



Research Article

Effects of Sustainable Marketing on Fast Fashion Shoppers' Perception and Behavioral Inertia

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ABSTRACT

The integration of sustainability as a theme, either explicitly or in more subtle formats and techniques, is becoming increasingly prevalent within the realm of marketing and brand communication. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of two different sustainable marketing initiatives employed on the website of a prominent fast fashion brand on consumer perceptions and intentions to modify their shopping behavior. The examination focuses on understanding the nature and extent of shoppers' responses to these marketing initiatives. Given the complexity of consumer perceptions, 100 semi-structured interviews with shoppers in the field were conducted to better understand the phenomenon under research. We transcribed shoppers' responses and conducted a qualitative content analysis of their self-reports. Our results show that fast fashion shoppers demonstrate a spectrum of responses. Sustainable marketing initiatives that enable consumers to be actively involved were perceived more positively. In conclusion, it can be inferred that fast fashion brands engage in sustainable marketing primarily to cultivate positive emotions and assuage ethical concerns among consumers, thereby fostering brand loyalty and customer retention.

KEYWORDS

fast fashion, ethical purchasing gap, sustainable marketing, corporate social responsibility, brand loyalty

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 9 May 2023

Accepted: 6 November 2023

Published: 22 November 2023

1. Introduction

The engagement of consumers with ethical issues has a more than 20-year history in society and research and has seen a recent rise (Mohr et al., 2021). Furthermore, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, health issues and pro-social concerns have moved to the forefront of ethical consciousness. Correspondingly, consumer awareness of brands' corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable marketing initiatives has increased over the past three decades, whereas ethical consumer purchasing behavior continues to lag (Robichaud & Yu, 2021; Janssen & Vanhamme, 2015; Granskog et al., 2020). Especially when it comes

to fast fashion, consumers primarily adhere to their (over)consumption habits (Hill & Lee, 2015; Mohr et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the predicted impact of consumers' ethical consciousness on the apparel industry, particularly in the fast fashion sector, is high (Balchandani et al., 2021; Garcia, 2018; Vehmas et al., 2018; Granskog et al., 2020). In this context, sustainability - as one of the most prevalent notions in business and society in the last two decades - is an established concept within the fashion industry, encompassing both economic and cultural efforts toward sustainable development in this sector (Niinimäki, 2015). In accordance with that, sustainable



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business and marketing practices include “not only a sustainable value base but also ethical consideration” (Niinimäki, 2015, p. 3).

Our study sheds light on how fast fashion brands leverage sustainable marketing to reinforce consumers’ reluctance to engage in ethical purchasing behavior while at the same time fulfilling consumers’ requirements of a more conscious consumerism. Accordingly, sustainability in the fast fashion industry appears to be a paradox: on the one hand, the industry’s production of fast-changing collections with little longevity, on the other hand, the industry’s sustainable marketing efforts in response to the current consumers’ sense of the importance of consuming less and their demand for making clothing more durable (Liu et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021; Vehmas et al., 2018; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). Moreover, fast fashion is a labor-intensive industry characterized by increasing demands “on workers at the expense of their well-being” (Gupta and Hodges, 2012, p. 217).

Academics have frequently used theories of reasoned action and planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Liu et al., 2021; Robichaud & Yu, 2021) as well as quantitative methods to explain why consumers “share a concern for environmental issues even as they indulge in consumer patterns antithetical to ecological best practices.” (Joy et al., 2012, p. 273). Our study seeks to contribute to the explanation of this dissonance in the context of sustainable marketing and fast fashion. Following an exploratory approach, we use in-field interviews and qualitative analysis to investigate consumer responses to sustainable marketing initiatives from an established global fast fashion brand. In doing so, we aim to answer the research questions of how different consumer groups (by age, gender) respond to sustainable marketing activities (associated with the cause of the environmental harm of fashion production or the consequences of fashion consumption) and how they connect that to their continuous fast fashion consumption behavior. Moreover, in our explanation of the relationship between customer and brand, we note that customers’ loyalty to fast fashion brands can increase when the brand offers sustainable marketing activities.

Given its comprehensive nature, sustainable marketing, which encompasses marketing activities in the environmental, social, and economic sectors, is better suited to covering the corresponding corporate practices of fast fashion giants. Such activities are not limited to the theme of green practices but incorporate a range of themes, such as working conditions in the supply chain, fair trade, environmental protection, overconsumption, and wastage (Jung et al., 2020). In this paper, we use the definition of sustainable marketing as an “evolution of marketing that blends the mainstream economic and technological perspectives with the emerging concepts of relationship marketing and the social, ethical, environmental, and intergenerational perspective of the sustainable development agenda” (Belz and Peattie, 2009, p. 18). Furthermore, the spectrum of activities includes initiatives under the umbrella of CSR, a concept that has been in use for decades (Caroll, 1979). However, the main contrast between CSR and sustainable marketing initiatives is that CSR lacks explicit underlying marketing rationales.

In line with the unfortunate establishment of non-ethical standards in the fast fashion industry, the term ethical fashion has been coined and described in the literature: “ethical fashion can be defined as fashionable clothes that incorporate fair trade principles with sweatshop-free labor conditions while not harming the environment or workers by using biodegradable and organic cotton” (Joergens, 2006, p. 361). Hence, ethical fashion stands for the renunciation of non-ethical behavior and is intended to express brands’ or corporate well-doing. The term serves as an umbrella encompassing terminology such as ethical clothing, eco-clothing, recycled clothing, organic clothing, green fashion, and sustainable fashion (Carey & Cervellon, 2014).

In this context, previous research on ethical fashion has concentrated on why consumers are reluctant to engage in purchasing ethical fashion (White et al., 2019a). Correspondingly, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how consumers perceive sustainable marketing and how this connects to purchasing ethical fashion or to (non-)ethical consumption behavior in regard to fast fashion (Blasi et al., 2020; Bocti et al.,

2021; Ramirez et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is a continued call for qualitative research to explain (non-)ethical consumption behavior (Bray et al., 2011; Eckhardt et al., 2010; Öberseder et al., 2011; Park & Lin, 2020; Yu et al., 2019). Specifically, the role of inertia, which prevents consumers from changing their consumption patterns toward pro-social and pro-environmental behavior, has been highlighted as a promising explanatory approach (Bray et al., 2011; Mohr et al., 2021; Papadopoulou et al., 2022). The question of whether consumers will remain loyal to fast fashion brands that institute sustainable practices merits in-depth examination through a qualitative study (Jung et al., 2020).

1.1. Sustainable Marketing and Responses to It

The growing consumer awareness of health and environmental issues has sparked a surge in sustainable marketing practices. However, this increase may also foster skepticism and distrust toward corporate practices in this area (Chatterjee, 2009; Iglesias et al., 2020). Durif et al. (2010) categorized the element of doubt in consumers' minds about the "greenness" of products as a greenwashing phenomenon. Greenwashing is defined as a form of disinformation from organizations seeking to shape their public image as environmentally friendly (Laufer, 2003). In this sense, companies launching green products for the sake of reciprocally greening their parent brand may be accused of greenwashing (Hill & Lee, 2015). However, at the same time, a brand's reputation and consumers' brand allegiance are more than ever determined by the brand's adoption of sustainability (Mohr et al., 2021).

In response to a rise in consumers' ethical consciousness, fast fashion giants such as Gap Inc., Inditex Group (Zara, Bershka, Oysho), and Hennes & Mauritz (H&M) have begun engaging with various associations and initiatives, such as the Better Cotton Initiative (Shen, 2014) or the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (Doyle, 2018). Companies seek to outdo each other in terms of launching sustainable marketing initiatives (Hesse & Hofschulte, 2021; Pucker, 2022) and claim that they are "applying ethical fashion principles" (Liu et al., 2021, p. 1175). Nevertheless, Yu et al. (2019)

and Robichaud and Yu (2021) reveal that consumers are often unaware of brands' CSR and sustainable marketing activities, while others even report a kind of CSR fatigue and that consumers reject many such activities as cynical (White et al., 2019a; Bray et al., 2011). To counter the lack of consumer awareness regarding their efforts, fast fashion giants have intensified such activities, for example, by transparently displaying the "Fashion Transparency Index" (Harris et al., 2016; Hesse & Hofschulte, 2021).

At the same time, research has noted similar skeptical consumer responses to CSR and sustainable marketing practices, both of which are perceived as lacking authenticity or as posturing (Gupta & Hodges, 2012). Consumer responses are expected to be more positive for initiatives that are integrated into the core positioning of the brand, e.g., in the fast fashion sector new collections incorporate ethical considerations de facto on the product-level, in contrast to marketing messages like "for a better nature" that remain on the campaigning level (Du et al., 2007). Moreover, previous research has emphasized that a fit between the brand and sustainable marketing activity increases the likelihood of positive consumer perceptions (Barone et al., 2007). However, negative perceptions of a brand's motives mitigate this effect (Barone et al., 2007). The latter can occur, for example, when the use of sustainability arguments by brands is an obvious attempt to promote sales.

Based on the argumentation described above, we derive Proposition 1 and Proposition 2:

Proposition 1: The implementation of sustainable marketing initiatives by brands that consumers identify with fast fashion results in a diverse range of responses from consumers, ranging from advocacy to skepticism.

Proposition 2: The effectiveness of sustainable marketing initiatives that lead to advocating or skeptical consumer perceptions, reactions, and behavioral changes depends on the specific content design and implementation of such activities.

1.2. Varying Consumer Groups Responses

In a study limited to the US fashion industry and a sample consisting of Generation Y consumers, Hill and

Lee (2015) empirically demonstrate that consumer knowledge about sustainability and their existing evaluations of a firm's sense of environmental responsibility influence their perception of eco-friendly clothing collections and potential reciprocal effects. The authors reveal that Generation Y consumers consider that a fit is possible between fast fashion and sustainability (Hill & Lee, 2015). In a recent study, Robichaud and Yu (2021) demonstrated that Generation Z's purchase behavior with regard to fair trade items "can be used as a communication tool among their peers to project personal values". Consequently, sustainable activities have a symbolic value that brands must know how to use (Groening et al., 2018; Park & Lin, 2020). In addition to age, further demographic factors are also likely to play a role in ethical consumption (Park & Lin, 2020). However, the literature on the influence of demographic factors on ethical consumption has produced conflicting findings (Carey & Cervellon, 2014; Park & Lin, 2020; Robichaud & Yu, 2021; Bray et al., 2011). Loe et al. (2000, p. 187) summarize that research has demonstrated either no significant gender differences or that "females tend to be more ethically sensitive than males." More recently, Zhang et al. (2021) noted that females are "less aware of the social equality issue" (p. 1663) and "spend less on fast fashion products with sustainability features, but they are more stable in terms of the willingness to pay a higher price" (p. 1663).

Based on what we know about the influence of demographic factors on consumer responses toward sustainable marketing, we derive Proposition 3: The response of consumers to sustainable marketing initiatives is anticipated to be more advocating or skeptical across different demographic groups.

1.3. (Non-)Ethical Consumption Behavior

Although consumers may claim to engage in conscious consumption behavior and corporations are increasing sustainable marketing practices, consumers frequently avoid ethical purchase behaviors (Elhaffar et al., 2020; Loe et al., 2000; Yu et al., 2019; White et al., 2019a). The gap between attitude, intention, and a corresponding behavior is labeled as an ethical purchasing gap (Nicholls & Lee, 2006), an ethical

consumer intention-behavior gap (Carrington et al., 2010), an intention–purchase gap (Park & Lin, 2020), an attitude–behavior gap (White et al., 2019a), or a CSR-consumption paradox (Janssen & Vanhamme, 2015). Referring to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior, while consumers seem to have the intention to consume fashion more consciously, they do not fully implement or act on that intention. Behavioral, normative, and control beliefs have been used as factors to predict consumers' intentions to engage in ethical behavior (Janssen & Vanhamme, 2015; Park & Lin, 2020).

Bray et al. (2011) explore the role of inertia in purchasing behavior (behavioral inertia) as a strong barrier preventing "any change, or even consideration of change, in consumption patterns" (2011, p. 603). In addition, price sensitivity, personal experience, ethical obligation, lack of information, and quality have been noted as factors impeding ethical consumption (Bray et al., 2011). Higher prices are cited as a common reason for non-pro-social purchase behavior (Öberseder et al., 2011), and further factors are categorized as external (i.e., lack of availability, inefficient ethical alternatives, social obligations, limited budget) or internal (i.e., "opting for the easy choice," "compromise in everyday life") (Bocti et al., 2021). For a comprehensive review of marketing and behavioral science literature on the topic, see White et al. (2019a). In addition, Eger et al. (2021) note that during the Coronavirus pandemic, quality, availability and convenience continued to represent as shoppers' purchase reasons across product categories.

Proposition 4: Ethical considerations (i.e., regarding material, durability or recyclability) arising during the decision to purchase fast fashion are overridden by traditional non-ethical considerations (i.e., regarding pricing or style).

1.4. Brand-consumer Relationship

The definition of sustainable marketing indicates its relevance and importance for brand-consumer or firm-customer relationships (Belz & Peattie, 2009). More recently, Bodor et al. (2021) demonstrated that sustainable marketing is an antecedent of loyalty to fast fashion retailers. Based on Jung et al.'s (2020) empir-

ical knowledge concerning the influence of CSR on a brand's image, the authors highlight the positive impact of sustainable marketing on the generation of loyalty rather than a promotional impact on sales. The authors noted that loyalty helps brands maintain a stable customer base and reduce acquisition costs (Jung et al., 2020). Papadopoulou et al. (2022) point out that environmentally “conscious shoppers no longer must look far to identify sustainable options that will satisfy their consumption need and reflect their values.” (p. 358).

At the same time, a significant body of literature has focused on why consumers adhere to their fashion consumption habits and do not switch to ethical fashion consumption. As mentioned previously, consumer behavior appears to be paradoxical: on the one hand, a rise in consumer consciousness (can be understood as planned behavior or intention (Ajzen, 1991)); on the other hand, consumers' inertia and their adherence to habitual behaviors (can be understood as a non-conversion into action (Ajzen, 1991)). To the best of our knowledge, only the previously mentioned studies explore the underlying strategic rationales to leverage sustainable marketing for established fast fashion brands (Bocti et al., 2021; Bodor et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2020; Mohr et al., 2021).

Proposition 5: The influence of sustainability-oriented fast fashion marketing extends beyond shaping consumers' skepticism or advocacy toward specific initiatives and single behavioral reactions to play a long-term bonding and loyalty-building role in regard to the brand-consumer relationship.

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we describe how we gathered and analyzed data. We then present the findings of our examination, and finally, we discuss the qualitative propositions that we developed based on our literature review.

2. Materials and Methods

Considering the multitude and complexity of explanations of consumer behavior, we opted for a qualitative research design focusing on a general understanding of consumers' perceptions of sustainable marketing activities as well as the effects on their self-reported con-

sumption habits (Campbell & Cowton, 2015). There is a need for in-depth research when exploring such substantial and sensitive questions about attitudes and beliefs. Accordingly, it is appropriate to focus on a single brand case study with strong manifestations of the phenomenon under research in a geographically limited market (Arrigo, 2013; Campbell & Cowton, 2015; Yin, 1981). Therefore, after a brief examination of the fast fashion giants active in the German market, we selected shoppers of one brand with multifaceted sustainable marketing activities (Hesse & Hofschulte, 2021). Our interest is not to cast blame on the fast fashion brands mentioned in our paper, nor do we intend to compare the incumbents' practices. Consequently, where the use of an identifier was unavoidable, for example, while quoting the interviewees, we anonymized brand indicators by using the letter X.

2.1. Data Collection

Given the limited existing research on consumer perceptions and interpretations of fast fashion sustainable marketing, consumer interviews have been identified as the most promising technique (Arsel, 2017). To sample participants, we conducted field interviews. We positioned ourselves directly in front of a fast fashion store in Koblenz, a mid-sized city in Germany. Consequently, in contrast to many existing studies, we sampled interviewees who were clearly involved in non-ethical fashion consumption. Thus, responses may have been biased since respondents may have legitimized their consumption habits to mitigate cognitive dissonance. Nevertheless, we decided in favor of interviews “in situ” (Arsel, 2017, p. 941) to take advantage of the embeddedness of the interview in a real-life situation. The benefits of a real-life feature and the authenticity of the dialogue outweighed the possible disadvantages. Moreover, we noted that many studies on CSR work with samples of participants who actively seek to participate in a survey (Carrington et al., 2010; Connell, 2010). Hence, such informants may have been biased because their level of interest in sustainability issues was clearly above the average of the general public (Davies et al., 2012). Therefore, we did not selectively interview those shoppers who were explicitly interested; rather, we approached one customer after

another, specifically targeting those who had left the store carrying a branded bag. After 50 interviews, we cross-checked our sample with regard to gender and age and based on a comparison with the fast fashion brand's description of customers, we continued.

Moreover, in our sampling, we did not aim for a representation of the basic population of fast fashion shoppers but rather to narrow the typical fast fashion average with regard to gender and age (see [Table 1](#)). In total, 100 interviews were conducted in Germany between November 2nd and November 28th, 2020, each lasting between five and ten minutes. After 100 interviews, theoretical saturation of the data was reached; that is, no new or relevant data were expected from subsequent interviews ([Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007](#)).

The framework for all the interviews was set in an interview guide based on our review of the literature and in correspondence to our research questions (see [Appendix](#)). The interview-guide is organized into thematic blocks to facilitate the conduct of semi-structured interviews. Each interview began with general questions about the interviewee's consumption habits. The remainder of the questions referred to the brand's website, the perception of the website, and its impact on the consumer's attitude towards the brand. As brand websites have become the dominant communication channel for brands' sustainable marketing activities ([Boardman & McCormick, 2022](#); [Vehmas et al., 2018](#)), we selected two of brand X's webpages as stimuli for the interviewees. One of the webpages provided details about a recycling initiative inviting customers to bring their used clothing to the brand's stores to be recycled by the fast fashion giant. As an incentive for participating in the store's clothing recycling program, the participants were given a voucher that could be redeemed to purchase new garments at any of the brand's retail locations. The focus of the initiative is on consumer activity. The other webpage provided detailed information about an ethical fashion collection that guarantees the use of recycled raw materials as well as optimized working conditions in the supply chain, thus addressing the causes of harm from fast fashion and focusing on the product. The web-

pages were alternately presented on a tablet so that the order of viewing the webpages changed for each of the participants.

To maintain a neutral position, one interviewer conducted all the semi-structured interviews and deepened the dialogues wherever needed to delineate the interpretations of the fast fashion shoppers. For instance, questions were added on how the shoppers perceived sustainable marketing activities that addressed the cause of environmental and social harm (i.e., raw materials), in contrast to those focusing on the consequences (i.e., recycling initiative). Moreover, we explored whether and to what extent the preceding issues led consumers to engage in scrutinizing the sustainability-fast fashion "oxymoron" ([Rutter et al., 2017](#), p. 15). We were interested in consumers' ad hoc interpretations and judgements, as unpacking those aspects qualitatively enabled us to gain an initial understanding of both the nature of consumer perceptions and the impact of sustainable marketing in fast fashion. At the end of each interview, demographic data were collected, and the interviewer added field notes to each interview's audio file. We guaranteed anonymity to the interviewees to mitigate social desirability bias ([Randall & Fernandes, 1991](#)).

After securing verbal permission from each participant, the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer to maintain consistency, resulting in 121 pages of verbatim transcripts. Since the aim of our study is not "to simply generalize, but rather provide a rich and contextualized understanding" ([Abd Aziz et al., 2021](#)), our data collection method promised to allow for a rigorous in-depth analysis.

2.2. Data Analysis

The unit of analysis in our examination was the consumer level. We analyzed responses from fast fashion shoppers inductively via qualitative content analysis, following [Mayring \(2004\)](#). [Figure 1](#) illustrates our data analysis process and its connection to our findings.

Based on the written transcripts, we prepared the data by compiling the answers in text blocks. The two authors, acting as independent coders, managed the data using ATLAS.ti, a program that supports qual-

Table I. Gender, Age, Frequencies of Purchases of Interviewees

Gender		
Male	42	
Female	58	
Total	100	
Age		
15-17	10	
18-29	50	
30-49	28	
50-64	10	
65-72	2	
Total	100	
Number of self-reported purchases per month		
	at X stores	fashion in general
0-1 purchases	59	56
2-3 purchases	22	27
4 or more purchases	19	17
Total	100	100

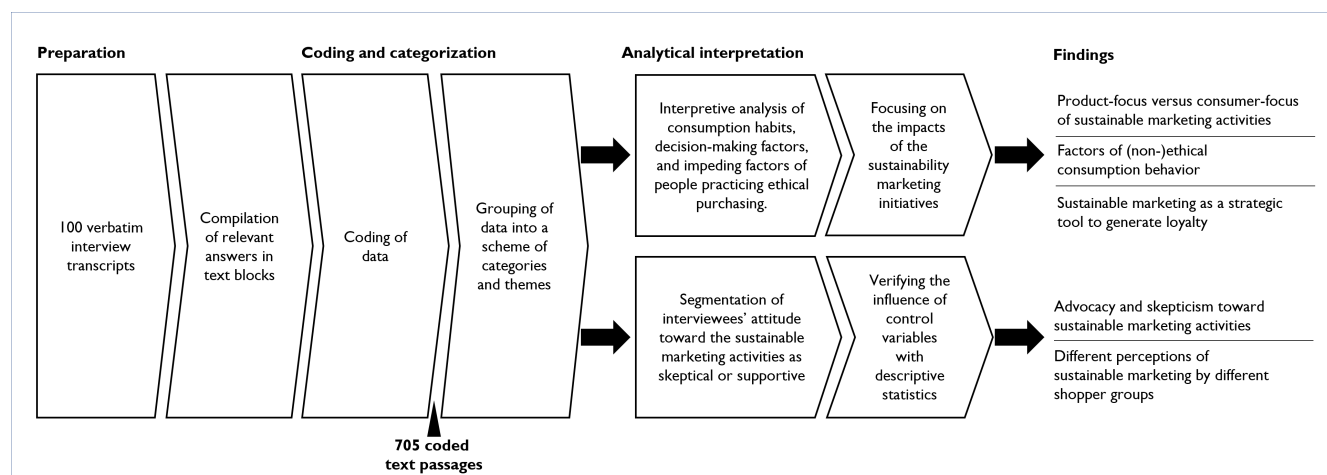


Figure I. Process of Data Analysis and Its Connection to the Findings

itative analysis. During this process, we looked for patterns of thought and attribution while categorizing, rejecting, or identifying the dimensions. ATLAS.ti was employed to maintain a transparent and comprehensible data analysis process, that is, while coding the data and transferring the interpretive findings into a scheme of categories and themes. This process started “with open codes, mostly as words or short phrases” (Rambaree, 2020, p. 563) which, in the next

step, were categorized into groups such as “habits” or “expressions of skepticism.” A comparable approach for analyzing qualitative data was successfully employed by Abd Aziz et al. (2021), Ali et al. (2019), and Rambaree (2020). The data were coded without a preconceived framework of consumer responses, which follows the practice of seeking patterns and distilling categories found in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through this process, we identified an exten-

sive list of 705 coded text-based passages. Given the exploratory approach of our research, the coding and categorization of our research represented a preliminary step that laid the groundwork for our analytical interpretation.

In the next step of this interpretive analysis, we concentrated on codes that represented the consumption habits, decision-making factors, and impeding factors of respondents practicing ethical purchasing. Herein, we shed light on the impacts of the sustainable marketing initiatives mentioned by fast fashion shoppers.

In addition, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify the types of responses that could be categorized as either supportive of or skeptical toward the stimuli. The focus of this analysis was on developing a qualitative understanding of consumer reactions. Accordingly, the frequencies of such categories were less important than the qualitative description of how the shoppers referred to sustainable marketing activities. In the process of demonstrating our findings, we limited the references to the frequencies of codes to those peculiarities that were significant and clear. We followed [Mohr et al. \(2021\)](#), who describe the underlying intention of that limitation: “the frequencies and proportions are reported to give the reader a more complete understanding of the findings, but they are not intended to be projected to the general population.” (p. 57). In this approach, we used codes that represented a segmentation perspective, grouping the interviewees based on respondent type (skeptical versus non-skeptical) and verifying the influence of the control variables (e.g., gender and age) using the descriptive statistics. Explicitly, we examined two-tailed effects of gender and skepticism/advocacy; shopping frequency at the store and skepticism/advocacy; fast fashion shopping frequency and skepticism/advocacy; and age and skepticism/advocacy.

3. Results

We organized our findings along the five propositions that were developed. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the relationship of our findings to the data analysis process.

3.1. Advocacy and Skepticism Toward Sustainable Marketing Activities

The responses of our interviewees were, in general, dichotomous, tending to be more advocating of or more skeptical about the brand’s activities. In total, we coded more text passages as advocating (153 times) than as skeptical (87 times) (see [Table 2](#)).

At the heart of the skepticism expressed was a concern about the trustworthiness of the brand’s activities, the brand’s underlying rationales, and the underrepresentation of the activities in the core business of a fast fashion brand.

The interviewees directly accused brands of greenwashing and greedy behavior; for instance, participants 37 and 12 said:

“Collecting old clothes, and next trading with them, X has revenues ... In my opinion, it is pure greenwashing and increasing revenues.” (P37)

“Because they are a large corporation that is mostly run by narcissistic chief executive officers.” (P12)

Other interviewees expressed doubt rather than direct criticism:

“Is there really something behind this or is it just conscience appeasement?” (P54)

Whereas skepticism was directly linked to the brand, the responses coded as advocacy focused more on initiatives and environmental intentions:

“I think it’s very good because the idea of recycling should slowly catch on in companies like this. It has a sustainable and meaningful effect.” (P9)

“Materials such as cotton are very valuable, and it is a shame to throw them away or not reuse them. I also find this activity great.” (P10)

Consistent with Proposition 1, our empirical investigation provides evidence for a wide range of reactions to sustainable marketing initiatives expressed in terms of degrees of advocacy and skepticism.

3.2. Product-focus Versus Consumer-focus of Sustainable Marketing Activities

In addition to perceptual contrasts in general, we observed a higher proportion of skeptical text

Table 2. Code Frequencies

	Responses to recycling initiatives		Responses to alternative collections		Total
Advocating	Necessity	38	Value	39	153
	Need	44	Cause-relation	19	
	Reference to reality	6	Exclusivity	4	
Skepticism	Sum	88 (28%)	Non-profit	3	87
	For-profit/ commercial intentions	15	Sum	65 (56%)	
	Questionable impact	12	Hypocrisy, incredibility	29	
	Greenwashing	8	Irrelevance, inadequacy compared to core business	17	
	Sum	35 (28%)	Ignorance, confusion	6	
Total		123	Sum	52 (44%)	240
				117	

passages (52 out of 117, which equals 44%) when interviewees responded to the new sustainable ethical fashion collection (focused on the product) compared to the proportion of skeptical text passages focusing on the recycling initiative (35 out of 123, which equals 28%) (focused on the consumer activity) (see Table 2). Correspondingly, the rationales behind the interviewees' preferences between the recycling initiative and the organic collection were of interest.

Most notably, the respondents explained that their preference for the recycling initiative was due to the opportunity to be actively engaged in the process. Many interviewees reported that they were familiar with fashion recycling. As such, the activity is well known and thus considered more trustworthy. The interviewees also admitted to having their own clothing surplus and thus understood the importance of recycling. In contrast, skepticism toward the recycling initiative involved scrutinizing both the business model and its relevance. Specifically, interviewees questioned whether an exploitative intention underlay the coupling of a sales voucher with a sustainable marketing initiative:

“Since customers are given a voucher for this, fast fashion is supported all the more, which in my opinion is a huge paradox.” (P37)

The same participant compared the volume of the

regular fast fashion business to the number of items handled in the context of sustainable marketing activities.

“It is still a very small number of organic products, in contrast to the rest of the product line. Consequently, there is almost no impact on sustainability. The main sales are still made with the regular product line.” (P37)

The interviewees' perception of the ethical fashion collection was more skeptical and focused mainly on the lack of transparency and trust in the brand's underlying intentions and the company's general credibility. This contrasts with our expectation of a greater preference for activities focusing on production of fashion than on the consequences (recycling activity by the consumer). However, in interpreting this preference of the interviewees, we refer to Proposition 2, that trust and familiarity with an activity (recycling initiative) balance out the potential lack of impact. In addition, a major reason for the differing responses is that the implementation of the recycling initiative enables consumers to actively contribute.

3.3. Different Perceptions of Sustainable Marketing by Different Shopper Groups

Because the examination of qualitative data from different angles offers rich perspectives, we added a thematic analysis. Each of the 100 interviews was analyzed again by counting codes and categorizing each interviewee

as “skeptical” or “not skeptical”. When assigning the two themes to respondents, we evaluated any skepticism expressed concerning one or both sustainable marketing activities. Next, we used descriptive statistics, that is, cross tabulations, including the Phi Coefficient, which can indicate the correlation of binary variables. We looked for significant two-tailed effects of gender and skepticism/advocacy; shopping frequency at the store and skepticism/advocacy; fast fashion shopping frequency and skepticism/advocacy; and age and skepticism/advocacy. Gender and skepticism/advocacy were the only variables that showed a statistically significant effect, with an approximate significance of .043. The corresponding Phi coefficient of $-.202$ can be interpreted as having a small-to-medium negative effect. Based on the cross-tabulation, we saw fewer skeptical female interviewees and more advocating female interviewees. In addition, the proportion of women who advocated the brand’s initiatives was higher than that of advocating men. Referring to Proposition 3, our findings indicate a correlation between gender and skepticism/advocacy.

3.4. Impeding Factors of Ethical Consumption Behavior

A key theme that emerged from the data involved the decision-making factors used to explain individual fast fashion consumption habits (see Figure 2). Price, quality, and style are the most frequently mentioned factors. While the price factor was substantiated in comments referring to discounts and the price-performance ratio, the factor of style was expressed with keywords such as “look,” “design,” “fashionable,” and “colors.” Quality was referred to in detail in comments that included terms like “materials,” “processing,” and “durability.” However, with regard to quality, the respondents seemed to disregard the limitations of fast fashion goods.

Correspondingly, fast fashion shoppers voiced less concern about factors involved in ethical consumption, that is, sustainability, origin of materials, or working conditions in production facilities. Moreover, interviewees explicitly referred to factors that impede more ethical consumption behavior and thus gave themselves a “free pass” when it came to their fast fashion shopping habits. Again, price – here, an expected or observed

price mark-up for more ethical fashion – was used predominantly to explain their personal inertia in purchasing ethical fashion. For instance:

“I would also like it to be affordable. That also comes into it.” (P74)

“It’s okay, but the price would have to stay the same. If there is a price increase, then people will buy less because it will become too expensive.” (P11)

Less frequently, interviewees admitted their disinterest in or lack of awareness of the environmental issues linked to fast fashion, as well as their concerns about the comfort of the material. For instance:

“I can’t do anything about it anyway. It doesn’t really affect me.” (P76)

“But with some basic tops, I have the feeling you somehow sweat more in it. Then it’s a bit uncomfortable.” (P79)

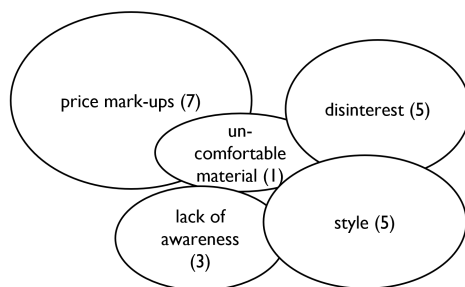
Furthermore, fast fashion shoppers gave various excuses and justifications regarding their fast fashion purchases. Some customers admitted to shopping “too often”, explaining that being interviewed about their purchasing behavior makes them feel trapped, for instance:

“I probably bought way too much. Bad!” (P19)

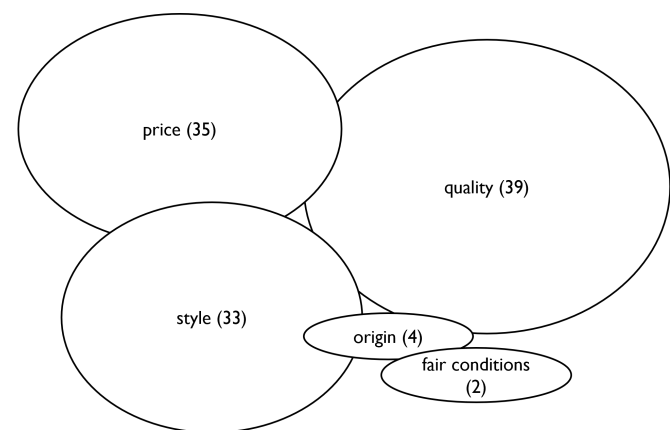
During their interviews, some shoppers sought rationalizations for their consumption habits, for instance, by explaining that they were not buying for themselves but for their children. This supports Proposition 4, indicating that ethical factors are secondary to consumer shopping behavior. In addition, we see that shoppers express impeding factors; however, they do not directly link them to their inertia in non-ethical consumption behavior. With respect to Proposition 4, there is no indication in the data of a relationship between the frequency of purchasing clothing and the frequency of visiting the store. Hence, whether consumers buy more frequently or less frequently is not identified as playing a role for their self-reports on sustainable marketing initiatives.

3.5. Additional Factors Triggered by Sustainable Marketing

Referring to brands’ sustainable marketing activities, the interviewees indicated that being enabled to do



Coded impeding factors of ethical fashion consumption
(the size of the bubble illustrates the relative frequency of the coded impeding factors of ethical fashion consumption in the coded text passages)



Coded decision-making factors of fashion consumption
(the size of the bubble illustrates the relative frequency of the coded decision-making factors of fashion consumption in the coded text passages)

Figure 2. Coded Impeding Factors of Ethical Fashion Consumption Vs Coded Decision-Making Factors of Fashion Consumption

good (i.e., making their fast fashion consumption more ethical) generated positive emotions. For instance:

“I feel better when I can contribute something myself.” (P40)

The interviewees explicitly highlighted elements such as letting customers generate their own personal contribution to, for example, the preservation of the environment by contributing to clothing recycling:

“I feel better when I do something. Returning my old stuff instead of thoughtlessly throwing it away may support the environment at least a bit.” (P41)

Similarly, offering an alternative collection contributed to the well-being of fast fashion shoppers and was explicitly mentioned as assuaging their conscience (which was burdened by their consumption habits). Shoppers described the impact in positive terms:

“Knowing about the improved working conditions, one has a cleaner conscience.” (P100)

“It makes you feel better while shopping.” (P86)

“I can go shopping with a better conscience.” (P86)

3.6. Sustainable Marketing as a Strategy To Generate Loyalty

The interview passages can be used to identify impacts of sustainable marketing. Hence, we observed instances of customer well-being and intentions to repurchase, patronize the brand, and be loyal to the store. There were sporadic statements by interviewees linking their perceptions of sustainable marketing activities to future purchase intentions:

“I would actually think about going to X more often.” (P93)

More frequently, fast fashion shoppers associated sustainable marketing activities with the brand. For example:

“It has the effect on me that my opinion of X is more positive than before.” (P1)

“A good idea that makes X more likeable.” (P39)

“I see X as a role model.” (P10)

“My image of X is improving. I support their activity.” (P87)

“For me personally, it definitely puts X in a better light.” (P98)

The mention of such positive impacts and interviewee statements describing brand allegiance indicate that customers are less inclined to move to a more ethical alternative supplier in the fashion landscape. This positive effect goes beyond the direct impact of sustainable marketing initiatives – in the case at hand, the number of items in the organic collection sold and the volume of returned garment collection items. This refers to Proposition 5: Sustainable marketing activities may provide instances of well-being, enable customers to assist in doing good, provide persuasive reasoning to continue fast fashion shopping, and reinforce customer inertia by assuaging their conscience. Consequently, sustainable marketing initiatives may support established fast fashion brands by strengthening and repositioning their relationships with their customers.

4. Discussion

The contradiction between sustainability and fast fashion is continuously translated into a gap between shoppers' attitudes toward sustainability and their actual (non-)ethical shopping behavior. Building on the consumer perspective, we used responses from 100 interviewees embedded in the shopping situation to analyze propositions describing the perceptual and behavioral effects of the sustainable marketing of an established fast fashion brand (see an overview in Table 3). Our examination allows us to resolve some of the contradictions between sustainability and fast fashion.

Following appropriate academic standards and the principles of qualitative methods, we show consumer reactions to sustainable marketing stimuli, ranging from advocacy to skepticism. Hence, we argue that Proposition 1 can be accepted. Our findings confirm those of previous empirical studies on business ethics research (Bocti et al., 2021; Bray et al., 2011; Carrington et al., 2010; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). In line with Papadopoulou et al. (2022), we observe that consumers engage more positively in sustainable initiatives than in advocacy for the brands, an effect previously observed in qualitative studies on the perception of green demarketing activities (Hesse & Rünz, 2020).

Referring to Proposition 2, we show that a higher

proportion of skepticism was expressed toward a new ethical fashion collection, a program associated with production processes and components, and hence the reduction of the causation of environmental damage. With a recycling initiative, a fast fashion brand facilitates customers to act themselves and thus actively contribute to the greater good. While many facets of more ethical consumption are vague and seem abstract, such actions are tangible, and hence, consumers are more likely to engage in them (White et al., 2019a). In the sense of Ajzen (1991), consumers can act in a way that they have previously planned; hence, they have an opportunity to achieve congruity about their intended conscious consumerism. Moreover, by acting themselves, consumers are enabled to overcome barriers to ethical fashion consumption like “powerlessness” (Bocti et al., 2021, p. 34). Particularly in the realm of fast fashion, the mitigation of such impeding factors contributes to a more positive perception of sustainable marketing activities. All in all, we argue for an acceptance of Proposition 2 that different ways of implementing or designing of sustainable marketing initiatives create distinct responses.

Moreover, we see notable differences in the response patterns of female and male respondents; in particular, we found a small-to-medium effect, revealing a lower number of female interviewees to be less skeptical toward sustainable marketing than male respondents. These findings substantiate Proposition 3. Our results are not generalizable; however, the lower level of female skepticism calls into question Loe et al.'s (2000) finding that women have a higher degree of ethical sensitivity. Moreover, our empirical findings cannot support a further specific influence of demographic factors. Consequently, we see a need for further research to better understand whether and which factors may influence the perception of sustainable marketing.

Engaging in subtle sustainable marketing and coupling it with customer engagement, for example, in garment recycling, may facilitate consumers to retain their fast fashion consumption habits. We show that in their self-reports, consumers' decisions about clothing purchases continue to be rooted in arguments from the

Table 3. Propositions and Findings

Propositions	Findings
<p>Proposition 1: The implementation of sustainable marketing initiatives by brands that consumers identify with fast fashion results in a diverse range of responses from consumers, ranging from advocacy to skepticism.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposition 1 is supported by our empirical investigation.
<p>Proposition 2: The effectiveness of sustainable marketing initiatives that lead to advocating or skeptical consumer perceptions, reactions, and behavioral changes depends on the specific content design and implementation of such activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust and familiarity with an activity (e.g., recycling initiative) balance out the potential lack of impact. • Sustainable marketing initiatives lead to more advocating responses if the implementation of the recycling initiative enables consumers to actively contribute.
<p>Proposition 3: The response of consumers to sustainable marketing initiatives is anticipated to be more advocating or skeptical across different demographic groups.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In total, we identify fewer skeptical female interviewees and more advocating female interviewees.
<p>Proposition 4: Ethical considerations (i.e., in regard to material, durability or recyclability) of the purchase decision referring to fast fashion are overruled by traditional non-ethical considerations (i.e., in regard to pricing or style).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally, we strengthen the argument that consumers seek to rationalize non-ethical consumption by referencing traditional non-ethical considerations. • Moreover, we are able to show that whether consumers buy more frequently or less frequently is not identified as playing a role for their self-reports on sustainability marketing initiatives.
<p>Proposition 5: The influence of sustainability-oriented fast fashion marketing extends beyond shaping consumers' skepticism or advocacy toward specific initiatives and single behavioral reactions to play a long-term bonding and loyalty-building role in regard to the brand-consumer relationship.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable marketing activities provide instances of well-being, enable customers to assist in doing good, provide persuasive reasoning to continue fast fashion shopping, and reinforce customer inertia by assuaging their conscience.

past, which provides evidence for Proposition 4. Companies thus exploit the fact that shoppers do not immediately recognize the consequences of their non-ethical purchase behavior, i.e., environmental impact (stemming from the use of large quantities of water, energy and chemicals), the depletion of finite resources (e.g., water, oil, and natural fibers), as well as the exploitation of labor throughout the supply chain (Mcdevitt et al., 2007). Therefore, sustainable marketing has a two-sided effect: While many consumers express advocacy of and support for pro-environmental and pro-social initiatives, sustainable marketing activities reinforce consumption inertia by providing consumers with a clear conscience (Bray et al., 2011).

Fast fashion brands are caught between their intention to fulfill customer requirements for pro-environmental and pro-social behavior and their business needs to gain brand equity and stabilize their customer base (Granskog et al., 2020). At the same time, an increasing number of fast fashion shoppers, especially those classified as Generation Y and Z, are torn between “their desire to behave ethically” (Wiederhold and Martinez, 2018, p. 420) and the existing inertia in their fashion shopping habits (Hill & Lee, 2015; Papadopoulou et al., 2022; Robichaud & Yu, 2021). Thus, given the intentions of Generation Y and Z, enhancing a company’s relationship with its customer base strengthens its competitive advantage (Yu et al., 2019). Bodor et al. (2021) similarly conclude that corporate sustainable activities represent a “major prerequisite for developing customers’ loyalty toward fast-fashion stores.” (p. 806). Hence, in line with Papadopoulou et al. (2022), we interpret loyalty generation as an effect of fast fashion brand sustainable marketing and, as stated in Proposition 5, enabling consumers to do good and assuaging their conscience have a positive effect on loyalty formation.

4.1. Theoretical Implications

First, our study contributes to the understanding of consumer perceptions of sustainable marketing as well as the impact of sustainable marketing on established fast fashion brands. Explicitly, in regard to different perceptions of various sustainable marketing activities, we highlight how sustainable marketing activities

encourage consumers to engage themselves. Accordingly, consumers are enabled to achieve congruity between their intention (i.e., conscious consumerism) and their actions (i.e., purchasing items from an organic collection or returning garments) (Ajzen, 1991). In addition, we indicate the risks of linking sustainable marketing to sales promotion. Furthermore, our study contributes to the knowledge on gender differences in responses to sustainable marketing.

Second, our findings increase the understanding of the effects of sustainable marketing on consumers’ behavioral reactions in the realm of fast fashion brands in a German setting. We point out that the sustainable marketing initiatives of an established fast fashion brand support the inertia of consumption habits.

As in the principles of grounded theory, we do not develop a new theory or test an existing theory; rather, we extend existing knowledge by drawing ties between theoretical reference points (Mohr et al., 2021). Based on our interpretation of the interview data, we unveiled how brands can leverage consumers’ environmental and social concerns with sustainable marketing for the purposes of customer loyalty and retention. This argument is in line with Jung et al. (2020), who determined that sustainable marketing activities are a source of loyalty and can have positive effects on customer retention.

4.2. Practical Implications

Fast fashion brands that intensify their sustainable marketing activities should consider the skepticism of their audience. By comparing two kinds of sustainable marketing activities (i.e., a recycling initiative and the introduction of an organic collection), our study may help managers to understand the factors that influence customers’ decisions and perceptions. Encouraging customers to contribute by acting themselves (i.e., by returning their surplus of garments) supports the positive effects of sustainable marketing. On the other hand, links to sales promotions or a lack of transparency (i.e., how recycling is handled) can be interpreted as pretense, an alibi, or greenwashing, thus reconfirming suspicions about the industry’s reputation. Customers may feel better without disruptive changes to their consumption habits. Specifically, while

addressing Generation Y and Z and further groups of more consciously acting consumers, brands must be aware of the threat of potential churn to new eco-brands (Park & Lin, 2020; Vehmas et al., 2018). These groups specifically prefer to buy from environmentally conscious brands (Thredup, 2018). They distinguish precisely between advocating environmental initiatives but rejecting corporate sustainable marketing practices (Papadopoulou et al., 2022).

However, fulfilling fundamental consumer requirements regarding pricing, quality, and style is a *sine qua non* in the fast fashion business. In addition, as a sufficient condition, sustainable marketing activities facilitate customers to maintain their consumption habits. And at the same time, consumers can behave ethically and make conscious purchases without churning for competitive brands.

Hence, managers of established fashion brands may leverage the opportunity to implement sustainable marketing activities and simultaneously fulfill urgent consumer demands for sustainability. This two-sided business benefit of sustainable marketing activities both stabilizes the customer base and fulfills consumer demands for sustainability at the same time (White et al., 2019a). However, if fashion brand managers misuse sustainable marketing for greenwashing purposes, their strategy runs the risk of back-firing as consumers' environmental consciousness increases. Empathy for consumers' pro-environmental and pro-social concerns can help leverage sustainable marketing for brand loyalty and customer retention. Furthermore, by offering more sustainable options, established fast fashion brands can additionally leverage trends that encompass more ethical behaviors, including upcycling, vintage shopping, do-it-yourself fashion, "trashion" and slow fashion (Vehmas et al., 2018; Park & Lin, 2020).

4.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although we believe that our work makes several noteworthy contributions, it is nonetheless limited. Since we explored the responses of fast fashion shoppers in the German market context, consumer reactions to sustainable marketing activities should also be examined in other contexts, as cultural perspectives on (non-)ethical consumption behaviors may also signifi-

cantly influence responses. Due to pragmatic reasons in the context of in-field interviewing, we did not control for demographic variables beyond gender and age such as ethnicity, social class, income level, educational level, or occupation. However, future investigations of responses to sustainable marketing activities should include such kind of variables. Nevertheless, while we did not consider such differences, we leveraged participants' self-reports of their own behavior (Carey & Cervellon, 2014).

Furthermore, as we followed theoretical sampling, we were limited to "snapshots" (Pettigrew, 1990, p. 269) when developing our understanding of the effects of sustainable marketing activities. Moreover, our case selection limits the findings to a specific brand and company (Rein & Stott, 2009). In addition, the specific presentation of the two sustainable marketing activities may explain the different perceptions. In that regard, we did not consider whether the communicative designs of sustainable marketing activities are more emotional or functional. White et al. (2019b) pointed out the influence of how companies communicate with consumers and "talk to the Heart or the Brain." In one of the initiatives under research, consumers were promised an incentive (i.e., a sales voucher) for returning clothes for recycling, whereas the second initiative (i.e., the organic collection) was visually presented by models. Moreover, our research is limited because we assume a simplification of the viewing patterns of websites (Boardman & McCormick, 2022). Correspondingly, we did not validate whether and to what extent respondents are familiar with the webpages we used as stimuli.

To understand consumer responses, we asked fast fashion shoppers to participate in interviews in a pedestrian zone in a medium-sized German city. The potential richness of the answers to our questions outweighed the potential informant bias resulting from the location factors. This decision also limited the extent to which we could collect and control participant-related data. Furthermore, the Coronavirus pandemic brought about disruptive changes in shopping behavior, which may have also influenced our interviewees (Campbell et al., 2020).

Explicitly, our sampling was influenced by a so-called “lockdown light” in the area under research so that only shoppers who had been vaccinated against or had recovered from the Coronavirus were interviewed. Other situational factors such as place, day of the week, and weather are inherent limitations of our study.

The range of factors influencing shopping behavior cannot be conclusive because the sample for our study does not aim for representativity or generalizability. However, our sample provides insights into influencing factors and may contribute to the understanding of their variety. This, in turn, explains the complexity of considering consumers’ inertia while at the same time binding them to the brand. Individual experiences and preferences for specific brands may also limit the interpretability of this study. In addition, our argumentation does not consider whether and to what extent interviewees have a relationship with the case-specific fast fashion brand or the explicit store (e.g., because a sales representative had been providing good customer service over several years), nor whether they are familiar with the sustainable marketing initiatives on the webpages. Correspondingly, the choice of focal marketplace could also have an influence. Nevertheless, it is essential to view our findings as a preliminary categorization highlighting the need for future quantitative testing (Mohr et al., 2021). To enhance the credibility and broaden the scope of our results, conducting additional studies, particularly those with a focus on representativeness and generalizability, holds promising potential.

5. Conclusions

Fast fashion, by its very nature, embodies unsustainability, such as production-based environmental harm, resource depletion, labor exploitation and over-consumption. Fast fashion brands are prime examples of organizations that cause environmental degradation while operating a multitude of pro-environmental and pro-social activities. Ostensibly, this may lead to a turnaround in the ethical purchasing gap, which can be closed by consumers without disruptive changes in fast fashion shopping behavior. In such a situation, fast fashion giants allow consumption decisions to look

less irresponsible and, as a result, their consumers do not perceive themselves as non-ethical buyers. In particular, younger fast fashion shoppers who are torn between pro-environmental concerns and their consumption habits can enjoy a clearer conscience. However, we agree with Pucker (2022), a former COO of an outdoor apparel brand, who points out that fashion that is “less unsustainable is not sustainable.”

Building on data from impromptu interviews in the field, we find that fast fashion shoppers tend to perceive themselves as engaging in ethical clothing consumption when purchasing items from brands involved in sustainable marketing activities. This, in turn, is interpreted as the intention of brands to retain customers; hence, the strategic role of sustainable marketing activities is strengthened. Our criticism is focused on the ills of pseudo-social sustainable marketing activities, which blur the unethical components of fast fashion. Given the seductiveness of consumer goods, many consumers would appreciate having an “ethical free pass” to engage in fast fashion shopping and adhere to their habits.

Funding Statement

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Cite as

Hesse, A., & Rundau, J. (2023). Effects of Sustainable Marketing on Fast Fashion Shoppers’ Perception and Behavioral Inertia. *Journal of Sustainable Marketing*, 4(2), 265-285. <https://doi.org/10.51300/JSM-2023-114>

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Appendix. Interview Guide

Theme 1: Purchasing habits

- How often do you visit brand stores?*
- How many times have you bought clothes for yourself in the past six months?
- What are your purchasing criteria when buying clothes?

Stimuli webpage A on tablet**

Theme 2: Perceptions of the sustainable marketing initiative A

- How do you perceive the initiative?

Theme 3: Impacts of the sustainable marketing initiative A

- What effects does the sustainability initiative have on you?
- How do you think about this activity?

Stimuli webpage B on tablet**

Theme 4: Perceptions of the sustainable marketing initiative B

- How do you perceive the initiative?

Theme 5: Impacts of the sustainable marketing initiative B

- What effects does the sustainability initiative have on you?
- How do you think about this activity?

Theme 6: Comparing the sustainable marketing initiatives A and B

- How do you judge the sustainability initiatives?
- How do the two sustainability activities compare?
- Which one do you like more?

* All lists of questions serve as a compilation from which the interviewer decides the flow and level of detail during the dialogue.

** Webpages are presented alternately in the sequence of the interviews so that the order of viewing the webpages changed for each of the participants.

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