

# Fast Fashion and the Sustainability Paradox: An Analysis of Consumer Purchasing, Retention, and Disposal Practices

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## KEYWORDS

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Fast Fashion  
Consumer Behavior  
Sustainability  
Textile Waste  
Sustainable Fashion Awareness

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## ABSTRACT

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This study investigates consumer behavior in the fast fashion industry and its impact on sustainability. Through a survey of 683 participants conducted between March 13 and April 4, 2025, the research evaluates purchasing habits, clothing longevity, disposal practices, and awareness of sustainable fashion. Findings reveal that while affordability remains a top priority, a majority of consumers express willingness to adopt more sustainable habits if made convenient and affordable. Most respondents retain clothing for over three years, and many are open to donating or repairing garments. However, awareness of textile recycling programs remains low.

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This study underscores the importance of education, accessibility, and incentives in fostering more responsible fashion consumption.

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## 1. Introduction

Fast fashion is a business model that emphasizes the rapid production of inexpensive, trend-driven clothing that mimics styles seen on runways and social media. This approach allows brands to quickly bring new collections to market, often at the expense of quality, ethical labor, and environmental sustainability (Remy et al., 2016). Companies like Shein, Zara, H&M, and Forever 21 have become industry leaders by encouraging consumers to buy more clothing, more frequently, often discarding items after only a few wears. As fashion cycles have accelerated, clothing has become increasingly disposable, reshaping consumer expectations while placing significant strain on the planet's resources (McKinsey & Company, 2020). The environmental consequences of fast fashion are far-reaching. The fashion industry is responsible for an estimated 10% of global carbon emissions, making it one of the world's most polluting sectors (UN Environment Programme, 2019). The production of synthetic fabrics like polyester releases microplastics into waterways, while the dyeing and finishing of textiles contributes to water pollution and toxic chemical runoff (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Perhaps most alarming is the issue of textile waste—millions of tons of clothing end up in landfills each year, with many garments made from materials that do not easily decompose (EPA, 2023). These challenges highlight the urgent need to rethink how clothing is produced, purchased, and discarded.

While much attention has been given to the practices of fast fashion brands, consumer behavior plays a critical role in shaping the industry's environmental footprint. The choices individuals make—such as how often they shop, whether they consider sustainability when purchasing clothing, and how they dispose of old garments—can significantly impact the life cycle of a piece of clothing. Understanding these habits is essential for developing strategies that encourage more responsible consumption, such as choosing higher-quality garments, repairing rather than replacing, or donating and recycling used items (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). By influencing consumer mindsets and encouraging behavioral shifts, it is possible to reduce textile waste and mitigate fast fashion's environmental impact.

This study aims to explore how consumer habits influence clothing longevity and disposal methods in the fast fashion era. The central research question guiding this investigation is:

How do consumer habits affect the longevity of clothing and disposal methods in the fast fashion industry?

To answer this, the study considers the following sub-questions:

- What factors influence consumer decisions to keep, donate, or dispose of clothing?
- Do consumers understand the environmental impact of clothing disposal methods?
- How can increased awareness impact the longevity of clothing usage?

Using data collected from 668 survey responses gathered across the United States between March 13 and April 4, 2025, this research seeks to identify behavioral

patterns, analyze levels of sustainability awareness, and propose data-driven recommendations for more environmentally responsible fashion consumption.

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## 2. Empirical Research

### Demographic Overview

The survey gathered responses from a wide range of age groups, with the largest representation from individuals aged 35–54, followed by those 55 and older. The majority of participants identified as female, with only a small portion identifying as male or non-binary. This gender distribution may reflect greater engagement among women in fashion-related matters. In terms of shopping habits, most respondents reported primarily purchasing clothing from department stores or online marketplaces, while a smaller segment favored thrift stores. Notably, only a limited number of participants reported shopping at sustainable or ethical brands, and fast fashion retailers such as Shein, Zara, and H&M, though present, were not the dominant choice (Fashion Revolution, 2022). This suggests that while fast fashion is accessible, many consumers opt for more traditional or convenient outlets.

### 2.1 Purchasing Habits

Clothing purchase frequency varied, with a majority (46%) indicating they shop for new clothing only a few times per year, and another 31% shopping every few months. Only a small number of respondents reported shopping weekly, suggesting that most do not engage in habitual consumption. When asked about the most important factor influencing their clothing purchases, price was the leading consideration (47%), followed by quality and longevity (39%). Sustainability was cited as the top factor by only 3% of respondents. These results

highlight a clear preference for affordability and durability over environmental considerations. While specific data on fabric awareness is forthcoming, the emphasis on price suggests limited engagement with material composition or the ecological footprint of textiles.

## **2.2 Clothing Longevity and Maintenance**

Notably, a significant majority of respondents (82%) reported keeping their clothing for more than three years, indicating a tendency toward longer-term use rather than frequent wardrobe turnover. When garments become damaged, 47% of respondents occasionally repair or alter their clothes, and 19% consistently do so. However, 13% stated they never attempt repairs, suggesting room for increased education on simple mending techniques. Regarding care practices, most respondents employ some methods to extend their clothing's lifespan, such as washing less frequently or storing items properly. Still, a significant number (245 respondents) indicated they take no extra steps to preserve their garments, pointing to an opportunity for awareness-building around sustainable maintenance habits.

## **2.3 Clothing Disposal**

When clothing is no longer wanted, the most common action taken is to donate to charities or thrift stores. Many also choose to give items to friends or family or repurpose them for other uses. Despite these efforts, a portion of respondents still dispose of clothing in the trash, citing reasons such as the garments being too worn to donate. A striking finding is that 62% of respondents were unaware of clothing recycling programs, such as those offered by major retailers like H&M (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Among

those who were aware, only a small group reported actively using such services. This gap suggests a need for greater promotion of textile recycling options and easier access to take-back programs.

## **2.4 Sustainability Awareness and Willingness to Change**

The survey revealed that while environmental awareness around fast fashion remains limited, there is a clear interest in sustainable alternatives. Only 10% of participants actively research the environmental impact of fast fashion, while 90% know a little, some, or nothing at all. Despite this, 88% of respondents expressed a willingness to recycle or donate clothing if it were convenient, and 70% of respondents indicated they would consider paying more for sustainably made clothing if the price difference were reasonable. Key motivators for choosing sustainable fashion included lower prices, increased availability in stores, and more stylish options. These insights suggest that while sustainability is not yet a top priority, many consumers are open to change—provided it is made accessible, affordable, and fashionable.

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# **3. Methodology**

## **3.1 Research Design**

A survey-based research design was selected to gather data on consumer clothing habits, as it allowed participants to remain anonymous and respond honestly—particularly about potentially sensitive behaviors such as discarding clothing. The survey format also enabled the collection of quantitative data from a large and demographically diverse sample across the United States. To distribute the survey efficiently, the survey was created using Google Forms and shared

on Facebook, a platform that provided easy access to a wide network of willing respondents representing various age groups, income levels, and geographic regions.

### 3.2 Participants

The survey received responses from 683 individuals across the United States, representing a wide range of ages, genders, regions, and living environments. In terms of age, the majority of participants were between 35 and 54 years old, with 252 respondents (37%) aged 35–44 and 220 respondents (32%) aged 45–54. An additional 136 respondents (20%) were aged 55 and older, 53 were aged 25–34, 7 were aged 18–24, and 15 were under 18.

The survey was completed by a predominantly female audience, with 664 respondents identifying as female. Only 12 identified as male, 5 as non-binary, and 2 chose not to disclose their gender.

Geographically, the South had the largest number of participants (228), followed by the Northeast (176), the West (146), and the Midwest (133). Respondents also represented a range of living environments, with 437 (64%) living in suburban areas, 148 (22%) in rural areas, and 98 (14%) in urban locations.

This broad demographic spread provided a diverse cross-section of American consumers, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of clothing habits, disposal behaviors, and sustainability awareness across different communities.

### 3.3 Survey Content

The survey included 28 multiple-choice and “select all

that apply” questions, designed to gather quantitative data and qualitative insights about consumer habits related to fast fashion, clothing longevity, and disposal practices. The questions were grouped into five main categories:

**Demographics** – Age group, gender identity, geographic region, type of residential area (urban, suburban, or rural), and household income level. This data enabled analysis of consumer habits by demographic trends and regional differences.

**Purchasing Habits** – Frequency of clothing purchases, primary shopping locations, average monthly spending, and key purchasing factors (e.g., price, trendiness, quality, sustainability, brand reputation). It also asked about fabric awareness and preference for natural or synthetic fibers.

**Clothing Longevity and Maintenance** – How long clothing is retained before replacement, frequency of repairs or alterations, and washing routines. Participants were asked whether they take proactive steps to extend garment lifespan, such as using cold water, washing less frequently, or using repair kits.

**Clothing Disposal Methods** – Frequency of donations or resale, typical disposal methods, and reasons for discarding clothing. Those who reported throwing clothes away were asked why, such as damage or lack of alternatives.

**Sustainability Awareness and Behavior** – Awareness of fast fashion’s environmental consequences (e.g., microplastics, carbon emissions, landfill waste), interest in sustainable fashion, willingness to pay more for

sustainable items, and knowledge of recycling programs.

This comprehensive scope enabled a rich and meaningful analysis of the connections between behavior, awareness, and environmental impact.

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## 4. Results

After collecting the survey responses, Microsoft Excel was used to systematically organize and analyze the data. The responses were sorted and filtered to identify patterns and trends, and created graphs and charts to visually represent key findings. The Excel tools calculated percentages and frequency counts for each multiple-choice option and grouped responses by age group, income bracket, region, and area type to uncover demographic differences in behavior.

To gain deeper insights, consumer habits were compared across various subgroups—for example, analyzing whether younger or older participants were more likely to throw away clothes, or whether higher-income respondents demonstrated greater awareness of sustainable fashion practices. The analysis also focused on identifying the most common clothing disposal methods, the typical length of time consumers keep their clothes, and how these behaviors relate to participants' sustainability awareness.

This comparative approach allowed her to uncover relationships between consumer knowledge, behavior, and environmental impact, forming a data-driven foundation for the results and recommendations presented in the paper.

### Restating Key Findings

This survey reveals that while most consumers prioritize affordability and convenience when shopping for clothing, there is growing interest in sustainable fashion—particularly when it is accessible and reasonably priced. Respondents tend to purchase clothing infrequently and often keep garments for extended periods. Many are willing to donate or repair items rather than throw them away, yet awareness of textile recycling programs and the environmental impact of fast fashion remains low (UN Environment Programme, 2019; EPA, 2023). This gap between consumer intentions and actions highlights the need for education, infrastructure, and incentives that promote more responsible clothing consumption.

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## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The survey results highlight a complex relationship between consumer values and purchasing behavior. While price is the most influential factor when buying clothes, many participants still expressed a genuine interest in sustainable fashion, particularly if affordability and style were not compromised. Most respondents reported shopping only a few times per year and tended to keep clothing for more than three years, indicating that fast fashion habits may not always reflect constant overconsumption, but rather convenience and affordability. Notably, a majority would be willing to recycle or donate clothing if the process were more accessible, and many showed interest in learning more about the environmental effects of their fashion choices.

### 5.2 Consumer Behavior Patterns

Despite growing environmental concerns, fast fashion consumption remains high, driven largely by factors like low cost, trend accessibility, and shopping convenience. While a subset of consumers does shop at thrift stores or sustainable brands, most still rely on department stores, fast fashion retailers, and online marketplaces. This trend may be partly attributed to a gap in awareness and availability of sustainable options (Fashion Revolution, 2022). A significant number of respondents had never heard of textile recycling programs, and relatively few had used them. Furthermore, sustainable brands may not be widely available in all communities, and when they are, they often come at a higher price point or lack the style variety consumers are looking for.

### **5.3 Barriers to Sustainability**

One of the clearest barriers to sustainable fashion behavior is lack of awareness. The majority of participants either knew very little or nothing at all about the environmental impacts of fast fashion, suggesting that even consumers who are open to eco-friendly choices may not have the information needed to act on them. Another barrier is convenience—many people throw away clothing because it is too damaged to donate, or they do not know where or how to recycle textiles (EPA, 2023). Additionally, while secondhand shopping is becoming more normalized, a portion of respondents indicated no interest in participating in clothing swaps or resale markets. Possible contributing factors include lingering stigma around secondhand clothing, lack of access, or unfamiliarity with the process.

### **5.4 Implications for Sustainability**

These findings point to several opportunities for encouraging more sustainable fashion habits. First, sustainable brands should be marketed more effectively, emphasizing not only their environmental benefits but also style, affordability, and convenience. Second, educational campaigns in schools, communities, and online could help inform consumers about fast fashion’s impact on carbon emissions, water waste, and microplastic pollution (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Third, retailers should consider expanding take-back programs, similar to H&M’s textile recycling initiative, and making them more visible and accessible. Clear signage, in-store bins, and small rewards (e.g., discounts or coupons) could motivate more people to participate in recycling efforts.

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## **6. Conclusion**

To address clothing waste and the broader environmental damage caused by fast fashion, several practical solutions should be implemented. Local governments and school districts can support educational initiatives that teach young consumers about sustainable materials and repair techniques (Braungart & McDonough, 2009). Retailers should expand take-back programs and provide incentives for donating or recycling used garments. Moreover, government regulations should hold fashion brands accountable for the environmental impact of their supply chains (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Policies such as extended producer responsibility, labeling transparency, and environmental taxation on fast fashion production can drive systemic change.

## **Call to Action**

Consumers also play a critical role in transforming the fashion industry. By choosing to buy less, shop secondhand, prioritize quality over quantity, and support ethical brands, individuals can help reduce demand for disposable clothing. Sustainable fashion must also become more inclusive—affordable, stylish, and available across all regions. Increased visibility of recycling programs, online clothing swaps, and thrifting apps can make sustainable fashion more accessible to everyone. The shift toward environmentally responsible fashion is not only feasible but also essential—and it begins with informed, intentional choices.

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