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Impact of Fast Fashion Trends and Knowledge of Environmental Impact on Consumer Behaviour: Promoting Process Safety and Responsible Consumption (SDG 12)

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Abstract

India's demographic dividend in terms of a young population is an economic asset. The youth of the country is contributing to various sectors of the economy, and many industries see the young generation as an open market, especially the fashion industry. However, the fast fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries in the world. This study explores consumer behavior and perceptions regarding fast fashion, focusing on factors such as frequency of shopping, influences on purchasing decisions, and awareness of the environmental impact associated with fast fashion. Data collection was done by carrying out a survey of 139 participants based on a standard questionnaire. The survey targeted a diverse demographic, capturing data on age, gender, and monthly income/pocket money, to understand how these variables affect shopping habits. 45 % of women shopped "every few months", whereas 55 % men shopped "rarely". The females (45 %) who earn more (>60,000 INR/month), shop more frequently, as compared to males (30 %). The findings reveal that the frequency of clothing purchases is influenced by a combination of social pressures, personal confidence linked to wearing trendy clothes, and the perceived affordability of fast fashion, with over 81 % attributing feeling confident to dressing well. While fast fashion is popular for its trendy and budget-friendly clothing, the findings reveal a concerning gap between consumers' awareness of its environmental impact and their purchasing decisions, for instance, 66 % respondents found the quality of fast-fashion products subpar to sustainable products, however, only 24 % would be willing to pay a higher price for sustainable products. A lack of awareness, only 24 % males and 12 % females acknowledged being aware of sustainable practices, and higher prices of sustainable brands deter the youth from opting for these products, with over 30 % opting not to pay more for a sustainable brand. While a sizeable percentage, nearly 80 % of respondents, acknowledged the environmental impact of fast fashion, fewer respondents, only 10 %, considered this impact when making purchases, indicating a gap between knowledge and behavior. The study suggests that increased brand transparency and consumer education could foster a shift towards more sustainable fashion choices. Increasing consumer engagement with sustainable fashion, ethical practices in manufacturing processes, and the introduction of initiatives that improve sustainability can go a long way in promoting sustainable consumption and achieving SDG 12.

Keywords: SDGs; Sustainable lifestyle; Fast fashion; Questionnaire; Responsible consumption

Introduction

Ornamentation is an innate trait displayed by living organisms, both in the plantae and animalia kingdoms. In earlier civilizations, humans across the civilizations and eras have used adornments as fashion items to look attractive and also as a social currency to establish their superiority over others. However, over the years, fashion has evolved to include very diverse and cross-cultural



adornments, accessories, make-up, and clothing. The way the people dress, the material used, and the preference for colors have most often centered around cultural identity, religion, social, and economic status (Vázquez-Atochero and Romero-Sanz, 2025). With industrial development, technological advancements, innovative practices, and globalization, the fashion industry has reached its pinnacle. As per the data, the average Indian household from high-income group families spends almost 5-10% of their annual income on clothing (National Sample Survey Organisation, 2006). This is attributed to increased disposable income, purchasing power, aggressive advertising, influence of social media, easy availability of products all across the globe, and flexible pricing. The younger generation, particularly, is inspired by the digital world, social media platforms, and the latest trends that keep popping up online (Xiao et al., 2023). The trendy outfits that are designed for events, parties, dining, and outdoors are not expensive and satisfy the dopamine levels of the young generation, "Gen Z" (Senayah and Tei-Narh, 2025). There are easy employment opportunities for youngsters to allow them to supplement their income, which allows them to invest in garments that have a short shelf life. Though this may not burn holes in the pockets of the young generation, it has serious implications for the environment.

The textile industry is extremely polluting and warrants immediate and appropriate action (Teerakapibal and Schlegelmilch, 2025). The fast fashion choices result in the exploitation of resources and further cause pollution of the air, water, and land, with the water bodies receiving the worst of it because of mobility and high dispersion potential of the various organic and inorganic pollutants leaching out of these industries (Mishra et al., 2020). The textile waste that is thrown causes solid waste pollution as well through landfills. The textile industry has an enormous carbon emission, thus increasing the carbon footprint (Raju and Kumar, 2025). The textiles, if they are not made from natural fabrics, also take time to decompose, thus increasing the ecological footprint. India is committed to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals, one of which is sustainable consumption. This generation needs to understand the implications of their consumer preferences on the environment (Butturi et al., 2025).

The present survey-based study was, therefore, carried out to understand how the younger generation perceives fashion and its cost, both economically and environmentally. The aim of the present study is to understand the role of shopping preferences, peer influences, awareness levels, and willingness to adopt sustainable practices to combat environmental pollution. It also explores gender-based and income-level-based differences in shopping preferences and decision-making. By underscoring the importance of awareness and the lack thereof, the current study highlights the motivations and limitations of the modern consumer and the needs of the market to be able to cater to them.

Methodology

A cross-sectional questionnaire-based study was designed and carried out on the students of an undergraduate college of the University of Delhi, India, belonging to first, second, and third years, and young working population to assess the spending patterns of different sexes across different age-groups, income-groups, and disposable income expenditures. The study included one hundred and thirty-five undergraduate students and their flatmates, usually working young adults. A questionnaire was designed keeping in mind all the parameters discussed and circulated through Google Forms. A questionnaire was also pretested in a small group of science students as a pilot study, and a modified questionnaire based on the experience and feedback received was thus distributed for the purpose of this study. Further, their attitudes and knowledge towards sustainability issues of fast fashion and their willingness to adopt better practices were also assessed by formulating various quantitative and qualitative questions.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions (Table 1) each to identify the demographics of age, sex, and income group, followed by spending patterns, pressure from peers, knowledge of the dangers of fast fashion, readiness to adopt sustainable practices, and the overall attitude towards sustainable fashion choices. The appropriate clearances and declarations were taken and provided to the participating individuals while keeping their identity completely anonymous. The data obtained for income was further divided into two categories for assessing the role of income on expenditure type: less than 60,000 INR per month (Approximately 687 USD), termed as the low-income group, and more than 60,000 INR per month, referred to as the moderately high-income group. The findings of the study were compiled using MS Excel and validated using appropriate statistical tools and presented in this study using descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Questions for the survey

<i>S.no.</i>	<i>Question</i>
1	Age of the respondent
2	Gender of the respondent
3	Income/pocket money (per month)
4	How often do you go shopping for clothes?
5	What factors influence your decision to purchase fast fashion items?
6	Do you think wearing trendy clothes makes you feel more confident?
7	Do people in your friend circle follow fast fashion trends?
8	Do you feel pressured to keep up with the latest fashion trends?
9	Where do you usually buy fast fashion products?
10	How do you perceive the quality of fast fashion clothing compared to more expensive brands?
11	Do you think the clothes you buy are environmentally friendly?
12	Are you aware of the environmental impact of "fast fashion"?
13	How often do you consider the environmental impact of your clothing purchases?
14	Which of the following stages of a product cycle do you think adversely affects the environment?
15	Are you aware of the fashion brands that sell eco-friendly fashion products?
16	Have you ever taken any of the following actions to reduce the environmental impact of your fashion choices?
17	When considering the purchase of fast fashion clothing, how often do you research the brand's ethical and sustainability practices?
18	Would you be willing to pay a higher price for sustainably produced clothing items?
19	If a fast fashion brand you regularly purchased from launched an initiative to improve their sustainability practices, such as reducing water usage or minimizing waste, would you be more likely to continue buying from them?
20	What are the challenges you face in adopting more sustainable fashion practices?

Results

Data on shopping preferences

Out of the 135 participants, four responses were negated in the final recordings due to a lack of consistency in their responses, 89 were males (65 %) and 46 were females (35 %), out of which there is an age distribution of maximum females (n=18) in the age group 15-20 and maximum males (n=36) in 21-25 age group (Table 2). The earnings per month of the females were further delineated in different income groups, with more than 35 % of females belonging to the <5000 INR category, followed by 14 % each for 5,000 to 10,000 and 10,001 to 20,000. 12% belong to the >75,000 INR category, 11 % to 20,001 to 40,000, 9 % to 60,001 to 75,000, and 5 % to 40,001 to 60,000 INR (Fig. 1). The monthly earnings of the males were categorized into <5,000 INR representing 26 % of the sampled demography, 22 % belonged to >75,000, and 17 %, 13 %, 10 %, 7 %, and 5 % were from 10,001-20,000; 5,001-10,000; 20,001-40,000; 60,001-75,000, and 40,001-60,000 income classes respectively (Fig. 1).

The annual shopping frequency of responders was also recorded into four categories in increasing order of purchases into "Rarely", "Every few months", "Once a month", and "Multiple times a month". The income categories were broadly divided into two categories: the moderately high-income category (more than 60,000 INR per month) and the low-income category (less than 60,000 INR per month). It was observed that the maximum women (45 %) in the low-income group shop "every few months" while the maximum males (55 %) in the same income group shop "rarely".

While 45 % of females in the moderately high-income group shop multiple times a month, 30 % of males in the same income group shop "rarely". Only 5 % of females and 3 % of males in the lower

income group shop “multiple times a month”. This data clearly shows that women with means tend to shop more frequently (45 %) as compared to men (20 %) (Fig. 2).

Table 2. Age groups of the sexes of the questionnaire-based survey's respondents.

Age groups of respondents	Females	Males
15-20	18	15
21-25	6	36
26-30	4	8
31-35	9	12
35-40	1	6
>40	8	12
Total	46	89

Maximum males (40 %) prefer to shop offline, whereas the difference between female shoppers is less distinct, as 37 % prefer to shop online and 36 % offline, showing the tendency of female shoppers to shop both online and offline (Fig. 3). On enquiring about the factors that influence their decision to purchase fast fashion items, most of the respondents agreed on “low prices” as the primary driving factor towards fast fashion, followed by “trendy styles”, “convenience”, “brand reputation”, and “social media influence”.

Data on the role of peers

The respondents were asked whether they associate feeling confident with their dressing, and the majority replied positively towards the trend that indeed dressing well makes them feel confident. The responses could be summarized as “sometimes” (n = 55), followed by “yes” (n = 32), “mostly” (n = 23), and “no” (n = 29). In another inquiry, respondents of the survey were asked whether they considered their peers to be fashionable or their likelihood of following the latest trends and a majority (89 %) responded in affirmatives of “all of them”, “most of them”, and “a few of them” and a minority (11 %) responded with “none of them”. Interestingly, 76 % of the young responders do not feel pressured to follow the latest trends.

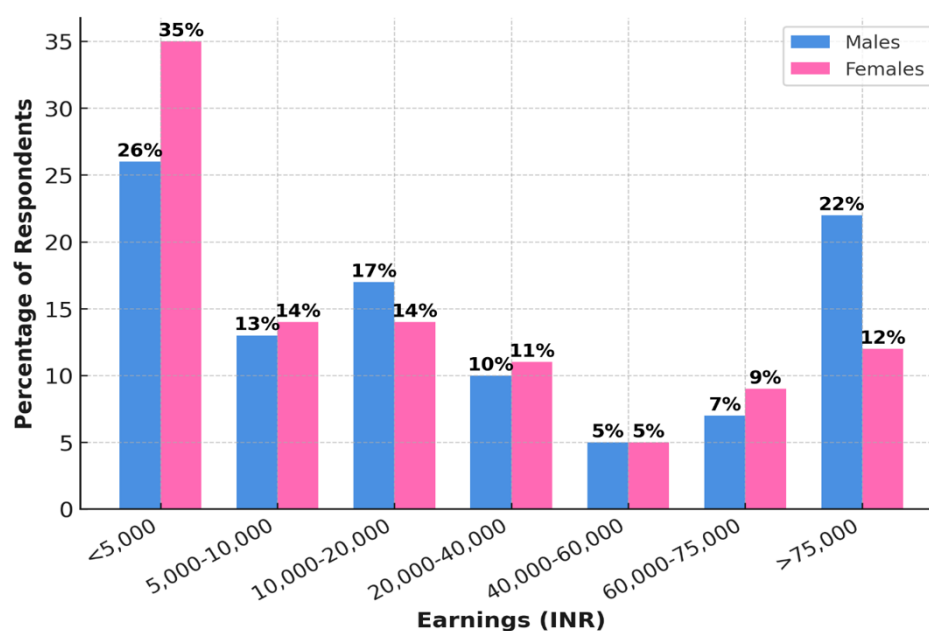


Fig. 1. The earnings of all respondents are presented as percentages of males and females

Data on awareness

When asked about the quality of fast fashion, 66% of respondents said that they find the quality of their purchases subpar compared to more expensive brands. 35 % responded that they found the quality of the products similar to or even better than the expensive brands, and 18 % were “not sure” about the quality comparison. In another question, respondents were asked whether they considered their fast-fashion to be environmentally friendly and the answers reflect the lack of awareness in the youth when it comes to the origin or the ecological footprint of their trendy choices as most of the responders (60 %) responded with “maybe” that implies that they are relatively unaware of the sources of the process of clothes manufacturing and/or the chemical treatment that are part of the textile processing. Whereas 20 % each responded with “yes”, i.e., the process is environmentally safe, and “no”, i.e., the knowledge that the fast-fashion production process cannot be considered green.

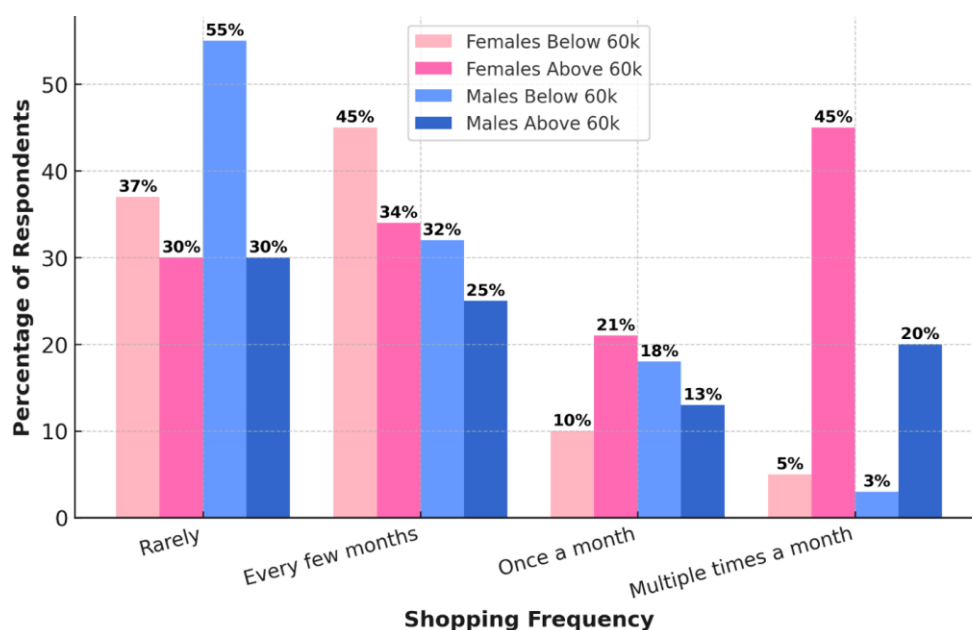


Fig. 2. The shopping frequency of respondents based upon their sex and income group

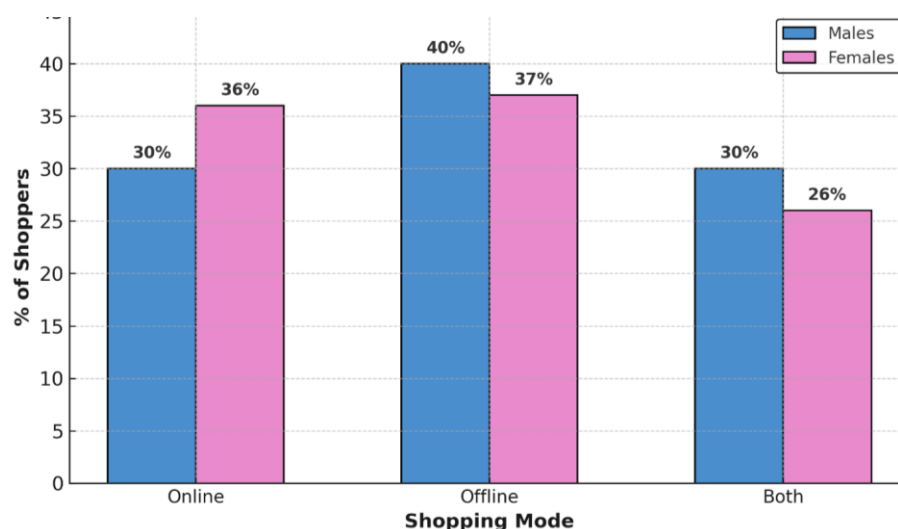


Fig. 3. The preferences of the sexes to shop for articles online, offline, or both

In a follow-up question, the respondents were asked whether they were aware of the harmful effects of fast-fashion consumption, and 24 % of males replied that they were aware of the consequences of fast-fashion consumption. In contrast, only 12 % of females could claim to be aware of the same. 23 % of males and 7 % of females responded with "Not aware and the rest 45 % of males and 24 % of females were partly aware of the harmful effects of fast-fashion on the planet. The remaining respondents chose not to comment (Fig. 4). In another follow-up question, the respondents were asked whether they considered the higher ecological footprint of their purchases as a deterring factor in deciding their fashion choices and a staggering 90 % responded with "never", "rarely", and "sometimes", a mere 10 % of the respondents answered with "yes". This revelation throws a light over two tendencies of human beings, firstly, human beings like to serve their self-interest over everything else and secondly, there is either lack of awareness/education in the public in general that they are yet not fully aware of the big toll that textile pollutants have on the resources of the planet and their role in causing pollution. Then, the respondents were asked if they recognized the clothing brands that practice sustainable manufacturing. Only 13 % could respond in the affirmative, and 87 % agreed to having incomplete knowledge of the brand's production process or sustainable practices. A follow-up to the above question was whether respondents were conscious in their choice of the brand by searching beforehand for their sustainable practices to be able to make a more informed decision. 19 % of the respondents said that they "always" do their research first, 57 % said "rarely" or "never", and 63 % said "occasionally" or "often". Hence, it is safe to conclude that a majority of the public choose to look the other way when it comes to making a conscious choice where there could be a trade-off between purchasing power, buying capacity,

trendiness of articles, or easy-accessibility of fast-fashion items, and they mostly tend to choose the easier way.

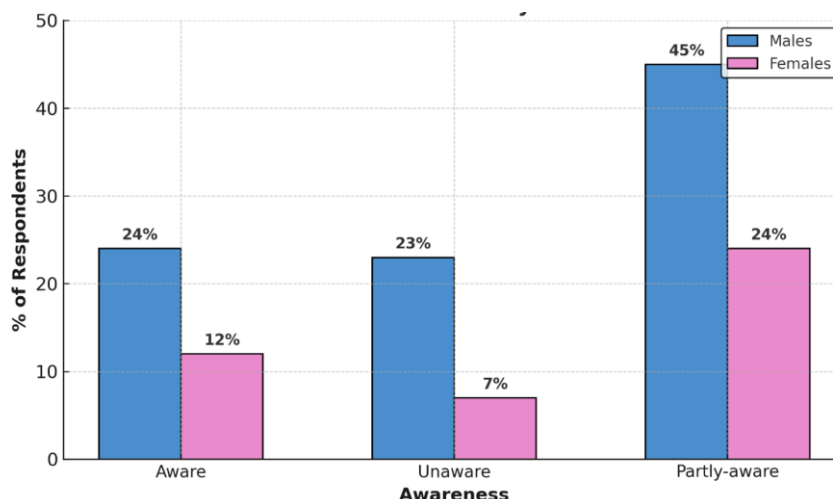


Fig. 4. Awareness in the respondents about the harmful effects of the production process of fast fashion

Data on willingness to adopt sustainable practices

In an effort to understand the sincerity of respondents in mitigating the negative impact of their fast-fashion choices on the planet, respondents were asked to identify the best practice to reduce the ecological footprint of their indulgence in fast fashion. The options provided were, "buying from sustainable fashion brands", "donating or recycling their old clothes", "renting or borrowing clothes", "repurposing or upcycling clothes", "shopping at a thrift or second-hand store/market", and "none of these", to which respondents informed that 24 %, 37 %, 6 %, 11 %, 6 %, 1 %, and 15 % respectively tend to follow this option over the others, underscoring the importance of donating and recycling clothes in Indian society. On enquiring about the willingness of individuals to spend more on sustainable products, 30 % responded "no", 24 % "yes", and around 46 % said that it "depends" on other factors such as spending capacity. Therefore, to understand this trend further, we assessed our data and noticed that depending upon the spending capacity of the individual, people who earn less than 60,000 INR a month, tend not to be willing to spend higher on sustainable products (21 %) as compared to people who earn more than 60,000 INR a month, who are more willing to spend on sustainable products (32 %) (Fig. 5).

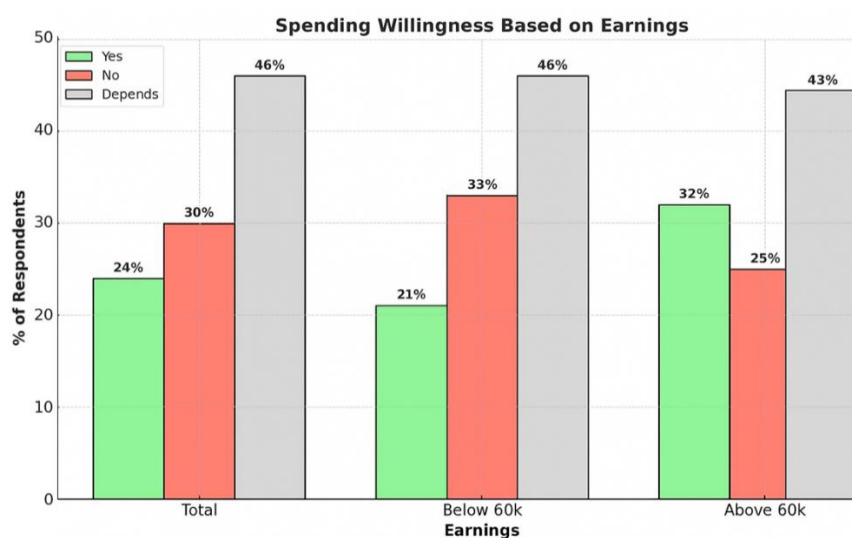


Fig. 5. Willingness of people to spend more on sustainable fashion based on their incomes (Earnings are reported in INR)

To reinstate whether individuals feel a moral and ethical obligation to adapt to sustainable fashion choices, it was asked of them if they will be willing to switch from fast-fashion to sustainable items if the production cost of sustainable products is reduced and maintained at a lower price point, 71 % responded with "yes" and 29 % responded with either "no" or "not sure". This is an interesting finding, as there is still a lack of awareness among youth that even after maintaining the price range,

some of them are unaffected by the sustainability of the products. Finally, there was an open-ended question in which respondents were asked about their challenges in adopting sustainable fashion. Affordability and availability were the two main issues faced by the youth in choosing sustainable fashion over non-sustainable but more economical fast fashion.

Discussion

With excessive production and consumption of fast-fashion products, it has become pertinent to adopt sustainable production processes for the manufacturing of fashion items (Mishra et al., 2020). The textile industry is one of the highest polluting industries of the world, and to combat water pollution, more environmentally friendly production processes are the need of the hour (Garg et al., 2020). Youth are highly interested in fashion, visualizing it as a cornerstone of their social acceptance (Jones and Podpadec, 2023). In terms of frequency and abundance, owning more articles is seen as a symbol of status (Banos-González et al., 2024). However, balancing fast-fashion with eco-friendly choices is challenging because of the cheaper price of fast fashion (Zhang et al., 2021). Most consumers tend to choose numbers both in terms of quantity and money over environment friendliness in their shopping preferences (Papasolomou et al., 2023). Much like plastic, fast fashion remains popular in the absence of competitive market choices offering affordability and trendiness of clothes, making the transition away from it difficult for most consumers (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010). There are several studies that attempt to monitor the attitude of consumers towards fast fashion and its perceived importance (Banos-González et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2021; Karaoglu et al., 2019; Jang et al., 2012).

This study is significant as, for the first time, the data on the attitude of the young Indian population about the impact of fast fashion and their environmental awareness has been studied, and the results obtained are consistent with other studies in different demographics and populations. The predominant factors affecting the consumption patterns of the youth are their perceived importance of dressing to impress and hoarding multiple dressing articles, as repetition of clothes is considered to leave a poor impression on the peer groups (Le, 2023). It is also pertinent to note that males and females have different spending patterns toward fast fashion (Suprpto et al., 2022). Richer males tend to buy less from cheap clothing brands as compared to females (Zhang et al., 2021). Richer females tend to shop more frequently than their male counterparts, and the mode of shopping is also more ambiguous for females, as they shop both online and offline almost equally, whereas males tend to shop online more (Lang et al., 2013). A concerning outcome is the youth's reluctance to adopt sustainable fashion, where purchasing power and the inherent cost of sustainable fashion products play a critical role (Castro-López et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2024; Pires et al., 2024). As India is home to the biggest adult population (17.5 %) in the world, it is of great value that the young adults of this nation are taught about the negative impacts of fast fashion and long-term benefits of choosing sustainable clothing as most of the developed nations are moving towards now after overexploiting and damaging their ecosystems (Sarkar, 2022).

Rigorous and directional cultural and educational shifts, which teach the students the importance of sustainability in economic growth, responsible consumption, and circular economy, will lay the way forward in molding the attitudes and character of future generations (Riiho and Kokko, 2024; Schewitz, 2023; Bennetta and Oeppen Hill, 2022). Carefully designed curriculum and change that starts at home will drive this paradigm shift that will be catalytic in meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement by considerably bringing down their carbon and ecological footprints (Agreement, 2015). Communication interventions can prevent young adults' intended clothing consumption, i.e., deter them from indulging in overconsumption. Experimental research has shown that sufficiency-based strategies, focusing on reducing consumption, encouraging young adults to make wiser choices, and adopting sustainable fashion, could be highly effective means for reducing the consumption of fast fashion (de Koning et al., 2024).

Additionally, quantitative research with larger sample sizes, longitudinal and latitudinal, is needed to accurately predict and measure the fast fashion's environmental impact across its lifestyle choices and practices, addressing supply chain transparency practices and gaps, material comparisons, production processes and standards, ecological footprint, effectiveness of policies, taxes, and product labelling (Olivar Aponte et al., 2024).

Conclusions

This study aimed to examine customers' knowledge, attitudes, behaviours regarding affordability, and willingness to change and to invest more in sustainable fashion choices based on their sex, age, and income. The study explores the understanding of consumers of the fast fashion process and the

market, the available options, and what their perceived value is of choosing eco-friendly fashion. Additionally, it was investigated whether consumers' knowledge about the harmful impacts of fast fashion is sufficient to drive environmentally conscious purchasing, necessitating a shift in their preferences. Most of the responders were university students at the undergraduate level and showed a lack of awareness regarding the harmful impacts of fast fashion. A descriptive analysis of 139 consumers, with 65 % male respondents and 35 % females, reveals distinct shopping patterns, especially after factoring in the income levels. Higher-earning females, 45 %, shop more frequently in a month. While 40 % of males prefer to shop offline, females are equally comfortable shopping both offline and online. Low price is the main driver for fast fashion. As many as 60 % are unsure about the environmental friendliness of the various brands and their sustainability practices, and 90 % rarely consider the ecological footprint of their purchases before shopping. Both affordability and availability are major barriers to adopting sustainable fashion, though 71 % would switch to it if sustainable options were cheaper. Women showed greater knowledge regarding sustainability-related issues, while men showed more willingness to invest in sustainable fashion, given the means, as compared to women. Thus, these results help in the understanding of the attitude and thinking of the young adult population, the millennials and the Gen-Z, regarding their clothing choices and its drivers, and indicate that there is a need for better knowledge dissemination to help educate consumers regarding the consequences of their fashion choices and the perceived importance of overconsumption, demonstrating the need for large-scale information campaigns and pedagogical methods to introduce the concept of sustainable fashion under the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-12) of responsible consumption and production.

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Author Contributions

MK conceived the idea of this study and conceptualized, edited, and jointly wrote the manuscript with SG, who also performed data analysis, formalized, and edited the manuscript. AT and KK curated the data and conducted the survey. RRB reviewed, validated the data, and edited the manuscript.

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Competing interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval

Not applicable.



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