Sustainable Fashion and the Young Indian Consumer Perspective: A Sociological Study

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Abstract—**Sustainable fashion is the buzzword going around all sustainability arenas on the global grounds and probably all responsible runways; and it has been gathering tremendous momentum. The fashion industry has been aware that it is responsible for a shocking 4-10% of global greenhouse-gas emissions every year and thus found it imperative to define sustainable fashion as "An ethical approach towards designing, sourcing, manufacturing, selling, and delivering clothing in a way that minimizes the industry's negative impact on people and the planet along the entire value chain". However, it depends on location, audience, and the constantly changing environment on the basis of which it keeps changing. And without an iota of doubt, today we live in a world where the artisan coffee costs more than a t-shirt which is an inevitable consequence of what fast fashion is all about. "Fast fashion" or what may be called as the new fashion cult is the current scenario where designs go "out" of fashion in a flash because some of the fashion brands have 52 seasons instead of 4 in a year (one for almost every week). The present study aims to examine 100 respondents from Mangalore, Karanataka, and study the consumer perceptions and their behaviour towards eco-friendly or sustainable fashion. With the fact that India has the world's largest Gen Z population the present study explores the perception of Gen Z and their interest in sustainable fashion.**

Keywords— **Consumer behaviour, eco-friendly, fast fashion, Gen Z, sustainable fashion**

I. INTRODUCTION

The World Commission on Environmental Development used the term "sustainable development" for the first time in 1987, defining it as "development that meets the need of current generations without jeopardising future generations' ability to meet their own needs". Thus, rightly the concept of sustainable development encompasses the idea of sustainable fashion today. Sustainable fashion is the buzzword going around all sustainability arenas on the global grounds and probably all responsible runways; and it has been gathering tremendous momentum. Although the huge fashion industry contributes largely to the world economy annually, the sector is also well-known for its significant negative effects such as labour exploitation, water pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. In fact the fashion industry has been aware that it is responsible for a shocking 4-10% of global greenhouse-gas emissions every year. And it is here that Sociologists get back to the Pareto principle, 80% of the consequences come from 20% of the causes[1]. Consequently, fashion industry defined sustainable fashion as "An ethical approach towards designing, sourcing, manufacturing, selling, and delivering clothing in a way that minimizes the industry's negative impact on people and the planet along the entire value chain". However, it depends on location, audience, and the constantly changing environment on the basis of which it keeps changing. Sustainable fashion then becomes the strategy aiming to reduce the negative effects of the fashion sector while facilitating and nurturing long-term social, environmental, and economic stability. And it is not just the fashion industry but the consumer which comes within the realm of this strategy for it to make a sustainable planet. The last two decades of the 21st century has seen a dramatic shift in the relationship people have with their clothing[2]. In a world where artisan coffee costs more than a t-shirt, people get into a thoughtless cycle of buying and discarding garments instead of taking time to value and use them. The speed of consumption habits is so high that the physical and mental space of consumers' is clearly lagging behind. Hence, individual values determine the sustainability of a product too.

The goal of sustainable fashion is to create a closed-loop system where clothing is made, worn, and then recycled or repurposed, reducing the environmental impact of the fashion industry. In other words, the concept since inception emphasizes on the 3 Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. However, the need of the hour is 4 additional Rs – Research, Repurpose, Repair and Rent. Researching and educating oneself enables to have the ability to make an informed choice and consider alternate options when investing in fashion. In today's times, all of this

enlightening is easily done through the internet, social media and conversations. Similarly repurposing could be through clothes swapping and pre-loved clothes, old clothes used in making jewellery, accessorizing, redesigned into new dresses and even cutting them into cloths used for cleaning. Ultimately repurposing gives clothes a new life. And if anything could be repaired, then repairing clothes could extend their lifespan and they could be used instead of adding to the landfill. Also if the lifestyle demands for not repeating clothes and leaving the item lay dormant in the wardrobe forever, renting is one of the sustainable options available too.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The European Commission while defining environmental design emphasizes on designs that use low-impact materials, focus on resource efficiency, invest in high quality and durability, reuse, recycle and renew[3]. And encouraging sustainable fashion might lead to an increase in the market share of "green clothes," enhanced recycling, and might also reduce effects of pollution[4].

Chaudhary in a study in a few Asian countries including India found that the buying behaviour and the green purchase intention of the consumers' was dependent on perceived value and willingness to pay[5]. With the social media, NGOs and various organizations advocating sustainable fashion, there has been a growing awareness about the environmental implications of purchase behaviours. Koszewska and Sobuj et al. in their studies found that the attitudes, social norm, environmental concern and environmental knowledge of consumers had a great impact on determining if they will pay a higher amount for sustainable textiles[6,7].

However, Moon et al. in a study among Asian have classified the hurdles to sustainable clothing. Limited knowledge of sustainable clothing and textiles among consumers, insufficient supply or less access to sustainable fashion, sustainable fashion being expensive than conventional clothing, and product design (more attention was given on environmentally friendly dyes and fibres rather than on aesthetic designs and styles) are some of the hurdles identified in the study[8].

Sakthi's study was in response to these mentioned hurdles. The study clearly stated that companies must come forward and encourage sustainable clothing because customers trust branded clothing. Along with

it what influences the consumer's purchase decision is the price of the clothing. Sakthi also suggested that if the government took specific initiatives, such as offering subsidies to producers then the demand for sustainable clothes will be much higher[9].

This was in line with the study conducted by Rausch et al. which found that instead of the durability of the material, the issue of fair wages, and the conditions under which they were produced, consumers most of the time check for cost effectiveness, quality as well as the comfort and fit of the clothing[10].

Brett created a framework that identified three key factors that impact consumer decision-making: product attributes, customer diversity and customer inconsistency[11]. Therefore, an open mind and accepting the fact that sustainability is essential yet complex is a pre-requisite.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study used an exploratory research design with a questionnaire that was sent to the respondents. 85 respondents from Mangalore were randomly selected from the Gen Z (age group 12–30 years). The respondents included both male and female.

IV. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The first section of the questionnaire collected the socio-economic and the basic demographic profile of the respondents. The other part of the questionnaire tried to envisage the consumer perceptions and their behaviour towards eco-friendly or sustainable fashion. With India having the world's largest Gen Z population, the present study explores the perception of Gen Z and their interest in sustainable fashion.

Table 1: Age of the respondents

Age Group	Number	Percentage
12–18	10	11.8
18–24	66	77.6
24–30	9	10.6
Total	85	100

Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents (77.6%) belonged to the age group of 18–24 followed by 11.8% respondents from the age group of 12–18 year. 9 respondents (10.6%) were from the age group of 24–30 years.

Table 2: Sex of the respondents

Sex	Number	Percentage
Male	16	18.8

Female	69	81.2
Total	85	100

Though the questionnaire was circulated randomly among the sample, majority of the respondents were female (69, 81.2%). Only 16 respondents were male (18.8%, see Table 2).

Table 3: Occupational status

Working	Number	Percentage
Yes	6	7.1
No	79	92.9
Total	85	100

As majority of the respondents belonged to the age group of 18–24 years (see Table 1), most of the respondents were not yet employed (92.9%) as shown in Table 3. Most of them were still studying at various levels.

Table 4: Monthly Income

Income (in Rs)	Number	Percentage
10,000–30,000	28	32.9
30,000–60,000	23	27.1
60,000–1 Lakh	22	25.9
More than 1 Lakh	12	14.1
Total	85	100

Since the study was conducted among the Gen Z, and that age would mostly be either underaged to be employed or yet to be employed, the question covered either their own monthly income if they were employed or else that of their parents. As seen in Table 4, majority of the respondents (32.9%) came from families with a monthly income of Rs 10,000–30,000 followed by 27.1% respondents with a monthly family income of Rs 30,000–60,000.

Table 5: Frequency of shopping for new clothes

Frequency	Number	Percentage
Several times a month	9	10.6
Once a month	18	21.2
A few times a year	43	50.6
Rarely	15	17.6
Total	85	100

Table 5 shows the consumer culture among Gen Z, specifically with regard to purchasing clothes. The data shows that majority of the respondents (50.6%) buy clothes more than one time a year and 21.2% buy clothes every month. The data also shows that 10.6% of the respondents buy clothes several times within a month. This clearly indicates the growing consumer culture among Gen Z.

Table 6: Monthly expenditure on clothes and accessories

Monthly Expenditure (Rs)	Number	Percentage
Below 1000	30	35.3
1000–2000	27	31.8
2000–3000	13	15.3
3000–4000	8	9.4
More than 4000	2	2.4
Not Applicable	5	5.9
Total	85	100

The data in Table 6 shows that 58.9% of the respondents spend more than Rs 1000 monthly on clothes and accessories. Noteworthy is the data in Table 3 which shows that 92.9% of the respondents are not working indicating that a majority of the respondents spend despite not earning.

Table 7: Importance of sustainable fashion

Importance	Number	Percentage
Extremely important	20	23.5
Very important	20	23.5
Somewhat important	36	42.4
Not important	9	10.6
Total	85	100

The data is Table 7 shows the importance of sustainable fashion to Gen Z. Majority of the respondents (42.4%) find it somewhat important for them. 47% of the Gen Z respondents find it extremely important and very important. This indicates that they are aware of the importance of sustainable fashion.

Table 8: Sustainable fashion actions taken

Actions Taken	Number	Percentage
Buying second-hand clothing	14	16.5
Supporting ethical fashion brands	29	34.1
Repairing clothing instead of discarding	37	43.5
Renting clothing for special occasions	9	10.6
Taking care of clothing to make them last longer	62	72.9
Other	17	20

Table 8 shows the various actions that the Gen Z respondents take to make their fashion sustainable. Majority of the respondents (72.9%) take care of their clothing to make them last longer and 43.5% of them repair clothes and use them instead of discarding them. Renting of clothing for special occasions or buying second-hand clothing is not something that is

mostly done by Gen Z (10.6% and 16.5%, respectively).

Table 9: Environmental impact considered while purchasing

	Number	Percentage
Always	8	9.4
Most of the time	19	22.4
Sometimes	36	42.4
Rarely	15	17.6
Never	7	8.2
Total	85	100

As seen in Table 9, majority of the respondents sometimes (42.4%) and most of the time (22.4%) consider environmental impact while purchasing clothes and accessories. However, 8.2% and 17.6% of the respondents never or rarely consider about environmental impact while purchasing, respectively.

Table 10: Important factors when choosing sustainable fashion brands

Factors	Number	Percentage
Use of organic and natural material	47	55.3
Fair and ethical production practices	39	45.9
Transparent supply chain	13	15.3
Reduced carbon footprint	16	18.8
Animal cruelty-free	40	47.1
Award-winning designs	6	7.1
Other	16	18.8

The data in Table 10 indicates that majority of the Gen Z consider products for purchase that are organic and use natural material (55.3%), animal cruelty-free (47.1%) and are produced through fair and ethical production practices (45.9%). The data here has a positive implication with regard to consumer behaviour among the Gen Z.

Table 11: Willingness to pay higher price for sustainable fashion

Willingness level	Number	Percentage
Very willing	6	7.1
Somewhat willing	32	37.6
Not willing	9	10.6
Depends on the item	38	44.7
Total	85	100

Table 11 shows that majority of the Gen Z respondents (44.7%) are willing to pay a higher price for sustainable fashion depending on the item they are purchasing. Only 7.1% of the respondents are willing to pay higher price for sustainable fashion.

Table 12: Actions expected in industry

Expected actions	Number	Percentage
Reducing water usage in production	26	30.6
Using recycled materials	50	58.8
Implementing fair wages for garment workers	49	57.6
Providing transparency about supply chain	21	24.7
Using renewable energy in production	38	44.7
Improving recycling and upcycling options for clothing	46	54.1
Increasing education about sustainable fashion	42	49.4
Other	11	12.9

According to the data shown in Table 12, using recycled materials, fair wages for garment workers, improving recycling and upcycling options for clothing are some of the sustainable actions that majority of the respondents expect from the industry.

Table 13: Challenges faced

Challenges	Number	Percentage
Products are expensive	35	41.2
Not easily available	25	29.4
Get duped by big brands	10	11.8
Fake influencer information	3	3.5
Not in line with fashion trends	9	10.6
Other	3	3.5

Sustainable fashion has its own challenges when it comes to consumer behaviour. Table 13 shows the challenges faced by Gen Z in adopting a sustainable fashion approach. Majority of the respondents (41.2%) find sustainable clothing expensive which is a major challenge in adopting sustainable fashion. The other major challenge is that such products are not easily available and found over the shelf commonly.

Table 14: Rental clothing instead of purchasing

Yes	20	23.5
No	25	29.4
Maybe	40	47.1

Total	85	100

Renting clothes instead of purchasing expensive one-time buys for occasions is one of the most effective ways to reduce the landfill and promotes sustainable fashion. Although the data in Table 14 shows that 29.4% of the respondent do not want to opt for rented clothes, majority of the respondents (47.1%) are open to the option of rental clothing instead of purchasing depending on the cost and availability.

Table 15: Areas of sustainable clothing options to be increased

Options	Number	Percentage
Casual wear	70	82.4
Formal wear	43	50.6
Sports wear	24	28.2
Children's clothing	30	35.3
Undergarments	25	29.4
Accessories	42	49.4
Shoes	37	43.5
Other	12	14.1

Data in Table 15 shows that majority of Gen Z respondents would like to see more sustainable fashion options in casual and formal wear (82.4% and 50.6%, respectively).

Table 16: Influence of consumer demand

Consumer influence	Number	Percentage
A great deal	39	45.9
To some extent	31	36.5
Not much	11	12.9
No significant impact	4	4.7
Total	85	100

Table 16 indicates that it is the consumer's demand that influences the fashion industry's sustainable practices to a great deal (45.9%). In other words the respondents are of the opinion that the fashion industry caters to the consumer demand.

Table 17: Familiarity of fast fashion

Familiar	Number	Percentage
Yes	52	61.2
No	33	38.8
Total	85	100

Production of cheap and low-quality clothing that are rapidly produced and are cycled in and out the market quickly to meet new trends is called as fast fashion. It is indeed being termed as the new fashion cult where designs go "out" of fashion as fast as they arrive. The data in Table 17 shows that the majority of the Gen Z respondents (61.2%) are familiar with the concept of fast fashion.

Table 18: Preference of fast fashion over sustainable fashion

Preference	Number	Percentage
Yes	29	34.1
No	56	65.9
Total	85	100

Table 18 indicates that the Gen Z is more inclined and prefers sustainable fashion over fast fashion. 65.9% of the respondents do not prefer fast fashion over sustainable fashion.

Table 19: Reason for fast fashion being a preferred choice

Reason	Number	Percentage
Cheap	14	16.5
In Trend	17	20
Easily available	23	27.1
Other	7	8.2
Not Applicable	24	28.2
Total	85	100

Since majority of the respondents do not prefer fast fashion over sustainable fashion (see Table 18), so the reason for preferring fast fashion was not applicable for majority of the respondents (28.2%). As seen in Table 19, fast fashion being easily available is the major reason why majority of the respondents (27.1%) prefer fast fashion over sustainable fashion. Fast fashion also being in trend is one of the important reasons among the respondents for choosing fast fashion over sustainable fashion.

V. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has used a very small sample size due to constraint of funds and the paucity of time. The study could give more significant results if the sample size would be bigger. A more detailed and comprehensive research could be conducted with a more exhaustive questionnaire providing results with higher reliability and validity.

VI. CONCLUSION

Sustainable fashion aims to create a closed-loop system. This system would entail production of clothing, wearing them and then recycling them. This way it would reduce the consequences of the fashion industry. In other words, manufacture and distribution of clothing done through this process would reduce harmful effects to the environment and in turn promote social responsibility. This would include using organic cotton which is eco-friendly

through processes that minimizes waste and pollution. With the rising awareness among the younger generations, the slow and sustainable fashion is on the rise. Sustainable and ethical fashion though may mean different things to different people:(a) zero waste or circular fashion (b) vintage or second-hand fashion (c) upcycled fashion (d) recycled fashion (e) fair trade fashion (f) vegan and cruelty-free fashion (g) slow fashion (h) regenerative fashion.

Nonetheless, it is fast fashion rather than sustainable fashion that dominates the fashion industry today. The clothing industry deliberately designs clothes that can be purchased at cheap prices. This leads the consumers to think of clothes as being disposable (more like use and throw) making place for newer and trendier clothes that are cheap. The fast fashion cycle is nowhere close to being sustainable. Depleting the Earth's natural resources at exponential rates, exploiting workers throughout the world, and resulting in an enormous amount of waste makes it a looming threat to humankind.

This resonates with the present study which found that although the Gen Z was aware of the concept of sustainable fashion, there was a large gap between knowledge and practice. The study showed that although most of the respondents bought clothes frequently throughout the year, sustainable fashion is casually important to them and they do not seriously consider the sustainable option when they are purchasing clothes.

Some global tragedies like that of the collapse of the Rana Plaza Factory in Bangladesh in 2013 was a wakeup call for the fashion industry and the entire world for it made it evident that behind the glossy facades of clean and pristine fashion store are hidden many social and environmental costs from fast fashion. This leads one to understand the major issues of the non-sustainable fashion industry such as human rights violation, complex supply chains and lack of transparency, rate of fashion, chemical use in fashion production, water waster and water pollution, textile waste, climate change and greenwashing, thus making sustainability more important in the fashion industry.

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