerged as two potentially important criteria that could encourage or discourage consumers from buying a particular fashion product. In the study by Radhi et al. (2020), quality is the top decisive factor for Iraqi consumers to buy or avoid buying a product in general, while price is second. However, our findings suggest that price may have more impact than quality with respect to fashion product decision making. In terms of sustainable fashion consumption, some respondents perceived sustainable fashion products as very expensive and expressed their inability to afford such products. For example, when asked whether she would consider purchasing from a sustainable fashion business in her country, Jina replies, *"No! Not really, because here most people are price sensitive and sustainable clothes are usually expensive, so I do not think someone would want to sell sustainable clothes here."* Other respondents believed that sustainable fashion items were unavailable in the KRI. For example, Xatin states, *"It is really hard to find the products and everything that are sustainable... most of our clothes now are made from polyester, so it is hard to find clothes that are not."*

Loreen points out another interesting factor that could potentially influence sustainable consumption when she notes, *"I used to go shopping a lot to be honest but ever since I started working, I've changed a lot so now I'd say every 4 months, depending on my needs."* The respondent indicates that her new financial independence has made her aware of the value of money spent, which influences her consumption of non-essential goods, such as fashion items, to decrease. This shows a potential association between financial independence and sustainable consumption.

This section indicates that (i) sustainability awareness, (ii) preconceived perceptions of sustainable prod-

ucts, such as level of price and availability, (iii) product design and quality, and potentially, (iv) financial independence among young adults may influence sustainable fashion consumption in the KRI.

#### 4.2. External Influences on Sustainable Consumption Behavior

Intention is a proximal predictor of behavior, and trust is a primary driver of purchasing intention (Hidayat et al., 2021). This means that trust is a primary factor that could influence consumers' sustainable consumption. This is reflected in our interviews during which most participants reported trust concerns about the legitimacy of potential sustainable businesses in the KRI. For example, Zozan states, *"Actually, it is hard to trust them. I have to see for myself and ask for resources to see whether they are sustainable."* Some participants link this distrust to the sizable counterfeit market in the region and the lack of rigorous governmental regulation, such as intellectual property rights. Ronahi says, *"I have doubts about the regulations that are put by the government. They don't exist and that is the problem. There is no law for intellectual property rights so business owners can bring whatever they want even when they are copies and this makes it harder to trust."* These participants argue that the lack of regulations and monitoring of how products enter the market and how they are sold make it challenging to trust that a product is sustainable or of good quality based only on the sellers' claims. Moreover, the lack of intellectual property rights enables businesses to copy mainstream brands and/or new market entries/options, thus making trust in sustainability claims problematic.

Despite the mistrust reported by several participants, they noted key factors that would eventually enable them to trust and purchase products from a sustainable fashion business. The first factor is the level of transparency. As Casim points out, *"In that case I would be more careful about that and I would research, or follow their real acts and behaviors and then, based on that, I will choose between trusting or distrusting them."* Second, consistency of portrayed values and actions of the sustainable business is very important. As Zara states, *"Well, if I see a purpose in it, if I see their personality, if it reflects what it says, then yes, I'd trust it. Even if no one else*

has done it before.” Third, the way other people in the society or in-group members view or act towards the sustainable business was noted as impactful. As Loreen says, *“If...I see people following suit and I see like good results and people giving good feedbacks, maybe I’d be able to take that step [...]”* Such reflections of social norms may be an influential factor in encouraging these consumers to shop from sustainable fashion businesses in the KRI because the majority of participants expressed strong agreement when asked whether they would shop at sustainable fashion businesses if this behavior was a societal norm. Thus, social norms and in-group members’ behavior may have important influences on sustainable fashion consumption.

In addition to the factors above, some participants agreed when asked whether they follow the latest trends, while the majority claimed to follow their personal style. Nevertheless, the influence of trends remains prominent as some participants did admit to the influence of trends on their fashion purchasing behavior; for example, Xatin says, *“It depends on the trend. If I like it and I find that it’s suitable for me, then I’ll try to find an item like that.”*

In short, the factors that emerged from our interviews as potentially influencing sustainable fashion consumption include: (i.) mistrust in the business process due to lack of transparency and inconsistency between brands’ communicated values and actions, (ii.) lack of public policies and government regulations, (iii.) in-group’s views and behavior, and (iv.) fashion trends.

**4.3. Changing Towards Sustainable Fashion Consumption**  
More than half of our participants had prior knowledge of sustainability in general. Participants with prior knowledge reported acting more sustainably regarding their fashion shopping frequency, as mentioned in section 4.1, and the type of apparel they consume. For example, Ronahi says, *“[...] actually I believe I am currently a little sustainable too. I mainly shop vintage clothing.”*

Other participants also point out their preference for vintage clothing. However, they base this preference on the uniqueness and lower prices of such clothing. For example, Jina states, *“I shop [...] vintage clothing as they have unique designs that you can’t find elsewhere,*

*and they have a low price.”* Regardless of the reason, these participants show consistency in their shopping behavior. Consistency, in turn, is what makes up a habit because a habit is a behavior that persists as it is regularly performed over time (Kurz et al., 2014). Moreover, other participants consistently shop for what they perceive to be high quality products, as Ravin says, *“I do not buy from fake brands at all. I always look for quality pieces that would look good and last longtime [...]”*

Social media can play a significant role in promoting sustainable consumption because most participants consider social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest as their primary source of fashion inspiration. This observation was noted primarily by younger participants in our sample, who appeared to search on social media for fashion inspiration more than older participants. The latter considered family, friends, and relatives more frequently as sources of fashion inspiration. For example, when asked about sources of fashion information, Xatin, 23, answers, *“Hmm, I just generally get it from the internet. From what I see from Instagram, from Tik Tok, I just observe what the people are wearing. And if I have a piece of clothing and I’m trying to find something that match with it, then I’ll definitely go to Pinterest for that, so I can see how other people have organized their outfit.”* On the other hand, Amina, 33, answers, *“From online sites, as well as, from people I know, it could be family or friends”.*

Overall, this section further highlights the possible importance of sustainability knowledge, price, and quality on sustainable fashion consumption. It also indicates the potential value of social media influences on sustainable fashion consumption as well as more traditional word-of-mouth sources, perhaps depending on the consumer’s age.

## 5. Discussion

Our findings reveal several interesting points that both contradict and confirm existing literature. In contrast to the findings of Heeren et al. (2016) and Cogut et al. (2019), our exploratory findings suggest the possibility of an association between sustainability knowledge, intention to behave sustainably, and sustainable behavior such as lower shopping frequency and considering

the type of apparel consumed (e.g., preference for vintage clothing). We can support the potential legitimacy of this finding, considering that sustainability knowledge in our sample was linked to expressions of sustainable behavior intention, which is a strong predictor of behavior (Cohen, 1992; Webb & Sheeran, 2006).

Furthermore, the SHIFT framework's self-concept, which holds that people need to maintain positive self-views, is helpful in understanding our qualitative results as the construct predicts that many consumers might start to engage in more pro-environmental behaviors after learning that their current behavior has negative impacts on the environment (White et al., 2019). This finding may also apply to behaviors related to other sustainability pillars. In other words, sustainability knowledge may reveal consumers' harmful and unsustainable behaviors, which in turn may influence behavioral change to reduce discomfort arising from behavior-knowledge incongruence in order to restore positive self-views. In addition, according to the SHIFT framework, sustainability knowledge may increase the frequency of sustainable behavior because people need to see consistency in their behavior to avoid feelings of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Thus, one sustainable consumption behavior could potentially lead to its practice in the future as well.

Another factor that may impact Kurdish-Iraqi consumers' sustainable consumption behavior involves preconceived perceptions of sustainable products. In line with the MAO model (Ölander & Thøgersen, 1995), our findings suggest that many of those in our small sample associate sustainable products in general and sustainable fashion items in particular with expensiveness and unavailability in their region. This, in turn, appears to impact their sense of self-efficacy as they believe that sustainable consumption's perceived expense limits their ability to make such purchases. These perceptions could also result in negative emotions towards sustainable products considering that these consumers are highly price-sensitive (Jones et al., 1994) and do not find reasons to justify the prices of sustainable products, especially those consumers with little or no prior knowledge of sustainability. Furthermore, these views arise from exposure to

inaccurate sustainable product information, information overload, or confusion. Thus, as suggested by the SHIFT framework, providing accurate information and easy access to sustainable products may be essential to encouraging sustainable consumption.

The above points highlight the significance of sustainability communication. Our interviews with younger Kurdish-Iraqi participants indicated that social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest are important sources of consumption-related information among younger Kurdish-Iraqi consumers. This finding highlights the potential importance of these channels for sustainability communication campaigns to raise awareness on the subject. Older Kurdish-Iraqi consumers reported obtaining consumption-related information predominantly from their surroundings, friends, and families. This finding highlights the possible importance of creating social desirability for sustainable products, discussed later in this section.

In addition, sustainability education is critical as research indicates that it increases positive attitudes towards sustainability (Nousheen et al., 2020). Because attitudes are often related to behavior (Vaidis, 2006), it is reasonable to believe that sustainability education will increase sustainable consumption behaviors. Moreover, tailoring communication for consumers with and without sustainability knowledge could lead to the desired behavior, for example, by emphasizing the quality of the product while simultaneously emphasizing the product's sustainability. People attracted by quality products may rationalize their purchase as a "quality purchase", but many may also consider the fact that they made an ethical purchase of their own free will. Even if the "ethical purchase" is mitigated in the consumer's mind, as consumers rationalize their ethical purchase, they may adapt their attitude to their behavior (Vaidis, 2006), encouraging this behavior to last over time and potentially increasing ethical purchase considerations.

Our findings reveal yet another exciting point we can compare with existing literature. On the one hand, existing literature generally agrees that the transition of young adults from being financially dependent on parents to become financially independent has a

high potential to result in impulsive buying behavior among this segment (Pradipto et al., 2016). On the other hand, our findings suggest that financial independence among Kurdish-Iraqi young adults may lead to more sustainable consumption behavior, such as less shopping frequency. According to Bea and Yi (2018), financially independent young adults, who no longer receive support from their families, have higher levels of financial insecurity, leading to increased saving behavior (Henager & Mauldin, 2015). Saving behavior is positively associated with sustainable consumption, for example, encouraging collaborative apparel consumption (Park & Armstrong, 2019). Moreover, according to White et al. (2019), pro-environmental consumers have lower financial self-efficacy as they worry more about their finances and save for the future. These studies suggest that the level of social insecurity among Kurdish-Iraqi consumers might increase as they become financially independent and stop receiving financial support. This process could thus cause them to care more about saving for the future and have lower levels of financial self-efficacy or perceived financial capability regarding fashion purchases.

Consistent with Thomas et al.'s (2017) study, our findings do not provide exploratory support for a relationship between the legacy hypothesis and sustainable consumption behavior. This finding is also per the SHIFT framework's *matching temporal focus*, which indicates that consumers behave less sustainably when they are informed of the benefits of sustainable actions for future generations instead of the benefits for themselves. In other words, the legacy hypothesis focuses on the benefits of action for future generations, while consumers are more present-focused and view such future payoffs of sustainable actions to be too distant. Moreover, consistent with existing literature, customer experience (Esmailpour & Mohseni, 2019), product design, and quality (Vuong et al., 2018) can impact consumers' purchasing intentions.

In addition, businesses can engage in advocacy initiatives to promote the adoption of sustainable policies, as demonstrated by international sustainable fash-

ion brands such as Stella McCartney's launch of the UN charter for sustainable fashion (McCartney, 2018). The latter is also an example of a useful tool for businesses to strengthen trust in their business while avoiding mistrust in governmental institutions by invoking the application of the principles and actions of a charter issued by an international institution such as the UN.

Our findings further suggest that consumers may trust business claims of sustainability when they see detailed and transparent information, brand consistency, and in-group member trust of that business. According to the SHIFT framework's application of social norm and social identity theory, people tend to follow practices that are socially approved and adopted by in-group members. Therefore, creating social desirability around sustainable fashion products in the region could significantly influence Kurdish-Iraqi consumers' consumption behavior. In addition, associating sustainable fashion products with the desired status within society could also have a positive impact on sustainable fashion consumption, as the SHIFT framework notes that people tend to engage in socially desirable actions that convey social status. This could be highly effective as there is a strong relationship between status/class and buying behavior (Iftikhar et al., 2011)

Our exploratory study suggests that Kurdish-Iraqi consumers may routinely shop for quality and vintage clothing regardless of sustainability knowledge. Incentivizing these actions and giving feedback to consumers about the positive implications of their behavior could promote the practice of sustainable fashion consumption as suggested by the SHIFT framework's habit formation theory. One may increase the effectiveness of incentivizing sustainable behavior if such incentives are followed by informing the consumers of the importance of such actions. This is because incentives and penalties may not result in consistent, sustainable consumption behavior (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977). In sum, promoting sustainability knowledge paralleled with the incentives and feedback could result in longer-termed sustainable consumption. The following table summarizes our conceptual model.

**Table 1.** Barriers and facilitators to sustainable fashion consumption in Kurdistan region of Iraq

Barrier	Mitigation
Preconceived perceptions of sustainable products	<p>Breaking stereotypes surrounding sustainable fashion products:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raising awareness and communicating the availability of sustainable fashion options among existing products;</li> <li>• Making sustainable consumption easy for the consumers (e.g. setting sustainable products as the default).</li> </ul> <p>Creating social desirability around sustainable fashion products:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting trends with sustainable fashion products;</li> <li>• Associating them with a desired status within the society (e.g. through high product design, quality, and customer experience).</li> </ul>
Lack of sufficient sustainability awareness	<p>Raising awareness on sustainability:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest to spread awareness;</li> <li>• Keeping messages clear;</li> <li>• Promoting the incorporation of sustainability education within educational and cultural platforms through advocacy with governmental and non-governmental institutions.</li> </ul> <p>Incentivizing sustainable fashion consumption behavior:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rewarding sustainable fashion consumption behavior (e.g. consumption of vintage clothing and quality products);</li> <li>• Giving feedback about the positive implications of their behavior to promote continuity in such actions.</li> </ul>
Mistrust in governmental regulations and monitoring of businesses	<p>Promoting the issuing of national policies in favor of sustainable fashion and better compliance with their implementation.</p>
Mistrust in businesses	<p>Building consumers' trust in sustainable businesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating on compliance with sustainable development recommendations of international institutions;</li> <li>• Ensuring transparency within all businesses processes;</li> <li>• Maintaining consistency between actions and communicated values.</li> </ul>

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study offer potential pathways for further investigation, thus providing novel insights that can promote cross-sectional and experimental research. This study can serve as a basis for future inquiries in the domain. Consequently, these results can facilitate the process for researchers to generate theory-grounded research inquiries that possess empirical justification with a larger sample size. By adopting this approach, it becomes plausible for man-

agers to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the connection between varying factors enabling them to make informed decisions. While these findings may not be directly employable, they constitute an important contribution to scholarly research. Researchers can augment the existing knowledge base of their field and gain a more profound comprehension of the studied phenomena by adding to these discoveries.

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## Appendix A. Profiles of interview participants

Name	Age	FI	Marital status	Level of education	WE	Work-study field	Shopping frequency	SK
Amina	33	Yes	Married with children	Master	Yes	Human Resources Management	1-2/week	Yes
Ala	33	Yes	Married with children	Master	Yes	Marketing	Very often	No
Casim	24	Yes	Single	Bachelor	Yes	Business Administration	4/year	Yes
Imran	23	Yes	Single	Bachelor	Yes	IT	1/month	No
Jina	25	Yes	Single	Bachelor	Yes	Operations	2/week	Yes
Loreen	26	Yes	Single	Bachelor	Yes	Business Administration	3/year	Yes
Mona	24	Yes	Single	Bachelor	Yes	Operations	1-2/month	No
Mazar	25	Yes	Single	Bachelor	Yes	Operations	2-3/week	Yes
Niaz	28	Yes	Married with no children	Bachelor	Yes	Finance	2/month	No
Regr	16	No	Single	High school	No	Other	1/month	No
Ravin	29	Yes	Single	Master	Yes	Human Resources Management	1/week	No
Ronahi	29	Yes	Married with no children	Bachelor	Yes	Administration	1/month	Yes
Safin	29	Yes	Married with no children	Bachelor	Yes	Operations	1/month	No
Xatin	22	No	Single	Bachelor	No	Computer science	3/year	No
Zozan	23	No	Single	Bachelor	No	Environmental sciences	4-6/year	Yes
Zara	23	Yes	Single	Bachelor	Yes	Engineering	2/year	Yes

Note: WE = Work Experience; FI = Financial Independence; SK = Sustainability knowledge

## Appendix B. Some references from collected data

Code	Participant	Reference
Internal influences on sustainable consumption: Influences on general consumption behavior		
Inhibitors to shopping	Xatin	A cheap quality. Something that won't last me for a while, and a very unnecessary high price. That's what I usually go for.
Shopping criteria	Zara	It depends, when it comes to shoes, I focus more on the quality, I don't even mind paying extra if the quality is good. But when it comes to blouses, dresses etc. the quality is not that important to be honest. I'd say the quality, the price and the style, if it's to my taste.
Shopping frequency	Zozan	How often do I go shopping... ummm... about once in 2 or 3 months.
Perceived availability, financial capability and sustainable products		

*Continued on next page*

Table B.2 continued

Financial independence and sustainable consumption	Loreen	I used to go shopping a lot to be honest but ever since I started working, I've changed a lot so now I'd say every 4 months, depending on my needs.
Preconceived perceptions of sustainable products	Jina	No not really because here most people are price sensitive and sustainable clothes are usually expensive so I don't think someone would want to sell sustainable clothes here.
External influences on sustainable consumption: Impact of trust on sustainable consumption		
Consequences of the counterfeit	Amina	In my opinion, if there are appropriate regulatory conditions on counterfeit goods, the market and business sector will respond quickly to the demands of changing consumption habits and patterns.
Importance of trust	Zara	Actually, it is hard to trust them. I have to see for myself and ask for resources to see whether they are actually sustainable.
Social influences on sustainable consumption		
Influence of society-group	Loreen	That's a good question. I think it's the same when it comes to become a vegan or a vegetarian. Because for me, personally, I've always wanted to become a vegetarian. But it's a bit difficult to take that step because first of all it takes time and it's also about your surroundings. If my family and friends adopted this behavior, like being sustainable then I would too, why not? But it's not like I would be the 1st one to do it. I'm just gonna be honest. I wish I was like that, you know, to start doing something new, but I'm not that brave I'd say.
Influence of trends	Zara	To be honest. I've always had a particular style, I think I'm more a heavy classic style we can say. But sometimes yes, I do follow the trends.
Changing towards sustainable consumption: Consumers' sustainability awareness		
Vintage clothing	Jina	I shop about 2 times per week for vintage clothing as they have unique designs that you can't find elsewhere and they have a low price
Sustainability knowledge	Zara	I think not harming the animals is a part of maintaining and being sustainable.
Habits and sustainable consumption		
Impact of habits	Imran	Well, I never took into account how many clothes I owned or where they went when I threw them away.
Change in point of view	Safin	Yes, I think I should start to learn more about this
Potential platforms for raising awareness on sustainable consumption		
Source of awareness raising	Casim	Hmmm yes, so about my view, yes it has changed. Like in the recent years, because of my own knowledge, and my own follow up of the world news, you know, I'm aware of how this environment thing is getting so warning to us, to all of us, so yeah sure my viewpoint has changed about that, and I really care about not getting our planet into a very dangerous position, so yeah, that's my take on that.

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Table B.2 continued

Source of inspiration	Amina	From online sites, as well as, from people I know, it could be family or friends.
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## Appendix C. Interview questions

Identity	
Age	How old are you?
Education/ level of education	What's your level of education? What studies did you do?
Work-study field	In what industry do you work/study in?
Independence/Responsibility	Do you take responsibility for other individuals in your family or are you independent? (Do you have children?)
Part one	
Shopping frequency	How often do you go shopping?
Shopping criteria	What do you take into account first when you go shopping?
Inhibitors to shopping	What could refrain you from buying a product?
Influence of trends	Do you follow the latest trends?
Source of inspiration	Where do you get your fashion inspiration?
Part two	
Sustainability knowledge	Do you know what sustainable consumption is? <i>If not:</i> Give a short definition of sustainable consumption. <i>Then:</i> Explain that sustainable consumption is an appropriate behavior and most adopted in many countries. Explaining and giving examples and statistics of why sustainability is important. Give information about the benefits of sustainability for future generations. Give information about the benefits of sustainability for the person in the future
Influence of society-group	Would you adopt this sustainable behavior if it was adopted by your society?
Impact of habits	Can you recall any of your habits being contradictory with sustainable consumption after our explanation?
Impact of trust	Would you trust a sustainable business in your country?
Change in point of view	Do you think your view has changed about how you should consume from now on?

LUMINOUS  
INSIGHTS

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