

Research Article

Exploring Antecedents to the Attitude-Behavior Gap for Sustainable Fashion Consumption in Germany

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Climate change is a major concern today. This concern has led to the emergence of pro-environmental market trends, such as ethical consumerism. Although many consumers hold positive attitudes toward purchasing sustainable brands, their actual behavior is often inconsistent with their attitudes. This phenomenon, referred to as the attitude-behavior gap, has been an ongoing topic in many research papers. However, this gap with regards to sustainable fashion consumption has received limited attention and few researchers have identified potential marketing tactics to bridge the gap. The first purpose of this study is to gain insight on reasons behind the attitude-behavior gap for sustainable fashion consumption in Germany. The SHIFT framework is then applied to identify potential marketing tactics that could help reduce this gap. Fourteen interviews of German consumers, who expressed concerns about environmental degradation and stated that they had changed at least some of their consumption behaviors in line with those concerns, were conducted to better understand attitudes toward purchasing sustainable fashion as well as factors that may impede behavior consistent with those attitudes. Interviews were analyzed using the grounded theory method. Analysis revealed the following potential contributors to the attitude-behavior gap for sustainable fashion: price, lack of presence, information, fashionability, self-over-sustainability and powerlessness. Based on these findings and the SHIFT framework, marketing tactics that could potentially influence sustainable fashion consumption were then identified. These tactics may prove useful for marketers in the sustainable fashion sector.

KEYWORDS

Attitude-Behavior gap, sustainable fashion, marketing strategies, consumer behavior

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I. Introduction

In today's world, consumer concerns related to the environment are increasingly urgent and significant. According to a 2019 survey, global concern for the environment since 2014 has increased 6%. This rise of concern has contributed to the emerging trend of

ethical consumerism, which is an intentional form of consumption that is based on an individual's personal and moral beliefs. This emerging trend has in turn yielded growth in sustainable industrial sectors and processes, one of which is the sustainable fashion industry (Lundblad & Davies, 2015). Unlike fast fashion,

ion, which employs production methods that harm the environment and which emphasizes short-term product use leading to excessive waste, sustainable fashion aims to do the exact opposite (Boström & Micheletti, 2016). To further elaborate, the sustainable fashion industry stresses ethical conduct, uses organic materials, avoids damaging the environment in its production process, and attempts to thereby reduce the negative impacts of the non-sustainable fashion (including fast fashion) industry (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018; Henninger et al., 2016).

Although ethical consumerism is on the rise, the gap between positive consumer attitudes toward safeguarding the environment and purchasing behavior continues to exist, whereby environmentally concerned consumers continue to purchase brands that have negative environmental impacts regardless of their intention to purchase eco-friendly alternatives (Devinney et al., 2010). To further demonstrate, a recent survey found that 65% of the consumers sampled stated they would purchase brands that are sustainable and environmentally friendly, yet only 26% actually did (White et al., 2019). This phenomenon, commonly known as the attitude-behavior gap (ABG), is particularly evident with respect to fashion consumption (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Although numerous theoretical studies have examined the ABG in terms of ethical consumerism (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Johnstone & Tan, 2015), very few have sought to increase understanding of the gap for fashion consumption (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). In addition, even fewer studies have suggested potential tactics to mitigate the ABG for purchases of non-sustainable versus sustainable fashion (Mckeown & Shearer, 2019). Hence, additional study of the underlying causes and factors that impede sustainable fashion consumption is needed.

The ABG then remains a concern for sustainable and social marketers as well as policymakers because the majority of consumer purchasing behavior remains environmentally unsustainable and, as a result, finding ways to motivate behavior change is a priority (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). This is especially relevant in the fashion sector since the fast fashion industry has one

of the highest pollution levels in the world (Boström & Micheletti, 2016). Hence, the first aim of this research paper is to explore consumer attitudes and other barriers that may contribute to the ABG for fashion consumption. Subsequently, this study will recommend potential marketing tactics that could help reduce the effects of barriers to increased purchases of sustainable fashion.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The first section examines the emergence of sustainable fashion consumption and the different literatures that aim to understand ABG, specifically with regards to the behavioral models used. Next, Papaioikonomou et al. (2011) holistic framework, which describes external and individual limitations that impede ethical consumption, is introduced. In this section, potential marketing tactics that are effective in influencing ethical behavior are also identified. In section 3, the method for this study is described. In section 4, research findings are outlined. Last, in section 5, the research paper discusses the potentially relevant marketing tactics that could bridge the ABG for non-sustainable versus sustainable fashion consumption and concludes with limitations and future research recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainable Fashion Consumption

There are various terms that describe sustainable fashion, such as ethical-, eco-, or green- fashion, and these are used interchangeably in different literatures (Henninger et al., 2016). For the purpose of this study, sustainable fashion is defined as fashion that uses environmentally friendly and biodegradable material, reduces water consumption during production, avoids harmful substances, and thereby, reduces the negative impacts of fast and other forms of non-sustainable fashion (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). Studies that examine purchasing behavior have found that consumers increasingly express ethical and environmental concerns regarding fashion consumption (Lundblad & Davies, 2015; Niinimäki, 2010). Yet, consumer demand for sustainable fashion brands remains limited (Jacobs et al., 2018). Thus, a gap exists between consumer attitudes towards sustainable fashion consumption and their actual fashion consumption. The ABG in

general has been a frequent topic within literature, specifically with regards to ethical consumption (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Johnstone & Tan, 2015; Davari & Strutton, 2014), whereby consumers with an ethical mindset hold a sense of responsibility towards the environment and society, and wish to express their values and beliefs through their purchasing behavior (Carrington et al., 2010). Many of those studies have sought to discover the barriers that impede sustainable purchasing, such as price (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011; Chang, 2011), convenience and availability (Johnstone & Tan, 2015; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), and perceived quality (Newman et al., 2014). Despite significant research on the ABG, sustainable marketing scholars continue to recommend further study in order to increase understanding of this phenomenon (Jacobs et al., 2018). Liobikienė and Bernatoniene (2017) further claim that specifying the industry can help identify factors associated with the ABG in that context. While many studies have focused on certain sectors, such as household cleaning products (Johnstone & Tan, 2015; Bodur et al., 2015) or food industries (Davari & Strutton, 2014; Gifford & Chen, 2017), limited research has centered on sustainable fashion consumption (e.g., (Lundblad & Davies, 2015; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). In addition, even fewer studies have identified potential marketing tactics that could help mitigate the ABG in fashion consumption (Mckeown & Shearer, 2019). Thus, it is important to further investigate the factors that may cause the ABG with respect to sustainable versus non-sustainable fashion choice, as well as suggesting potential marketing tactics that could help reduce the ABG.

2.2. Exploring the Attitude-Behavior Gap

Many studies have employed attitude-behavioral frameworks (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000; Hassan et al., 2016; Papaoikonomou et al., 2011) to better understand the ABG within ethical consumerism. The most frequently used model is Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to Ajzen (1991) theory, intention is the main factor that influences behavior. Such intentions are influenced by attitude towards the behavior, subjective norms,

and perceived behavioral control. However, many theorists have criticized this model, claiming that it does not consider other factors that may affect behavior, suggesting that this could perhaps be one of the underlying causes of the ABG (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011; Carrington et al., 2010; Caruana et al., 2016). Furthermore, most theoretical approaches tend to focus specifically on the relationship between attitudes and behavior rather than the actual behavior (Carrington et al., 2010). In response to these issues, theorists have reconceptualized the elements of Ajzen (1991) theory of planned behavior and constructed a holistic approach that integrates other factors found to impede consumer ethical behavior (Carrington et al., 2010). The idea of using a holistic framework to investigate the ABG is highly relevant with respect to sustainable fashion consumption, as many complex factors are involved. For instance, Lundblad and Davies (2015) explored female sustainable fashion consumers' reasons for purchasing or not purchasing sustainable fashion. They found that the ABG for sustainable clothing purchases could stem from consumers' feelings of disempowerment, their limited awareness of sustainable clothing purchase impacts, limited fashionable choices, and doubts about the credibility of information that is provided. Similarly, a survey of female fashion consumers found that transparency, availability and information within the sustainable fashion industry are impeding factors (Jacobs et al., 2018). In addition, consumers in this study cared more for self-benefits and perceived sustainable fashion as not durable.

Taking a different approach, Wiederhold and Martinez (2018) interviewed younger female and male consumers in Germany to better understand the ABG associated with sustainable fashion found that price, availability, transparency, image, inertia, and consumption habits acted as barriers towards reducing the gap. Although Wiederhold and Martinez (2018) study takes a similar approach to this study, such as including German female and male consumers, they focused on younger participants ranging, ages 23-30. According to Carrigan et al. (2004), older people hold a stronger sense of social obligations and could be a

potential target group for ethical consumption. Thus, this study has not only incorporated the perceptions of older consumers, who may provide additional insight into the ABG for sustainable fashion consumption. Based on the extant literature, many factors influence sustainable fashion consumption. To facilitate analysis of this study's findings, Papaoikonomou et al. (2011) holistic framework is applied as their model draws both on commonalities from other theoretical conceptualizations and their own empirical research on factors that influence ethical behavior. Their framework also identifies perceived external and individual factors that interfere with ethical purchasing.

2.2.1. External Limitations

Lack of Availability. Lack of availability is said to interfere with a consumer's intention to purchase a sustainable product. To further elaborate, if the consumer's intention to purchase sustainable products exists, but availability is lacking, the consumer is likely to purchase what is readily available (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). The lack of availability in sustainable clothing has also been a commonly found barrier (Shaw et al., 2016; Hassan et al., 2016). However, Papaoikonomou et al. (2011) state that their study was based in Spain where the ethical market was still developing. Other countries that have a variety of ethical products, such as Germany, may not have the same issue. Furthermore, Jacobs et al. (2018) argue that sustainable clothing can be easily purchased online.

Inefficient Ethical Alternatives. Papaoikonomou et al. (2011) note that many of their participants were not satisfied with the existing ethical products in the market. Thus, even if ethical products were available, the lack of satisfactory options could also impede purchase. This is especially relevant to sustainable fashion purchasing, as studies show that green purchase process occurs in stages (Groening et al., 2018), specifically with regards to perceived negative attributes that may stigmatize sustainable clothing (Jacobs et al., 2018). In particular, consumers may feel that they are compromising on certain criteria such as style, color, design and/or quality when selecting an ethical alternative (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011; Bray et al.,

2011; Jacobs et al., 2018).

Keeping up with Social Obligations. Keeping up with the social obligations refers to the pressures of social norms, whereby people feel they need to comply with what others are doing (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011). These social constructs, in particular, have a great impact on clothing purchases as fashion provides consumers with a sense of belonging and allows them to gain acceptance from others (Lundblad & Davies, 2015). Thus, fashion purchasing tends to be linked to fashionability, self-expression/self-identity, and adhering to social standards (Lundblad & Davies, 2015), which may outweigh one's ethical standards (Mcneill & Moore, 2015).

Lack of Information and Legitimacy. In relation to the lack of information and legitimacy, Papaoikonomou et al. (2011) claim that consumers find it difficult to inform themselves with factual information on ethical products. Furthermore, Birtwistle and Moore (2007) report that consumers tend to have low awareness of the environmental impacts the fast fashion industry creates, which leads them to continue purchasing this type of clothing regardless of their ethical attitudes. However, recent findings show that possessing information has little impact on consumers' ethical decisions (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Regardless, the main issue in both cases is that consumers mistrusted the legitimacy of the information provided. This could partly be due to greenwashing, whereby companies make false claims about the environmentally friendly attributes of their product (Lane, 2012).

Limited Budget and High Prices. The last factor regards the premium price consumers pay for ethical products. This has been a common barrier reported by researchers (e.g., (Chang, 2011; Buder et al., 2014; Shaw et al., 2016), whereby consumers find it too expensive to act ethically, which in turn pushes them to buy the cheaper products that are not eco-friendly. In the sustainable clothing industry, items tend to be higher priced as higher quality of raw materials and better standard of labor costs are used (Jacobs et al., 2018). Hence, price could pose as a barrier to sustainable fashion purchasing.

2.2.2. Individual Limitations

Opting for the Easy Choice. Some consumers find that consuming ethically requires more time and energy (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011). Opting for the easy choice is all about the convenience of purchasing a non-sustainable product, especially since finding sustainable options is sometimes more time consuming and effortful. Hence, the time and effort needed to research, find, and analyze information on sustainable clothing could hinder a consumer's motivation to purchase such items and push them to opt for whatever is readily available (Papista et al., 2018).

Compromise in Everyday Life. The compromises in this case could also relate to the time and effort it takes to act ethically, yet it also relates to a consumer's motivation and willingness to act ethically. The question here is - are consumers willing to compromise on certain aspects for the greater good? Hesitancy to compromise could also be connected to brand loyalty, as strong loyalty reduces consumers' motivation to try more sustainable alternatives regardless of their environmental concerns (Bray et al., 2011). Moreover, strong brand loyalty could bias perceptions, such as removing brands from one's consideration set that have been connected to sweat-shops (Hassan et al., 2016). Overall, these are the common barriers that have been found to impede ethical consumption and perhaps sustainable fashion consumption. The first aim of the research paper is to further investigate the barriers that could cause the ABG for fashion purchases by examining beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors regarding non-sustainable versus sustainable fashion consumption through in-depth interviews of both older and younger female as well as male consumers. By conducting in-depth interviews using Papaoikonomou et al. (2011) framework as a guide, this study hopes to find both expected and unanticipated factors.

2.3. Bridging the Attitude-Behavior Gap: Marketing and Sustainable Behavior

As noted earlier, the second part of the research involves obtaining initial insights into marketing tactics that could narrow ABG for non-sustainable versus sustainable fashion. One approach to doing this

involves first looking at a comprehensive set of tactics found to influence ethical behavior. White et al. (2019) reviewed a variety of studies that tackled marketing and ethical consumerism and devised a comprehensive framework that can be applied as technologies and societies evolve within diverse situations (White et al., 2019). Their framework can thus help address the ABG, specifically with regards to sustainable fashion consumption. The framework is represented by using the acronym SHIFT standing for: social influence, habit formation, individual-self, feeling and cognition, and tangibility (White et al., 2019). Within each of these areas, White et al. (2019) suggest tactics that could increase sustainable behavior, such as using prompts/feedback/incentives, making sure sustainable actions can be observed by others, emphasizing self-benefits, making actions effortless, framing messages accordingly, and providing information in a tangible manner. White et al. (2019) also state that the best way to use the SHIFT framework is to first understand the specific behavior, the situation in which it takes place, and the barriers that exist. Thereafter, they recommend focusing on the most relevant tactics for the different barriers within the SHIFT paradigm. Thus, after understanding the barriers that exist in the sustainable fashion purchase context, we will recommend marketing tactics in line with the SHIFT framework.

3. Method

The first purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the attitudes and motives that contribute to non-sustainable versus sustainable fashion purchasing and identify common barriers that impede more sustainable fashion purchase behavior among consumers who profess to care about the environment and who have changed at least some of the consumption behaviors in line with these concerns. To help identify these impeding factors, the study employed a qualitative, inductive research method. As noted, research regarding constructs that affect sustainable fashion consumption is limited (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). Qualitative research seeks to "make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Denzin and Lin-

coln, 2011, p. 3). In-depth discussions with consumers potentially facilitate a nuanced understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2013) as qualitative approaches have been shown to provide valuable and unique factors that aid understanding of the ABG (Hassan et al., 2016).

3.1. Data Collection and Sample

This study employed semi-structured, in-depth and open ended interviews. Semi-structured interviews, a major qualitative data collection method, can provide useful exploratory information on people's attitudes, opinions, values, motives, and beliefs (Barriball & While, 1994). Fourteen interviews were conducted with German citizens using snowball sampling. Carried out during November and December 2020, the interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes.

This study employed snowball sampling, in part, because data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which further restricted access to participants. Thus, some interviews were done face-to-face, but the majority took place over the phone. In both cases, a non-threatening environment was created to encourage deeper participant reflections (Creswell, 2013). Use of snowball sampling is also justified by the need to include certain demographics that previous ABG studies in sustainable fashion consumption have excluded. Thus, study participants varied in terms of age, gender, and occupation.

The interviewer began by providing an overview of the topic and information regarding his/her background as well as a brief description of the information that would be requested and how that information would be used (Gill et al., 2008). Following consent, the interviews were recorded. Certain criteria were applied to identify appropriate participants. The first criteria required that the participants have post-secondary or higher education levels as some studies have identified a positive relationship between ethical consumption and education (Jacobs et al., 2018). The second criteria was that participants express concern about environmental threats such as global warming.

To ensure that both criteria were met, after an introduction and an overview of the topic, the inter-

viewer began with more general questions regarding the consumer's clothing purchasing behavior. This line of inquiry provided insight on the consumer's typical behavior, such as salient clothing attributes and purchase location preferences (e.g., online versus place-based). In addition, the interview then moved on to determine whether the participant had changed consumption behaviors in line with environmental impact concerns. As the study aims to enhance understanding of the reasons that consumers who claim to care about the environment and intend to purchase environmentally friendly products do not ever or do not always do so with regards to sustainable fashion, this component of the interview process screened out 11 out of 20 potential participants who did not meet these criteria. To avoid social desirability bias, especially as it relates to ethical stances, participants were told that this section was about their general outlook and was not specific to clothing. In addition, care was taken to ask questions about personal concerns that did not lead the respondent.

The final section involved discussion of sustainable fashion. This part delved into meanings participants associated with sustainable fashion as well as beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors regarding purchase of sustainable clothing items. As noted earlier, considering past behavior is crucial to understanding factors that may impede this behavior (Papaioikonomou et al., 2011). Hence, this final discussion provided additional insight into factors that could disrupt behavior and further explain the ABG with regard to sustainable fashion consumption. Moreover, the interview's chronological order reduced the likelihood of participants providing socially desirable answers. Recorded interviews were subsequently analyzed for in-depth qualitative analysis.

The final sample consisted of nine females and five males. The average age was 41, ranging from 21 to 58 years old. All participants either had or were in the process of obtaining an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. Twenty-nine percent held undergraduate diplomas, 21% were in the process of obtaining one, and 50% held postgraduate diplomas. Occupations varied (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant's Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation
P1	Female	25	Undergraduate	Student
P2	Female	55	Undergraduate	Teacher
P3	Male	34	Postgraduate	Unemployed
P4	Female	24	Undergraduate	Student
P5	Female	57	Postgraduate	Project Manager
P6	Male	53	Undergraduate	Teacher
P7	Male	51	Postgraduate	IT Department
P8	Female	49	Postgraduate	Financial Manager
P9	Female	21	Undergraduate	Student
P10	Female	55	Postgraduate	IT Department
P11	Male	35	Undergraduate	Sales Associate
P12	Female	33	Postgraduate	Project Manager
P13	Female	58	Postgraduate	Teacher
P14	Male	29	Undergraduate	Software Developer

3.2. Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed through an inductive approach using grounded theory. Adopting this approach allowed researchers to decipher meanings and construct potential themes arising from the raw data (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly “grounded theory aims to generate a substantive theory that will explain a phenomenon in a specific context” (Cho and Lee, 2014, p. 5). As this study aims to find the factors that disrupt sustainable fashion consumption, grounded theory methods will further aid in identifying possible explanations for the ABG in this context. Grounded theory analysis involves three coding steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell, 2013).

In the open coding step, researchers build a detailed description of what is initially discovered while interpreting the data based on their own views and previous subject knowledge (Creswell, 2013). They further categorize the information and then develop labels that summarize the data obtained (Cho & Lee, 2014). This part focuses on the major categories found within the data, and depends on researchers carefully reading the transcripts several times, immersing themselves in the details (Creswell, 2013). Writing notes and memos also aids in this process. Accordingly, through careful and articulated readings and interpretation of the interview

transcripts, the open coding analysis identified the first set of codes by combining and comparing the common themes found.

Next, researchers undertake axial coding, which correlates and explores relationships among the categories found in the initial stage (Cho & Lee, 2014). This exploration leads to development of a visual model that identifies the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This model highlights the most “saturated” or frequently discussed factors, including what may have causal implications with regards to the phenomena of interest (Creswell, 2013). Linking relationships within previously found themes, our axial coding analysis resulted in a conceptual model that specifies common factors that may impede purchasing sustainable fashion (see Figure 1). Selective coding is the final analysis stage, during which theory is articulated in the form of a visual picture or a descriptive statement (Creswell, 2013). This study used description to posit influential factors that may disrupt consumer intentions to purchase sustainable fashion.

To enhance confidence in the study's findings, researchers reviewed central themes from the interviews with a few participants. This method seeks to gain participants' opinions regarding the validity of researchers' interpretations (Creswell, 2013) and is

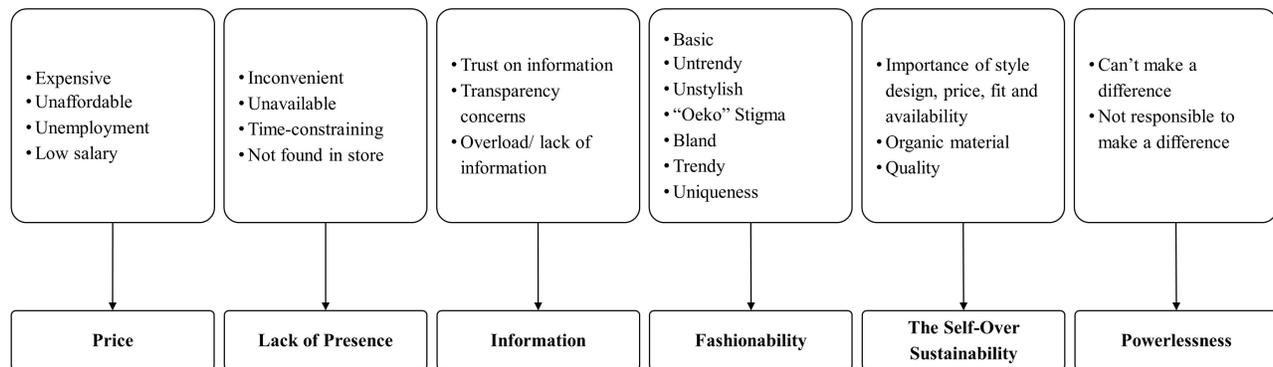


Figure 1. Visual Model Identifying the Influential Factors That Disrupt Sustainable Fashion Consumption

viewed as a critical step in grounded theory analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) because it facilitates further consideration of participant perceptions (Thomas, 2006).

4. Results

The following section presents the common factors found within this study that may impede sustainable fashion purchasing. Those factors include: price, lack of presence, information, fashionability, self-over-sustainability, and powerlessness.

4.1. Price

The most frequent emerging theme was that sustainable fashion is not affordable. On one hand, these conceptions were said to be due to the fact that most sustainable alternatives are higher priced. On the other hand, the relatively small number of participants that have actually sought out sustainable clothing items, found them to be too expensive and not worth purchasing.

P7: “I think all this stuff like Bio things in the supermarket, the organic things, are more expensive. And that’s why I think maybe other things which are sustainable are more expensive. That’s my connection.”

P4: “I went to the store that was sustainable, and I went in there and the T-shirt was 35 euros, it was like a plain white t-shirt. A plain white t-shirt but like 35 euros and a long sleeve t-shirt like 50. I was just like we gotta get out of here, you know?”

The findings also showed that the older aged partici-

pants with higher income would rather purchase items that are durable and in that sense, sustainable, regardless of the price.

P10: “Let’s say, sometimes it’s really better, when you buy something that costs a bit more, but you wear it maybe for three years or so.”

P2: “Sometimes when you buy cheap clothes, you wear them once or twice or you wash them once and then they’re not good to wear. That’s why I like to buy items that are good quality and last.”

P5: “Price is also important because I think if I buy something, I have to have the feeling that I get something for my money. That it’s not that I’m only paying for the brand, if you know the quality is good.”

The younger generation with lower income, however, were reluctant to purchase such items due to the high prices.

P3: “Even though I know that in the long run, it’s better for me to buy the sustainable option, I’m gonna go buy the cheaper option.”

P14: “I just haven’t found another store where I feel like I’m getting things at a reasonable price, where I can justify it to myself to spend whatever on clothes and to socially do better on the environment.”

4.2. Lack of Presence

The lack of presence within the market was another major barrier as perceived lack of availability made purchasing sustainable clothing inconvenient, time constraining and effortful. Participants, other than Pp and

P11, claimed that they never find sustainable clothing brands or are not aware of such brands in Germany. This was especially said to be due to the lack of availability in the places they usually shop. Due to the lack of availability, many participants also stated that it is difficult and inconvenient to purchase sustainable clothing brands. Further claiming that it takes time and effort to actually have to do the research and find sustainable brands, most participants noted that they would rather avoid hassle and instead, go to preferred and easily accessible shops, which did not carry sustainable clothing brands.

P13: “First, you don’t find the places, then there’s not much awareness of it and three it’s more like easier to go to one place where you have all the shops where you can buy things.”

Interestingly, the findings show that the majority of the participants above 30, prefer to purchase their clothing in stores rather than online, which also helps explain why marketplace presence is very relevant.

P8: “Yeah, I think what I would need personally is really that it’s a bit more easy to get because I’m absolutely not an online shopper, so I really like to go to the stores and put my hands on the stuff to feel it, to see it and to try it.”

P10: “To be frank, I don’t buy online, I like to shop in the shops so that if it [sustainable fashion brands] was more available there I would consider it.”

4.3. Information

With regards to information, participants offered two different perspectives. On the one hand, some participants that hope to find sustainable clothing products claim that there might be an overload of information, which may make purchasing clothes more due to heavier cognitive loads. This is especially relevant to online stores.

P12: “I think online, the problem is there is just too much information, I would say an overload of information, there are so many links that I am opening in a new tab and I want to look at them later, that those information saying hey you can save some plastic here or you can buy this nice pullover that is sustainable here, those just get lost in all this information.”

On the other hand, the majority of participants wish to attain more information on sustainable clothing brands, specifically how they are produced and help the environment. Accordingly, participants further stated that certain labels signal how environmentally friendly a brand is, yet these labels are limited. Due to this, the participants requested that such information be more present, for example, in the news or advertisements. They further stated that providing such information could possibly alter their purchase decisions.

P5: “This is of course very very important to know how it was produced and if the brand informs or advertises how things are done and how sustainable they are, would definitely be a thing where I would prefer to buy from them.”

P9: “I think maybe they should like show more of the pros of it [sustainable clothing] like show how the people that make the clothes, get better money and like how the water is saved and how the chemicals are not getting into the water”

With regards to the credibility of such information, the majority of participants stated that trust German governmental organizations to provide accurate information. Nevertheless, they also noted that companies in general should increase the transparency of their production inputs and processes.

P7: “I think in Germany, if it’s not correct, somebody will say something and then they will take it away. So that’s why I trust the system more.”

P3: “But the process by which the items are produced needs to be clarified and needs as well to be made much more transparent to people.”

4.4. Fashionability

When it came down to purchasing clothing, the majority of male participants claimed to purchase clothing only when necessary (e.g., P6 and P3), while the majority of females’ purchasing criteria depended more on design and style (e.g., P1 and P2).

P6: “Well I purchase clothes because I need them but not because of fashion.”

P3: “When it comes to my personal buying habits,

in terms of clothes, for example, I rarely buy clothes if I don't need them. I rarely buy clothes, because I see them and they look good."

P1: "I think it's just a bit hard in general to find the style I like, so I shop to find the style that I like."

P2: "I usually go [shopping] because I like something and I buy it."

The majority of participants expressed negative attitudes toward the fashionable appearance of sustainable clothing. Some claimed that they imagine such clothes to be very basic, with neutral colors and designs that do not reflect popular trends. Yet, all participants noted that they assumed sustainable clothing is more durable and better quality. Interestingly, younger participants, who have seen sustainable clothing brands, reported that, in their experience, these brands are modern and fashionable. They further stated that many consumers have incorrect perceptions of sustainable fashion, thinking that these clothes are typically cotton and plain. The participant quotes that follow illustrate the divergent opinions on sustainable fashion between two generations.

P7: "I had the image in my mind over a model wearing environmental clothes. In Germany, we have the Oeko lot¹, we call them...they wear more cotton clothes and then the very typical kind of sandals."

P13: "Just the classic forms that's all I think of, nothing that is into fashion and just, for example, normal jackets that you wear with everything, normal pants, that are normal colors. Not trendy clothes, they are classics. So something you wear every day, you use everyday. Not trendy clothes."

P9: "Well, I think nowadays, sustainable fashion is like, very much, I would say, the normal fashion. So I don't think there is that much of a difference"

P11: "The sustainable fashion brands I know of are unbranded, and they sell streetwear and skate clothes, which is just like any shop but better quality."

¹ The "Oeko" in German refers to the prefix "Eco-" and in this case, P7 mentions "Oeko lot" - individuals who are considered environmentalists and who live an eco-friendly lifestyle.

4.5. The Self-Over-Sustainability

The aspect of self-over-sustainability also relates to the concept of style. However, this concept was a recurring theme, whereby participants' responses to whether they consider sustainability while purchasing clothing were that they never considered the sustainability attribute when shopping for clothes. That is, a majority of respondents noted that style, fit, quality and material are more important than whether the item was made sustainably. Furthermore, the majority of the participants stated they purchase clothes out of necessity and/or because of style. This statement appears to contradict certain ethical positions stated earlier and tended to occur more frequently with female participants. Thus, even though these participants considered themselves to be environmentally conscious and responsible consumers, when it came clothing purchases, such ethical positions were neglected in terms of their decision-making.

P2: "I never thought about it. It's just an instinct you go with, that you do think of the environment, you do think of the product, but each one has his own way of choosing their clothes."

P1: "I don't process that before I go shopping, or if I see something on the street walking, the thing that's on my mind is, will it look good on me? Will it fit me? Not, is it made this way? Do they not harm anything? So in my mind, I don't think of that."

P7: "I don't really pay attention to this when buying clothes, if it's sustainable or not. Not really, If I'm being true to myself."

P13: "Well because I was not aware of sustainable fashion, and when I buy things, I only think this would look nice here, this would be nice there, this suits me, this looks good on me, not that it is sustainable."

4.6. Powerlessness

A few participants have noted that sometimes making a difference is not in their hands, and that perhaps the responsibility should not always fall on them. Thus, even when they have changed certain behaviors with regards to the environment, they also feel that the responsibility shouldn't be one-sided. They stated that politicians and companies should also address social

and environmental responsibilities so that all of the burden does not only impact the consumer.

PI4: “If I’m not given reasonable options by companies that already don’t care, there’s only so much I can do as a consumer to look for alternatives”

PI: “But as a consumer, I do think more of the quality of clothes than I do, of how it’s made because, like I said before, I don’t feel like I have a big influence on that,” (i.e., extent of clothing sustainability).

5. Discussion

Previous studies have sought to understand the attitude-behavior gap (ABG) within ethical purchasing. Nevertheless, limited research focuses on the ABG in terms of consumer choice of non-sustainable versus sustainable fashion. Furthermore, even fewer studies have recommended potential marketing tactics that can help to bridge the ABG. Hence, this study has not only contributed to providing a better understanding of why the ABG exists for sustainable fashion consumption, but will also recommend in the following discussion possible marketing approaches to reducing this gap.

First, most participants claimed that price is one of the major barriers to purchasing sustainable fashion. Yet, study findings also suggest that older, higher income consumers are willing to pay more for better quality. Gender did not appear to play a role in this finding. Price barriers to sustainable clothing purchases have been found in previous studies as well (Johnstone & Tan, 2015; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018; Papaoikonomou et al., 2011)

With regards to the lack of presence (availability), many participants are unaware of sustainable clothing brands in their area. If they are aware, they find it difficult and inconvenient to locate such products. According to Jacobs et al. (2018) online shopping may increase sustainable fashion availability. However, in this study, many older participants preferred in-store shopping. Thus, although online shopping could increase presence, the older generation or those who prefer in-store shopping may still find it difficult to purchase sustainable alternatives. Furthermore, when it came to online shopping, some of the participants found the

process to be overwhelmed with unnecessary information that distracts them from their virtual experience. As most sustainable fashion brands are not easily accessible, many participants preferred to maintain their old habits of purchasing. This finding harkens back to Papaoikonomou et al. (2011)’s lack of availability barrier and opting for the easier choice. In our study, this outcome did not vary across gender.

Nevertheless, the lack of presence also appears to contribute to limited awareness of sustainable fashion in general. Many participants were interested in learning more about where and how their clothes are made. Others claimed to want less information of this nature and focused more on the more tangible clothing attributes. At the same time, participants generally believed that their government provides them with trustworthy and transparent information, especially with respect to the labels placed on environmentally friendly products.

Lack of presence may also be related to some respondents’ sense that sustainable clothing is unlikely to be fashionable. This observation appeared particularly salient among respondents who had no previous knowledge regarding sustainable clothing brands. Jacobs et al. (2018) have also expressed this concept, yet in their study most participants expected sustainable clothing to be less durable. This study however, found that durability was the one positive belief about sustainable clothing, even though negative style perceptions blocked purchase. This factor was primarily noted by female sample members, as style was an important attribute among others for choosing clothing items. On the other hand, the male group more often chose clothes based on functionality rather than fashion and reported that inconvenience was a major barrier to finding and buying sustainable clothing.

The idea that sustainable fashion is seen as unfashionable also relates to the concept of self-over-sustainability. In this case, wanting an outfit that is comfortable, affordable, and fashionable may always outweigh its sustainability. This appears especially relevant for clothing purchases, as most participants had no issue purchasing sustainable alternatives for

items such as food or household items.

Last, the concept of powerlessness was also a common factor. [Wiederhold and Martinez \(2018\)](#) termed this as inertia, the amount of energy the consumer is willing to give to actually make a difference. Some participants felt that the responsibility to make a difference should not fall completely upon the consumer, but also on the people in power and companies. This was also caused by the fact that some participants felt that shifting to sustainable clothing purchases may sometimes have a small impact on the environment and social concerns.

In conclusion, the theory that emerges in this case is that the high prices, lack of presence and information, options that aren't stylish, self needs over sustainability, and feelings of powerlessness all appear to contribute to the ABG for sustainable clothing consumption. Although our findings share common themes, this study contributes by providing additional support for key ABG antecedents, while suggesting that certain moderators such as gender and age are likely to be important. This study however aims to go one step further by using these findings to suggest relevant marketing tactics that may prove useful in bridging the ABG.

5.1. Bridging the Gap

As mentioned earlier, this research aims to recommend relevant marketing tactics based on results presented herein and [White et al.'s \(2019\)](#) SHIFT framework (See Table 2). To that end, in relation to price, an additional tactic to consider involves incentives and feedback. Another centers on using loss-framed messages, e.g., focusing on what consumers will lose rather than what they will gain. With regards to the lack of presence, it is important to ensure that the product is not only available, but also easy to purchase. For online-shopping, making the process user-friendly and featuring less information may prove more effective. With in-store experiences, placing sustainable brands in the main shopping areas should prove beneficial as this tactic will increase sustainable clothing brand presence and accessibility, especially for older generations. Having shops featuring sustainable clothing brands is also likely to help improve negative attitudes toward such brands' fashion style.

Taking such actions over time should increase social acceptance of sustainable clothing brands. Furthermore, making such behaviors public where others can observe and evaluate their actions should also increase social desirability ([White et al., 2019](#)). Another way to isolate the stigma that sustainable clothing is unfashionable is by using descriptive norms, which in this case could include celebrity endorsements ([Mckeown & Shearer, 2019](#)). As for information, in order to have a balance between too little and too much information, it is important to focus information with clear self-benefits ([White et al., 2019](#)). Implementing self-benefits can also help remove the unequal power dynamic between choosing self-over-sustainability. In this regard, appealing to what a consumer will personally gain from a certain purchase can counteract the barrier. [White et al. \(2019\)](#) also find that focusing on self-efficacy can make consumers more confident that their actions make a difference. They furthermore stress that since consumers are more present focused, the positive consequences of their actions can be communicated in terms of immediate outcomes within a specific region or city.

6. Limitations & Recommendations

As is the case with all empirical research, this study has limitation. First, a qualitative method was used, meaning that the results presented herein are exploratory. Future research using quantitative cross-sectional and/or experimental approaches is needed to determine which suggested marketing tactics designed to reduce the ABG for sustainable versus non-sustainable fashion are more or less effective. Another limitation involves the focus only on German consumers. Hence, the themes that arose from our grounded-theory analysis and the potential marketing interventions that were offered in the previous section may not extend to other countries with different cultures. Further research should be conducted in other cultures to increase the external validity of the findings in this study. Similarly, despite the study's exploratory design, interesting potential differences between female and male well as older and younger participants were observed. Future research using quantitative methods would help determine the extent to which these

Table 2. SHIFT framework recommendations may potentially bridge the ABG

Impeding Factor to Purchasing Sustainable Fashion	SHIFT framework recommendations
Price	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentives • Feedback
Lack of Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss-framed messages • In-store availability in shopping areas • Online shopping easy and user-friendly
Information Fashionability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-benefits • Create a higher social desirability of sustainable fashion by increasing presence in shopping areas • Descriptive norms (e.g. Celebrity endorsement)
Self-Over-Sustainability Powerlessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-benefits • Self-efficacy • Present-focused messages

observations can be generalized and employed to develop demographically targeted marketing tactics that help bridge the ABG (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018).

In sum, this study has contributed an initial set of possibly relevant marketing tactics that could be important not only for sustainable and social marketers, but also for the future of this planet, as these may prove useful for creating positive consumption change across a wider spectrum of personal purchases (Todd, 2004). Furthermore, it provides avenues to policymakers who may identify macro-level approaches to changing behavior (Griskevicius et al., 2012). Clearly, climate change affects all beings and more sustainable consumption will help address this crisis and provide a better future for the planet.

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INSIGHTS



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