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UNPACKING SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION: A TYPOLOGICAL AND DUAL-PATHWAY APPROACH TO CLOTHING ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The growing concern over environmental degradation has placed sustainable consumption, particularly in the fashion industry, high on both academic and policy agendas. This conceptual paper explores the dynamic underpinning sustainable clothing adoption by highlighting the attitude-behaviour relationship and its psychological and contextual determinants. Drawing on consumer behaviour theory, the paper argues that positive attitudes towards sustainable clothing promote collaborative consumption practices. However, when attitudes are negative or ambivalent, consumers are likely to experience cognitive dissonance, which hinders adoption. To capture the intricacy of behavioural outcomes, a dual-pathway framework is proposed. The initial pathway, grounded in the conventional values-attitude-behaviour model, posits that solid sustainability attitudes lead to intentional engagement in sustainable practices. The second, a context-driven pathway, contends that situational enablers, such as affordability, fashion trends, or peer pressure, can directly motivate selective adoption, even in individuals with weak or ambivalent attitudes. This integrative approach reflects the non-linearity of consumer behaviour and underscores the role of internal and external drivers. Several propositions are advanced to account for variations in sustainable consumption behaviour across different consumer profiles. These comprise conditional, aspirational, and non-engaged segments based on combinations of attitudes and adoption likelihood. The article contributes to sustainability literature by providing an overarching conceptual framework that includes both psychological processes and situational drivers of behaviour. The implications are discussed for marketing communication strategies, policy development, and future empirical validation. Greater sustainability in clothing consumption can be viewed as the strength of the relationship between an individual's consumption attitude and sustainable clothing engagement. The attitude-adoption relationship is moderated by situational factors and facilitating conditions such as the need for uniqueness. Personal values are contributing factors to sustainable consumption adoption along with collaborative practices engagement as a consequence of the relationship. Implications for research and sustainable management ty are presented.

KEYWORDS: Sustainability, Recycling, Collaborative Consumption, Re-Use, Re-Design.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable fashion is a concept that has recently attracted the attention of scholars and manufacturers in society. Sustainability is a complex phenomenon for which there is no single, general definition. Sustainability refers to balancing human activities and the natural environment by reducing the harm to both human beings and the environment caused by these activities. The extant literature largely considers sustainable fashion from a practical perspective. Sustainable fashion practices adopt a lifecycle thinking which defines it as taking and returning resources (cradle-to-cradle principle), recycling the materials, considering societal implications, saving resources, and enhancing attachment and appreciation of sustainable fashion through aesthetics, uniqueness and quality (Aakko & Koskennurmi-Sivonen, 2013).

Although academic research on sustainability has received considerable attention, it has largely focused on sustainable consumption values and motivations (Phipps et al., 2013). Implicit in this research is the emergence of the prosumer phenomenon within the framework of fashion marketing. Therefore, this study presents that contemporary society is moving towards the integration of consumers and producers - a rise in prosumers in 'value co-creation'. Although though several researchers (Osbaldiston & Schott, 2012) have provided operational definitions of sustainable consumption (use and response), the theoretical definition requires stronger integration. The apparel business needs new innovative models of practice to reduce its environmental footprint, which is severe in every phase of the product's life cycle, from the production processes, care and maintenance, as well as disposal.

Therefore, this article provides a multilevel conceptualisation of sustainability, drawing on with theoretical backgrounds in cognitive psychology, human factors, and behavioural psychology. Sustainable consumption and the emergent nature of sustainable systems are defined from a multilevel, theoretical standpoint. An input-throughput-output model is advanced to illustrate a series of phases unfolding over time that constitute the core processes and emergent situations underlying sustainable clothing consumption. In an effort to illuminate the nature of sustainable consumption, this study reviews literature and existing definitions of sustainable consumption at organisational and individual levels, as well as other related phenomena. Testable propositions, practical implications, and directions for further research are advanced.

2. DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABILITY

The question of how sustainable consumption practices can be promoted features prominently for both policymakers and researchers alike, with a plethora of measures (Maletič et al., 2014); however, these are largely functional definitions lacking theoretical significance. Two major perspectives on sustainable consumption are conceptualised: one that centres on the factual impact of sustainable consumption practices (impact-oriented approach) and another that centres on pro-ecological or pro-social intention practices (intent-focused approach).

Traditionally, sustainable consumption was defined by the so-called Oslo definition (Norwegian Ministry of Environment, 1994). However, this definition has received severe criticism because it is not scientific but stems from the political sphere. According to the classical concept, sustainable consumption behaviour is defined as individual acts of satisfying needs through the acquisition, use and disposal of goods and services that do not compromise the environmental and socio-economic conditions of society (currently living or in the future) to satisfy their own needs (Defila, Di Giulio & Kaufmann-Hayoz, 2014). Additionally, sustainable consumption has been described in numerous ways. Goworek et al. (2017) view consumption as a phenomenon comprising of three interlinked phases: acquisition, use, and disposal. These phases have been significant in assessing sustainable consumption behaviour in consumer research. Sigala (2014) defines sustainable consumption behaviours as customer voluntary behaviours that support sustainability with the recognition of environmental and societal influences during consumption. However, the advent of collaboration consumption practices has blurred the lines between phases. However, it is evident that there is no consensus on the definition of sustainable consumption (Mont & Plepys, 2008). Roos et al. (2017) view sustainable fashion consumption as a subset of the sustainable fashion system, which includes demanding sustainable alternatives, caring for garments in less impact-intensive ways and responsible disposal or recycling of obsolete goods.

3. CLOTHING CONSUMPTION CONTEXT

Literature on sustainability has increased significantly in recent decades. Definitions of sustainable consumption, however, remain broad, with the concept of sustainable consumption applied to numerous contexts and belief systems. Considering these diverse perspectives, sustainably conscious consumers are generally defined as those

who consider the wider impact of their clothing consumption on the physical environment (e.g., Barnett et al., 2005). However, research suggests that, despite a shift toward sustainable practices in the clothing supply chain, consumers have yet to fully embrace sustainable clothing and sustainable consumption practices (e.g., Birtwistle & Moore, 2007). These studies suggest that, whereas many consumers have strong views toward the consumption of sustainable goods, these convictions do not always translate into action.

4. EXPLORING SUSTAINABILITY ATTITUDES

Although research on attitudinal behaviour regarding sustainability is available, none is specific to sustainable clothing consumption (i.e., consumer's reduction or reuse of fashion items). Understanding consumer drivers for adoption, such as sustainable clothing consumption, is, however, far more complex and may begin with a closer examination of general values and attitudes. However, several barriers hinder the development of positive attitudes toward sustainable consumption. Consumption is premised on choice within a set of alternatives, and the consumer's relative evaluation of consumption practices would evoke more extreme relationships with behaviour. Thus, attention is drawn to an individual's attitude and situations that lead to attitude-congruent consumption behaviour in conceptualising sustainable consumption and determining an empirical basis for its measurement.

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT

Building on the literature review, the dual-pathway framework (as shown in Figure 1) offers an integrative standpoint on how sustainable clothing consumption emerges from both individual psychological dispositions and external contextual stimuli. The framework conceptualises sustainability adoption as the result of two key pathways: Path A follows a value-attitude-behaviour persuasion, and Path B is driven by contextual opportunities such as affordability and trend influence. These two pathways work simultaneously and help explain both committed and incidental sustainability. This pathway assumes that sustainable behaviour is largely shaped by values and attitudes (Propositions P1-P3).

P1: Personal consumption values positively influence attitudes toward sustainable clothing consumption. (Values-->Attitudes)

P2: The lower the consumer's attitude toward recycled or reused clothing, the lower the likelihood of engaging in sustainable clothing consumption.

(Attitudes -> Behaviour)

P3: Sustainable consumption attitudes mediate the relationship between personal consumption values and the adoption of sustainable behaviour. (Values ->Attitudes->Behaviour)

Central to the proposed framework is a typology of consumer pathways, which posits that collaborative consumption behaviours, specifically reuse, repair, recycling, redesign, renting, and leasing emerge as behavioural outcomes of both internal drivers (Values act as the primary catalyst, dictating how an individual perceives the necessity of sustainable action) and external drivers (the individual's immediate environment). Key Proposition suggests that sustainability practices are adaptive outcomes where internal values are reconciled with external environmental realities through specific behavioural pathways. They align with an individual's immediate environment by selecting diverse, sustainable modalities. This process is further mediated by the individual's internal characteristics. Consequently, the framework is anchored in the conceptualisation of individual consumption values, such as environmental concern and anti-materialism, which serve as critical antecedents to the formation of sustainability attitudes (Propositions P1-P3).

The theoretical flow can be defined by the following equation:

$$v_i \rightarrow A_s \xrightarrow{E_{ext}} B_{pathway}$$

Where:

V_i : Individual Consumption Values

A_s : Sustainability Attitudes formed by internal value systems.

E_{ext} : External Environmental Context

$B_{pathway}$: Collaborative Consumption Outcomes (the typology of reuse, repair, recycling).

As illustrated in the structural representation, the model operates on the premise that Individual Values V_i are the primary catalysts for Sustainability Attitudes A_s . However, the transition from attitude to action is not direct; it is moderated by the External Environment E_{ext} . This interaction determines which specific Behavioural Pathway $B_{pathway}$ is ultimately selected, allowing the consumer to maintain congruence between their internal beliefs and their external reality.

However, the attitude-behaviour relationship is not always linear or consistent.

The framework addresses this complexity by integrating two critical moderators:

a) Facilitating conditions, precisely the need for uniqueness, can enhance sustainable behaviour

when consumers perceive sustainable clothing as stylish, innovative, or expressing individuality

P4: The positive relationship between sustainable consumption attitudes and behaviour is strengthened when consumers perceive uniqueness in sustainable clothing options. (Behaviour-> Collaborative Practices)

b) Situational influence, such as affordability, availability, trend influence, and peer norms, which may enable behaviour even when personal attitudes toward sustainability are weak (Proposition 5).

P5: Situational factors such as affordability, accessibility, and social influence moderate the relationship between attitudes and sustainable behaviour. (Situational enablers as moderators)

This delineates the contextual pathway, a parallel route in which consumers engage in sustainable practices due to favourable conditions rather than strong persuasion. Therefore, the framework highlights that collaborative sustainability behaviour is the product of the interaction between internal enablers (attitudes and values) and external influences (facilitating conditions and situational

factors). It proposes consumption engagement, the likelihood that a consumer will act on their values in a particular context.

Finally, collaborative sustainability practices represent the output phase of the framework (P6), reflecting the tangible actions taken by consumers across both pathways.

P6: The adoption of sustainable behaviour positively influences actual engagement in collaborative clothing practices.

Collaborative clothing practices contribute to circular clothing models and demonstrate how sustainability can be realised through diverse motivations and conditions. By integrating attitudinal and contextual determinants within a single framework, this model advances theory by explaining how internal dispositions and external drivers jointly shape sustainable clothing consumption. It encourages future empirical studies to test these variables and their interactions, providing a roadmap for understanding why and how consumers engage in sustainable clothing practices.

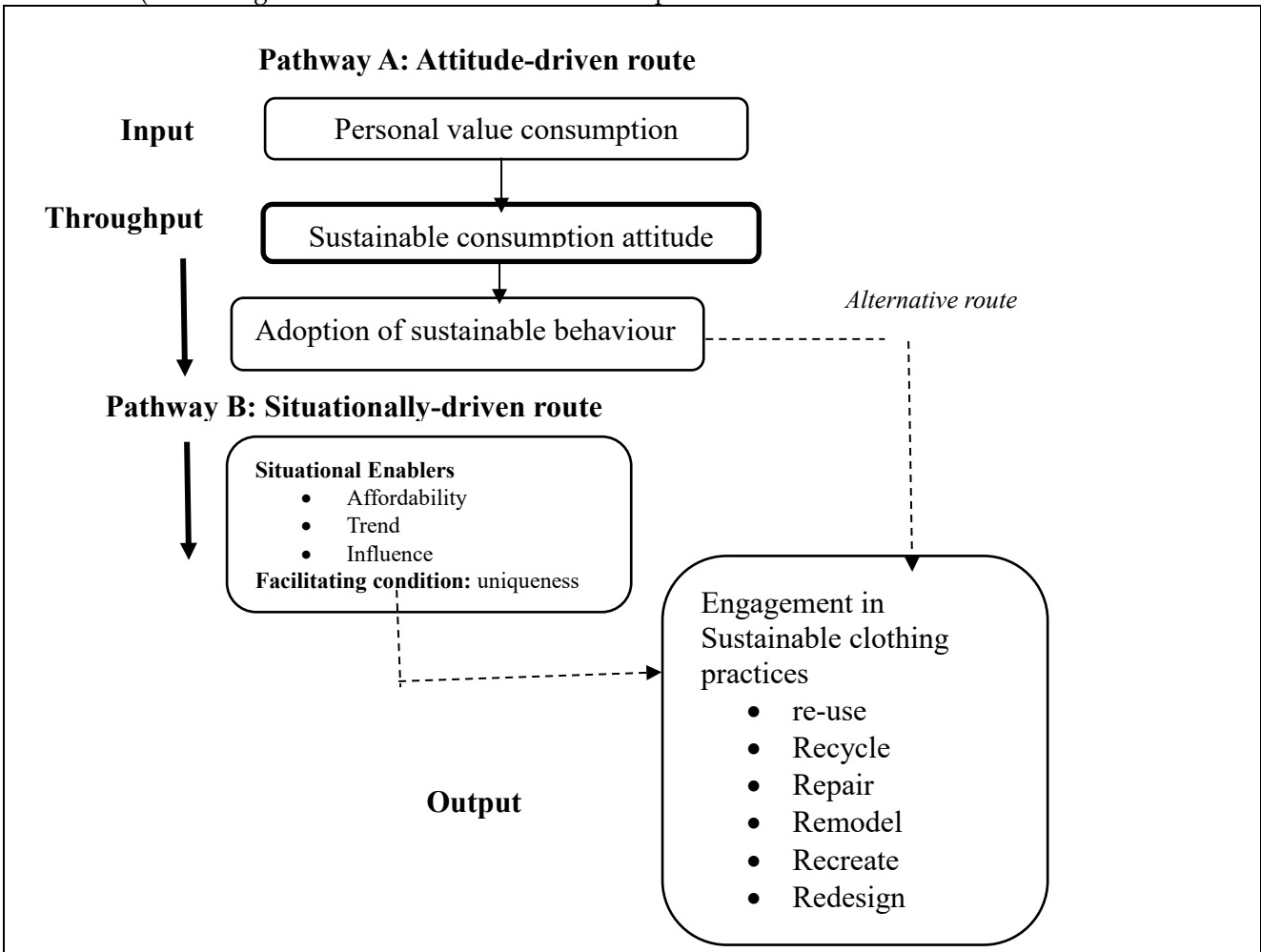


Figure 1: Dual-Pathway Framework.

Consumption Attitude-Behaviour Relationship

Classification of previously developed constructs of consumption attitude and the propensity to adopt of sustainability yields four distinct behavioural settings relevant to sustainable clothing consumption. These settings emerge from the intersection of high and low levels of both dimensions (as shown in Table 1). Each quadrant represents a distinct consumer profile regarding sustainable clothing consumption.

Table 1: Consumption Attitude-Sustainability Adoption Matrix.

	High sustainability adoption likelihood	Low sustainability adoption likelihood
High consumption attitude	1 Adoption/Engagement	3 Aspirational Engagement
Low consumption attitude	2 Conditional Adoption	4 No Adoption/Engagement

5.1. Adoption/Engagement (High Consumption Attitude & High Adoption Likelihood)

This setting reflects consumers who are both attitudinally aligned with sustainability and behaviourally active in sustainable clothing practices. Such individuals actively seek clothes that are produced in an environmentally and ethically manner, show concern for clothing's impact on humans and the environment, and make buying choices based upon such considerations. Such individuals provide fertile ground for loyalty initiatives, value-oriented communication, and co-creation efforts within sustainable clothing ecosystems.

Empirical evidence validates the attitude-behaviour adoption link such that a stronger positive attitude and perception towards sustainability will increase adoption likelihood (Chou et al., 2012). Yet sustainable consumption is not solely a product of attitude; it is shaped by overarching lifestyle habits, normative beliefs, and social pressure (Sharma & Jha, 2017). As a result, consumer decision-making may be influenced by heuristic cues (e.g., recycle, re-use) when information is not salient (Tobias-Mamina & Kempen, 2020). This results from limited information relative to sustainability, highlighting the key role of situational and contextual factors in shaping adoption.

5.2. Conditional Adoption (Low Consumption Attitude & High Adoption Likelihood)

Conditional adoption results when individuals display behavioural engagement in sustainable clothing despite having weak attitudinal attachment. Their decision to purchase sustainable clothing may be driven by external conditions rather than intrinsic sustainability values (Kempen et al, 2023). Although

clothing is classified as a high-involvement product category in fashion management research, consumers adopt sustainable consumption based on situational cues, such as familiarity and appropriateness, time pressure, and the variety of selection (Choe & Noh, 2018). Such behaviours are explained by conformist bias, in which consumers select options accepted and endorsed by the majority, irrespective of personal beliefs (Bentley, 2009). While these consumers may not prioritise sustainability in their value system, their reception to behavioural adoption positions them as an opportunity segment.

5.3. Aspirational Adoption/Engagement (High Consumption Attitude and Low Adoption Likelihood)

The aspirational pathway highlights consumers who hold strong pro-sustainability attitudes but fail to translate them into consistent sustainable consumption behaviours. This inaction may emanate from barriers such as limited access to sustainable options, high prices, scepticism toward sustainability claims, and lifestyle constraints (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). These consumers are often engaged at an aspirational level; they appreciate sustainable clothing principles, express concern for environmental and ethical issues, and may even make occasional green purchases without changing broader consumption habits. Bridging this pathway requires reducing both perceived and structural barriers, improving the credibility and visibility of sustainability initiatives, and framing sustainable clothing as convenient, affordable, and desirable (Kempen et al, 2023).

5.4. No Adoption/Engagement (Low Consumption Attitude and Low Sustainability Adoption Likelihood)

A low consumption attitude, combined with a low likelihood of adoption, implies that individuals

perceive sustainable clothing as irrelevant or incompatible with their values and lifestyle. These consumers often prioritise low cost, trendiness, and regular wardrobe renewal, behaviours generally associated with fast fashion consumption. The proliferation of fast fashion makes it easy for consumers to buy leading to over-consumption. Kempen et al. (2023) highlight a positive relationship between materialism and overconsumption, showing that consumers driven by materialistic values are less likely to engage in sustainable practices. From a diffusion of innovation perspective, these individuals are least likely to adopt without a significant shift in perception.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion suggests that sustainable consumption is an intricate phenomenon that merits a more complex conceptualisation than has been reported in extant literature. The framework recommends that, from a management perspective, sustainability adoption likelihood may be of equal significance to consumption attitude strength, leading us to the development of the concept of consumption engagement. For example, an implication of the two categorisations is that a weak attitude but positive likelihood (conditional engagement) may be more likely to lead to sustainable consumption practice adoption than a very positive attitude but Low adoption likelihood (Aspirational). Thus, incorporating the concept of consumption attitudes will likely increase the predictive ability of the adoption models. Additionally, the framework highlights the

significance of situational influences and facilitating conditions as moderators of the relationship between sustainable consumption attitudes and sustainability adoption. This has significant managerial implications, including focusing attention on improving consumption attitude, attempting to manage situational factors and/or facilitating influences such as uniqueness. Lastly, the framework highlights the consequences of adopting sustainable consumption in the context of clothing (e.g., reuse, recycling, redesign, repair, remodel, recreate, renting, leasing), underscoring the long-term importance of effective management of collaborative engagement. Broadening the view of collaborative engagement to integrate personal values, consumption attitudes, underlying processes, and the various contingencies affords management with a robust path emphasising appropriate alternatives. It is, however, expected that this article's effort will lead to further conceptual and empirical development, expanding knowledge in the area of clothing and clothing sustainability.

7. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Existing research on consumer behaviour in the circular economy and sustainable clothing lacks in-depth exploration grounded in robust theoretical foundations. Key gaps remain in understanding how specific circular and sustainable strategies affect clothing consumption and consumer perceptions of sustainability (Han et al., 2017). To advance this field, further research grounded in theories is crucial to help close the attitude-behaviour gap present in sustainable consumption.

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