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To cite this article: Eunsuk Hur & Eleanor Faragher- Siddall (2022) Young Consumer Perspectives on Government Policy Interventions for Sustainable Fashion Consumption in the UK, Fashion Practice, 14:3, 405-427, DOI: [10.1080/17569370.2022.2125149](https://doi.org/10.1080/17569370.2022.2125149)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17569370.2022.2125149>



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Published online: 11 Nov 2022.



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Young Consumer Perspectives on Government Policy Interventions for Sustainable Fashion Consumption in the UK

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Abstract

Sustainability has been one of the most salient issues in the fashion industry in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a reawakening of the environmental and ethical issues in garment production and consumption. Young consumers are actively raising their voices on the currently unsustainable state of the fashion industry system. Despite this, their perspectives on policy intervention in sustainable fashion are often overlooked. This study focuses on the challenges associated with sustainable consumption behaviors among young consumers and reveals the enabling factors that leverage sustainable actions via

policy intervention. In-depth interviews were conducted to investigate the potential effectiveness of proposed policies in creating effective behavioral change within the UK market. The study found that eco-labelling and educational policies have particularly high levels of consumer support. Eco-labelling is considered a critical educational and awareness-raising tool for supporting sustainable fashion consumption; however, the existing labelling approach is inadequate due to the complexity of current terminology, lack of eco-literacy, and consumers' distrust of industry claims about eco-products, flagging a need to ensure industry transparency. New attention-grabbing labelling, universal eco-terminology and more effective and transparent green communication strategies using a combination of physical and other digital communication are required.

KEYWORDS: policy interventions, sustainable fashion consumption, theory of planned behavior, TPB, fashion consumer

Introduction

The necessity of improving sustainable consumption through government interventions in the fashion industry is intensifying (Smith and Christie 2021; Vermeir and Verbeke 2008). Young people are increasingly taking the lead in political campaigns and initiatives centered on environmental and social issues and extending to those in the fashion industry. Youth-led activist groups, such as Youth Strike 4 Climate and Extinction Rebellion Youth, represent the rebirth of environmental politics (Arya and Henn 2021). Extinction Rebellion Fashion Action, for instance, has been urging the British Fashion Council since 2019 to postpone London Fashion Week and engage in emergency discussions to address the fashion industry's contribution to climate and environmental crises (Extinction Rebellion Fashion Action 2022).

The fashion industry has been criticized for contributing to climate change, increased greenhouse gas emissions, harmful chemical discharge, textile waste, and poor working conditions (Gazzola et al. 2020). The textile industry contributes 8%–10% of global carbon emissions, excluding the impact of the significant retail and consumer usage on the environmental footprint, such as transportation and consumer laundry usage (Virta and Räisänen 2021; Niinimäki et al. 2020). The fashion industry generates approximately 92 million tons of garment waste each year globally. This corresponds to a garbage truck full of textile waste every second (Beall 2020). Due to the seriousness of climate change and criticism concerning environmental and social issues, the UK government has declared its commitment to achieving “net-zero carbon emissions” by 2050 (WRAP 2020). However, this will require coordination between the fashion industry and the general public (Deben et al. 2020). There is still insufficient direction as to how the UK plans to reach

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net-zero carbon emission by 2050 and how consumers and the fashion industry can participate in this initiative. Limited attention has been paid to implementing sustainable fashion consumption (SFC) through policy intervention.

Policy instruments can influence costs, the quality of textiles and other materials, and the environmental and human safety of products and services at both the production and consumption stage. Many fashion businesses are assessed by sustainability rating agencies (SRAs) against environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards (Clementino and Perkins 2021). Some SRAs, including Good on You, the Fashion Transparency Index and the Higg Index, aid consumer decision-making in selecting sustainable brands. Nevertheless, customers struggle to identify sustainable brands that are truly accountable. Research shows that consumers are often cynical about a company's CSR standards (Parguel, Benoît-Moreau, and Larceneux 2011). The measurement process of ESG performance could lead to unethical behavior by companies to obtain a better evaluation.

One of the simplest types of sustainable textile-related information is found on the care labels. Currently, 107 eco-labels are utilized globally and locally throughout the apparel industry (Ranasinghe and Jayasooriya 2021). Despite several clothing eco-labels, customers struggle to find environmentally friendly products in the marketplace (Sharma and Kushwaha 2019). The *Fixing Fashion* report noted that attempts by several brands and retailers to influence their target audiences of 16- to 29-year-old women was an issue for sustainability (Environmental Audit Committee 2019). Young consumers are often fashion-conscious, and their impulsive fashion purchases are driven by boredom (Sundström, Hjelm-Lidholm, and Radon 2019). At the same time, they are more likely to engage in activism concerning environmental and social issues pertaining to a range of SFC practices than other generations, such as Generation X and baby boomers (Diddi et al. 2019). Past studies have focused on Generation Z's consumer behavior of clothing swap, rental and recycling activities (McCoy, Wang, and Chi 2021; Diddi et al. 2019). However, with limited research on young consumers' perspectives on government policy interventions for SFC, the subject calls for an in-depth investigation.

This study explores how young consumers in the UK perceive current policy on sustainable fashion and discover which policies have the greatest potential to encourage pro-environmental behavioral change. Different interpretations and definitions of SFC are reviewed. Barriers to SFC are examined by analyzing existing academic literature on consumer behavior and behavioral change theories applicable to UK government policy. Existing policy implementation of SFC and the fashion industry in the UK are also reviewed. In-depth interviews were conducted to understand young consumers' attitudes and perceptions of policy interventions in the UK fashion industry and their potential

effectiveness. The findings of this study offer insights into the role of policy intervention on SFC, providing a theoretical explanation of its power, or lack of, to generate change.

Literature Review

Barriers to sustainable fashion consumption

Over the past two decades, textile production and clothing consumption have doubled worldwide, from 7 to 13 kg per person, resulting in 100 million tons of clothing consumption (Shirvanimoghaddam et al. 2020). In the UK alone, approximately £140 million worth of second-hand clothes are discarded in landfills or incinerators yearly (WRAP 2012). Two-thirds of textile materials are made of synthetic fibers, some of which take decades to degrade. For example, clothes made of polyester can take nearly 200 years to decompose (Shirvanimoghaddam et al. 2020). Hence, there is sufficient evidence to show that current fashion consumption practices are unsustainable.

The concepts of “sustainable consumption” and “overconsumption” are ill-defined in socio-political terms. The notion of sustainable fashion has evolved semantically through time, moving from “green” (focusing on a single environmental issue) to “eco” (concerning the environmental impact of the entire product life cycle; Madge 1997) to “sustainable” fashion (balancing the environmental, social and economic impact on society) (Hur 2014). One of the most widely adopted definitions of sustainable consumption, with its roots in the meaning of sustainable development, was presented at the Oslo Symposium in 1994: “*the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the lifecycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations*” (quoted in Šajn 2020, 2). Despite this comprehensive definition, consumers often find it difficult to make appropriate decisions on SFC. Past studies (Kong et al. 2016; Hur and Cassidy 2019) show that most consumers have limited knowledge of sustainability in fashion. Public-facing communications for promoting SFC are usually ambiguous and misdirected, resulting in consumer frustration rather than pro-environmental action (Evans and Peirson-Smith 2018). There is limited guidance on how to improve the infrastructure of the fashion industry or alter consumer behavior. Geels et al. (2015) argue that existing approaches for sustainable consumption predominantly focus on “degrowth” or small-scale solutions that do not consider how companies could solve environmental and social issues.

Recent research by the British Business Bank shows a prevailing lack of awareness among small firms in the UK of important terms such as “net zero,” “carbon-neutral” and “carbon footprint.” Awareness and knowledge about these issues are important for implementing environmentally friendly business practices (Circular Online 2022). Also, most

consumers are unaware of what happens to used clothing donations after the life cycle of those items ends (Norris 2012; Hur 2020). There are no clear sustainability-oriented regulations on how or where the donated clothing ends its life cycle, whether passed on from the consumer or as textile industry waste (Norris 2012). It is important to increase awareness and enhance the SFC of consumers and businesses to improve cooperative social responsibility.

The attitude–behavior gap between consumers’ sustainability concerns and their purchases of sustainable fashion goods is in a constant state of psychological imbalance (Han, Seo, and Ko 2017). Consumers often confront psychological deflation that spurs their materialistic desires for new and different items. This prompts them to handle boredom or stress with a recreational shopping experience (Armstrong et al. 2016). The desire to display a certain social identity is another barrier to adopting SFC (McEachern, Middleton, and Cassidy 2020). Convenience and lack of availability of sustainable clothing ranges are major deterrent factors. Consumers have easier access to fast fashion than sustainable clothing options, as those take more time and effort to locate (Armstrong et al. 2016). In addition, economic considerations have a significant impact on a consumer’s decisions. Sustainable fashion brands have a higher price than conventional clothing and are often viewed as expensive (Rausch and Kopplin 2021). As society’s influence on the environment becomes more widely recognized, there is an increasing need to address consumption patterns and consumer behavior. A holistic strategy with a systematic approach is necessary, taking into account social systems, to come to grips with the complexity of SFC activities.

Sustainable fashion policy interventions

Policy development to intervene in sustainable fashion production and consumption is increasingly important for the UK government. In terms of net-zero carbon emission aspirations, the UK is at the global forefront by codifying a 2050 net-zero objective into regulations. It has recently set more ambitious goals, such as reducing emissions by 78% by 2035 (GOV.UK 2021). Textiles 2030 was recently introduced by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to promote conversations on national policy with the UK government and plan the implementation of extended producer responsibility (EPR) and other important reduction changes (WRAP 2022). EPR exists in the UK for electrical items, batteries, automobiles and packaging. However, in the textile sector, these regulations are still under development, and there is limited guidance for either producers or consumers to support SFC, such as guidelines on clothing disposal and textile recycling.

According to the European Environment Agency (2019), product policies such as green public procurement, sustainable design, EPR, eco-labelling and regulations fall under the category of policy interventions

on sustainable products. There is a clear demand for a more cohesive and all-encompassing development of product policies and circular business models on a larger scale, backed by rules related to resources and design, manufacturing and distribution, use and reuse, and collection and recycling.

Consumers are seldom able to clarify if a product with an eco-label fits the requirements as stated; therefore, credibility is essential for eco-labels (Janssen and Hamm 2012). Consumers can be skeptical about eco-labels if they have difficulty understanding the meaning of the terminology on the labels and the level of transparency in the information provided (Thøgersen 2010). Almost 89% of consumers expect brands to publish information on their suppliers; nevertheless, voluntary sustainability initiatives to improve supply chain transparency and traceability are still practiced by a minority of brands (Lehmann et al. 2019). As a result, consumer mistrust and cynicism prevail. Consumer wariness of sustainability marketing from fashion brands extends to a lack of trust in pro-environmental policies on the part of the government; in particular, increased taxation increases consumer skepticism (DEFRA 2008).

Using existing consumer behavior change research, Jackson (2005) investigated potential policy interventions to encourage pro-environmental behavior. The two methods were intensive (information-based labeling or education) policy to encourage pro-environmental or pro-social behaviors, or economic cost-and-benefit methods involving taxation or incentives to encourage or discourage behaviors. Education plays a significant role in improving consumers' knowledge of sustainable production and consumption (information-based), even if it produces only a small behavior change. Goworek et al. (2012) found that "participants were willing to consider altering this type of behavior in response to government interventions or increased information about the sustainability of clothing consumption." This indicates the importance of the government's role in helping consumers adapt their behaviors and overcome barriers, perceived or real, to SFC. Awareness allows consumers to reflect on their consumption habits and provides them with a new "mechanism to take action" (Prothero et al. 2011). Consumers feel obligated to consume more sustainably for the collective good (Menegat 2002).

There is mounting evidence of a global trend among young people to support and participate in new, non-institutionalized political approaches that better suit their lifestyles and allow them to realize their political ambitions (Arya and Henn 2021). Generations Y and Z are the biggest consumer group, accounting for approximately 40% of global consumers in 2020, and representing over \$350 billion in purchasing power in the US alone (Amed et al. 2020). Understanding their attitudes and perceptions and using policy to help them form good habits early is essential for meeting long-term sustainability goals. However, little research has explored policy effectiveness from a consumer perspective

and how it can alter consumer attitudes and perceptions. This research fills this gap by examining young consumers' perceptions of and attitudes toward current government intervention in sustainable fashion. Furthermore, this study uncovers enabling factors that could overcome barriers to SFC directly and indirectly to ensure more effective implementation of public policy.

Method

Research design

The attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of the consumers interviewed for this research informed our understanding of policies consumers believe can be effective and affect their behaviors. Interview questions were adapted from Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen 1991). In Ajzen's model, "behavioral beliefs" refer to actions arising out of consumer beliefs (Ajzen 1991). Likewise, "normative beliefs" refer to the approval or disapproval by consumer reference groups from which the consumer draws moral and behavioral norms on certain behaviors. The influence of reference groups can improve the consumers' level of compliance (Ajzen 1991). Finally, "control beliefs" are consumer perceptions of the feasibility of undertaking a behavior, such as the ease of doing so, the resources and opportunities available, and the barriers (Ajzen 1991). Combining all these beliefs gives rise to consumer attitudes and the intention that dictates the end behavior. It is the strength of this intention, according to TPB, that affects the likelihood of behavior (Figure 1).

In past studies, data gathering, and analysis methods using the TPB model, were largely quantitative, with qualitative approaches being directed only to eliciting beliefs. There is little research using the qualitative method for obtaining rich data on the reasoning behind the attitude towards the behavior or how subjective norms and perceived behavior shape consumer intentions and behavior using the TPB model (Stefano and Klobas 2008). The research in this paper was conducted using a qualitative approach with the TPB model. This study investigates young consumer attitudes in the UK regarding policy intervention on SFC, proposes approaches to overcome barriers to SFC and explores the role of labelling, taxes, education, communication, and reference groups in influencing SFC.

Sampling and data collection

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants. The research focused on Generations Y and Z female consumers in the UK. All respondents were 36 years or younger (Chandler and Munday 2020). The study included 20 respondents, female, aged between 18 and 33 years, and based in the UK (see Table 1).

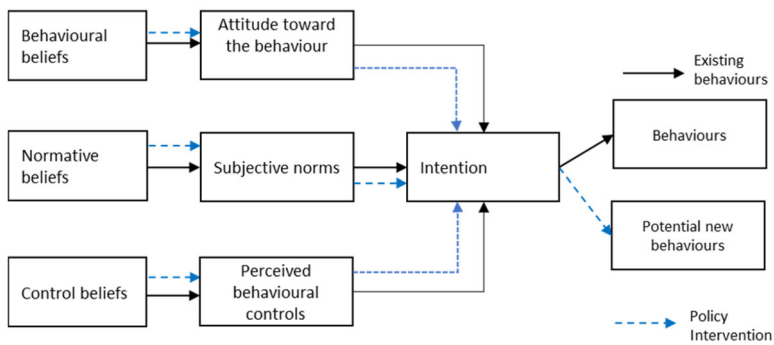


Figure 1

Influence of policy interventions on consumer behaviors (adapted from Ajzen 1991).

Table 1. Participants' occupations.

Respondent	Age	Occupation
A	22	Student
B	22	Unemployed
C	25	Consumer analyst & graphic designer
D	23	Student
E	24	Account executive (advertising agency)
F	23	Carer & graphic designer
G	27	Primary school teacher
H	33	Business development manager
I	23	Administrator/Secretary
J	23	Sales & Marketing
K	24	Marketing Executive
L	29	Digital Marketing
M	25	Policy analyst (climate change)
N	18	Student
O	25	Primary school teacher
P	27	Software sales (technology industry)
Q	22	Student
R	25	Student
S	26	Full-time athlete/student
T	22	Graphic designer

According to Vasileiou et al. (2018), qualitative research demands at least 12 participants to ensure data reliability and saturation. Our sample size of 20 respondents was deemed well above the level necessary to secure accurate and reliable data to draw conclusions. The interviews were semi-structured and covered the major themes of this research but also allowed an open conversation to appropriately record verbal and physical responses (Dudovskiy 2018). Ethical considerations were applied when conducting interviews. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and they understood the data would be used for academic research. All necessary steps were put into place to safeguard the anonymity of respondents (Sanjari et al. 2014). The interview protocol was known only to the interviewer, reducing the chances of external bias and pre-planned responses.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. These include (1) familiarization with the data; (2) identifying initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) evaluating themes; (5) defining the themes; and (6) presenting the report. Triangulation, member checking and search for disconfirming evidence were employed to ensure the reliability and validity of this study. To reduce any possible confounding element introduced by the researchers' experience or judgments, two researchers independently analyzed the data to identify emerging themes, search for convergence across multiple sets of information and compare common themes until an agreement was reached (Creswell and Miller 2000). The data were coded into four distinct categories in line with the TPB model, characterizing young consumers' attitudes towards (1) the fashion industry and sustainable consumption, (2) policy intervention on sustainable fashion, (3) the role of subjective norms, and (4) perceived behavior controls, focusing on the influence of education, product labelling and taxation. The end findings were supported by specific quotations to summarize the overall theme and respondent responses.

Results

Attitudes towards the fashion industry and sustainable consumption

The first set of questions covered respondents' perceptions and attitudes towards the fashion industry, its environmental impact, and their understanding of sustainability and sustainable consumption. Responses demonstrated a strong awareness of the retailer-to-consumer relationship within the industry. Still, they had a lower level of knowledge and a higher level of skepticism regarding the production and sustainability aspects of the fashion industry. Only four of the 20 interviewees made any reference to the production side of the industry. When asked if they wondered about the sustainability aspect of the industry, only half of the respondents stated that it comes to mind, while the majority said, "no, not really," or implied that it had only come to mind recently or "within the last few months."

The results suggest that for most consumers, the level of sustainability within the fashion industry was either unknown or an afterthought. The responses, even among those who demonstrated higher awareness, suggest a dissociation in consumer thought process regarding the fashion industry and environmental issues. Despite this lack of awareness and disconnect, the respondents seemed to understand the underlying principles of SFC. They suggested five areas of importance: reduction of consumption, buying sustainable brands, buying second-hand, choosing clothes and brands from reputable sources, and focusing on the long-term use and longevity of items.

When questioned on their role in sustainable consumption, only four respondents suggested measures that could help reduce their environmental impact. These suggestions addressed the issue of education and awareness and an overall reduction in consumption. The lack of acknowledgement of the important role a consumer could play suggests a potential dissociation in the consumer's mind between their actions and the impact on the environment when it comes to fashion products. As a result, responsibility on the part of the consumer is not strongly supported by changes in intention or behavior. The findings of the research support existing literature, demonstrating a need for policies to improve SFC education to consumers and reinforce good consumption habits.

Policy intervention on sustainable fashion

Contrasting previous responses regarding the individual's capacity for action, when discussing policy intervention, respondents suggested that the government had a big role to play, implying that the government could and should be doing more: "I think the government does have a role to play because otherwise, there's no one really stopping these companies (I)." General support for increasing policy intervention in the industry was very high, even when consumers had no specific policy idea in mind. Several respondents used the question as an opportunity to make further policy recommendations and criticize the government's lack of intervention thus far. Respondent F stated, "I feel like they don't really care enough at all about it, or are impacting it at all, so especially in the UK with the Leicester stuff that's coming out and that they've been through, it just goes to show that they are kind of just ignoring or turning a blind eye to it. It's not really on their priority list" (F).

Some respondents even pointed to the current government's ignorance of or failure to address the issues. This criticism often accompanied a comparison to other industries in which the government has more successfully intervened. Respondent R stated, "I think the UK fashion industry gets away with it, a lot, with the government. They're not held accountable as they should do. And there's a lot of other stuff, I think that the government holds other industries a lot more accountable for sustainable actions than in the fashion industry."

The suggestion from consumers themselves was that the UK fashion industry should be just as regulated for its environmental impact as any other industry operating within the country, whether that be the food or energy industry. The policy suggestions that were put forward in answers again largely focused on improving education and awareness, over half mentioning this as a necessary key intervention. Several respondents also mentioned the volumes of clothing sold as a large problem in response to this question and elsewhere within the interview; moreover, taxation or regulation was mentioned by a few respondents

Table 2. Attitudes towards UK policy intervention for sustainable fashion.

Key finding	Sample comments
High support for increasing government intervention to improve environmental impact of UK fashion industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think the government does have a role to play because otherwise, there’s no one really stopping these companies” (I) • “I think the government certainly could do a lot more, especially with public policy” (L) • “I think it’s something that the government should definitely look into” (T) • “I think it’s every market that the government has some sort of influence over, so they can create policies and stuff which they the fashion industry has to follow, or if they have sort of a minimum, at least they’ve got to do this” (O)
Criticism at a lack of government intervention so far	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think the fashion industry gets away with it, a lot, with the government. They’re not held accountable as they should do. And there’s a lot of other stuff, I think that the government holds other industries a lot more accountable for sustainable actions than in the fashion industry” (R) • “I feel like they [the government] don’t really care enough at all about it, or are impacting it at all, so especially in the UK with the Leicester stuff that’s coming out and that they’ve been through, it just goes to show that they are kind of just ignoring, or turning a blind eye to it. It’s not really on their priority list” (F)
Comparison with actions of government in other industries: e.g., food industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “So I think there’s literally no harm in the government engaging and just trying to encourage the reduction of one-time-use anything. So whether that’s clothes, whether it’s fashion, or it’s food or plastic, I don’t think it can do any harm” (P) • “If there was, perhaps, policy that prevented extremely unethical brands from selling their products within the UK market. Same as like we have for UK food produce” (K) • “I feel like it’s the same with the food industry, so why couldn’t it be the same and more, for the clothing industry?” & “You instantly recognise the product transparency on food packaging, and so why couldn’t we have them on clothing packaging?” (T)

in the context of particularly damaging specific fabrics or materials as factors to potentially consider for future policy development (see [Table 2](#)).

Attitudes towards product labelling

Several respondents directly commented on how they believe eco-labelling would impact their own behaviors, and how the use of eco-labelling would help in educating themselves and improving their own awareness.

Eco-labelling rendered them unable to avoid or ignore the environmental impact of a product, thus encouraging them to make those behavioral changes. Furthermore, all 20 respondents supported the implementation of a “universal” terminology in the UK industry to describe an item of clothing’s sustainability or environmental impact. And 19 respondents agreed that they would like to see more information on clothing labels relating to sustainability; the information made it easier to “hold companies to a higher standard,” facilitated “consistency” and made it “easier” for consumers to “understand.” Several respondents again drew comparisons to the standard of labelling within the food industry.

However, alongside the confirmation of support for eco-labelling, the most significant findings regarding eco-labelling were the confirmation of a paradoxical skepticism towards it similar to that expressed earlier, along with some surprising behaviors of respondents. Only half of respondents look at care labels when they shop, being far more likely to pay attention to additional tags on clothing or signage on instore racks and in online shopping sites in store and online, the extra information drawing their attention to the items. This finding suggests that if eco-labelling were implemented, it would be far more effective if not presented on the existing care labels hidden within the garment but on more noticeable tags or extra labels, and in visible locations such as store signage.

Respondent O stated, “I think it just needs to be really clear. I think that with labelling really, I don’t really check labelling really other than for the price. So, if it’s something maybe colorful, or something that attracts the eye” (O). Similarly, respondent R commented, “I’m lazy and if it means I’m reading a lot of things on the label, like the part with washing instructions, I’m not looking at that. If it’s like a marketing thing that’s in my face, like it’s easy to understand it, I can’t really avoid it” (R). Likewise, most respondents had seen eco-labelling before, but many expressed skepticisms about it and a feeling of being “misled” by the brands that displayed these labels, with respondents raising the spectre of greenwashing. “I guess I know what those terms mean, but I think I do question whether the retailer is meaning the true definition of the word, or if they’re just kind of sticking a label on it without fully following through. So, I’m not really confused by it, but I kind of don’t trust it” (L).

The consumers suggested that their struggles with the terms and words that brands, and retailers use often come more from an angle of mistrust and skepticism than genuine misunderstanding of sustainability terminology. Confirmation of such mistrust is significant, as even before respondents were asked about confusion over terminology, within earlier question sets respondents gave the impression of feeling skepticism towards sustainability actions in the fashion industry and government policy so far. Several respondents directly commented on how they believe it would impact their own behaviors, and how the use of eco-

labelling would help in educating themselves and improving their own awareness. Eco-labelling rendered them unable to avoid or ignore the environmental impact of a product, thus encouraging them to make those behavioral changes.

Enabling factors and perceived behavioral controls

Consumers' current control beliefs fell into four clear categories: price, education and awareness, availability, and eco-labelling, these being the main obstacles and tools with which to increase ease of engagement with sustainable fashion consumption. Eighteen out of 20 respondents noted price as the main barrier to SFC. Even with education, many consumers are unable to access sustainable choices due to economic restraints. The majority supported a tax on unsustainable fashion products, several noting that the tax would serve as a deterrent or would at least discourage consumers; over half of consumers believed that a tax of this nature would affect their buying decisions. Overall, the results suggest that while consumers do not want to pay more, they would be willing to do so to improve the sustainability of the industry. Respondent O stated that "although obviously you don't want to pay more money for something, but actually in the long term if it's going to be of benefit, I think it's actually going to be a way that people will quickly learn." This raises the prospect that a short-term tax might be enough to head consumers away from non-sustainable clothing purchases and entrench sustainable practices in the industry.

Discussing the role of government in education and the formation of new "norms," and the role of government and reference groups in influencing consumer attitudes, intentions and potentially behaviors through recommendations, all respondents supported the government taking a role in educating consumers about the environmental impact of the fashion industry. Another opportunity for policymakers is afforded by the findings' support for the existing literature on the influence of reference groups on consumers. The influence of friends and family clearly led consumers to express a complex range of emotions, from negative feelings of guilt and pressure to follow their group members' behaviors, to more positive reactions. Respondent Q stated, "If someone like a friend or family recommended something, that would probably make me more likely to buy it. Because I've just sort of trusted their opinion" (Q). "I think if everybody's doing it, it'll become second nature to everybody. And it would be something that's quite easy to get on board with" (G). However, while respondents believed their friends and family influence them, some were skeptical about their friends' and family's actual knowledge, and so questioned their ability to influence them on the topic.

Discussion and Conclusion

Contributions to knowledge and implications for policy intervention

This study concentrated on challenges associated with sustainable consumption among young consumers and identified enabling factors that leverage sustainable actions via policy intervention using the theory of planned behavior (TPB). With an extended TPB model, this study is one of the first pieces of research investigating consumer attitudes in the UK towards policy intervention on SFC. It offers strategies to overcome barriers to SFC and discusses the role of labelling, taxation, education, communication and reference groups in shaping SFC. Past studies have mostly concentrated on identifying barriers to SFC and offer limited suggestions for public policy measures that can enhance SFC. Our research addresses this gap by offering a conceptual framework (see [Figure 2](#)) that outlines the key challenges and enabling factors for encouraging and regulating SFC via policy intervention. From a managerial perspective, this research provides recommendations for policymakers, fashion marketers and managers to develop new labelling strategies, public sustainability marketing campaigns, and resource and waste management strategies for SFC.

Role of education and eco-labelling

The most interesting finding outside existing literature was consumer focus on eco-labelling as a key education and awareness tool that would make it easier for them to consume sustainably. Consumers believed that eco-labelling might be the most effective and convenient tool to identify environmentally friendly products and care for those products in a sustainable way. However, the current labelling format was considered ineffective for encouraging SFC. The need for more attention-grabbing strategies via paper and digital communication was highlighted. As per the existing theory of policy intervention ([Jackson 2005, 2014](#)), this study shows that the current information-based policy on eco-labelling is not efficient. Utilizing multiple digital communication channels and paying attention to the consumer experience journey could provide consumers with added value ([Vehmas et al. 2018](#)).

Implementing a universal terminology was identified as the key to combatting negative perspectives. This would reassure consumers about the integrity of the information on labels, a task that can only be facilitated through robust policy and regulation, such as adding an economic cost-benefit measure and providing comprehensive information on production methods. This study supports [Henninger's \(2015\)](#) findings that consumers are unaware of existing eco-labels on garments or what they mean. Consumers are skeptical about the reliability of eco-labelling and whether it is a credible tool to communicate sustainability practices. Due to the uncertainty of factual information in eco-labelling, tags do

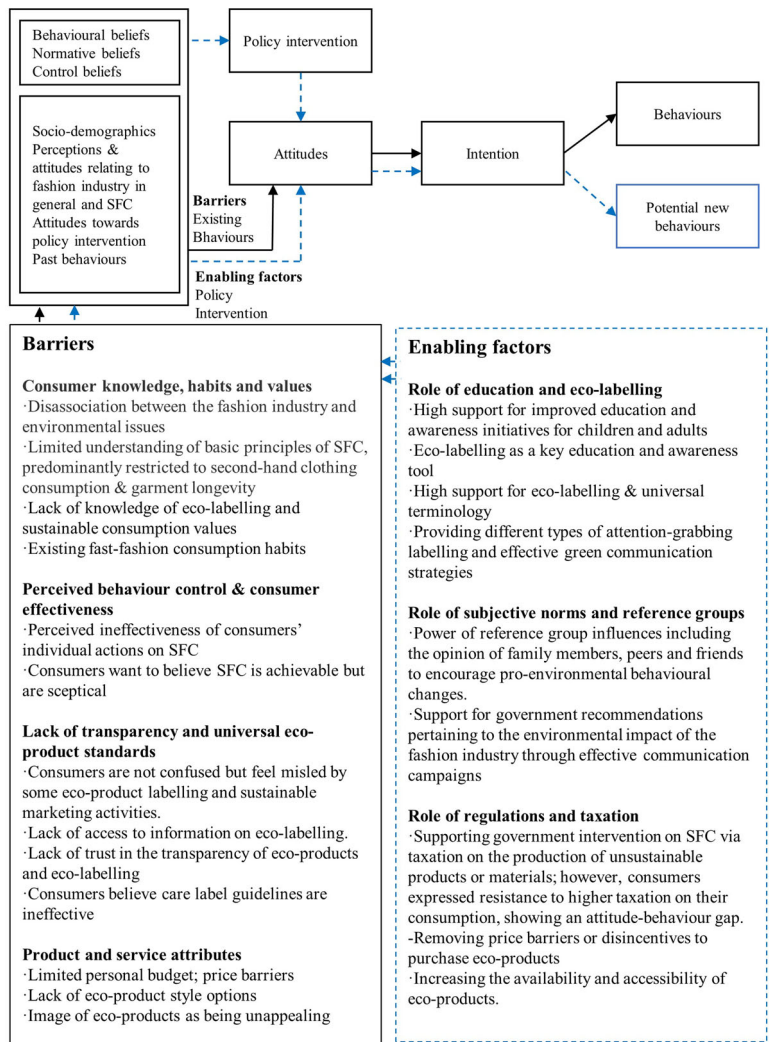


Figure 2 Enabling factors for government interventions in sustainable consumption, and implications.

not offer much advantage (Mukendi et al. 2020). Organisations like the Sustainable Apparel Coalition and Fashion Revolution have established sustainability ranking systems (Fashion Revolution 2020). Some fashion companies have produced their own labelling schemes, but only a few of these have gained widespread acceptance. The mapping of existing eco-labelling certifications could help reduce skepticism and uncertainty in the fashion market and help businesses provide the details that showcase environmental responsibility when producing fashion products (Henninger 2015).

A graphic design process that actively analyses consumer attitudes and behaviors will ensure the new labelling strategy grabs consumer

attention. Study findings suggest that if eco-labelling were implemented, it would be more effective if presented on noticeable tags or extra labels and in visible locations such as store signage instead of being hidden within the garment. Lee et al. (2020) suggest that when customers are exposed to priming messages while shopping for a fashion product, their inclination to purchase sustainable fashion goods increases. The above synergy could be deployed in green messaging by incorporating eco-friendly colors and eco-logos in noticeable eco-labelling. Online and off-line visual merchandising around sustainability could also be more actively utilized.

Roles of sustainability governance

This empirical research shows that consumers see government intervention on SFC in an extremely favorable light, especially regulating unethical practices by fashion brands and greenwashing activities. An important finding of this research is that governments can gain popularity by exerting greater control over industry practices and consumer purchases. Regardless of political opinion, the responses implied that intervention in improving the sustainability of the UK fashion industry would forge a more favorable public opinion of the government, as opposed to the negative backlash that usually coincides with government interventions in private industry (Jackson 2005). While reported in DEFRA's 2008 report on pro-environmental behaviors and the lack of transparency in the sustainability statements on product attributes (Joshi and Rahman 2015), this skepticism was not a major finding of this research. However, it may prove a substantial obstacle to the success of government intervention and for retailers and brands within the fashion industry.

Role of reference groups and sustainability education

Corresponding to recent research findings from Lazaric et al. (2020), sustainable consumption is inhibited by what is considered appropriate in a person's social environment. Consumption patterns are guided by social acceptance and an individual's need to keep up with their peers. Overall, the impact of reference groups on consumer norms is evident. Encouraging conversations with family and friends could help promote pro-environmental behavioral changes as they are the key to normalizing better consumption behaviors and making them second nature.

Parallel with past studies, our findings show that consumers lack a fundamental understanding of the impact of the fashion industry on the environment (Rausch and Kopplin 2021; Kumar, Prakash, and Kumar 2021) and lack consensus on what constitutes sustainable fashion (Hur and Cassidy 2019). Experiential sustainability education can help consumers discover personal drivers, understand the impact of their consumption habits in their daily lives, and identify barriers to changing

their habits (Armstrong et al. 2016). This experiential learning for sustainable consumption can help young consumers search for alternative ways to satisfy their cravings, such as restyling, reproducing and re-inventing objects using existing items.

Various commercial and educational organizations in the fashion sector demand incorporating sustainable fashion practices into the curriculum. A short curriculum and/or informational campaign should be developed for primary and secondary schools and should include input from the education department, education boards, teachers and students. This will ensure that the curriculum and campaigns developed are factually correct, easy to understand, and can improve awareness among consumers in the UK.

Role of regulations and taxation

Despite many respondents stating they supported a tax, only a few indicated that a tax would alter their behavior. Price has been highlighted as one of the major contributing factors to the attitude-behavior gap (Joshi and Rahman 2015; Wiederhold and Martinez 2018). This contradiction highlights the complexity of consumer attitudes toward taxation and the necessity of developing policy measures around taxation that would induce the desired behavioral changes. Price and affordability of fashion items are important factors, and the effect of taxation policy on prices must be evaluated politically and ethically. The complexity of implementing taxation policies is clear, even among consumers who indicate support for them. Policymakers should consider improving social fairness for this group and use strategies to minimize income disparity and provide examples of affordable SFC.

Recommendations for future research

There is a clear demand for policy intervention on SFC and the need to create cohesive, unified, and specific legislation and guidelines. Who will be affected by the tax, which specific areas will be taxed (e.g., materials, retailers, country of export, volume), and what level of taxation would be effective in changing consumer behavior is still unknown. Taxation policy needs more theoretical development and research to determine the exact taxation method to be applied and the exact points at which tax would be collected from the fashion industry. The policy should consider consumers' apprehension regarding the tax as this can be a limiting factor of their support.

This study focuses on young female consumers in the UK, aged between 18 and 33 years, and explores policy interventions for SFC. Further studies could analyze how other factors, including consumer incomes, geographical locations, race, lifestyle and personality traits, could influence consumer perceptions and acceptance of the policy in SFC. A rigorous systematic literature review could be conducted,

mapping existing literature on SFC policies in the UK and case studies of international regulations on policy intervention on SFC.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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