The Impact of Fast Fashion Brand Sustainability on Consumer Purchase Decision

Mahima Singh[1] and Gururaj Dangare[2]

Pratibha Institute of Business Management, Pune

Abstract

Fast fashion has revolutionized the apparel industry by offering trendy clothing at low prices and quick turnaround times. However, growing awareness about environmental degradation and unethical labour practices has prompted consumers to reassess their purchase behaviors. This research examines the influence of sustainability practices by fast fashion brands on consumer purchase decisions. The study uses both primary and secondary data to analyze how environmental concerns, ethical sourcing, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) impact consumers' attitudes and behavior. The findings suggest that while awareness of sustainability is rising, price sensitivity and fashion trends still dominate purchasing decisions. However, a significant shift is evident among Gen Z and Millennials, indicating a future where sustainability could become a key brand differentiator.

Keywords: Millennials, Greenwashing, Fashion Sustainability, Consumers

INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry is valued at over $1.5 trillion, and fast fashion contributes significantly to this figure. Fast fashion brands like Zara, H&M, and Shein have built empires by delivering affordable, stylish clothes with rapid production cycles. However, these benefits come at a cost—massive carbon emissions, textile waste, and exploitative labour conditions. The environmental footprint of fast fashion is vast. It is responsible for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions and significant water usage and pollution. Moreover, unsustainable manufacturing processes and poor labor practices in developing countries have brought ethical issues to the forefront. As a result, the demand for sustainable fashion — characterized by ethical labour, eco-friendly materials, and conscious consumption — is growing among environmentally and socially aware consumers. Modern consumers, especially Millennials and Generation Z, are increasingly aware of the environmental and social implications of their consumption habits. This has led to a shift toward more responsible buying behavior, with some consumers opting for brands that prioritize sustainability. In response, many fast fashion brands have launched "sustainable collections"

and CSR initiatives. However, the effectiveness and authenticity of these efforts are often questioned, with concerns about greenwashing and superficial branding. Consumer awareness around sustainability has grown substantially, especially among **Millennials and Gen Z**, who are more informed and socially conscious than previous generations. Social media, environmental documentaries, global climate movements, and influencer advocacy have amplified the discourse around **ethical consumption**. Nevertheless, despite rising awareness, many consumers continue to prioritize **price**, **style**, and **brand identity** over sustainability when making purchase decisions. This disconnect between attitudes and actions is referred to as the **attitude-behavior gap**. It highlights the complexity of consumer decision-making in fast fashion, where economic and psychological factors often override ethical concerns. As a result, understanding what truly drives consumer choices in this context becomes crucial for brands aiming to balance profitability with responsibility

Research Problem

While many fast fashion companies are now introducing "conscious collections" and sustainability campaigns, it is unclear to what extent these initiatives actually influence consumer behavior. Are consumers willing to pay more for sustainable fashion? Or do affordability and trendiness still dominate?

Objectives

- To assess consumer awareness regarding sustainability in fast fashion.
- To analyze the impact of sustainability practices on purchase decisions.
- To examine the demographic variables influencing sustainable purchase behavior.
- To evaluate the role of corporate social responsibility in brand loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fast Fashion and Sustainability

Fast fashion thrives on overproduction and overconsumption. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017), the industry is responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions and 20% of wastewater. It also consumes vast resources, such as 2,700 liters of water to produce a single cotton shirt.

Consumer Awareness and Behavior

Research by McKinsey (2020) indicates that consumers are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of their purchases. Yet, a significant gap exists between concern and action—a phenomenon known as the **attitude-behaviour gap**. While 70% of consumers claim they would choose sustainable options, only about 20% follow through.

CSR and Brand Loyalty

Corporate Social Responsibility plays a vital role in shaping consumer trust and brand loyalty. Studies (Cone Communications, 2017) suggest that 87% of consumers are more likely to buy from a company that supports environmental or social issues.

Sustainable Fashion and Brand Strategies

Sustainable fashion incorporates eco-friendly raw materials, ethical labor standards, and reduced environmental footprints throughout the supply chain (Fletcher, 2014). Many fast fashion brands, under pressure from watchdogs and sustainability-conscious consumers, have launched initiatives such as **H&M's Conscious Collection**, **Zara's Join Life**, and **UNIQLO's sustainability reports**.

However, **Turker and Altuntas (2014)** argue that these strategies are often limited to "corporate window-dressing," lacking measurable impact. The phenomenon of **greenwashing**, where brands exaggerate or misrepresent their environmental efforts, has led to increasing skepticism among informed consumers (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Consumer Attitudes Toward Sustainability

Numerous studies reveal a growing concern among consumers about ethical and environmental issues in fashion. For instance, a survey by **McKinsey & Company (2020)** found that **67% of consumers** consider the use of sustainable materials an important factor in purchase decisions. However, this concern does not always translate into behavior.

Joergens (2006) noted that while many consumers express willingness to support sustainable fashion, they are often deterred by higher prices, limited options, or lack of trust in brand claims. **Vermeir and Verbeke (2006)** call this the **attitude-behavior gap**, which is particularly pronounced in fast fashion due to its emphasis on affordability and trendiness.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a **quantitative, descriptive research design**, aiming to assess consumer awareness, behavior, and perceptions regarding sustainability in the fast fashion industry. The approach is appropriate for gathering standardized data from a large group to identify trends, relationships, and patterns in consumer behavior. A structured survey questionnaire was used as the primary tool for data collection.

Population

The target population for this research includes **consumers aged 18–35** who actively engage in **fast fashion consumption**. This demographic was selected due to its high influence on fashion trends and increasing exposure to sustainability narratives via digital platforms.

Sampling Technique

- A **non-probability purposive sampling** method was adopted to select respondents who are:
    - Aware of fast fashion brands (e.g., H&M, Zara, Shein).
    - Actively engaged in online or offline fashion shopping.
- This technique ensured relevance to the study's subject area.

Sample Size

A total of **300 responses** were targeted. After eliminating incomplete responses, **300 valid questionnaires** were analyzed.

Data Collection Method

Instrument

A **structured, self-administered questionnaire** was used for data collection, developed using a 5-point Likert scale and multiple-choice questions.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	122	40.7%
	Female	178	59.3%
Age Group	18–25 (Gen Z)	158	52.7%
	26–35 (Millennials)	142	47.3%
Education	Undergraduate	109	36.3%
	Postgraduate	191	63.7%
Monthly Income	Below ⬜ 30,000	118	39.3%
	⬜ 30,000–⬜ 60,000	127	42.3%
	Above ⬜ 60,000	55	18.3%

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the respondents
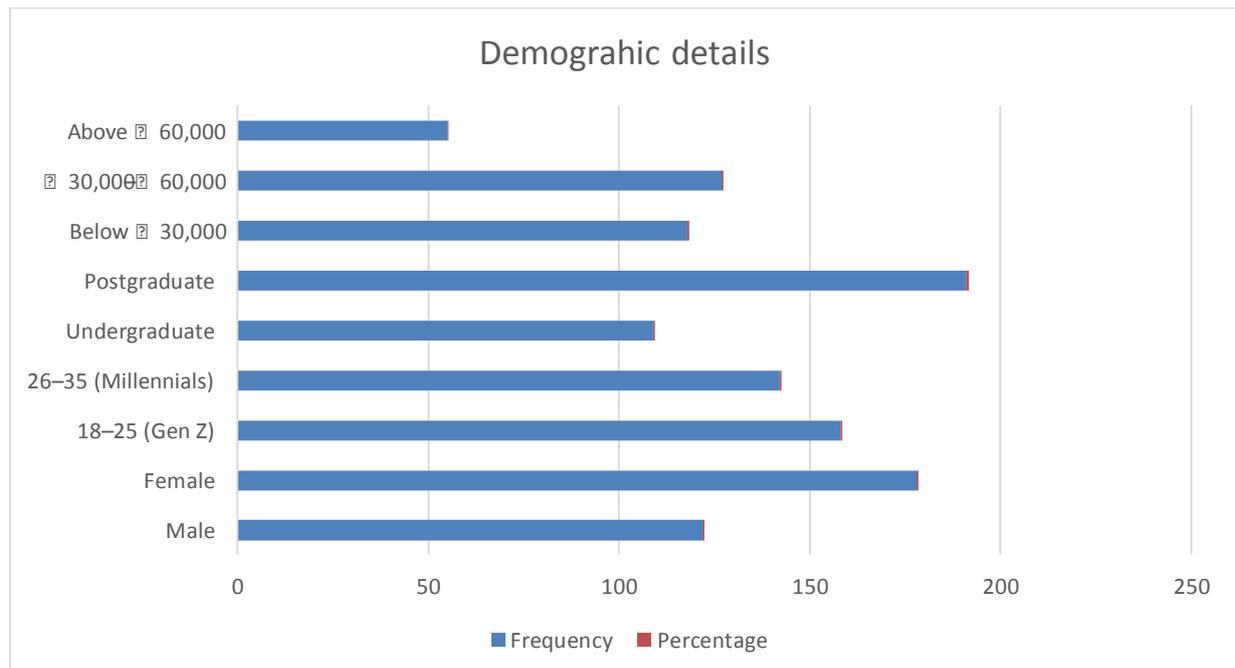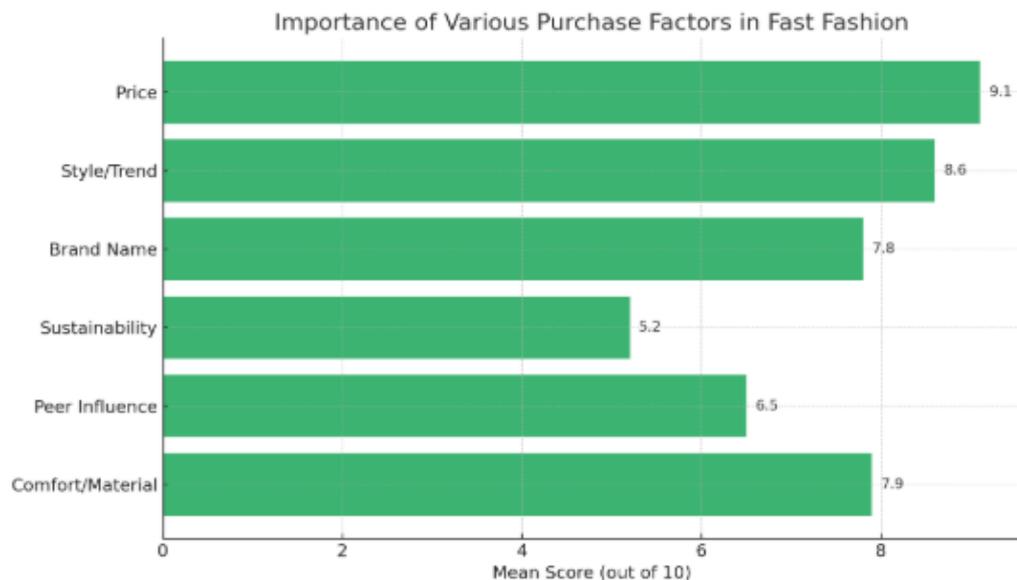
Graph 1: Demographic profile of the respondents

2. Awareness of Sustainable Fashion

- **82%** of respondents had heard the term **"sustainable fashion"**.
- Only **39%** could define it correctly (e.g., ethical labor, eco-friendly materials).
- **28%** were aware of sustainability efforts by fast fashion brands (e.g., H&M Conscious, Zara Join Life).

Interpretation: Awareness was higher among postgraduate students (61%) and respondents aged 18–25 (Gen Z).

3. Importance of Purchase Factors

Respondents rated various factors on a **10-point Likert scale** (1 = Not important, 10 = Extremely important)

Importance of Various Purchase Factors in Fast Fashion

Factor	Mean Score (out of 10)
Price	9.1
Style/Trend	8.6
Brand Name	7.8
Sustainability	5.2
Peer Influence	6.5
Comfort/Material	7.9

Graph 2: Respondent's ratings on various purchase factors

| Purchase Factor	Mean Score
Price	9.1
Style/Trend	8.6
Brand Name	7.8
Sustainability	5.2
Peer Influence	6.5
Comfort/Material	7.9

Table 2: Mean score of purchase factors

Interpretation: Price and trend remain the dominant purchase motivators. Sustainability scored moderately, indicating secondary importance.

4. Willingness to Pay for Sustainable Fashion

Extra Cost Willing to Pay	% of Respondents
No extra cost	42%
Up to 10% extra	34%
10–25% extra	18%
More than 25%	6%

Table 3: Interest to pay Extra cost for sustainable fashion
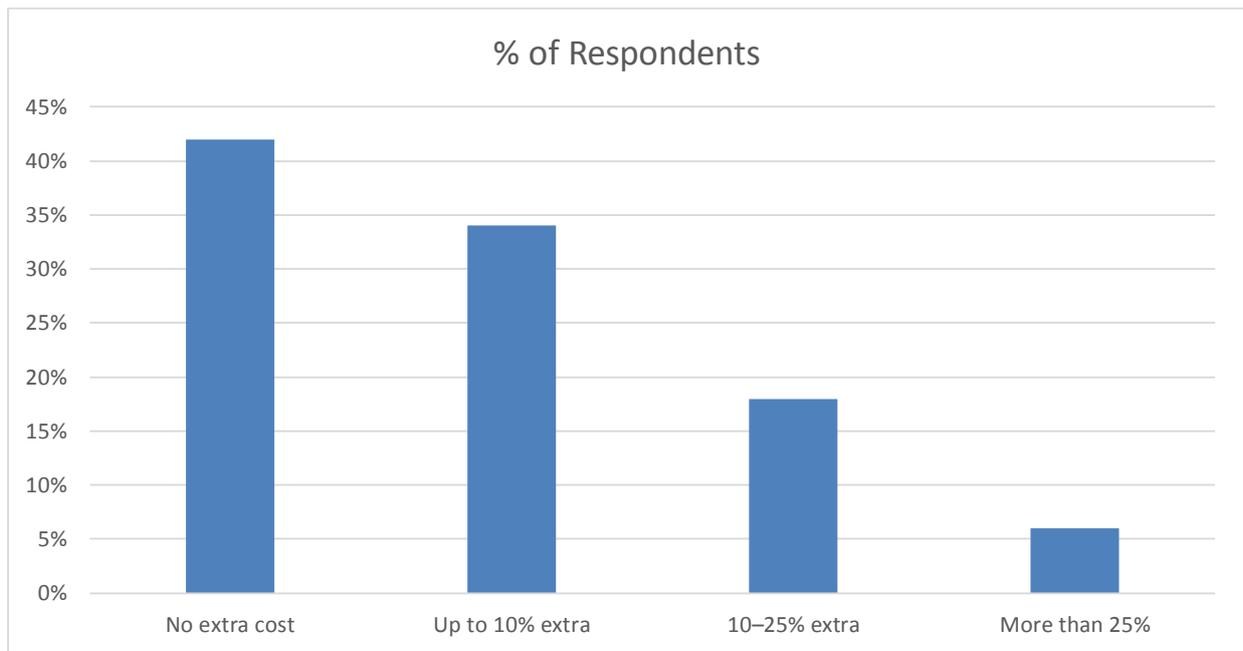
Graph 3: Percentage of extra cost willing to pay for sustainable fashion

Interpretation: Only 24% were willing to pay more than 10% extra. Younger consumers (18–25) were **twice as likely** to pay a premium.

5. Brand Sustainability and Trust

- **60%** reported they trust brands more if they show transparency in sustainability efforts.
- However, **only 15%** had ever researched a brand's environmental or social performance before purchasing.

6. Attitude-Behavior Gap

| Question	Yes (%)	No (%)
Do you believe sustainability is important in fashion?	74%	26%
Have you ever bought clothes because they were labeled "sustainable"?	31%	69%

Table 4: Attitude behavior gap
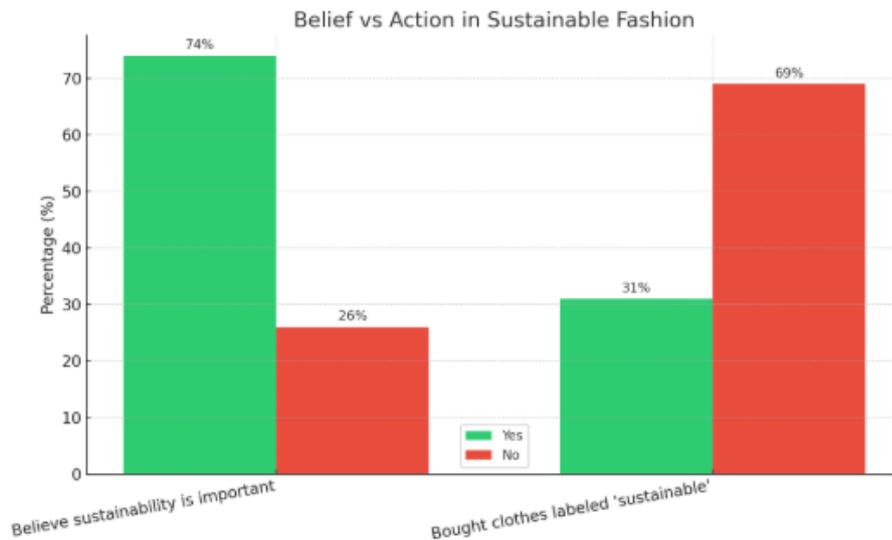
Graph 4: Belief vs Action in Sustainable Fashion

Interpretation: A significant **attitude-behavior gap** exists. Although 74% agree sustainability matters, only 31% have acted on it in their purchases.

7. Gender-Based Differences
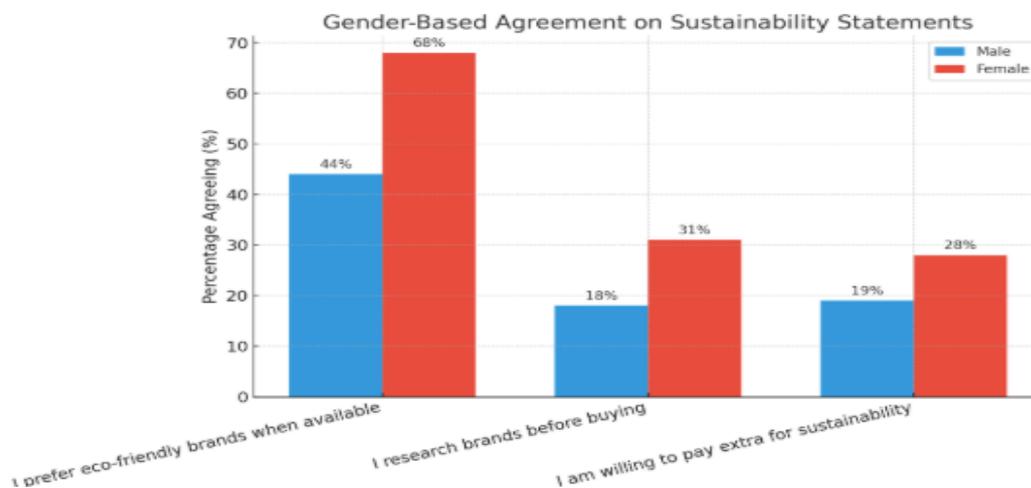
Graph 5: Gender-based differences

Statement	% Agree (Male)	% Agree (Female)
"I prefer eco-friendly brands when available"	44%	68%
"I research brands before buying"	18%	31%
"I am willing to pay extra for sustainability"	19%	28%

Table 5: Gender based differences statements

Interpretation: Women showed significantly higher ethical and environmental engagement than men.

FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

1. Awareness of Sustainability

- 82% of respondents had heard the term "sustainable fashion."
- Only 39% could define it accurately (e.g., eco-friendly materials, ethical labor).
- 28% knew of any specific sustainability initiative by brands like H&M Conscious or Zara Join Life.

2. Purchase Decision Drivers

Factor	Influence (out of 10)
Price	9.1
Style/Trend	8.6
Brand Name	7.8
Sustainability	5.2
Peer Influence	6.5

Table 6: Purchase decision drivers

3. Willingness to Pay

- Only 24% were willing to pay more than 10% extra for sustainable clothing.
- Among those, the majority were in the 18-25 age group.

4. Demographics and Sustainability

- **Gender**: Females showed more interest in ethical shopping (65%) than males (42%).
- **Age**: Gen Z (18–25) respondents ranked sustainability higher than Millennials (26–35).
- **Income**: Higher-income groups were more inclined toward sustainable choices.

5. CSR and Brand Loyalty

- 60% reported increased trust in brands with transparent CSR practices.

- However, only 15% had ever researched a brand's sustainability credentials before purchasing.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that while sustainability is becoming an increasingly important factor, it is not yet the primary driver in fast fashion consumer purchase decisions. The majority of consumers still prioritize affordability and style, although a meaningful shift is occurring among younger, more conscious consumers. The fast fashion industry stands at a critical crossroads, challenged by the need to balance profitability with ethical and environmental accountability. This study explored the intersection of sustainability and consumer behavior in the context of fast fashion, aiming to understand how conscious consumption is shaped by awareness, demographic factors, brand initiatives, and corporate social responsibility.

1. Consumer Awareness of Sustainability

The findings indicate that while general awareness of sustainability in fashion is relatively high—particularly among Gen Z and educated urban consumers—**depth of understanding remains superficial**. Many respondents recognized terms like "eco-friendly" and "sustainable collections" but lacked clarity on what constitutes genuinely sustainable practices. This suggests a need for brands and educators to go beyond surface-level marketing and invest in **sustainability literacy** through transparent communication.

2. Influence of Sustainability on Purchase Decisions

Despite strong consumer sentiments in favour of sustainable practices, the **actual impact on purchase decisions is modest**. Price and style still dominate as primary purchase drivers. Although a significant portion of consumers agree with the ethical premise of sustainability, this does not consistently translate into buying behavior—highlighting a persistent **attitude-behavior gap**. Only a minority are willing to pay a premium for sustainable fashion, reinforcing the perception of it being a niche concern rather than a mainstream motivator.

3. Role of Demographics in Shaping Sustainable Behavior

Demographic variables such as **age, gender, education, and income** significantly influence consumer attitudes toward sustainability. Younger consumers (18–25) and women, in particular, demonstrated a greater inclination toward eco-conscious buying. Postgraduates and those in higher income brackets were also more likely to support sustainability initiatives, both in perception and action. These findings underscore the importance of **segment-specific marketing** when promoting sustainable fashion offerings.

4. Corporate Social Responsibility and Brand Loyalty

The study further confirms that **corporate social responsibility (CSR)** initiatives, when perceived as authentic and transparent, enhance **brand trust and loyalty**. Consumers are more inclined to engage with brands that demonstrate a clear commitment to ethical labour practices, environmental protection, and community support. However, scepticism toward greenwashing remains prevalent, suggesting that CSR must be supported by **credible data, third-party certifications, and honest storytelling**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of consumer behavior, sustainability awareness, demographic influences, and corporate social responsibility (CSR), the following actionable recommendations are proposed for fast fashion brands, marketers, and policy advocates:

1. Strengthen Consumer Education and Transparency

- Launch **educational campaigns** through digital media, packaging, and in-store displays to clarify what "sustainable fashion" means—e.g., organic materials, fair trade, water-saving practices, etc.
- Use **QR codes** or **blockchain** technologies to offer product-level traceability that builds trust.
- Partner with influencers and eco-conscious celebrities to spread awareness in relatable ways.

2. Make Sustainable Fashion More Affordable and Accessible

- Introduce **tiered pricing** within sustainable collections to cater to different income segments.
- Offer **discounts**, **loyalty points**, or **recycling credits** to incentivize eco-friendly purchases.
- Explore **rental**, **second-hand**, or **resale platforms** to make ethical fashion options available at lower costs.

3. Customize Sustainability Messaging Based on Demographics

- Use **targeted digital marketing** and **personalized content** (e.g., Instagram campaigns for Gen Z, LinkedIn articles for professionals) to reach these demographics effectively.
- Conduct periodic **consumer segmentation** studies to adapt brand messaging to evolving values and expectations.

4. Improve the Credibility of CSR and Sustainability Claims

- Back all sustainability claims with **third-party certifications** (e.g., GOTS, Fair Trade, OEKO-TEX).
- Publish **annual sustainability reports** detailing measurable goals and progress.
- Engage in **two-way dialogue** with customers via feedback forms, sustainability forums, or brand transparency events.

5. Integrate Circular Fashion Practices

Finding: There is growing interest in sustainable consumption models, yet circular fashion is underutilized.

- Introduce **take-back** or **repair programs** to extend garment life.
- Offer **eco-rewards** for returning used clothes, which can be recycled or upcycled.
- Promote capsule wardrobes and minimalist fashion trends to encourage thoughtful consumption.

Limitations:

- The study is limited to urban India and may not reflect rural or global trends.
- Self-reported data may be biased by social desirability.
- Longitudinal tracking would provide deeper insights into changing behavior.

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