

# Sustainability Awareness on Fashion Brands: The Perception of Young Malaysian Consumers

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**Abstract.** Despite uncertainty and changeability, fashion is one of the world's most popular and in-demand industries. However, this industry is also known as one of the most significant contributors to pollution or wastage due to the process of making the textile or clothing, for example, the volume of water consumed, pesticides, or chemicals involved. The overconsumption of fashion products and the low awareness level have caused environmental problems. Therefore, actions need to be taken to slow down or curb these issues, such as by practicing sustainability. Recycling, upcycling, and choosing slow fashion or pre-love items will contribute to fashion sustainability. Nevertheless, studies on the awareness of fashion sustainability still need to be included, for instance, among consumers in Malaysia. This study aims to explore the young Malaysian consumers' perception of sustainability awareness of fashion brands. This study uses a qualitative approach by interviewing 20 respondents. The finding reveals that most respondents have mixed reactions towards fashion sustainability regarding knowledge and practice. Moreover, this study demonstrates that the motivation for practicing fashion sustainability must be highlighted to encourage or educate consumers. This study also indicates that the knowledge of sustainability should be emphasised from the beginning of education to grow and maintain awareness. Finally, the current study explores the effectiveness of social media in spreading the fashion sustainability, as it is the leading platform used by the young generation to connect or look for information. In conclusion, the findings are relevant for academia and the fashion industry as a guideline for consumers and businesses to practice sustainability.

## 1 Introduction

The fashion industry is booming to fulfil consumer demand globally [1]. Among fashion product ranges offered in the market are clothing for menswear, womenswear, kids wear, and workwear, to name a few, or different types of categories of fashion, such as luxury, ready-

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to-wear, fast fashion, mass production, accessories, and many more. However, behind the scenes, the fashion industry contributes to environmental threats, mainly clothing, such as water wastage and air pollution [2]. Therefore, recommendations have been made to avoid pollution in fashion, such as practicing fashion sustainability.

Fashion sustainability is a strategy used by brands to design apparel that cares for environmental impact, and this topic has been studied in many areas, such as recycling or upcycling to reduce water consumption [3]. However, the results vary, and regrettably, reports state the low awareness of fashion sustainability [4,5,6], regardless of the rising number of studies on this topic. We may ask, has society been aware of this and tried to make a change? How to create awareness among fashion consumers? Therefore, this study explores the young Malaysian consumers' perception of sustainability awareness of fashion brands, by interviewing 20 respondents. To analyse the data, coding and template analysis were utilised as suggested by [7]. The study has made significant findings demonstrating the behaviour and ways to stimulate awareness towards practicing fashion sustainability.

## 2 Literature review

Fashion is the medium to express ourselves or reveal our identities, such as religion, profession, culture, belongingness, and many more [8]. Fashion is also defined as famous style or practice trends, for example, in clothing, which is considered one of the most important necessities for human beings in the hierarchy by Maslow, 1943 [9]. Fashion trends vary and are followed by many fans worldwide, mainly the young generation, regardless of their nature to keep changing and fluctuating [10].

Of all types of industry, fashion is also recognized as one of the most demanded industries, with a revenue of US\$0.99tn in 2022 and estimated to keep growing by US\$1.37tn by 2025 [11]. With many categories of fashion offered in the market, such as luxury fashion (e.g. Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Prada), fast fashion (e.g. Zara, H&M, Cotton On), slow fashion (Eclipses, Pure Pod, Asket), haute couture (e.g. Chanel, Dior, Ellie Saab), pret-a-porter (e.g. Yves Saint Laurent, Nike, Maxmara), mass production (e.g. Primark, Asos, Mark & Spencer); this industry keeps giving more choices to the different types of consumers or to fulfil their fashion needs. Other than that, other categories of fashion listed is accessories lines such as shoes, handbags, jewelry, scarf, sunglasses, and, to name a few, mainly to enhance or create more styles.

However, despite being named one of the most demanded industries, fashion has its downside. One of the most spoken downsides of fashion is the wastage and its contribution to pollution, which have been proven to cause harm to the environment [12,13,14], such as through water pollution and wastage. Evidently, the World Economic Forum reported that fashion wastage climbed to almost USD400 billion yearly, as [14] also stated that the fashion and textiles industry will rise to 102 million tonnes annually. Meanwhile, [15] states that in Malaysia alone, it is estimated that more than two million of fashion and textile waste is produced almost daily. Among the fashion categories linked to this pollution are fast fashion and mass production [16]. Considering the critical and severe condition of how the fashion industry's production can cause wastage or pollution, therefore; actions need to be taken to stop or slow down these harms. For example, it has been noted in Malaysia that there is a rise in fashion brands that lead to fashion sustainability, such as the Modest Brand, Terrae, Twofrens, Wustler, and Earth Heir, to name a few. These brands have taken actions to educate and lead consumers to adapting sustainability, such as recycling, upcycling, sustainable events, fashion rental, or swapping. In addition, other fashion brands are also taking one step forward to encourage consumers to be involved in sustainability. For example, H&M offers coupons for consumers who give away their recycled clothes to this company. Other big fashion brands such as some international luxury brands such as Stella McCartney (eco-

friendly clothing), Prada (re-nylon), and Vivienne Westwood (recycled and eco-friendly fabrics) are among the alternatives practiced by designers to create fashion sustainability. The practice or use of sustainable fashion will educate consumers about adopting sustainability in their choices. However, does the information regarding fashion sustainability reach consumers? Do these efforts made by fashion brands create awareness among consumers? Unfortunately, it is reported that the awareness results are mixed, with high and low possibilities. For instance, in Malaysia, consumers are reported to have low awareness [15,17]. Furthermore, studies on fashion sustainability are still lacking in Malaysia [18]. This is the gap that this study will address. Hence, more studies need to be done to encourage fashion sustainability awareness and practices, not only for a temporary period but long-life practice, mainly among young students who can change the dimension of sustainability by introducing them at an early age.

### 3 Methodology

This study explores the perception of sustainability awareness in fashion brands among young Malaysian consumers. In order to reach the aim, the researchers believed that they needed to obtain insights from the individuals involved in the activity of interest and have a deep conversation regarding the topic. In this case, researchers believe that respondent's experience or behavior regarding the knowledge or practice of fashion sustainability will give an understanding of this study. Hence, the qualitative approach was adopted as it has been proven previously relevant to explore human behavior [19] and permits researchers to have a deeper understanding of human behavior compared to the quantitative approach [20]. Semi-structured interviews were used with twenty respondents as [21] states that the ideal number of respondents is between 16-20 persons. Therefore, it validates the number of respondents for this study. Purposive sampling was employed as it allows researchers to choose respondents based on certain qualities and criteria matching the topic and their ability to provide relevant information [22]. The respondents for this study met the following criteria; young generation (aged between 18 and 25 years old) and fashion students. The young generation was chosen because they are familiar with online platforms [23]. Meanwhile, fashion students were employed as they have more knowledge regarding fashion matters and are aware of the current fashion issues. The interviews took place between August and October 2022 and lasted between 25 to 40 minutes each. Among the questions asked were regarding their fashion sustainability knowledge, fashion sustainability awareness, and fashion sustainability practice, to name a few.

### 4 Findings and discussion

To analyse the data, coding and template analysis were utilised as recommended by [7]. The results revealed three main themes and five subthemes, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of results

Themes	Subthemes
4.1 Attitude toward fashion sustainability	4.1.1 Mixed perceptions of fashion sustainability
4.2. Lack of motivation	4.2.1 Lack of information regarding sustainability 4.2.2 Lack of offers of sustainable fashion products
4.3. Spread the awareness	4.3.1 Social media to spread sustainability information 4.3.2 The roles of education sectors

## 4.1 Attitude toward fashion sustainability

The first main theme that emerges from the data is the attitude toward fashion sustainability. The current study demonstrates the mixed perceptions of consumer's attitudes toward fashion sustainability, mainly awareness and practice.

### 4.1.1 Mixed perceptions of fashion sustainability

One of the main questions asked was their opinion towards fashion sustainability. Initially, most respondents gave almost the same meaning or definition of fashion sustainability. Hence, this has shown that respondents know about fashion sustainability and at least have basic knowledge regarding this topic. Respondents commented:

*Respondent 3: "I do believe that sustainability is something that has to do with stopping the pollution and saving our planet....."*

*Respondent 5: "To me, sustainability involves many activities, mainly recycling, and done to reduce wastage....."*

However, when it comes to practice, not all respondents reply positively. They acknowledge the importance of sustainability, but being frank about not practicing it, concurs with [24] that knowing the sustainability but still low in consumption. This has demonstrated that knowing the definition of fashion sustainability does not guarantee practicing it.

*Respondent 3: "To be honest, I don't really practice sustainability. I don't blame others but myself. I find it hard to do".*

*Respondent 5: "Well, it depends on the situation. But so far, I rarely use the recycle bins, as I think I put all the materials in the same bins".*

In contrast, some respondents emphasize sustainability in their life, not only in fashion but also in other matters. They express that sustainability has become their priority and responsibility towards protecting the environment, aligned with [25]. For example, respondents pointed out:

*Respondent 7: "I prefer fashion brands which practice sustainability, that is the best way..... even though if I am the one in 1000 people who do this, I feel it is a self-satisfaction. A little change makes a big difference".*

*Respondent 11: "Yes, I do practice sustainability in my life. I will make sure to throw the rubbish accordingly. I am not worried about dividing different materials, but I am worried that our world is dying".*

Hence, findings have demonstrated the mixed reactions towards fashion sustainability and although the awareness is high, the practice is still low. We need to know more profoundly, which could lead to this low sustainability practice.

## 4.2 Lack of motivation

One of the main themes emerged was lack of motivation, which is divided into information and fashion products offered. According to the respondents, one of the common motivations for adopting sustainability is to save money [26]. Therefore, this study has demonstrated that motivation is significant in encouraging or supporting the public to adopt sustainability.

### 4.2.1 Lack of information regarding sustainability

Another subtheme emerged is the lack of information. Respondents express their frustration regarding the lack of sustainability information, which concurs with [27]. To justify this

statement, most respondents blamed the media for not channeling the information regarding sustainability to the public. For example, respondents expressed:

*Respondent 9: "I don't know if I'm not aware or it is a fact that, I don't really see any sustainable promotion or elements in our media.....the level of awareness is very low, hence this has demotivated many people".*

*Respondent 13: "From my observation, little information regarding sustainability is shared. It is vital to showcase sustainability on whatever medium to ensure the information or message of sustainability is delivered to the public".*

However, other respondents also argued that it is our responsibility to influence each other to demonstrate good manners to conserve our environment and not deny their obligation to keep the environment clean. Hence, current studies have demonstrated that the role of society is significant to influence others by showing good personal or social norms that could lead to practicing sustainability, aligned with [18]. It is a win-win situation; everyone has roles and does not rely on one party.

*Respondent 11: "It is our responsibility as a citizen to preserve our planet clean for the future generation".*

*Respondent 15: "In my opinion, everyone must keep our planet green and long-lasting. If we don't do this, then who else?".*

#### 4.2.2 Lack of offers of sustainable fashion products

The study also finds that from the producer brands' side, there is a shortage of fashion products based on sustainability offered in the market, aligned with [28]. Therefore, most respondents suggested that brands should be more aware of this issue and produce more sustainable products, concurring with [29]. Nowadays, few fashion brands educate their consumers sustainability, such as H&M, Patagonia, and Levi's [30], such a great effort to encourage consumers to consume fashion sustainability. Respondents expressed:

*Respondents 7: "I am very interested in fashion sustainability, but unfortunately, only a few fashion brands offer these features. Even for the local brands, it is tough to find, mostly emphasise aesthetic values than sustainability. Therefore, I suggest more fashion brands should start sustainable items in their collections or designs.....".*

*Respondent 18: "Yes, I have noticed that there are fashion brands in the market that practice sustainability, but mostly luxury brands, which I cannot afford as a student. I think other fashion categories should produce more sustainable products, such as mass production, fast fashion, and others. I will support and buy if I can afford them".*

### 4.3 Spread the awareness recommendation

The final main theme that emerges from the data is the recommendations from respondents to spread awareness, which online platforms have a major role in performing information circulation regarding fashion sustainability.

#### 4.3.1 Social media to spread sustainability information

The young generation nowadays is exposed to and familiar with social media [23]. Coming from this generation, respondents have stated that online platforms have a major role to

circulate the information about sustainability, aligned with [31]. Hence, fashion brands should take this opportunity to encourage consumers to be familiar with sustainability. Respondents pointed out:

*Respondent 10: "I think the information about sustainability should be conveyed via social media; it is unbeatable and impossible that the information cannot be reached."*

*Respondent 18: "Young generations are on Instagram and TikTok nowadays. Why don't we use this opportunity to spread the information about sustainability?"*

#### 4.3.2 The roles of education sectors

Findings also demonstrate that education sectors play a significant role in spreading awareness regarding sustainability. Respondents suggest that the education sectors should introduce sustainability issues as early as possible to provide sufficient knowledge on fashion sustainability, which concurs with a study by [32]. Respondents stated:

*Respondent 9: "I remember when I was in primary school, I was not introduced to any sustainable activities, and there were not many bins for recycling. I think this is the ideal time to expose the young generation to curb this issue"*

*Respondent 20: "I do notice in some countries when I travel, I see the recycle bins are everywhere, and they even have bins for recycling the clothes. But here, not many are available in our countries"*

## 5 Conclusions

In conclusion, the current study has contributed to sustainability by escalating the knowledge or new direction of fashion sustainability in Malaysia. For example, this study has demonstrated that the level of awareness towards fashion sustainability in Malaysia is growing; however, the practice still needs to improve. More efforts must be made to balance awareness and practice toward preserving the environment.

Moreover, this study has also shown that a lack of information regarding sustainability and offers of sustainable fashion products in the market can reduce the motivation towards adopting sustainability in life. Hence, fashion brands need to emphasise providing more information and producing sustainable products to encourage consumers to adopt sustainability in their life. More fashion brands need to motivate their consumers to adopt fashion sustainability. Finally, this study has also contributed not only from the business perspective but also from the education system that sustainability can be encouraged from the beginning, as there are strong recommendations from the respondents to be exposed to sustainability from a young age, mainly at school. This exposure is significant as a guideline for the young generation to keep practicing sustainability in the future.

Future studies should hire people not from fashion backgrounds such as lecturers, educators, or the community, to see the different perspectives of the reaction or awareness of fashion sustainability.

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