

Sustainable Fashion Consumption: Behavioral Drivers and Barriers in Emerging Markets

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Abstract

The global fashion industry is undergoing growing scrutiny due to its environmental footprint, resource intensity, and labor practices. While sustainable fashion initiatives have gained traction in developed economies, consumer adoption patterns in emerging markets remain uneven and underexplored. The behavioral drivers and barriers influencing sustainable fashion consumption in emerging economies, where rising incomes, urbanization, and digital connectivity are reshaping purchasing behavior. Determinants such as environmental awareness, social norms, cultural values, price sensitivity, brand trust, and perceived product quality. Although consumers in emerging markets increasingly express concern about environmental issues, a gap often exists between pro-environmental attitudes and actual purchasing decisions. High price premiums, limited availability of sustainable apparel options, lack of credible certification, and information asymmetry frequently discourage adoption. Behavioral factors such as status signaling, peer influence, and habit persistence further shape consumption patterns.

Keywords: Sustainable fashion; Ethical apparel consumption; Emerging markets; Consumer behavior

Introduction

The fashion industry is one of the most resource-intensive and environmentally impactful sectors in the global economy. Rapid production cycles, high water consumption, chemical use, textile waste, and carbon emissions have intensified concerns about the sustainability of contemporary apparel systems. In response, sustainable fashion has emerged as an alternative model that emphasizes ethical sourcing, eco-friendly materials, fair labor practices, and circular production processes. While adoption of sustainable fashion has gained visibility in developed economies, its growth trajectory in emerging markets presents distinct opportunities and challenges. Emerging markets are characterized by rising disposable incomes, expanding middle classes, rapid urbanization, and increasing digital connectivity. These dynamics have fueled demand for fast fashion and international brands, often prioritizing affordability and trend alignment over sustainability considerations. At the same time, younger consumers in these markets are becoming more aware of environmental and social issues through social media exposure and global sustainability movements. This dual dynamic creates a complex consumption environment where awareness may coexist with limited behavioral change. Consumer decision-making in emerging markets is influenced by multiple economic and

psychological factors. Price sensitivity remains high, and sustainable apparel is often perceived as more expensive or less accessible. Trust in sustainability claims can be limited due to weak regulatory oversight and concerns about greenwashing. Cultural norms, social status signaling, and peer influence also shape purchasing patterns, sometimes reinforcing conventional consumption habits rather than ethical alternatives. A persistent intention–behavior gap further complicates sustainable fashion adoption. Consumers may express positive attitudes toward environmentally responsible products but fail to translate those attitudes into purchasing behavior. Structural barriers such as limited product availability, lack of clear eco-labeling, and insufficient consumer education contribute to this disconnect. The behavioral drivers and barriers specific to emerging markets is therefore essential for designing effective sustainability strategies. Businesses, policymakers, and civil society actors must account for local socioeconomic contexts, cultural influences, and affordability constraints. By examining how economic realities intersect with environmental awareness and social norms, this study aims to explore pathways that can encourage more responsible fashion consumption in rapidly developing economies.

Environmental Awareness and Attitude Formation in Emerging Markets

Environmental awareness plays a foundational role in shaping sustainable fashion consumption. In emerging markets, awareness levels are rising due to increased access to digital media, global climate discourse, and growing exposure to environmental challenges such as pollution, water scarcity, and waste accumulation. However, the process of translating awareness into stable pro-environmental attitudes is influenced by socioeconomic realities, cultural contexts, and institutional credibility.

1. Sources of Environmental Awareness

In many emerging economies, awareness is shaped by a combination of formal education, media coverage, and social media engagement. Digital platforms have significantly expanded access to global sustainability conversations. Youth populations, in particular, are exposed to climate activism, ethical fashion campaigns, and international sustainability standards. Influencers and public figures often amplify environmental messaging, contributing to broader public discourse.

2. Personal Experience and Local Environmental Issues

Direct exposure to environmental degradation can strengthen awareness. Urban air pollution, textile waste accumulation, and visible water contamination create tangible experiences that make environmental concerns more immediate. In regions where textile production is a major industry, awareness may also stem from labor and environmental conditions associated with manufacturing processes.

3. Role of Education and Socioeconomic Status

Higher levels of education are generally associated with stronger environmental concern and greater openness to sustainable consumption. However, income constraints can limit the ability to act on these attitudes. In emerging markets, awareness may coexist with limited purchasing power, creating tension between environmental values and affordability priorities.

4. Cultural Influences on Attitude Formation

Cultural norms and collective values influence how environmental responsibility is perceived. In some societies, community well-being and intergenerational responsibility reinforce positive attitudes toward sustainability. In others, status-driven consumption patterns may overshadow ecological considerations. Attitude formation is therefore embedded within broader cultural narratives about progress, modernity, and social mobility.

5. Trust and Institutional Credibility

Attitudes toward sustainable fashion are also shaped by trust in institutions and brands. Weak regulatory enforcement and instances of misleading sustainability claims can generate skepticism. Without credible certification systems and transparent communication, consumers may question whether sustainable apparel genuinely delivers environmental benefits.

6. Generational Differences

Younger consumers often demonstrate stronger environmental attitudes compared to older generations. Exposure to global sustainability movements and digital activism contributes to a more pronounced sense of environmental identity among youth. This demographic shift holds potential for long-term transformation of consumption patterns.

environmental awareness in emerging markets is expanding but remains unevenly distributed. Attitude formation is influenced by education, income, cultural values, institutional trust, and generational change. For sustainable fashion adoption to accelerate, awareness initiatives must be paired with accessible product options, credible certification mechanisms, and culturally relevant messaging that resonates with local consumers.

Economic Constraints and Price Sensitivity in Ethical Apparel Purchasing

Economic realities strongly influence sustainable fashion adoption in emerging markets. While environmental awareness may be increasing, purchasing decisions are often guided by affordability, income stability, and perceived value for money. Ethical apparel frequently carries a price premium due to higher production standards, sustainable materials, and transparent supply chains. For price-sensitive consumers, this premium can represent a significant barrier.

1. Income Levels and Budget Allocation

In many emerging economies, a large segment of consumers allocate a substantial share of household income to essential goods such as food, housing, and transportation. Apparel spending is often limited to functional or trend-driven purchases at competitive prices. Under such constraints, ethical fashion products may be viewed as discretionary or luxury items rather than everyday necessities.

2. Perceived Value Versus Price Premium

Consumers often evaluate sustainable apparel through a cost-benefit lens. If eco-friendly products are priced significantly higher than conventional alternatives, buyers may question whether the environmental benefits justify the additional expense. Without clear communication of durability, quality, or long-term value, price premiums can discourage trial and repeat purchases.

3. Competition from Fast Fashion

The rapid growth of low-cost fashion retailers intensifies price competition. Fast fashion models offer affordable, trend-aligned products with frequent inventory turnover. For many consumers, particularly younger demographics with limited disposable income, affordability and style accessibility outweigh sustainability considerations. This competitive environment makes it difficult for ethical brands to scale without addressing pricing challenges.

4. Limited Economies of Scale

Sustainable apparel producers in emerging markets often operate at smaller scales compared to mainstream manufacturers. Lower production volumes can increase unit costs, reinforcing higher retail prices. As demand grows and supply chains mature, cost reductions may occur, but initial scaling challenges can slow market penetration.

5. Informal Markets and Second-Hand Alternatives

In some emerging economies, informal clothing markets and second-hand apparel are widely accessible and affordable. While resale markets can support circular consumption, they may also reduce demand for newly produced ethical apparel. Consumers may prioritize affordability over certified sustainability.

6. Financing and Payment Flexibility

Access to consumer credit and flexible payment systems can influence purchasing behavior. In markets where installment payments or digital wallets are expanding, ethical brands may reduce price barriers by offering structured payment options. Such financial innovations can make sustainable products more attainable for middle-income consumers.

7. Long-Term Economic Considerations

Although sustainable apparel may cost more upfront, improved durability and quality can lower replacement frequency over time. However, consumers often focus on immediate expenditure rather than long-term savings, reinforcing present-bias behavior.

economic constraints and price sensitivity are central barriers to ethical apparel purchasing in emerging markets. Bridging this gap requires strategies that enhance affordability, communicate long-term value, and leverage economies of scale. Without addressing economic realities, rising environmental awareness alone is unlikely to translate into sustained shifts toward responsible fashion consumption.

Conclusion

Sustainable fashion consumption in emerging markets is shaped by a complex interplay of environmental awareness, cultural norms, and economic realities. While awareness of ecological and ethical concerns is gradually increasing, especially among younger and digitally connected consumers, this awareness does not automatically translate into consistent purchasing behavior. The persistent intention-behavior gap highlights the influence of structural barriers such as price premiums, limited product availability, and skepticism toward sustainability claims. Economic constraints remain one of the most significant obstacles. In price-sensitive markets, affordability often outweighs environmental considerations, particularly when fast fashion alternatives are widely accessible. At the same time, cultural values, social influence, and status-driven consumption patterns further complicate the shift toward ethical apparel. Without trust in certification systems and transparent supply chains,

consumers may hesitate to pay higher prices for products labeled as sustainable. However, emerging markets also present meaningful opportunities. Growing youth populations, expanding digital platforms, and increasing global exposure to sustainability narratives create favorable conditions for long-term transformation. Brands that combine affordability, transparency, and culturally relevant messaging are better positioned to bridge the gap between awareness and action. Policymakers and industry stakeholders must also strengthen regulatory frameworks, support eco-labeling standards, and encourage responsible production practices. Ultimately, advancing sustainable fashion consumption in emerging markets requires coordinated efforts that address both psychological motivations and economic constraints. Only by aligning environmental values with accessible pricing, credible information, and social acceptance can responsible apparel consumption become a mainstream norm rather than a niche preference.

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