



OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FASHION CONSUMPTION IN SRI LANKA

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The fashion industry's prevailing patterns of production and consumption are widely recognized as unsustainable, while being the world's largest environmental polluter. Even though consumers show interest in sustainable fashion, their actual behaviour lead to a mismatch. Therefore, this study aims to explore consumer opportunities and challenges in sustainable fashion consumption, focusing on Sri Lankan consumers. The study used an exploratory research design under the qualitative approach based on inductive reasoning. To produce insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-one respondents, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed eighteen (18) potential opportunities and were reclassified into five (05) main themes; namely, social and cultural influences, marketing and brand strategies, sustainability and circular economy, consumer behaviour and motivation, and market dynamics and challenges. Simultaneously, the researcher identified twelve (12) key challenges and further reclassified them into six (06) main themes as product-related issues, lack of product availability and accessibility, lack of awareness, high prices, trust issues, and health-related problems. This study adds to the corpus of knowledge by filling in the gaps in the literature and providing fresh perspectives on consumer behaviour in relation to sustainable fashion. Practically speaking, the study offers insightful advice to help industry participants, including fashion retailers, marketers, and legislators, create stronger strategies that encourage sustainable consumption.

Keywords: challenges, opportunities, sustainable fashion purchasing

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INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry is often regarded as the world's second-largest polluter, causing major harm to the Earth through excessive resource use, water waste, chemical pollution, textile waste, etc. In response to these challenges, multiple companies and businesses have begun to offer sustainable fashion products to reduce environmental impact and encourage environmentally conscious practices. Anna Brismar (2014) has shown that sustainable fashion comes in various forms. While some actors and individuals stress the value of producing clothing in a more ecologically responsible way, others support vintage or secondhand clothing or highlight the advantages of trading, renting, or borrowing clothing rather than buying brand-new items. A more sustainable industry can be achieved through any strategy that encourages production and consumption that is more socially, ecologically, and ethically conscious. Despite these initiatives, consumer adoption of sustainable fashion remains extremely limited (Hintikka, 2023). Consumer acceptance is still low despite increased awareness and greater access to sustainable fashion options because many consumers value cost, style, and convenience over sustainability. The disconnect between awareness and action underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing consumer behaviour in the sustainable fashion industry (Connell & Kozar, 2014; Niinimäki, 2010).

In understanding these considerations, it is imperative to look at both the opportunities and the challenges that consumers face while embracing sustainable fashion. Gaining an understanding of these processes can eventually promote a wider adoption of sustainable fashion practices by bridging the gap between consumer demand and sustainable solutions. In order to provide insights that might guide industry strategy and government, this study intends to explore the potential and challenges associated with sustainable fashion consumption. However, in the Sri Lankan context, there is a substantial empirical knowledge gap concerning sustainable fashion purchasing. As a result, this study seeks to address the highlighted gaps by investigating the opportunities and challenges that customers encounter when consuming sustainable fashion products. Therefore, the research questions this study seek to address are:

“What are the challenges consumers encounter when purchasing sustainable fashion products, and what are the possible opportunities for sustainable fashion consumption?”



METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy and an inductive research approach. The inductive technique begins with data collection to investigate the phenomenon, and a theory is developed based on that evidence (Saunders et al., 2019). Furthermore, this research is exploratory in nature and aims to gain new insights and evaluate the phenomenon in a new light (Saunders et al., 2019). Since this research aims to explore the opportunities and challenges related to sustainable fashion consumption in the Sri Lankan context, it falls under the qualitative research approach and is classified as exploratory research. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, as it is a systematic approach for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. In this study, a semi-structured interview and a purposive sampling technique were used as the primary data collection method, with one respondent at a time. The target population for this study was the consumers who have knowledge about sustainability and sustainable fashion products. Although the researcher initially planned to collect data from 30 respondents, data saturation was instead achieved after conducting 21 semi-structured interviews with consumers. As a result, the researcher purposefully selected 21 consumers ensuring variety in age, gender, educational background, district, and occupation.

Furthermore, the study used a number of strategies in line with the four main criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to guarantee the reliability of the qualitative research findings. Transcribing all semi-structured interviews, keeping a clear chain of evidence throughout the data collection process, and clearly presenting the results using visual aids such as graphic models contributed to increased credibility. An independent review procedure that included expert proofreading and guidance from the study's supervisor also enhanced the study's credibility. Systematic data collection techniques, including audio recordings of all semi-structured interviews, and taking observational notes during each session were used to guarantee reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the interview process, the researcher identified twelve (12) key challenges that customers face in sustainable fashion consumption. These twelve factors were then classified into six (06) common variables: product issues (lack of style preference, lack of aesthetic appeal, lack of masculine appeal, quality concerns, and limited variety); lack of product availability and accessibility (limited accessibility and lack of product availability); lack of awareness; high price; lack of trust (greenwashing concerns and brand trust issues); and health issues. Furthermore, through the interview process, the researcher identified eighteen (18) opportunities related to sustainable fashion consumption. These eighteen factors were then classified into five (05) common variables: social and cultural influences (culture, social influence, community engagement, and media influence); marketing and brand strategies (digital marketing, prominent display, perceived brand equity/corporate reputation, and green marketing); consumer behaviour and motivation (consumer trends, customer retention, consumer education, and rewards); sustainability and



circular economy (waste management, second-hand market, product transparency, and circular fashion); market dynamics and challenges (hygiene assurance and market gap).

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Research findings indicated several interesting points in the existing literature. The current study contributes to the existing literature on sustainable fashion consumption and explores hidden challenges and opportunities related to sustainable fashion consumption. Most of the research has ignored exploring these factors together, but this research uniquely integrated both dimensions and provided a new holistic perspective by exploring opportunities and challenges from the consumer's perspective. To overcome these sustainable fashion challenges, brands need to focus on creating stylish, inclusive collections that also reflect masculine tastes, something many consumers feel is currently missing. Using social media, influencers, and fashion events can help shift old-fashioned views and make sustainable choices more relatable. Clear quality promises like warranties and durability certifications can ease doubts, while bringing fashion closer to people through mobile stores, online platforms, and local retailers will improve accessibility. Most consumers are willing to adopt a wide variety of sustainable fashion products with discounts and low-cost options. Storytelling and community events can make it more appealing while educating consumers to encourage sustainable fashion purchasing. Furthermore, consumers prioritize transparency and clear labelling, like skin-care and health considerations in sustainable fashion, which is currently lacking.

In terms of the consumer opportunities in sustainable fashion, marketers can connect Sri Lanka's rich cultural traditions such as batik with modern sustainable fashion designs. Since local fashion designers and social influencers play a significant role as trusted community figures, they can build authenticity to encourage consumers to adopt sustainable fashion products. Nowadays, most consumers prefer experiences such as online community groups, exhibitions, and pop-up events. This will encourage consumers to purchase sustainable fashion and automatically build consumer awareness. Especially, younger consumers are willing to use gamified contents, eco rewards, loyalty cards, and features like QR codes to make informed choices. Brands can utilize those features and support circular fashion by providing donations, establishing upcycle centres, and ensuring hygiene as a strategy to encourage sustainable fashion choices. Finally, these strategies empower consumers to adopt sustainable fashion without any hesitation.



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