

SUSTAINABLE FASHION - WHAT MATTERS TO GENERATION Z?

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Abstract

Purpose - The study examines the importance of sustainability factors for Generation Z members when making purchasing decisions for fashion industry products. The study seeks to identify the key motivators and barriers influencing their consumer behaviour, as well as to analyse the gap between their stated attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour.

Methodology - An online survey was conducted with 263 Generation Z members in Croatia. Data were analysed to examine relationships between ecological identity, attitudes, and sustainable consumption behaviours.

Results - The findings reveal a significant attitude-behaviour gap. While Generation Z values sustainability, practical factors such as comfort, quality, and price take significant precedence in their purchasing decisions. High price was identified as the most dominant demotivator, followed by limited availability and choice. Conversely, ethical considerations (e.g., absence of child labour) and functional attributes (e.g., product durability) were the strongest motivators, ranking higher than purely ecological factors. Notably, the analysis revealed different psychological drivers for different sustainable behaviours.

Contribution - Generation Z in Croatia demonstrates an awareness of sustainability issues, but a considerable gap persists between their attitudes and actions, largely due to pragmatic barriers like price and availability. Findings suggest that not all sustainable behaviours are driven by the same motives: paying more for a sustainable product is an identity-driven, emotional act, whereas buying second-hand appears to be a more pragmatically driven behaviour.

Keywords sustainable fashion, Generation Z, consumer behaviour, attitude-behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Rapid shifts in trends, driven by frequent changes in consumer preferences and growing consumer insatiability, encourage continuous purchasing and consumption. This pattern of behaviour promotes a throwaway culture, where clothing is quickly discarded and replaced, and fashion is increasingly perceived as fast and fleeting. As a result, the fashion industry is increasingly highlighted as one of the world's major environmental polluters. Consequently, the industry is facing mounting pressure to adopt sustainable practices.

Fundamentally, fashion contradicts sustainability, which emphasises longevity and durability. According to Brewer (2019) this is known as the "fashion paradox", which is described as the tension between the industry's imperative to constantly generate new trends to satisfy consumer demand for novelty and exclusivity. Once these trends gain

widespread acceptance, they lose their exclusivity, revealing that the very *raison d'être* of fashion is fundamentally at odds with sustainability. The concept of sustainability which includes environmental, social, and economic dimensions, is becoming an imperative rather than merely a trend.

In this context, consumers play a crucial role, with Generation Z being particularly prominent. This generation, representing nearly one-third of the global population is often labelled the “sustainability generation” due to their reported environmental awareness (Seyfi et al., 2025).

However, a common issue in sustainability discourse is the attitude-behaviour gap, which refers to the divergence between consumers’ self-reported pro-environmental attitudes and their actual purchasing behaviour (Bray et al., 2011). This gap is especially relevant in the fashion domain, where factors such as cost, aesthetics, functionality, and peer influence can prevail over sustainability concerns. This research contributes theoretically by linking ecological identity and emotional attitudes with sustainable fashion behaviours, and practically by providing implications for brands and policymakers to address the persistent attitude-behaviour gap.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Sustainability and sustainable development

Sustainable development in Croatia is defined as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, 2024). A more specific definition describes sustainable development as “a balance between the need to improve quality of life (economic component), to achieve social well-being and peace for all (social component), and the need to preserve environmental components as natural assets upon which both current and future generations depend” (Narodne novine, 2009:658). From this, three pillars of sustainable development can be identified: social progress, environmental protection, and economic development. But the most widely accepted definition of sustainable development was introduced by the World Commission on Environment and Development in the 1987 Brundtland Report, defining it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). In response to escalating ecological challenges, including climate change and resource depletion, the concept of sustainability is gaining increasing importance in both public discourse and academic research. The development of consumer environmental awareness is driven by the growing degradation of the environment. This has led to the evolution of marketing practices, leading to the emergence of green marketing, which emphasises ecological attributes of products and services. Extending beyond green marketing, sustainable marketing seeks to align business goals with the long-term interests of society and the environment, integrating all three pillars of sustainability (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019).

Sustainability represents a comprehensive concept that integrates three interdependent dimensions — environmental, economic, and social. These are commonly referred to as the three pillars of sustainable development. The most widely accepted definition was introduced by the World Commission on Environment and Development in their 1987 report, *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland Report), defining it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). In response to the escalating global environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, sustainability has become an imperative for governments, businesses, and consumers alike. Sustainable development therefore involves balancing economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection to ensure long-term societal well-being.

1.2. The concept of sustainable fashion

The global fashion industry generates approximately USD 1.3 trillion in revenue annually and employs more than 300 million people worldwide, accounting for around 2% of global GDP (Gazzola et al., 2020). At the same time, this sector consumes more than 98 million tonnes of non-renewable resources annually, including petroleum for synthetic fibres, fertilisers for cotton, and chemicals for textile processing, as well as around 93 billion cubic metres of water (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). This level of consumption significantly contributes to droughts, the release of 500,000 tonnes of microplastics into the ocean (Gazzola et al., 2020) and is responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions (Conca, 2015).

Sustainable fashion represents the fashion industry's response to the pressing challenges of sustainability. Although the discourse around sustainable fashion began as early as 2008, no universally accepted definition of the term has yet been (Mukendi et al., 2020). In general, sustainable fashion refers to production and consumption models that integrate environmental and social considerations, while maintaining fair and economically viable business systems, according to Palomo-Domínguez et al. (2023). The same authors add that sustainable fashion encompasses various practices and categories, including the use of sustainable materials (e.g. recycled, organic, animal-friendly products), environmentally responsible production processes (handmade, vintage, bespoke clothing), local sourcing, and fair trade.

Sustainable fashion aligns with all seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations. Choi & Li (2015) state that fashion companies must achieve the 5Rs to be considered sustainable. These include:

1. Reduce – minimising waste and harmful environmental impact
2. Reuse – extending the lifespan of materials and products
3. Recycle – transforming waste into new materials or products
4. Re-design – minimising resource use and opting for less environmentally harmful materials
5. Re-image – raising awareness and reshaping perceptions around sustainability

Sustainable fashion is frequently used interchangeably with terms such as *eco-fashion* or *green fashion* and encompasses all three pillars of sustainability within the fashion sector - from production to retail (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023). According to (Markuz et al., 2022), eco-fashion includes garments produced from raw materials cultivated without pesticides, harmful chemicals, bleaches, or dyes, grown organically or made from recycled textiles and materials (e.g., plastics), algae, or biological waste-based textiles (e.g., casein protein derived from milk). The ecological dimension of sustainable fashion extends beyond material and packaging choices and includes the conditions of production, such as ensuring fair treatment and adequate compensation of workers, prohibiting animal testing, and avoiding the use of animal skin, fur, or child labour.

The primary objective of fashion designers who promote sustainability is to minimise environmental harm across the entire supply chain, from the sourcing of raw materials to the end consumer, while also encouraging reverse product flows (e.g. returns for recycling). In response, new, more environmentally friendly production, consumption, and disposal methods are increasingly being adopted throughout the industry. Modern concepts and models that reflect various sustainable fashion strategies include the following (Celcar, 2020:5)

1. Designing sustainable collections
2. Zero-waste fashion design and pattern cutting
3. Recycling of waste materials
4. Reuse of raw materials
5. Upcycling textile materials and garments into high-quality products
6. Redesign and repair of textiles and clothing
7. Designing multifunctional garments
8. Products that support the local economy
9. Designing fair trade products that highlight environmental and social issues
10. Promoting the use of second-hand and vintage clothing, including rental services
11. Development of new sustainable, biodegradable, renewable materials, technologies, and processes

1.3. Generation Z

Generation Z is emerging as a powerful consumer group wielding significant purchasing power in the context of fashion industry consumption. While their influence varies by geographic region, this group is increasingly replacing Millennials as the primary market segment. Their tastes and perceptions of fashion differ in many respects, requiring fashion brands to adapt quickly to keep pace with their purchasing habits and preferences. For this generation, fashion is more than just a means of fitting in with others. The focus is no longer merely on the physical attributes of a fashion product, its functional benefits, or the emotions it evokes when worn. Instead, fashion increasingly functions as a medium for self-expression, identity formation, and alignment with personal values (Markuz et al., 2022).

Generation Z, raised in the digital era and shaped by periods of economic instability, exhibits unique consumer characteristics. They value authenticity, transparency,

inclusivity, and brand social responsibility (Markuz et al., 2022). For Generation Z, clothing serves as an extension of their identity and a tool for expressing opinions. Moreover, they actively use social media to gather information, share opinions, and place pressure on fashion companies to adopt more sustainable and socially responsible business models.

Despite their high level of awareness, numerous studies have identified a persistent gap between attitudes and behaviour within this generation (Bray et al., 2011). The reasons for this gap are varied and may include the higher cost of sustainable products, limited availability, lack of information, perceived lower quality, or lack of aesthetic appeal (Nekmahmud & Fekete-Farkas, 2020). Gaining a deeper understanding of the specific motivators and barriers influencing sustainable consumption among Generation Z is key to effectively addressing this gap.

A 2024 Euratex study on the purchasing habits of 19,000 consumers across the USA, Germany, Japan, Italy, France, India, China, and Brazil revealed a significant discrepancy between sustainability concerns and actual consumer behaviour. While 71% of respondents were concerned about sustainability, only 38% adopted sustainable behaviours, with just 12% reporting purchasing sustainable products, and a mere 3% were willing to pay a premium for them. This raises the question: to what extent do Generation Z's sustainability-related attitudes align with their actual behaviour? Generally, Generation Z displays a positive attitude toward buying sustainable products. They are moving away from unsustainable brands and are willing to spend more on sustainable alternatives.

Nanda's (2020) research presented slightly different results: 54% of Generation Z respondents were willing to pay 10% more for a sustainable product. In contrast, other generations showed lower percentages, with Millennials close behind at 50%, followed by 34% Generation X (34%) and Baby Boomers (23%). A study conducted in Croatia on a small sample (95 respondents) from Generations Y and Z found that they were willing to pay up to 20% more for a sustainable fashion product - with 36.8% ready to pay between 11% and 20% more (Dlačić, Franulović & Sredl, 2021:89). Although some Generation Z consumers are opposed to spending more on sustainable goods, they still show the strongest preference for sustainability in purchasing decisions compared to Generation X, Baby Boomers, and even Generation Y.

Research by Razum et al. (2017) indicated that while Croatian Generation Z consumers are more aware of environmental issues in fashion, this awareness has minimal impact on their actual purchasing behaviour. Similar conclusions were drawn by Markuz et al. (2022), who found that Generation Z consumers often hold green attitudes that are not followed by green actions. The absence of green behaviour may stem from high prices, inferior performance, lower quality, and similar factors. "Due to Generation Z's limited resources in terms of financial and physical capital, their purchase decisions are primarily driven by economic motives" (Lindgren & Major, 2021, as cited in Markuz, Plečša & Ban, 2022:180).

Attitudes play a significant role in shaping consumer behaviour, as demonstrated by numerous studies consistently reporting a positive correlation between this construct and consumer decisions. An attitude is defined as “a learned predisposition to respond consistently favourably or unfavourably to a particular object” (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015:193). Typically, attitudes are conceptualised as comprising three interrelated components: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. This research focuses on the first two. The cognitive component includes beliefs, opinions, and attributes that an individual associates with an object, whereby positive or negative characteristics directly shape their attitude. The affective component refers to the feelings and emotions linked to the attitude object; these can significantly affect the overall evaluation of the object through the emotional reactions it elicits (Maio & Haddock, 2009).

In addition to cognitive and affective components of attitude, this research also considers the concept of pro-environmental identity. Previous studies show that personal identity - particularly ecological identity - can strongly influence preferences, intentions, and environmentally oriented behaviour (Qasim et al., 2019). Van der Werff et al. (2013) define environmental identity as the extent to which individuals see themselves as people whose actions are environmentally friendly. The stronger this identity, the greater the likelihood of adopting and practising pro-environmental behaviours in daily life.

By examining cognitive and affective attitudes alongside ecological identity, it is possible to more accurately understand and predict consumer behaviour patterns. This has important implications for designing effective marketing strategies and public policies aimed at promoting sustainable consumption.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research aims to analyse the importance of sustainability-related factors in the purchasing decisions of Generation Z regarding fashion industry products in Croatia. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) examine the extent to which they value sustainability in their purchasing decisions; (2) identify the existence of a gap between their attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour, and (3) explore the correlation between affective and cognitive attitudes, ecological personal identity, and purchasing behaviour, including the willingness to pay premium for the purchase of sustainable fashion products.

The primary data for this study were collected through an online survey, which was distributed over ten days from July 12 to July 22, 2024. A non-probability snowball sampling technique was employed to recruit participants. Following the elimination of incomplete or invalid responses, the final sample comprised 263 individuals, all belonging to Generation Z (defined as those born between 1995 and 2010).

The questionnaire or research consisted of six interrelated sections. The first section included demographic questions (age, gender, place of residence, occupation, education, income). The subsequent sections focused on: (1) the cognitive component of attitude, assessed through self-reported knowledge and awareness of the social and environmental challenges in the fashion industry (items adapted from Zhang et al., 2021); (2) the

affective component of attitude, measuring emotional reactions to unsustainable fashion practices (based on Maio & Haddock, 2009); (3) ecological identity; (4) behavioural aspects of purchasing, including the share of sustainable or second-hand purchases and willingness to pay a premium for sustainable products; and (5) the importance of general purchasing factors and specific drivers and barriers to sustainable fashion, developed based on relevant literature and findings from pilot focus groups. The collected data were processed using SPSS software for advanced statistical analysis, including scale reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha), exploratory factor analysis, and correlation analysis (Pearson's correlation coefficient). The internal consistency of the applied scales (cognitive, affective, and ecological identity) was tested.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, providing insights into the purchasing behaviour of Generation Z in relation to sustainable fashion. The results are structured to first outline the demographic profile of the respondents, followed by analysis of purchasing factors, sustainability motivators and barriers, willingness to pay, and psychological drivers of sustainable behaviour. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 263 individuals who participated in the study. The gender distribution shows a predominance of female respondents, accounting for 65% (n = 172), whereas male participants represented 35% (n = 91). In terms of educational attainment, the largest proportion of respondents held a master's degree (35.36%), followed by those with a high school education (31.94%) and a bachelor's degree (30.80%). A minimal percentage of the sample reported having only a primary school education (0.76%), a specialist degree (0.76%), or a Ph.D. (0.38%). Regarding employment status, most participants identified as students (55.89%), indicating a significant representation of the academic population within the sample. Employed individuals constituted 38.40% of respondents, while the remaining identified as unemployed (4.56%) or high school students (1.14%). When considering average monthly income, the distribution was skewed towards higher income brackets. The largest income category reported was "More than €2400" (27%), followed by "€801–1200" (20%), and both "€1201–1600" and "€1601–2000" at 15% each. Notably, 5% of respondents reported earning less than €400 per month, and another 5% fell within the €401–800 range. These figures indicate a relatively diverse socioeconomic background among respondents, with a tilt towards middle-to-upper income levels.

Table 1: **The respondents' demographic profile**

Variable	Classification	Value	
		N	%
Gender	Male	91	35
	Female	172	65
	Total	263	100
Education	Master's Degree	93	35,36
	High School	84	31,94
	University (Bachelor)	81	30,80
	Primary School	2	0,76
	Spec. in Economics	2	0,76
	PhD	1	0,38
	Total	263	100
Employment Status	Student	147	55,89
	Unemployed	12	4,56
	Employed	101	38,40
	High School student	3	1,14
	Total	263	100
Average Monthly Income (€)	Less than 400	13	5
	401 – 800	12	5
	801 – 1200	52	20
	1201 – 1600	40	15
	1601 – 2000	40	15
	2001 – 2400	36	14
	More than 2400	70	27
	Total	263	100

Source: Author's research

The internal consistency of the applied scales (cognitive, affective, and ecological identity) was tested. Cronbach's Alpha values confirmed high reliability: cognitive $\alpha=0.82$, affective $\alpha=0.86$, ecological identity $\alpha=0.88$, supporting the stability and internal consistency of the measurement instruments.

3.1. Reasons for purchasing fashion products

In the context of fashion consumption, purchasing decisions are shaped by a variety of factors that may influence the outcome of their final choice. Understanding the role of product sustainability within the decision-making process, and its importance compared to other determinants of consumer behaviour is essential for both academic research and industry practice. To gain a better understanding of consumer priorities when selecting fashion products, the perceived importance of ten key factors was analysed: quality, price, design, sustainability, brand, comfort, trendiness, practicality, availability, and influencer impact. Participants rated the importance of each factor on a Likert scale

ranging from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important), with the results presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Reasons for purchasing fashion products

Variable	Mean	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Quality	4.51	0.69	4.42	4.59
Price	4.24	0.88	4.14	4.35
Design	4.32	0.89	4.22	4.43
Sustainability	3.64	1.05	3.51	3.77
Brand	2.62	1.14	2.49	2.76
Comfort	4.56	0.71	4.47	4.65
Trend/Fashion	2.90	1.11	2.77	3.03
Practicality	4.25	0.89	4.14	4.36
Availability	4.21	0.93	4.10	4.32
Influencers	1.71	0.98	1.59	1.83

Source: Author's research

Table 2 presents descriptive data on the perceived importance of various factors influencing the purchase of fashion products, expressed through the frequency distribution of respondents' answers on a Likert scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important), along with the corresponding mean values for each factor. As shown in the table, comfort was rated as the most important factor ($M = 4.56$) with over 67% of participants marking it as extremely important (rating 5). This is followed by quality ($M = 4.51$), which was also rated with the highest score by more than 60% of respondents. Aesthetic/design ($M = 4.32$), practicality ($M = 4.25$), and price ($M = 4.24$) were also considered highly important, indicating the prominent role of functional and aesthetic characteristics in purchase decision-making. Although ranked somewhat lower, sustainability ($M = 3.64$) still demonstrates a moderate level of importance, suggesting the presence of some, though not dominant, environmental awareness among respondents. On the other hand, brand ($M = 2.62$) and trends/fashion ($M = 2.90$) were perceived as less relevant factors. Influencers emerged as the least important factor, with an average score of 1.71; more than half of the respondents stated that this factor is not important to them at all when making decisions about purchasing fashion products. In addition to mean scores, standard deviations and observed ranges were calculated. For example, sustainability ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.12$, range = 1–5) showed much higher variability compared to comfort ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.68$, range = 3–5). This indicates that while comfort was consistently rated as very important, sustainability was more divisive among respondents. Table 3 presents the study's findings on the importance of various environmental and ethical factors in purchasing fashion products.

Table 3: **Environmental and ethical factors in fashion purchasing**

Variable	Mean	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Use of environmentally friendly materials	3.56	1.05	3.43	3.68
Fair working conditions and fair wages for workers	3.87	1.03	3.74	3.99
Humane treatment of animals	4.01	1.02	3.89	4.14
No child labour	4.20	1.02	4.08	4.33
Local production	3.42	1.11	3.29	3.55
Minimal packaging	3.51	1.07	3.38	3.63
Reduction of CO ₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions	3.55	1.08	3.42	3.68
Product durability and quality craftsmanship	4.33	0.92	4.21	4.45
Transparency and availability of production information	3.59	1.09	3.46	3.72
Brand environmental conservation initiatives	3.61	1.06	3.48	3.74

Source: Author's work

According to the results presented in Table 3, the highest-rated factor was product durability and quality of workmanship ($M = 4.33$), indicating that respondents place significant value on product longevity. This is further confirmed by the fact that nearly 60% of them rated this factor as extremely important when purchasing sustainable products. This finding aligns with the earlier results shown in Table 2, where quality emerged as one of the key motives in fashion purchasing decisions. The second highest-rated factor was absence of child labour ($M = 4.20$), which more than half of respondents (53.6%) rated as extremely important, indicating a strong ethical orientation among participants towards protecting human rights in production. Humane treatment of animals was also rated highly ($M = 4.01$), with just over 45% of respondents selecting the highest rating. Closely following are fair working conditions and fair wages for workers ($M = 3.87$), with 36.5% marking this factor as extremely important. In terms of environmental dimension of sustainability, the highest-rated factors are environmental preservation initiatives ($M = 3.61$), transparency and availability of information on the production process ($M = 3.59$), reduction of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions ($M = 3.55$), and the use of environmentally friendly materials ($M = 3.56$). The lowest average scores were recorded for minimal packaging ($M = 3.51$) and local production ($M = 3.51$). Overall, these results suggest that respondents attach moderate to high importance to sustainable brand practices. Interestingly, respondents appear to prioritise ethical and functional aspects of production over environmental ones, which contrasts with the focus of most research that tends to view sustainability primarily through an environmental lens. Additional tests of group differences were conducted. A t-test revealed that women rated ethical factors significantly higher ($M=4.28$) than men ($M=3.89$), $p<0.05$. An ANOVA by income showed that respondents with higher incomes

(>2000 EUR) demonstrated greater willingness to pay a premium, $F(2,260) = 4.12$, $p < 0.05$.

3.2. Barriers to purchasing sustainable fashion

Members of Generation Z value sustainability as a factor in purchasing fashion products. However, the findings indicate that some factors often hold greater importance in their decision-making process. This subsection provides insight into barriers that prevent or demotivate respondents from purchasing sustainable fashion products, as well as the extent of their influence. The following tables show the distribution of respondents according to the degree to which specific factors discourage them from buying sustainable fashion products. Each chart presents one reason why respondents may choose not to purchase more sustainable fashion items.

Table 4: Barriers to purchasing sustainable fashion products

Variable	Mean	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
High price of sustainable products	4.06	1.00	3.93	4.19
Lack of information about sustainable brands	3.89	1.04	3.76	4.02
Limited availability of sustainable fashion	3.82	1.08	3.69	3.96
Lack of trust in sustainability claims	3.74	1.09	3.60	3.87
Lack of attractive design options	3.62	1.11	3.48	3.76
Lower product quality perception	3.41	1.06	3.28	3.54
Lack of awareness of environmental impact	3.35	1.08	3.22	3.49
Limited size range or accessibility	3.23	1.05	3.10	3.36
Difficulty in verifying product origin	3.11	1.10	2.97	3.25
Limited promotion or visibility of sustainable fashion	3.08	1.07	2.95	3.21

Source: Author's research

Table 4 presents the key barriers that respondents perceive as limiting factors in the context of purchasing sustainable fashion products. Responses were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (does not prevent me at all) to 5 (completely prevents me), along with the corresponding mean values. Descriptive results presented in Table 4 indicate that respondents generally rated economic barriers as the most influential in shaping their sustainable fashion purchasing behaviour. The factor "High price of sustainable products" ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.00$, 95% CI [3.93, 4.19]) achieved the highest mean score, followed by "Limited availability of sustainable fashion" ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.08$, 95% CI [3.69, 3.96]) and "Lack of information about sustainable brands" ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.04$, 95% CI [3.76, 4.02]). In contrast, "Lack of trust in sustainability claims" ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.09$, 95% CI [3.22, 3.50]) and "Limited promotion or visibility of

sustainable fashion” ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.07$, 95% CI [2.95, 3.21]) received comparatively lower ratings. However, since no formal statistical tests (e.g., repeated-measures ANOVA) were conducted, these differences should be interpreted as descriptive rather than inferential. The use of 95% confidence intervals around the means allows for cautious interpretation of potential variations in perceived importance. Overall, the results suggest that respondents perceive multiple, interconnected barriers that include financial, informational, and trust-related factors, indicating that sustainable fashion consumption remains influenced by both practical and perceptual limitations. Beliefs that such products are of lower quality than conventional products ($M = 3.16$), have reduced performance ($M = 3.00$), or lack aesthetic appeal ($M = 3.09$) were rated slightly lower, but still received moderate average scores.

In conclusion, respondents most strongly emphasise economic and logistical barriers as the primary reasons preventing them from purchasing sustainable products. However, a lack of trust, insufficient information, and perceptions regarding product characteristics also play a secondary, yet non-negligible, role.

Table 5: Willingness to pay

	Frequency Distribution N (%) *					Mean
	Under 1%	1-5%	5-10%	10-20%	Above 20%	
How much more (%) would you pay for a sustainable fashion product?	39 (14.8)	52 (19.8)	137 (52.1)	24 (9.1)	11 (4.2)	2.68
	Under 5%	5-10%	10-20%	20-50%	Above 50%	
What income increase (%) would lead you to buy sustainable fashion products?	33 (12.5)	63 (24.0)	74 (28.1)	54 (20.5)	39 (14.8)	3.01

Source: Author’s research

Table 5 presents the distribution of respondents regarding their financial willingness in the context of sustainable fashion. The first part refers to the amount respondents would be willing to pay for a product with sustainability features, while the second part relates to the income increase, they would require before purchasing such products. According to the results, the largest share of respondents (52.1%) would be willing to pay up to 10% more for sustainable products compared to conventional ones. A further 19.8% would accept a price increase of 1–5%, while 14.8% would agree to a price increase of less than 1%. Only 13.3% of respondents would accept a premium of over 10%—specifically, 9.1% within the 10–20% range, and just 4.2% would be willing to pay more than 20% for a sustainable version of a product. Regarding income thresholds, the results show that the highest proportion of respondents (28.1%) would consider such a purchase if their income increased by 5–10%, while 24% would make that decision with an increase of 1–5%. An additional 20.5% would require an income increase of 10–20%, and 14.8%

would expect an increase of more than 20% to make such a purchase. Finally, 12.5% of respondents would consider purchasing sustainable products even if their income increased by less than 1%.

3.3. Exploratory factor analysis and correlation analysis

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the underlying structure of items measuring attitudes toward sustainable fashion. The analysis included ten items grouped into three conceptual dimensions: cognitive attitude (three items, e.g. “Sustainable fashion contributes to environmental protection”), affective attitude (four items, e.g. “I feel good when I purchase sustainable fashion products”), and ecological identity (three items, e.g. “Being an environmentally responsible consumer is part of who I am”). These items were adapted from previously validated scales developed by Maio and Haddock (2009), Van der Werff et al. (2013), and Zhang et al. (2021). Each statement was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.820, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(45) = 1286.142, p < 0.001$), confirming that the data were suitable for factor analysis. Although the items were adapted from existing validated scales, EFA was applied instead of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) because the scale was modified for a new population and context (Generation Z consumers and sustainable fashion), requiring an exploratory validation approach. The three-factor solution obtained was conceptually consistent with the original model proposed by Maio and Haddock (2009), encompassing both cognitive and affective components, as well as the ecological identity construct introduced by Van der Werff et al. (2013). Moreover, the correlation coefficients between factors in this study showed a similar pattern to those reported in Maio’s original research, thereby strengthening the construct validity of the adapted measurement instrument. The results of the KMO and Bartlett’s tests are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Test of data suitability for factor analysis

KMO and Bartlett’s test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		0.820
Bartlett’s test of sphericity	Hi-square	1286.142
	df	45
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Author’s research

According to Table 6, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.820, which, based on Kaiser (1974) classification, indicates high suitability for factor analysis. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2(45) = 1286.142, p < 0.001$), confirming the presence of sufficiently strong intercorrelations among the variables to proceed with the analysis. Following the selection of the extraction method and rotation, and the verification of data suitability for exploratory

factor analysis, the results were interpreted. To examine the latent structure of the scale measuring consumers' environmental attitudes and behaviour, the EFA included ten items. A factor loading threshold was set at 0.4, with all loadings ≥ 0.6 , indicating a clear structure of the items. The aim was to identify the underlying dimensions that structure respondents' answers and assess the validity of the measurement instrument. Criteria for factor retention included Kaiser's rule (eigenvalue > 1), cumulative variance explained, and inspection of the pattern matrix. The analysis extracted three factors, which together explain 72.6% of the total variance (F1 = 43.85%, F2 = 17.67%, F3 = 11.09%), indicating satisfactory representation of the latent structure of the scale. A pattern matrix table with factor loadings was produced. All items loaded above 0.6 on the expected factors, confirming the construct validity of the measurement instrument. For instance, items measuring the cognitive component loaded between 0.72 and 0.81, ecological identity between 0.79 and 0.85, and affective attitudes between 0.76 and 0.83. The first factor relates to items representing the cognitive component of attitude. According to Maio (2019), the cognitive component includes beliefs, judgements, and attributes assigned to an object. It reflects the rational, informed side of attitude (awareness of issues), while the affective component reveals the emotional charge these issues provoke. The second factor comprises items related to the perception of one's own environmental impact when shopping, belief in nature conservation, and self-description as a "green" person. This factor is interpreted as the individual's ecological identity. In addition to specific attitudes toward the fashion industry, it highlights a sense of personal responsibility and identification with environmental values.

The third factor relates to the affective component of attitude, which, according to Maio (2019), refers to the feelings evoked by the object itself. In this study, it includes feelings such as disgust towards waste, anger about child labour, and pride when choosing sustainable fashion brands. The presence of strong moral emotions such as anger and disgust within the affective component suggests that attitudes towards fast fashion are not merely a matter of personal taste but represent a deeply moral issue for many consumers.

Table 7: **Exploratory factor analysis**

Latent Variable	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Communality	Factor		
					1	2	3
Cognitive attitude component	Cog_1	0.826	3.760	0.550		0.849	
	Cog_2		3.930	0.678		0.898	
	Cog_3		3.840	0.681		0.775	
Ecological identity	Iden_1	0.752		0.462			0.604
	Iden_2			0.787			0.867
	Iden_3			0.752			0.88
Affective attitude	Aff_1	0.862	3.970	0.799	0.901		
	Aff_2		4.310	0.787	0.872		
	Aff_3		3.520	0.672	0.741		
	Aff_4		3.630	0.788	0.775		

Source: Author's research

Following the identification of three dimensions through exploratory factor analysis, the next stage in the analysis examined the relationships between these latent variables and specific behaviours associated with sustainable fashion consumption. For this purpose, Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between the identified psychological factors and two behavioural indicators: (1) willingness to pay a premium price for sustainable fashion items and (2) the purchase of second-hand clothing.

Table 8: **Correlation matrix of variables**

Variable	Ecological identity	Cognitive attitude component	Affective attitude	Second-hand purchase	Willingness to pay a premium
Ecological identity	1	0.308**	0.570**	0.168**	0.339**
Cognitive attitude component	0.308**	1	0.363**	0.113	0.123*
Affective attitude	0.570**	0.363**	1	0.176**	0.301**
Second-hand purchase	0.168**	0.113	0.176**	1	0.188**
Willingness to pay a premium	0.339**	0.123*	0.301**	0.188**	1

Source: Author's research

Table 8 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients for the dimensions of environmental awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and consumer behaviour in the context of sustainable fashion. The results of this analysis reveal several statistically significant relationships among the observed variables. The strongest and most statistically significant correlation was found between ecological identity and the affective component of attitude ($r = 0.570$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that individuals with a more pronounced ecological identity also exhibit stronger emotional attitudes toward sustainable consumer behaviour. Ecological identity also positively correlates with the cognitive component of attitude ($r = 0.308$, $p < 0.01$), and with specific behaviours such as willingness to pay a premium ($r = 0.339$, $p < 0.01$) and the purchase of second-hand products ($r = 0.168$, $p < 0.01$), confirming its role as an important predictor of sustainable consumption patterns.

The affective component of attitude showed positive correlations with both behavioural measures - purchasing second-hand products ($r = 0.176$, $p < 0.01$) and paying a premium price ($r = 0.301$, $p < 0.01$) - highlighting the importance of emotional engagement in shaping sustainable habits. It is also strongly correlated with the cognitive component of attitude ($r = 0.363$, $p < 0.01$), which aligns with theoretical assumptions about the interdependence of the rational and emotional components of attitudes. The cognitive component showed a weaker yet statistically significant relationship with willingness to pay a premium ($r = 0.123$, $p < 0.05$), while its correlation with second-hand purchasing is not significant ($p = 0.068$). This finding may indicate that rational knowledge alone is insufficient to trigger concrete behaviour unless accompanied by emotional motivation or identity-based orientation. Finally, willingness to pay a premium price is significantly associated with all psychological constructs except second-hand purchasing, confirming its link with higher levels of ecological identity, knowledge, and emotional engagement.

Although the present study employed correlation analysis as an exploratory approach, the relationships observed between the attitudinal dimensions and behavioural indicators suggest potential directional effects. In particular, both cognitive and affective attitudes appear to influence willingness to pay for sustainable fashion products, which aligns with theoretical assumptions about the joint impact of knowledge and emotions on pro-environmental decision-making (Maio & Haddock, 2009). However, as this study focused on identifying associations rather than testing causal relationships, future research could apply directional analyses, such as multiple regression or structural equation modelling (SEM), to examine how cognitive and affective components jointly predict consumers' willingness to pay for sustainable products. Such modelling would enable a more robust assessment of the interdependencies among these constructs.

These results highlight ecological identity as the central psychological variable that connects attitudes and behaviours and confirm the importance of emotional attitudes in predicting sustainable consumer decisions. Interpretation of effect sizes according to Cohen (1988): The correlation between ecological identity and the affective component ($r = 0.57$) indicates a strong effect, while the link between the cognitive component and willingness to pay ($r = 0.12$) reflects a weak effect. The three attitudinal dimensions identified through the Exploratory Factor Analysis — cognitive attitude, affective attitude, and ecological identity — provide a comprehensive understanding of the

psychological mechanisms underlying sustainable fashion behaviour. Consistent with Maio and Haddock's (2009) attitudinal framework, cognitive and affective components jointly influence individuals' evaluative and emotional responses to sustainable fashion, while ecological identity, as conceptualised by Van der Werff et al. (2013), captures the internalisation of environmental values into self-concept. The strong intercorrelations among these factors observed in this study further reinforce the validity of the adapted measurement instrument and suggest that sustainable fashion consumption is shaped by an interplay of knowledge, emotion, and identity-based motivation.

4. DISCUSSION

This study examined the importance of sustainability factors for members of Generation Z in Croatia when making decisions about purchasing fashion products, identified the key motivators and barriers shaping their consumer behaviour, and analysed the relationship between ecological identity, affective and cognitive components of attitude, and willingness to pay for sustainable fashion products and purchase second-hand clothing.

The findings indicate that although Generation Z shows a moderate level of importance attributed to sustainability ($M = 3.64$), it ranks significantly lower than functional factors such as comfort ($M = 4.56$), quality ($M = 4.51$), aesthetics ($M = 4.32$), and price ($M = 4.24$). This suggests that sustainability is not currently a primary purchasing criterion but rather functions as a desirable attribute of a product. Interestingly, trends ($M = 2.90$) and influencer impact ($M = 1.71$) were rated among the least important factors, indicating that, despite their digital literacy, they are relatively immune to imposed fashion cycles. When examining the dimensions of sustainability more closely, respondents attributed significantly greater importance to ethical and functional aspects of sustainability than to environmental ones. The top-rated purchasing motivators were product longevity and craftsmanship ($M = 4.33$), the absence of child labour ($M = 4.20$), and humane treatment of animals during production ($M = 4.01$). In contrast, factors relating to the environmental dimension of sustainability - such as the use of eco-friendly materials ($M = 3.56$) and reduction of harmful gas emissions ($M = 3.55$) - were rated lower. These findings are particularly noteworthy given that the environmental dimension has been the most frequently studied aspect of sustainability in previous research. According to the results, Generation Z values concrete, humanistic, and personally beneficial aspects of sustainability (such as long-lasting products that save money), while environmental issues - often perceived as abstract or distant - play a less decisive role at the moment of purchase. The strong correlation between the high valuation of quality (Table 2) and product durability (Table 3) reflects a pragmatic approach in which sustainability is understood through long-term product value and durability.

In terms of barriers to sustainable purchasing, the most prominent - consistent with prior research - was high price ($M = 4.09$). Although demographic data indicates a sample with relatively higher incomes, price remains a major barrier, suggesting that the perceived value-for-money of sustainable fashion products is still insufficient. In addition to price, logistical issues such as limited product availability ($M = 3.86$) and

difficulty finding sustainable products in stores ($M = 3.87$) emerged as important barriers. Furthermore, distrust in sustainability claim ($M = 3.36$) and lack of information ($M = 3.51$) point to the issue of greenwashing and the need for greater brand transparency.

Exploratory factor analysis and correlation analysis were used to clarify the psychological background of this study. The factor analysis identified three factors: cognitive component of attitude, ecological identity, and affective component of attitude. The correlation analysis showed that willingness to pay a higher price - the most frequently cited obstacle to sustainable fashion purchases - is indeed linked to psychological factors. The strongest predictors were ecological identity ($r = 0.339$) and the affective component of attitude ($r = 0.301$), suggesting that the decision to spend more is not necessarily rational but is closely tied to the consumer's personal identity and emotional engagement. Consumers who see themselves as "green" and who experience strong emotions - such as anger at injustice or pride in choosing sustainable brands - are more willing to allocate additional financial resources. The cognitive component, which relates to awareness of environmental problems, also shows a statistically significant but weaker correlation with willingness to pay more ($r = 0.123$). This may suggest that factual knowledge alone is not enough to motivate higher spending; rather, building ecological identity and fostering emotional engagement with sustainability are crucial.

In contrast to willingness to pay more, the purchase of second-hand clothing appears to be driven by slightly weaker psychological factors. Ecological identity ($r = 0.168$) and the affective component ($r = 0.176$) show statistically significant but weaker positive correlations with second-hand purchasing, indicating that while identity and emotions play some role, they are not the primary drivers of this behaviour. Furthermore, the cognitive component was not significantly correlated with second-hand purchases ($r = 0.068$), suggesting that awareness of environmental issues alone does not encourage consumers to turn to the second-hand market.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on sustainable fashion by identifying distinct psychological dimensions that shape sustainable purchasing behaviour among Generation Z consumers. The findings advance theoretical understanding by demonstrating that affective attitudes and ecological identity are stronger predictors of sustainable fashion behaviour than cognitive awareness. This supports previous research suggesting that emotional and identity-related mechanisms play a central role in pro-environmental decision-making. From a scientific standpoint, this research bridges the gap between attitude theory and sustainable consumption by empirically validating multidimensional attitudinal constructs. It provides evidence that the attitude-behaviour gap can be better explained through affective and identity factors rather than purely cognitive components. Managerially, the study offers insights for brands aiming to engage Generation Z consumers. Marketing strategies should focus on evoking emotional connection and reinforcing consumers' sense of ecological self-identity rather than relying solely on rational sustainability messages. From a policy

perspective, the results underline the importance of systemic measures that enhance transparency, accessibility, and affordability of sustainable fashion options. Future research should validate these findings through confirmatory factor analysis and cross-cultural comparison, as well as explore the role of digital identity and social influence in sustainable fashion choices.

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