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Fast Fashion Vs. Sustainability: Consumer Attitudes, Awareness, And Behavioural Gaps Among Young Indian Consumers

A Primary Research Study Based on Survey Data

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Abstract: This study examines fast fashion and sustainability among young Indian consumers. Based on survey data from 48 respondents, it identifies a strong attitude–behaviour gap, where high environmental awareness does not translate into sustainable purchasing due to cost, availability, and style constraints. Instagram plays a major role in shaping consumption patterns.

Index Terms - Fast fashion, sustainable fashion, consumer behaviour, India

1. Introduction

The global fashion industry produces approximately 100 billion garments annually, with the average consumer discarding 60% of new clothing within a year (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). This hyper-consumption model, driven by cheap, trend-replicating retail chains, is what scholars and industry practitioners broadly term 'fast fashion'. Its consequences are staggering: the industry accounts for an estimated 10% of global carbon emissions, consumes 93 billion cubic metres of water annually, and is responsible for 20% of global industrial water pollution (UN Environment Programme, 2019).

India presents a particularly compelling case study. The country is both a major manufacturer and a rapidly expanding consumer market for fast fashion. Brands such as Zara, H&M, and a constellation of domestic digital-first platforms like Myntra have transformed how urban and semi-urban Indians, particularly youth, discover, purchase, and discard clothing. The rise of social commerce, Instagram haul culture, and influencer-driven micro-trends has shortened the already-brief fashion cycle to near-instantaneous turnover.

Yet alongside this consumption surge exists a paradox. Environmental awareness is at an all-time high among Indian youth. Concepts of sustainability, ethical labour, and circular fashion have entered mainstream discourse. But whether awareness translates to behaviour change remains an open empirical question, one this paper seeks to address through primary survey data.

This study investigates the attitudes, perceptions, and behavioural dispositions of young Indian consumers (primarily 18–34 years) toward fast fashion and sustainable fashion. Specifically, it aims to:

- Assess the frequency and nature of fashion consumption among the study cohort.
- Measure the level of fast fashion awareness and environmental concern.
- Identify barriers preventing the adoption of sustainable fashion alternatives.
- Examine the role of social media platforms in shaping fashion choices.
- Analyse the gap between stated environmental concern and actual purchasing behaviour.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Fast Fashion and Its Environmental Toll

Barnes and Lea-Greenwood (2006) define fast fashion as a business strategy that aims to reduce the lead time between the design conception of a garment and its availability at retail level, responding quickly to consumer demand. This model, pioneered by Zara's parent company Inditex and later adopted by H&M, Primark, and numerous online-only platforms, has democratised trend-following fashion while generating an enormous waste footprint.

Joergens (2006) was among the first to empirically examine whether ethical consumption concerns influenced fashion purchasing in Western markets, finding that while consumers expressed concern, price and style remained dominant decision factors. This foundational insight, the attitude-behaviour gap, has been replicated across multiple national contexts, and forms the central analytical lens of the present study.

2.2 Sustainable Fashion: Definitions and Consumer Perception

Sustainable fashion, as broadly defined in the literature, encompasses practices that reduce environmental harm, promote ethical labour conditions, extend product lifecycles, and support circular economic models (Henninger et al., 2016). In practice, this ranges from the use of organic and recycled materials to second-hand and vintage markets, slow fashion advocacy, and brand-level supply chain transparency.

Consumer understanding of 'sustainable fashion' is itself fragmented. Studies by Bray et al. (2011) and Cervellon and Wernerfelt (2012) show that consumers often conflate sustainability with premium pricing or limited aesthetic appeal, perceptions this study tests in the Indian context.

2.3 The Indian Consumer Context

India's fashion market is projected to reach USD 59.3 billion by 2025 (Statista, 2024), with online fashion retail growing at a CAGR exceeding 20%. Studies focusing on Indian millennials and Gen Z suggest that while environmental values are increasingly internalised, structural barriers, including affordability, the sheer volume of fast fashion alternatives, and social norms, significantly inhibit sustainable behaviour (Jain & Mishra, 2020).

Notably, Gupta and Ogden (2009) established that social norms and peer influence significantly affect pro-environmental consumer behaviour. In an Indian context, where social media penetration among youth has exploded, the role of platforms such as Instagram in mediating both aspirational consumption and sustainability awareness becomes especially salient.

2.4 Social Media and Fashion Consumption

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) demonstrated that Instagram influencers have a significant impact on purchase intention, particularly among young women. The 'haul video' phenomenon, where creators showcase large quantities of recently purchased, inexpensive clothing, has been identified as a key driver of fast fashion impulse purchasing (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Understanding which platforms most powerfully shape Indian youth fashion behaviour, and whether any sustainable fashion influencers penetrate this space, is central to designing effective intervention strategies.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, supplemented by qualitative open-ended responses. A structured questionnaire was administered digitally between April and July 2025 via Google Forms. The questionnaire comprised 28 items spanning demographics, shopping behaviour, brand exposure, motivational factors (on a 5-point Likert scale), sustainability awareness, barriers to sustainable fashion adoption, environmental harm perception, and social media influence.

3.2 Sampling

A total of 48 valid responses were collected using a convenience sampling approach, distributed through social media networks and peer outreach. While this limits generalisability, the sample is well-suited to exploratory, descriptive research and to generating hypotheses for larger-scale studies. The demographic profile of respondents is summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 48)

Category	Sub-group	Count	Percentage
Age	Under 18	2	4.2%
	18–24 years	39	81.3%
	25–34 years	7	14.6%
Gender	Female	24	50.0%
	Male	24	50.0%
Location	Delhi / New Delhi	18	37.5%
	Haryana (incl. Sonipat, Gurgaon, Faridabad)	22	45.8%
	Other Indian Cities	6	12.5%
	International (California, Sydney)	2	4.2%

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentage distributions). Likert scale items were averaged to compute mean motivation scores. Cross-tabulations were used to examine relationships between awareness levels, spending patterns, and willingness to pay for sustainable alternatives. Open-ended responses were thematically coded to surface qualitative insights.

Cross-tabulation analysis was used to examine relationships between environmental awareness and purchasing behavior.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Fashion Consumption Behaviour

The majority of respondents (54.2%) reported shopping for clothes every few months, while 27.1% shopped monthly. Only 16.7% reported purchasing clothing rarely (once or twice a year). This confirms an active consumption cycle among the study cohort consistent with fast fashion dynamics. Shopping channels were broadly divided, with 47.9% preferring a combination of online and in-store shopping, 27.1% exclusively in-store, and 25.0% exclusively online.

Monthly clothing expenditure for most respondents fell in the ₹1,000–₹2,500 range (45.8%), followed by ₹2,501–₹5,000 (22.9%), and under ₹1,000 (22.9%). This spending profile suggests a price-sensitive consumer base, which has direct implications for sustainable fashion adoption.

Table 2: Shopping Frequency and Monthly Spend Distribution

Shopping Frequency	Count	%	Monthly Spend	Count	%
Every few months	26	54.2%	Less than ₹1,000	11	22.9%
Monthly	13	27.1%	₹1,000–₹2,500	22	45.8%
Rarely	9	18.7%	₹2,501–₹5,000	11	22.9%
			Over ₹5,000	4	8.4%

4.2 Brand Preferences

Respondents were asked to select all fashion brands they had purchased from. Myntra-affiliated brands (Roadster, Dressberry, etc.) were the most commonly cited (72.9%), reflecting the dominance of India's largest fashion e-commerce platform. H&M was cited by 56.3% of respondents, followed by Zara (52.1%), Reliance Trends (47.9%), Pantaloons (43.8%), and Westside (39.6%). Notably, 25.0% of respondents reported purchasing from thrift or second-hand sources, suggesting a meaningful, if minority, awareness of circular fashion options.

Table 3: Brand Purchase Frequency Among Respondents

Brand / Channel	Respondents (Count)	% of Total
Myntra (Roadster, Dressberry, etc.)	35	72.9%
H&M	27	56.3%
Zara	25	52.1%
Reliance Trends	23	47.9%
Pantaloons	21	43.8%
Westside	19	39.6%
Thrifted / Second-hand	12	25.0%
Local Market / Other	6	12.5%

4.3 Purchase Motivations

Respondents rated five motivational factors on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all important, 5 = Extremely important). Comfort emerged as the highest-rated motivator (mean = 3.88), followed closely by Trendiness (mean = 3.15) and Price (mean = 3.06). Sustainability (mean = 3.02) and Brand (mean = 3.18) occupied the middle range, suggesting that while sustainability is not entirely dismissed, it does not yet function as a primary purchase driver for most respondents.

Table 4: Mean Ratings of Purchase Motivation Factors (Scale: 1–5)

Motivational Factor	Mean Score	Rank
Comfort	3.88	1st
Brand	3.18	2nd
Trendiness	3.15	3rd
Price	3.06	4th
Sustainability	3.02	5th

4.4 Awareness of Fast Fashion and Sustainable Fashion

A substantial majority (75.0%) of respondents confirmed familiarity with the term 'fast fashion'. An additional 14.6% indicated partial familiarity (responding 'somewhat'), while only 10.4% were unaware of the term. This high awareness rate within the 18–24 cohort is consistent with increased digital discourse, academic exposure, and documentary media (such as The True Cost) penetrating mainstream youth culture.

When asked whether they consider sustainability during purchasing, the responses reflected a more nuanced picture. Only 22.9% reported always or almost always doing so, 41.7% said sometimes, 16.7% said rarely, and 10.4% said never. This divergence between awareness and decision-making behaviour is a hallmark finding of the attitude-behaviour gap documented extensively in the consumer psychology literature.

Table 5: Sustainability Consideration in Purchase Decisions

Frequency of Sustainability Consideration	Count	Percentage
Always	8	16.7%
Sometimes	20	41.7%
Rarely	8	16.7%
Never	5	10.4%
Not sure / No response	7	14.5%

4.5 Perceived Environmental Harm of Fast Fashion

Respondents were asked to rate how harmful they consider fast fashion to be for the environment. The results reveal a predominantly alarmed cohort: 31.3% rated fast fashion as 'extremely harmful', 35.4% as 'very harmful', and 16.7% as 'slightly harmful'. Only 6.3% considered it 'not harmful', and 10.4% were unsure. Taken together, 78% of respondents perceive fast fashion as at least 'very harmful', a remarkably high proportion that underscores the awareness-action gap this study seeks to illuminate.

Table 6: Perceived Environmental Harm of Fast Fashion

Environmental Harm Perception	Count	Percentage
Extremely harmful	15	31.3%
Very harmful	17	35.4%
Slightly harmful	8	16.7%
Not harmful	3	6.3%
Not sure	5	10.4%

4.6 Barriers to Sustainable Fashion Adoption

Respondents were asked to identify all factors discouraging them from choosing sustainable fashion. Higher cost was overwhelmingly the most cited barrier, selected by 72.9% of respondents. Limited availability came second (47.9%), followed by lack of style options (41.7%) and lack of awareness (22.9%). These findings are consistent with the broader literature identifying price as the primary gatekeeper of sustainable consumer markets, and are especially salient given that the dominant spending bracket for this cohort is ₹1,000–₹2,500 per month, where most sustainable fashion brands operate at a premium.

Table 7: Barriers to Sustainable Fashion Adoption (Multiple Response)

Barrier	Respondents (Count)	% of N = 48
Higher cost	35	72.9%
Limited availability	23	47.9%
Lack of style options	20	41.7%
Lack of awareness	11	22.9%

4.7 Willingness to Pay a Premium for Sustainable Fashion

When asked whether they would be willing to pay more for eco-friendly or ethical clothing, 25.0% said 'Yes', 41.7% responded 'Maybe', and 33.3% said 'No'. The 'Maybe' plurality is significant, it represents a persuadable middle segment that has not yet been effectively targeted by sustainable brands or awareness campaigns. Notably, those who answered 'Yes' were more likely to already follow sustainable fashion influencers and to have previously boycotted a brand for ethical reasons.

4.8 Social Media Influence on Fashion Choices

Instagram was identified as the most influential platform for fashion choices, cited by 68.8% of respondents. Pinterest followed at 39.6%, YouTube at 35.4%, peer recommendations at 35.4%, and in-store displays at 33.3%. Only 14.6% of respondents reported following influencers who specifically promote sustainable fashion, a significant gap given that 68.8% use Instagram as a fashion reference. This suggests that while the channel exists, sustainable fashion content has not yet achieved meaningful penetration in the influencer ecosystem most relevant to this demographic.

Table 8: Platform Influence on Fashion Choices (Multiple Response)

Platform	Count	% of N = 48
Instagram	33	68.8%
Pinterest	19	39.6%
YouTube	17	35.4%
Peer recommendations	17	35.4%
In-store displays	16	33.3%

4.9 Current Waste-Reduction Actions

Respondents were asked about actions they currently take to reduce fashion waste. Donating or recycling clothes was the most common action (60.4%), followed by avoiding impulsive buying (58.3%), buying second-hand or thrifting (29.2%), and supporting sustainable brands (20.8%). A meaningful 10.4% reported taking no actions. These data suggest that waste-reduction behaviours are largely post-purchase (donation, recycling) rather than pre-purchase (brand switching, thrifting, boycotts), further confirming the consumption-first, reflection-second pattern.

4.10 Guilt, Boycotts, and Label Reading

A significant 52.1% of respondents reported having felt guilty or conflicted after purchasing from a fashion brand at least sometimes. Reasons cited included poor value for money, environmental discomfort, and the feeling that purchases were impulsive. However, only 22.9% had ever boycotted a brand due to ethical or environmental concerns, and only 25.0% regularly or always read clothing labels for material or production information. This pattern, emotional discomfort without sustained behavioural change, reinforces the core argument of this paper: awareness and even guilt are insufficient alone to drive sustainable purchasing habits.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Attitude-Behaviour Gap: Indian Youth and Sustainable Fashion

The most striking finding of this study is the magnitude of the gap between environmental concern and sustainable purchasing behaviour. With 78% of respondents categorising fast fashion as very or extremely harmful, and 75% familiar with the concept, awareness is demonstrably not the binding constraint. Yet only 25% are willing to unconditionally pay more for sustainable alternatives, and fewer than 15% follow sustainable fashion influencers. This is consistent with what Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) termed the 'attitude-behaviour gap' in environmental psychology, wherein knowledge and concern do not automatically produce commensurate behavioural change.

The Indian context adds specific texture to this gap. The dominant monthly fashion budget of ₹1,000–₹2,500 places most respondents well below the price threshold where most certified sustainable fashion brands operate. Cost is not merely a preference but a structural constraint, particularly for the student and early-career demographics that make up the 18–24 core of this sample.

5.2 The 'Maybe' Segment: A Critical Policy Target

The 41.7% of respondents who responded 'Maybe' to paying more for sustainable fashion represent a particularly important target for market and policy interventions. This persuadable middle is neither ideologically opposed to sustainability nor economically excluded from it. They are responsive to the right incentives, which, per our qualitative open-ended responses, are primarily lower prices, better style options, and broader awareness. One respondent captured this succinctly: 'Having more affordable and stylish options would help. Also, if local markets had more eco-friendly choices and there was more awareness about reusing or donating clothes, I'd find it easier to build sustainable habits.'

5.3 Instagram as Dual-Use Infrastructure

The finding that 68.8% of respondents cite Instagram as their primary fashion influence, while only 14.6% follow sustainable fashion creators, reveals Instagram as a dual-use infrastructure: currently dominated by fast fashion promotion but structurally capable of pivoting toward sustainability communication. Brands, NGOs, and government bodies seeking to accelerate sustainable fashion adoption would do well to prioritise Instagram-first content strategies targeting this demographic. The success of thrifting and second-hand fashion communities on Instagram and Pinterest in other global markets (notably South Korea and the UK) offers a viable template.

5.4 The Role of Thrifting as a Transitional Behaviour

The finding that 25% of respondents have already purchased from thrift or second-hand sources is encouraging. Thrifting occupies a uniquely favourable position in the sustainable fashion landscape: it is cheaper than fast fashion, aesthetically differentiated (appealing to trend-forward youth), and environmentally superior. Several respondents explicitly endorsed thrifting as a practical solution: 'I think thrifting might be the key in today's time.' Policy and platform interventions that lower barriers to thrift market access, including digital aggregation platforms for local second-hand sellers, could accelerate this behaviour beyond the 25% currently engaged.

5.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations that constrain the generalisability of its findings. First, the convenience sample of 48 respondents, predominantly from Delhi-NCR and Haryana, is not representative of India's demographically and economically diverse consumer population. Second, the self-reported nature of survey data introduces social desirability bias, respondents may over-report environmentally conscious attitudes. Third, the absence of income-level data limits the ability to disentangle price sensitivity from ideological resistance to sustainable fashion. Future research should employ stratified random sampling across geographic and socioeconomic strata, and supplement survey data with purchase transaction analysis.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the attitudes, awareness levels, and behavioural dispositions of young Indian consumers toward fast fashion and sustainable fashion. The findings reveal a population that is informed, concerned, and conflicted, but largely constrained from acting on its environmental values by the triumvirate of cost, availability, and aesthetic compromise.

The attitude-behaviour gap is not a knowledge problem. It is a structural and systemic one. Bridging it will require coordinated action across multiple levels: market-level innovation to bring sustainable fashion within accessible price ranges, platform-level commitment to amplifying sustainable creators on Instagram and YouTube, brand-level transparency in supply chains and materials, and government-level incentives (such as GST reliefs on certified sustainable clothing or extended producer responsibility frameworks).

The 41.7% 'maybe' segment represents a significant opportunity. Given the right combination of affordability, style relevance, and social proof, delivered through the Instagram ecosystems they already inhabit, a meaningful proportion of this cohort can be converted into sustainable consumers. As one respondent articulated: 'Fast fashion is tempting because it's affordable and trendy, but it often harms the environment and workers behind the scenes. Sustainability should feel doable, not overwhelming.' Making sustainability doable is precisely the challenge that researchers, brands, and policymakers must now collectively rise to.

This study contributes to the nascent but growing body of empirical literature on sustainable fashion consumption in the Global South, and specifically provides actionable, data-grounded insights for the Indian market. Future research should build on this exploratory work with longitudinal designs and representative sampling to track whether the attitude-behaviour gap is narrowing over time.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument Overview

The questionnaire covered the following thematic sections:

- Section 1 – Demographics: Age group, gender, city/state of residence.
- Section 2 – Shopping Behaviour: Frequency, duration of use, preferred shopping channel.
- Section 3 – Brand Exposure: Multi-select brand recognition and purchase history.
- Section 4 – Spending and Motivation: Monthly expenditure bracket; Likert ratings for price, trendiness, brand, sustainability, and comfort.
- Section 5 – Awareness and Consideration: Familiarity with fast fashion; frequency of sustainability consideration; association of terms.
- Section 6 – Barriers and Willingness: Multi-select barriers to sustainable fashion; willingness to pay premium.
- Section 7 – Environmental Concern: Perceived harm of fast fashion; climate change concern rating.
- Section 8 – Behaviour: Actions to reduce fashion waste; boycott behaviour; label reading.
- Section 9 – Social Media: Platform influence; sustainable fashion influencer following.
- Section 10 – Open-Ended: Additional thoughts and suggestions on fast fashion and sustainability.

Total responses collected: 48 | Period: April–July 2025 | Mode: Online (Google Forms) | Geography: Predominantly Delhi-NCR and Haryana, India.