RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Do fast fashion sustainable business strategies influence attitude, awareness and behaviours of female consumers?

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Abstract

In recent years, the fashion and textile industries have come under pressure to manage customer expectations. Previous research has shown that female consumers tend to buy more clothing than male consumers and are understood to care more about fashion. However, existing studies that have focused on understanding consumer attitudes toward sustainable fast fashion consumption have not been particularly explored from the female consumer's perspective. Neither have they attempted to explore the impact of sustainable business strategies on purchasing behaviour. This study attempts to bridge this gap and focuses on exploring the attitude and purchasing behaviour of female consumers driven by sustainable business strategies of fast fashion firms. The research findings are based on responses from 155 female consumers, followed by interviews to triangulate the findings. The results show that female consumers are sustainably conscious and aware of the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies. Furthermore, the study indicates that female consumers' attitudes and purchasing behaviour are both (unconsciously) influenced by the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies. Therefore, fast fashion companies should investigate how their sustainable initiatives and strategies influence the female consumer in terms of attitude and purchasing behaviour. This study thus adds to the limited empirical studies investigating female consumers' attitudes, awareness and purchasing behaviours.

KEYWORDS
awareness, consumer attitude, fast fashion, interviews, purchasing behaviour, survey, sustainable business strategies

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the 21st century, global clothing production has doubled, thanks to lower operating costs and higher consumer spending (The Economist, 2017). As a result, consumers are now buying more fast fashion items than ever due to their low prices (Camargo et al., 2020). Fast fashion refers to producing cheap garments inspired by catwalk styles for quick sales in the mass retail market (Ertekin & Atik, 2015). These garments from fast fashion companies are more affordable than high fashion, making them attractive to consumers (Cook &

Abbreviations: CSR, corporate social responsiblity; SBS, sustainable business strategies.

Yurchisin, 2017; Fares et al., 2022). However, its rapid pace and cheap prices come at a high cost to the environment (Colucci & Vecchi, 2021) and labour conditions (Dzhengiz et al., 2023). Mass production and overconsumption have led to vast amounts of clothing ending up in landfills or incinerators, contributing to pollution and resource depletion (Belz & Binder, 2017). Consequently, the increase in clothing production raises concerns about sustainability as this industry uses high levels of pesticides and emits many greenhouse gases (The Economist, 2017).

The fast fashion industry is one of the most labour- and water-intensive industries. For example, cotton production to meet the global demand for clothing is causing the drying up of the northern Aral Sea in Uzbekistan (BBC, 2015). This industry is a major contributor to deforestation, soil degradation and microfibres in seawater. Furthermore, to keep prices low, many fast fashion companies are moving their production factories to Asian countries where labour costs are low (Niinimäki et al., 2020). However, there are concerns about working conditions, worker health and safety for workers and employee well-being. It is estimated that if the current practices continue, the industry will consume more than 26% of the carbon budget by 2050 (EMF, 2017).

Consumers have become more interested in addressing sustainability issues as sustainability has become more prevalent. As a result, consumers expect and demand that fast fashion companies operate more ethically and sustainably (Ki et al., 2021). Furthermore, because fast fashion companies are well-known to the public and are held accountable for problems caused by them and their suppliers (Sarfraz et al., 2021), any incident can significantly impact the brand value and reputation of the fast fashion company. An example is the Bangladesh scandal in 2013, where a factory in Bangladesh collapsed with thousands of workers inside, killing more than a thousand people (Park & Kim, 2016). As a result, fashion consumers increasingly demand socially responsible processes and ethical conditions for factory workers (Park et al., 2017). In response, fast fashion companies have begun to adopt sustainable strategies and practices (Wren, 2022).

However, according to Wiederhold and Martinez (2018), while 30% of consumers intend to purchase sustainable products, only 3% make ethical purchases. This significant difference in consumer attitudes and purchasing behaviour is known as the attitude–behaviour gap (Siraj et al., 2022). This gap is caused by an old-fashioned image, high prices, lack of information, untrustworthy ethical claims and lack of product availability (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). However, being 'fashionable' often outweighs being ethical and sustainable (Dhir et al., 2021). Extant literature on the attitude–behaviour gap can be categorised broadly into two streams (Caruana et al., 2016). First, there is much attention on the constructs, situation issues and methodological flaws that explain the attitude–behaviour gap. For example, Wiederhold and Martinez (2018) investigated the main factors influencing the attitude–behaviour gap in the fashion industry. The second stream focuses on interpretive studies that consider collective and community-based aspects of sustainable consumption. For example, according to Islam (2020), ethical consumption is a multilevel phenomenon. These studies provide insights into the reasons behind the attitude–behaviour gap and an explanation for any tensions between the attitude and behaviour of consumers (Cairns et al., 2022). However, often, these studies do not suggest a clear business strategy to address the attitude–behaviour gap. According to ElHaffar et al. (2020), there is a need for research to investigate how to implement a strategy to address the attitude–behaviour gap rather than to explore this gap.

Furthermore, there is a gap in sustainability awareness between female and male consumers. For example, Cairns et al. (2022) highlighted that female consumers tend to buy more fashion products than men and are understood to care more about fashion. At the same time, White et al. (2019) showed that female consumers are more sustainable and aware of problems. Recently, Sun et al. (2020) found that young and older female consumers intend to accept low-quality products more than men. Therefore, this research will focus on female consumers' behaviour among a broader age group. This focus aligns with other studies (e.g., Dhir et al., 2021; Jacobs et al., 2018), which paid attention to female consumers as they displayed higher sustainable concerns.

Thus, this research investigates sustainable business strategies (SBS) to deal with the attitude–behaviour gap of female consumers in the fast fashion industry. This study, therefore, addresses the research question: *How do sustainable business strategies influence female consumers' attitudes, awareness and purchasing behaviour towards fast fashion companies?* This research adds value to current knowledge by looking at the attitude–behaviour gap from the perspective of the female consumer. Findings from this research will help fast fashion companies understand consumers' thoughts on sustainable fashion business strategies and practices. It is of great interest to fast fashion companies to get or maintain their brand value, image and equity as consumers will perceive that particular fast fashion company as favourable and may have a higher tendency to be loyal to that brand (Su & Chang, 2018).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical overview and develops hypotheses. Section 3 discusses the methodology adopted in this study. The findings and discussions are presented in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 concludes this study.

2 | THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

2.1 | Fast fashion

Fast fashion products are produced quickly, consumed in large quantities and often thrown away after a short period (Mason et al., 2022). Cost savings and capacity flexibility are common strategies for producing these cheap products; therefore, fast fashion companies often outsource (Sardar et al., 2016). Furthermore, the reasonable prices make fast fashion products accessible to almost all social classes (Ertekin & Atik, 2015).

While fast fashion products are affordable for almost everyone, Sun et al. (2020) discovered that price and product design are two key

-WILEY

factors influencing female consumers' purchasing behaviour. Retailers can offer small quantities of clothes with the latest fashionable product designs, prompting consumers to pay reasonably low prices instead of waiting for the sale (Cook & Yurchisin, 2017). These prices are made possible by the fast fashion companies' advanced technology, increased production speed and supply chain efficiency (Ertekin & Atik, 2015).

Fast fashion has created a vicious cycle as retailers keep inventing new limited merchandise, so consumers frequently shop (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Due to the low prices and trend-sensitive items, consumers are more inclined to buy impulsively (Peters et al., 2021). This was further substantiated by Cook and Yurchisin (2017), who asserted that consumers are attracted to impulsive buying through scarcity due to limited supply and available time. The scarcity of clothing items, the low prices and the short availability make them attractive to consumers, leading to an increase in fast fashion consumption.

2.2 | Sustainability in the fashion industry

The fashion industry provides a surplus of waste and causes environmental pollution (Kamis et al., 2019). According to Khare (2019), nearly 60% of all garments produced and purchased end up in landfills within a year of being made. Garment waste is an increasing problem as fast fashion items can be easily damaged and thrown away due to the low initial investment and low replacement costs (Degenstein et al., 2020). This created a throw-away culture, where clothing is thrown away and cannot be recycled easily (Brewer, 2019). There are two types of textile waste in the fashion industry: pretextiles and posttextiles. The pretextile waste is the waste produced before entering the consumer market, while posttextile waste is the waste after it has been sold in the consumer market (Kamis et al., 2019). Fast fashion items are generally challenging to recycle and decompose due to the fibres used. Synthetic materials break down slowly, and the decomposition of woollen clothing produces methane, which contributes to global warming (Yee et al., 2016).

Recent incidents in the fashion industry (e.g., the collapse of the eight-story Rana Plaza building) have influenced the consumer's perspective on the fast fashion supply chain (Camargo et al., 2020). As a result, they are more aware of the environmental impact (Apaolaza et al., 2022) and are interested in buying sustainable fashion products (Elf et al., 2022). From the companies' perspective, it is important to adopt sustainable practices in their supply chain (e.g., ISO 14000). Fast fashion companies have therefore started investing more in training and capacity-building programmes to maintain long-term supplier relationships and extend sustainability upstream in the supply chain (Mejías et al., 2019).

2.3 | Purchasing behaviour

The purchasing behaviour is understood as the consumer's actual buying decision. Consumers form their behaviour from a situation.

As consumers experience a product, their awareness of that product brand grows and stimulates purchasing behaviour (Ahn et al., 2018). Noh and Johnson (2019) showed that the brand's marketing efforts could influence consumers' purchasing behaviour if they identify with it. Consumers perceive the product's value by assessing the benefits received compared with the cost paid. In the fast fashion industry, product scarcity could positively influence purchasing behaviour as consumers have to buy impulsively (Şener et al., 2019). Additionally, McNeill and Venter (2019) showed that emotional motivators, such as pleasure sensations, are also drivers of purchasing decisions in the fast fashion industry. Another factor that affects the demand for fast fashion products is the gender of consumers. Koca and Koc (2016) revealed that female and male customers have different perceptions and preferences concerning fast fashion. With the rise of social media, an increasing number of female consumers have focused on purchasing fashion products (Xiao et al., 2023). Specifically, female consumers are more likely to have sustainable purchasing behaviour (Rees et al., 2019). A recent study by Kopplin and Rösch (2021) further confirmed that female consumers purchasing behaviour is driven by their sustainability concerns.

2.4 | Consumers' attitude

Fast fashion companies use marketing programmes to influence or change consumers' attitudes and purchasing behaviour (Sun et al., 2014). They promote their brand images and products, so consumers have a positive attitude towards the companies (Chang & Jai, 2015). Consumers prefer clothing congruence between self-images and brand images (Desfiandi, 2020). Song and Ko (2017) argue that although consumers say they prefer sustainable clothing items, there is often a gap between their attitude and behaviour, which hinders the sustainable fashion market. The psychological role of clothing consumption could be a reason for the gap between attitude and behaviour (Ertekin & Atik, 2015), as fashion consumption is considered pleasant and utilised for self-fulfilment and identity construction (Power & Mont, 2010).

A consumer can consider a range of available information such as price, quality and past experiences when making a purchasing behaviour. Jones et al. (2017) argued that information relating to sustainability plays a significant role in those decisions. According to Sreen et al. (2018), consumer attitudes toward green products influence their purchase intention. Furthermore, gender is a significant factor that shapes or changes a consumer's attitude (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). More specifically, Jones et al. (2017) suggested that females have a more assertive attitude towards sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes which was also echoed by Kopplin and Rösch (2021). Thus, we argue the following:

> **H1.** The attitude towards sustainability has a positive influence on the purchasing behaviour of female consumers.

2.5 | SBS

Fast fashion companies adopt strategies that quickly respond to consumer demand with low costs (Camargo et al., 2020). For example, H&M aimed at delivering fashion products with prices that suit everyone, which is the foundation of today's fast fashion business concept (Giertz-Mårtenson, 2012). *'Here today and gone tomorrow'* is the strategy of fast fashion companies to increase the visitations of consumers (Yee et al., 2016). Fast fashion companies need to respond to consumers as this enables companies to reduce waste and cost (Colucci & Vecchi, 2021).

Fast fashion consumers are increasingly aware of environmental and social problems, so fast fashion companies must adopt a sustainable strategy (Colucci & Vecchi, 2021). Park and Kim (2016) argued that the three pillars of sustainability (i.e., economic, environmental and social sustainability) must be fully integrated into the fast fashion business. Otherwise, it could harm the brand image and consumers' perception of sustainability efforts. Therefore, it is of great value that the fast fashion retailer develops a communication strategy that communicates to the consumer what sustainability means and how they meet economic, environmental and social sustainability requirements (Blazquez et al., 2020). Khare (2020) claimed that communication strategies should aim to inform and raise consumer awareness about the importance of sustainable fashion, fair trade products, and natural fibres.

An appropriate marketing strategy is beneficial for companies to transfer their sustainable strategy to the consumer. Brand personality is a tool used to build and strengthen brand equity and plays a strategic role in brand positioning for fast fashion companies (Su, 2016). The marketing message must be conveyed with the correct communication method that is tailored to the target audience (Park et al., 2017). If the brand is trustworthy, the degree to which the quality is consistent and meets expectations and improves word of mouth is also valuable advertising (Zeng et al., 2019). Park and Kim (2016) stated that the transparency of fast fashion companies positively impacts consumer trust, attitude and buying intention. Integrating sustainability into a business strategy improves the company's brand image and increases the product's credibility, leading to a stronger relationship with its consumer (Park & Kim, 2016).

Multiple fast fashion companies have claimed to support sustainability and have started sustainable product lines (Moon & Lee, 2018). For example, H&M started the conscious collection, Zara launched the green code programme, Forever 21 created the social responsibility programme and Inditex implemented a Code of Conduct for Manufacturers and Suppliers (Yoo et al., 2018). Additionally, some brands are now exploring garment leasing and rental services to further reduce waste (Tunn et al., 2021). These services are being provided through platforms (e.g., Vinted and ThredUp) that have gained popularity and are contributing to the sustainable fashion movement (de Bruyne & Verleye, 2023). These platforms have created vibrant communities of fashion-conscious individuals who are passionate about sustainable shopping. By buying and selling preloved fashion items, consumers contribute to reducing the fashion industry's

environmental impact and help build a more sustainable and circular fashion economy (Jain et al., 2022).

These sustainability programmes are key in building knowledge about sustainable products for consumers. Through these programmes, consumers have more understanding of companies' efforts toward sustainability (Elf et al., 2022). Furthermore, consumers with strong concerns about sustainability care more about product disposal, waste minimisation and social issues (Sarigöllü et al., 2021). According to Kong et al. (2016), consumer knowledge positively influences consumers' attitudes toward sustainable fashion products. Thus, we argue the following:

> **H2.** The sustainable business strategies of fast fashion companies will positively influence the attitude of female consumers.

Previous studies have found a relationship between sustainable knowledge and purchasing behaviour (Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Choi and Johnson (2019) found a positive relationship between environmental knowledge and purchasing behaviour. Khan et al. (2020) indicated that knowledge and attitude toward the ban on plastic bags positively affect consumer green behaviour. Furthermore, according to the social identity theory perspective, gender characteristics significantly affect consumers' concerns and knowledge (Lau et al., 2023). Thus, we argue the following:

> **H3.** The sustainable business strategies of fast fashion companies will positively influence the purchasing behaviour of female consumers.

2.6 | Consumer awareness

Consumers are becoming more aware of sustainable practices, putting pressure on companies to become more sustainable in their operations and supply chains (Kong et al., 2016). Research has shown that an increase in consumers' awareness levels of sustainable issues leads to a more favourable attitude towards sustainable products (Kong et al., 2016). Whereas Ganganaboina and Sana (2017) found that by following adequate communication strategies companies can create customer awareness towards their sustainability initiatives. Lundblad and Davies (2016) stated that consumers increasingly show ethical concerns in fashion consumption. Many consumers may stress their awareness and concern about sustainability and social rights. A study by Blazquez et al. (2020) showed that consumers' familiarity with sustainable fashion was high, particularly towards the social aspects of sustainability. Siraj et al. (2022) suggested that consumers need relevant sustainability information about the products to shape sustainable purchase behaviours. They further stressed that marketers and policymakers need to raise consumer awareness towards sustainability to promote sustainable consumer behaviour. Koca and Koc (2016) revealed that female customers demonstrate different approaches in their decision-making and purchasing behaviour when shopping for

—WILEY—

clothing for a variety of different reasons. Rees et al. (2019) in their study found that female consumers are more likely to have sustainable purchasing behaviour. Kopplin and Rösch (2021) further confirmed that female consumers purchasing behaviour is driven by their sustainability concerns. More recently, Xiao et al. (2023) found that with the rise of social media, an increasing number of female consumers have focused on purchasing fashion products. Several other recent studies such as Shimul et al. (2022) and Limbu et al. (2022) have also shown that female consumers' sustainability concerns drive their fast fashion purchase intention. We, therefore argue the following:

> **H4.** Sustainable business strategies of fast fashion companies raise female consumers' awareness.

Figure 1 presents all hypotheses in the proposed research framework.

3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a quantitative survey approach to test the hypotheses. The quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire through Qualtrics software. The target respondents for the survey were female consumers who were approached through personal networks and usage of social media (Facebook and Linkedin). Ethical approval was taken before the data collection to protect participants and the researcher.

The survey questionnaire statements followed a 5-point Likert scale designed to measure consumers' awareness, attitudes and purchasing behaviour regarding the sustainable strategies of fast fashion companies. This scale and questions are inspired by previous literature (Khare, 2019; Park et al., 2017). The survey questionnaire was distributed to around 500 fast-fashion female consumers through personal contacts, social media platforms (LinkedIn and Facebook) and
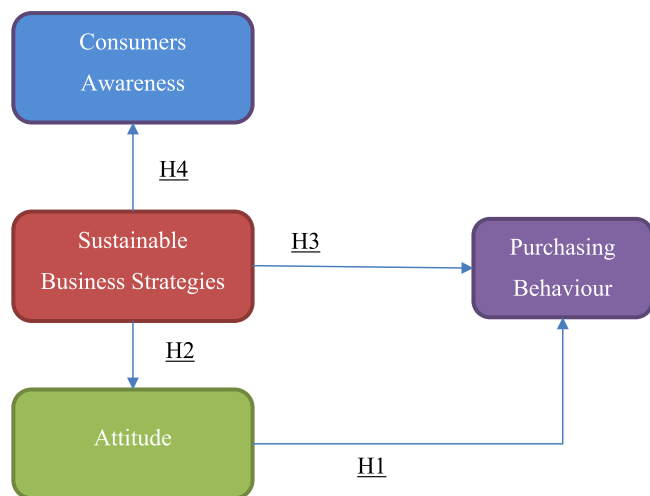

FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework.

following snowballing techniques. A total of 155 valid survey responses were collected from female fast fashion consumers resulting in a response rate of 31%. The data gathered were analysed using SPSS software.

The study also conducted interviews with six female participants afterwards to triangulate the findings. The interview questions are included in Appendix A. These interview participants were identified from the survey population who agreed to be part of the study for follow-up questions. Each interview lasted 30–40 min and was conducted online via MS Teams and Skype. The data collected from the qualitative study were analysed using NVIVO. After the coding, themes were identified, and the thematic networks were constructed and finally interpreted.

4 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 | Quantitative findings

This section first provides insight obtained from the quantitative survey data and interview findings will follow. The profile of the participating respondents is presented in terms of agreement with the terms, gender, age, monthly net household income and average net monthly expenditure on fashion (Table 1). Most female respondents (61%) were between 21 and 30 years old. Approximately 57% have a

TABLE 1 Demographics of the survey respondents.

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)		
<21	21	14%
21–30	94	61%
31–40	11	7%
41–50	7	4%
51–60	19	12%
>60	3	2%
Monthly net household income (EUR)		
<1000	59	38%
1000–2000	30	19%
2000–3000	20	13%
3000–4000	9	6%
4000–5000	16	10%
>5000	21	14%
Average net monthly expenditure on fashion (EUR)		
<50	59	38%
50–100	47	30%
100–150	31	20%
150–200	13	9%
200–250	0	0%
250–300	3	2%
>300	2	1%

monthly net household income of 2000 Euros, and about 68% spend less than 100 Euros per month on fashion items.

4.2 | Attitude towards fast fashion

Participants were then asked about their attitudes towards fast fashion and were presented with various options. The top five most frequently chosen topics by the respondents are shown in Figure 2. More than 70% of the respondents associate fast fashion with cheap, low quality and not sustainable. Furthermore, it is striking that all three topics related to sustainability are at the bottom and are not associated with fast fashion.

4.3 | Purchasing behaviour regarding fast fashion

The low price and quality are associated with fast fashion; they are the two most important purchasing considerations when buying clothes for the respondents (Figure 3). On the other hand, recycling is only important for 3% of the respondents. When buying fast fashion, the respondents are most influenced by previous experiences with
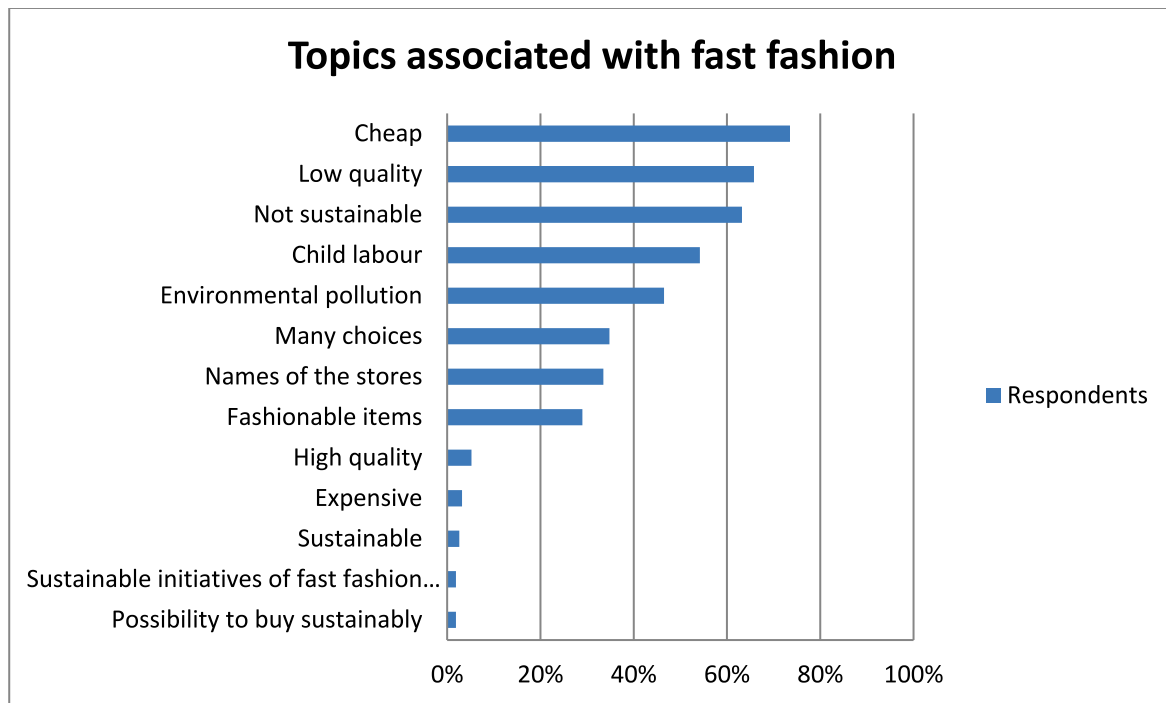

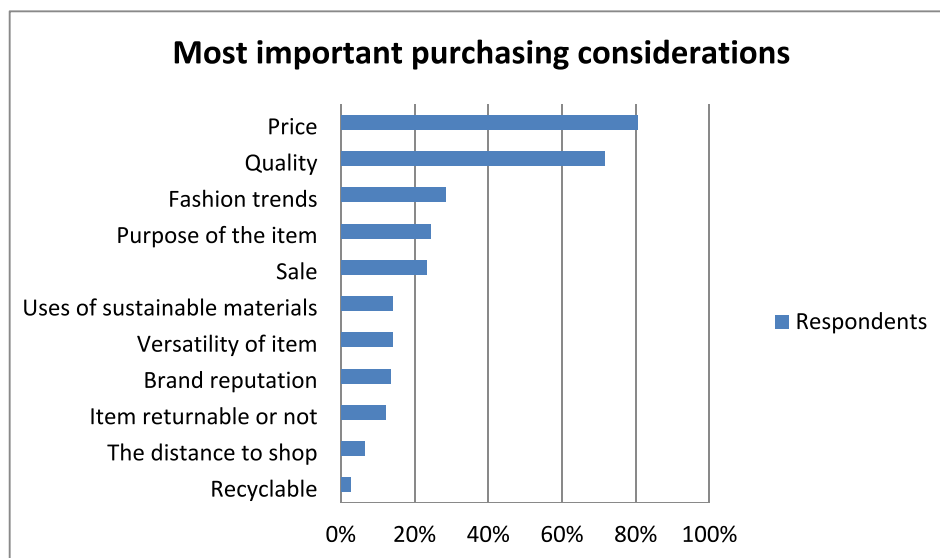**FIGURE 2** Topics associated with fast fashion.

FIGURE 3 Most important purchasing considerations.

the store and social media (Figure 4). Still, the percentages of the four most chosen answers are not far apart. Figure 5 presents a word cloud with the companies where the respondents last bought clothes. This illustrates that most respondents shopped at H&M, Zalando and Zara.

4.4 | Reliability of the Likert scale

The reliability of each construct was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, and a score greater than 0.6 is generally an acceptable level of reliability (Ursachi et al., 2015). Items that indicated a reliability score of less than 0.6 were excluded (only the statement *'I am eager to learn more about sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies'* under the Awareness item was excluded). After excluding one statement, the reliability and internal consistency of the constructs were confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, with values ranging from 0.601 to 0.711 for all constructs (Table 2).

4.5 | Awareness of sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies

The descriptive statistics of all the statements used in the questionnaire are shown in Table 3, including the mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*). Interestingly, 80% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree that fast fashion companies are sustainable ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.899$) (Figure 6). Furthermore, on average, the respondents slightly disagree that the fast fashion companies are trying to be

TABLE 2 Cronbach's alpha values of key constructs.

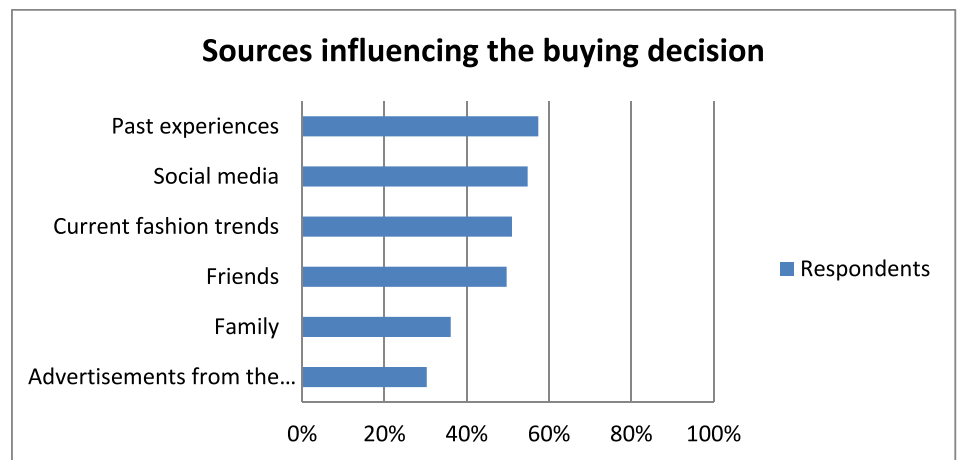| Items	Cronbach's alpha
Awareness	0.683
Sustainable initiatives (knowledge)	0.711
Attitude	0.668
Purchasing behaviour	0.601

FIGURE 4 Sources influencing the buying decision.

FIGURE 5 Word cloud of last visited stores by respondents.

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. dev.
Awareness					
Fast fashion companies are sustainable	155	1	5	4.22	0.899
Fast fashion companies are trying to be sustainable	155	1	5	3.38	1.046
I am aware of the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies	155	1	5	3.15	1.191
I am eager to learn more about the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies	155	1	5	2.35	1.074
I think that fast fashion companies are encouraging consumers to make sustainable decisions	155	1	5	3.75	1.067
I can name at least one sustainable initiative for every fast fashion company where I buy clothes	155	1	5	3.79	1.217
Knowledge					
In recent years, there has been an improvement in the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies	155	6	10	7.61	0.935
Fast fashion companies strive for cleaner production and sustainable resource efficiency	155	6	10	8.12	1.021
Fast fashion companies are putting greater emphasis on Eco-labelling, certification and sustainable marketing	155	6	10	7.77	0.91
Sustainable purchasing and sustainable transport are a step forward for all fast fashion companies	155	6	10	7.05	0.874
Fast fashion companies are communicating very clearly in what ways they are sustainable	155	6	10	8.48	1.034
There are big differences between fast fashion companies in the extent to which they have sustainable initiatives	155	6	10	7.5	0.942
Attitude					
I want to buy from fast fashion companies that are keeping a close eye on their overseas manufacturing operations to ensure their business practices are sustainable	155	8	12	9.06	1.067
I believe that fast fashion companies must produce items with a minimal negative impact on the environment and the well-being of employees	155	8	12	8.58	0.896
I believe that everyone should reflect on their buying behaviour at fast fashion companies	155	8	12	8.8	0.936
The sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies have had a positive influence on my attitude towards them	155	8	12	9.3	1.002
Fast fashion companies have sustainable initiatives and strategies only because consumers want them to	155	8	12	9.19	0.91
Purchasing behaviour					
I buy from fast fashion stores because of the low price	155	8	12	9.25	1.224
The sustainable commitment of the brand has a positive influence on my purchase decision	155	8	12	9.33	0.994
I tend to shop with a fast fashion company that is actively involved in their sustainable initiatives	155	8	12	9.83	0.961
I buy clothes from the sustainable lines of fast fashion companies	155	8	12	9.77	1.098
I would pay extra to purchase environment-friendly clothes	155	8	12	9.32	1.043

sustainable ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.046$) or encourage consumers to make sustainable decisions ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.067$). About 40% of the respondents are aware of the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.191$). However, more than 60% of the respondents could not name at least one sustainable initiative ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.217$).
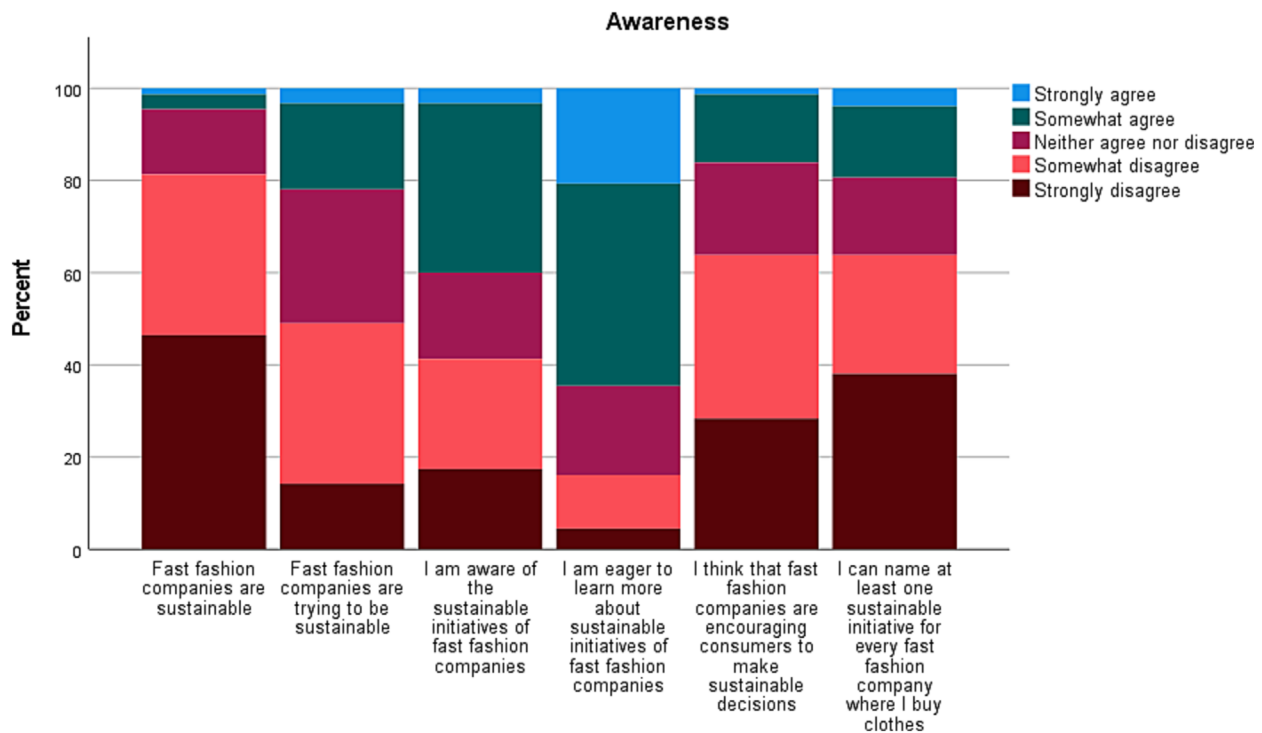
FIGURE 6   Respondents' awareness of sustainable initiatives.

4.6 | Knowledge of sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies

Around 74% of the respondents agree that sustainable purchasing and sustainable transport are a step forward for all fast fashion companies ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.874$) (Figure 7). Over 57% of respondents indicate that there has been an improvement in the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies in recent years ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.935$). However, the majority of the respondents do not think that fast fashion companies communicate these initiatives clearly ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.034$). About 45% of respondents see that fast fashion companies are emphasising Eco-labels, certification and sustainable marketing ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.91$). An interesting result is that around 33% of the respondents agree, 33% agree nor disagree and 33% disagree that fast fashion companies strive for cleaner production and sustainable resource efficiency ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.021$). Only 12% of the respondents disagree that there are big differences between fast fashion companies in the extent to which they have sustainable initiatives ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 0.942$).

4.7 | Influence sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies on the attitude of consumers

The respondents generally agree with the attitude statements (Figure 8). About 86% of the respondents believe that fast fashion companies must produce items with a minimal negative impact on the environment and their employees ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 0.896$). However,

the respondents indicate that they believe that fast fashion companies only employ sustainable strategies because consumers want them to ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 0.91$). Still, about 62% claim that sustainable initiatives positively influence their attitude towards the fast fashion company ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 1.002$). Respondents believe that companies should consider sustainability and that consumers should reflect on their purchasing behaviour at fast fashion companies ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 0.936$). About 75% of the respondents indicate that they want to buy from fast fashion companies that are keeping a close eye on their supply chain ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.067$).

4.8 | Influence sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies on the purchasing behaviour of consumers

About 71% of the respondents shop at fast fashion companies because of their low prices ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.224$) (Figure 9). Interestingly, about 64% of the respondents agree that brands' commitment to sustainability positively influences their purchase decision ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.994$). However, approximately 42% of the respondents do neither agree nor disagree with tending to shop with a fast fashion company that is actively involved in its sustainable initiatives ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.961$). Only about 45% of the respondents indicate that they buy clothes from the sustainable lines of fast fashion companies ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.098$). Yet nearly 66% of the respondents indicated that they would pay extra to purchase environment-friendly clothes ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.043$).
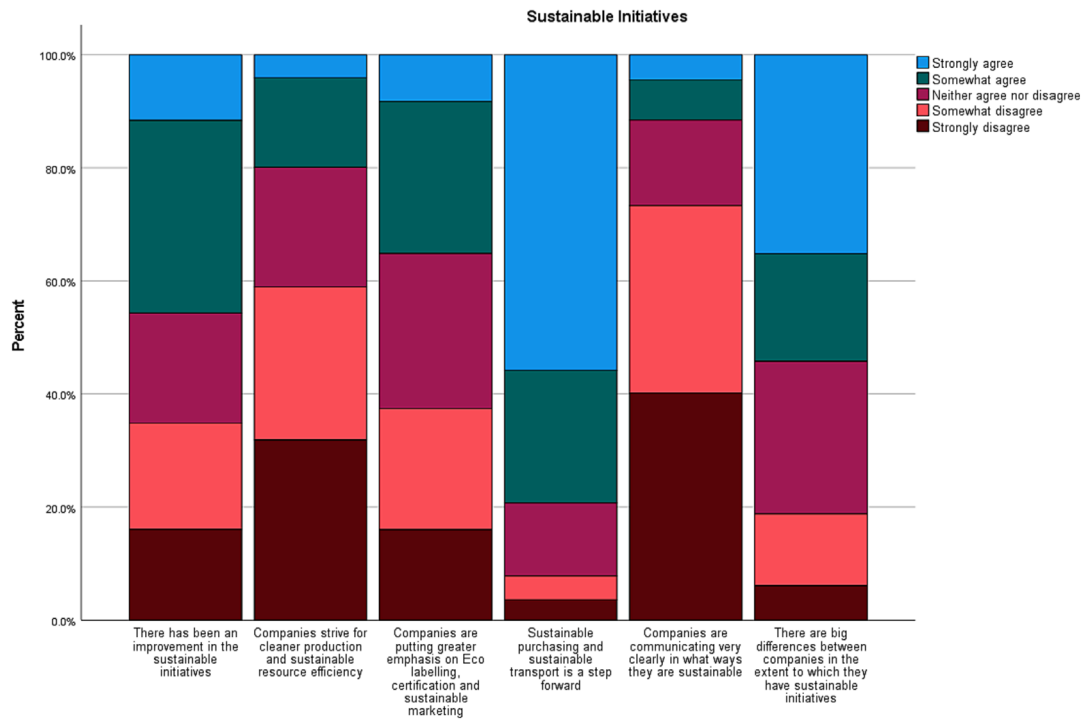
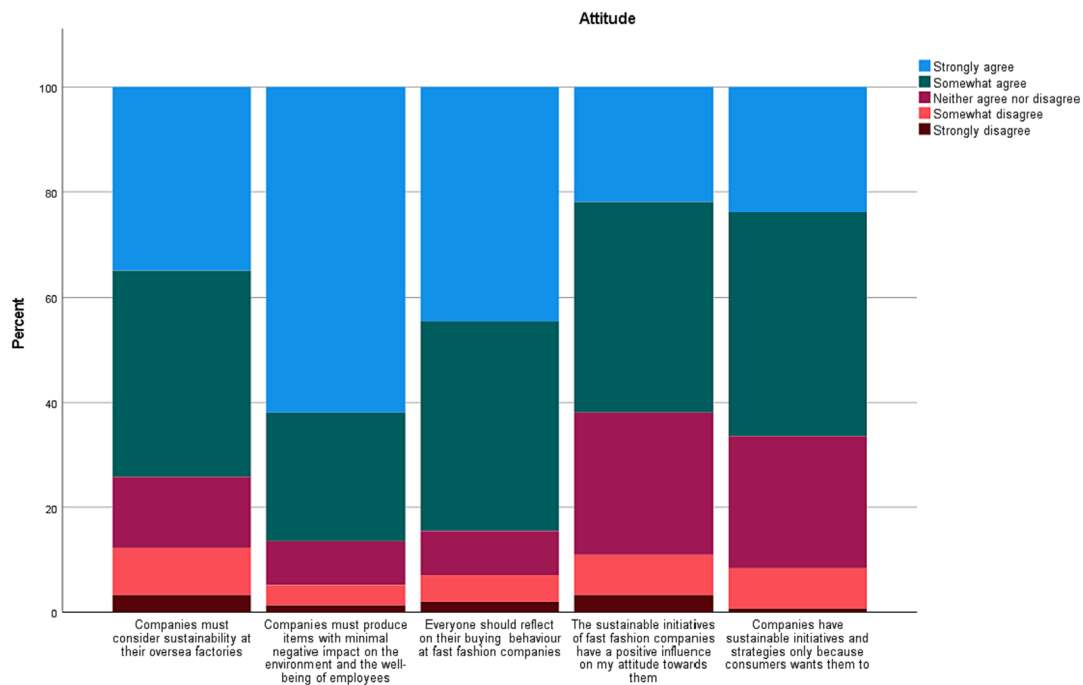**FIGURE 7** Respondents' knowledge of sustainable initiatives.

FIGURE 8 Respondents' attitude towards sustainable initiatives.

Respondents were asked what the main reason was for buying or not buying sustainable items from fast fashion stores. To this optional question, 92 respondents gave a wide variety of answers from price, quality or following fashion trends. On the other hand, respondents also mentioned that they buy sustainable/vintage items because of the concern towards the negative environmental and social impact and other sustainability-related issues. The most detailed answers concerned doubt about the intentions of the fast fashion companies and the doubt about how sustainable these sustainable lines are. Some respondents believed sustainable lines are only marketing strategies to get on the good side of the consumer. The lack of transparency, greenwashing and lack of information emerged as other reasons
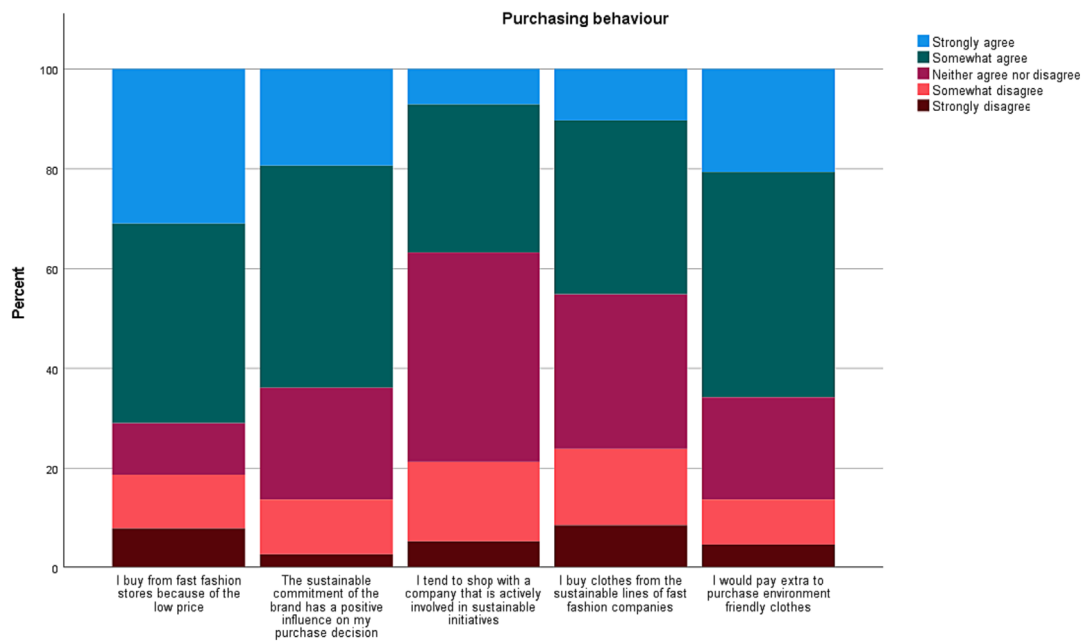
FIGURE 9 Respondents' purchasing behaviour concerning sustainable initiatives.

TABLE 4 Correlations analysis results.

		Awareness	SBS	Attitude	Behaviour
Awareness	Pearson correlation	1	.555**	.057	.154
	Sig. (two-tailed)		<.001	.481	.056
	N	155	155	155	155
SBS	Pearson correlation	.555**	1	.194*	.178*
	Sig. (two-tailed)	<.001		.016	.027
	N	155	155	155	155
Attitude	Pearson correlation	.057	.194*	1	.606**
	Sig. (two-tailed)	.481	.016		<.001
	N	155	155	155	155
Behaviour	Pearson correlation	.154	.178*	.606**	1
	Sig. (two-tailed)	.056	.027	<.001	
	N	155	155	155	155

Abbreviation: SBS, sustainable business strategies.
**Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (two-tailed).
*Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (two-tailed).

affecting respondents' decision not to buy sustainable items from fast fashion stores.

Most respondents are between the age of 21 and 30 and spend less than 100 Euros a month on fast fashion items. Moreover, cheap and low quality are mainly associated with fast fashion, and these companies are not seen as sustainable. Price and quality are correspondingly the most important purchasing considerations when buying clothes. Furthermore, respondents' top three recently visited stores were H&M, Zalando and Zara. In addition, interview findings discussed later in this section show the awareness, knowledge of sustainable initiatives, attitude and purchasing behaviour of female consumers.

Pearson correlations (Table 4) were used to analyse key constructs' relationships. Results of Pearson correlation indicated that knowledge of SBS was positively correlated to awareness ($r = 0.555$, $p < 0.01$), attitude ($r = 0.194$, $p < 0.05$) and purchasing behaviour ($r = 0.178$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, the attitude was positively related to purchasing behaviour ($r = 0.606$, $p < 0.01$). However, no significant correlations were found between awareness and attitude nor awareness and purchasing behaviour.

It is clear from Table 4 that a moderate correlation was observed between awareness and knowledge of sustainable initiatives. On the other hand, a strong correlation is measured between attitude and purchasing behaviour. And there is a very weak correlation evident

between knowledge of sustainable initiatives and attitude and knowledge of sustainable initiatives and purchasing behaviour.

4.9 | Hypothesis testing

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) proposed earlier was tested using empirical data. The correlation results support H1: attitude affects purchasing behaviour ($r = 0.606$, $p < 0.01$), which indicates that the consumer attitude is strongly related to the actual purchasing behaviour. Our findings thus support the research of Apaydin (2011), who argued that buying intent is strongly linked to consumer attitudes.

H2 predicted that fast fashion companies' SBS would positively influence female consumers' attitudes towards fast fashion. The results show a correlation between sustainable initiatives and attitude ($r = 0.194$, $p < 0.05$). However, the correlation coefficient is significant and positive yet very weak. The weak correlation is probably due to doubts about the motivation behind the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies.

The same doubts are probably why a very weak correlation between sustainable initiatives and purchasing behaviour has been found. H3 proposed that SBS of fast fashion companies will positively influence female consumers' purchasing behaviour. The results show a positive correlation between sustainable initiatives and purchasing behaviour ($r = 0.178$, $p < 0.05$). However, with this hypothesis, the correlation coefficient is positive yet very weak.

H4, which proposes that SBS of fast fashion companies raise female consumers' awareness, is supported ($r = 0.555$, $p < 0.01$). Female consumers know that fast fashion companies have sustainable initiatives and are knowledgeable about those initiatives. As Zhu and Sarkis (2004) stated, consumers are becoming increasingly aware of sustainable practices, leading to pressure on companies to incorporate sustainability into their strategies. However, in this research, only 60% of respondents claimed to be aware of the sustainable business initiatives of fast fashion companies. Table 5 below summarises the findings and hypotheses testing results.

4.10 | Qualitative interviews

To triangulate the survey findings, we conducted interviews to gain further insight into the findings. During the survey, we asked participants if they would be happy to be contacted for further interviews.

Six female participants responded positively; hence, they were approached to seek their views on attitudes, purchasing behaviours, awareness and SBS. Table 6 shows the profile of the interviewed participants.

4.11 | Consumer attitude and purchasing behaviour regarding fast fashion

The first question aimed to understand the purchasing behaviour of female consumers regarding fast fashion and their attitudes. Most participants mainly referred to the use of chemicals, child labour and the low wages of employees in third-world countries/supply chains. As one of the participants states, *'The first thing that comes to mind is child labour. It cannot be that cheap for the type of clothes that you get, and there must be a catch. The poor quality also comes to mind; you just wear the item for maybe two months, and then the quality deteriorates rapidly. I do not think they have CSR in third-world countries, which means that the employees' quality of life is also low, and there are no hard requirements/rules in their favour about their working environment (P3)'.* This quote perfectly describes the overarching thoughts of the participants about the fast fashion industry. Four participants expressed that their predominantly negative view of the fast fashion industry does not change their purchasing behaviour. The reasons are that they do not know what sustainable items are and where they can be bought, and sustainable clothes are too basic and too expensive.

On the other hand, two participants stated that their attitude influences their purchasing behaviour as they try to purchase fewer and more sustainable clothes. Likewise, participants also differ in what influences their purchasing behaviour. Five out of six female consumers are affected by fast fashion companies' advertisements. Multiple ways of advertising are brought up, namely, advertising in bus shelters, on television, in the mail and mannequins in the shops. P4 states, *'I really like it when they put outfits on models because that really helps me what fits nicely together, so that influences me very much'.*

Furthermore, half of the participants stated that influencers on social media influence their purchasing behaviour. Friends, family and fashion trends are also influential when buying clothes. The most important purchasing considerations when the participants buy clothes are price and quality, as all participants indicated. Participant 4 stated, *'The price is important and, on the other hand, if I put something on and I would really like it, and it gives me confidence, then it is worth a little more money.'* To conclude, female participants are influenced by multiple sources when buying clothes: advertisements, social

TABLE 5 Hypotheses summary.

Hypothesis			Result	Pearson coefficient	P-value
Attitude (H1)	⟶	Purchasing behaviour	Confirmed	0.606	0.01
Sustainable business strategies (H2)	⟶	Attitude	Confirmed	0.194	0.05
Sustainable business strategies (H3)	⟶	Purchasing behaviour	Confirmed	0.178	0.05
Sustainable business strategies (H4)	⟶	Awareness	Confirmed	0.555	0.01

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TABLE 6 Profiles of the interviewed participants.

Participant no.	Age	Monthly spending on fashion products (EUR)	Job	Number of times buying fashion products in a month (times)	Marital status
P1	23	300	Student	3	Civil partnered
P2	24	200	Facilities coordinator	12	Civil partnered
P3	25	150	Student	4	Single
P4	50	100	Head of the department	2	Divorced
P5	55	130	Ground attendant	1	Married
P6	60	70	Flight service specialist	2	Married

media, friends, family and fashion trends. Still, the most important purchasing considerations are price and quality, which Sun et al. (2020) highlighted in their study. Opinions of the female participants on whether their attitude towards fast fashion influence purchasing behaviour differ. Four participants indicate that attitude has no significant influence on their purchasing behaviour because their attitude is negative. However, they still buy fast fashion items, while two participants indicated that their attitude does influence their purchasing behaviour. Two thirds of the participants stated that social media, advertisements and friends unconsciously influence consumers and that this will (unconsciously) influence attitudes towards a particular fashion chain which was also highlighted in the work of (Sun et al., 2014). It is evident from the interviewees that regardless of holding a negative view of fast fashion companies, they still tend to buy them. Hence, it is no surprise that survey findings showed a strong and significant correlation (H1). However, this is an area that demands further investigation.

4.12 | Influence of SBS of fast fashion companies on the attitude of consumers

Four out of five participants who were aware of any sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies claim that the initiatives do not significantly influence their attitude towards fast fashion companies. One of the two main reasons is the lack of transparency and communication of fast fashion companies, leading to mistrust in the organisation. The other reason is clearly stated by Participant 1 'I do not think they [fast fashion companies] do it [have sustainable initiatives] because they think that is good for their employees, the environment and to make things better. But because they have to adhere to the rules and agreements and are under a lot of pressure from the media and consumers as well'.

Although sustainability is probably not the key driver for fast fashion companies, the participants do think it is effective that more attention is paid to sustainability and that the fast fashion companies try to move along. We found that interview participants were more inclined to buy products from fast fashion companies that are in the news because they are sustainable (e.g., H&M) than from regularly discredited companies with no sustainable policy at all (e.g., Primark). This reinforces the importance of brand commitment to sustainability, supporting the findings of Noh and Johnson (2019). At the same time, most participants argue that the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion

companies do not influence their attitudes. Yet they do show a certain influence on their attitude towards fast fashion companies as the female participants prefer to go to a sustainable, conscious fast fashion store. Hence, this is no surprise that survey findings showed a significant but weak correlation between attitude and SBS (H2).

4.13 | Influence sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies on the purchasing behaviour of consumers

Three participants in their 20s said their purchasing behaviour online is (unconsciously) influenced by the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies. The participants indicated that it is targeted when they look online for an item. As Participant 2 stated, 'Online, I will scroll through the sustainable tab or when I search for a black shirt, for example, they will show the sustainable black shirt as well so. If I like that one, I am more inclined to buy the sustainable shirt. So online, I will buy more often sustainably, but only because they pop up when I search for a specific item. I actually think it is really stupid of stores to make a separate section for the sustainable clothes because I think that is not in their favour as it is not attractive to go there'. Participants 1 and 3 gave the same reasoning, and if both prices are in the same range, they will also be more likely to buy the sustainable item as it is easier to compare items online. They do not buy sustainable items in the store because it is a separate department, and this is often associated with expensive and not trendy clothing. Participant 5 thought it was more age-related, as she had more than 20 years of knowledge of environmental problems. This can also be devoted to today's digital world as it is easier to keep up to date with all the news, especially the bad news that is often reported. So, this participant wanted to purchase more durable clothes because it is better for the world, wanted to wear them frequently and now can afford them. And finally, Participant 4 was interested in buying sustainable items but no longer knows which stores sell sustainable clothing and which stores only use sustainability as a marketing tool.

Participants unanimously wanted to convey to fast fashion companies that they must use clear and transparent communication about what sustainability means to them and how durable the items are. This will lead to an increase in consumer awareness and knowledge of sustainability, as was earlier noted in the study of Blazquez et al. (2020). Various possibilities are mentioned on how fast fashion

companies can achieve this by adjusting their sustainable (social media) advertisements and using informative posters in the store. So overall, female consumers were more inclined to buy sustainable items online than in the store as it is easier to search and compare items online. Furthermore, there is a lot of uncertainty about which fast fashion companies are sustainable and which ones use it as a marketing tool. This influences the purchasing behaviour of female consumers. However, the female participants did provide feedback on what fast fashion stores could change to gain consumers' confidence. The interview findings supported the H3 as there was a clear link between the SBS of the companies and purchasing behaviour.

4.14 | Awareness of SBS of fast fashion companies

We then asked participants about their awareness of the SBS of fast fashion companies. Three of the six participants immediately linked fast fashion companies' sustainable initiatives to the fashion industry's sustainability. However, when asked about awareness of sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies, only one participant indicated that she was not aware of any sustainable initiatives that fast fashion companies have. She stated that the possible reason for this is '*More clothes are sold over the internet than in stores, and I think people go straight to the right tab and do not pay attention to the sustainability tab. So, I think that is also a big aspect that makes people unaware of any sustainable initiatives because it is not clear enough on the screen*' (P6).

The most frequently mentioned sustainable initiative was the conscious line of H&M. Participant 2 stated that '*H&M are more clear that they have a sustainable line and with other fast fashion companies you really need to search for that sustainable line, and I do not do that, so I am not sure if they are sustainable, but maybe they do*'. Participants 1 and 5 were the only two female consumers who could identify multiple sustainable clothing lines from fast fashion companies. Furthermore, female consumers also notice the sustainable initiative to collect old clothes so the fabrics and cotton will be recycled and reused. The third sustainable initiative mentioned is the carbon offsetting that some companies are offering. Participant 1 stated, '*If you order at Zalando, you can compensate for the CO_2 that will be emitted by sending the product to you. So, you can pay some extra money to compensate for the CO_2*'. Finally, according to female consumers, the advertisement of fast fashion companies has changed in recent years. Fast fashion companies increasingly show their sustainable initiatives through advertisements. Participant 5 stated, '*I often see in advertisements or newspapers that companies show you pictures or stories of how they try to be sustainable*'.

However, there is also still a lot of doubt about the authenticity of these sustainable initiatives. Participant 4 stated, '*I think the clothing industry has taken sustainability on board because they feel they have to. So, they do show off to the outsiders that they find it important, but it is not really part of their strategy*'. Each participant agreed that the fast fashion industry is not clearly communicating what sustainability and sustainable initiatives entail. According to the female participants, the

transparency of fast fashion companies is also minimal, as the sustainable items do not clearly indicate what exactly is sustainable. As a result, there is still much uncertainty as to whether the item is socially, environmentally and economically sustainable produced, whether the supply chain is entirely sustainable and whether the transportation is sustainable. Participant 1 stated, '*They [fast fashion companies] are not transparent about how they produce their clothes. For instance, in the factories where the products of Zara are produced, you cannot even trace them. You can find the country where your item is produced, but it is really hard to figure out where it is actually coming from*'. All participants agree that the sustainable approach is not properly and sufficiently communicated with the consumer and that there is too little transparency from the sustainable process. However, four out of six participants do think that the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies influence fast fashion consumers in general. They all indicated their willingness to buy products from fast fashion companies that have clear SBS. Interview findings, therefore, support the H4, as most interviewees were largely aware of some of the sustainability initiatives of the fast fashion companies and reflected how this awareness influenced their decision to purchase from them. This is also in line with the findings of Lundblad and Davies (2016), who highlighted that consumers are becoming increasingly aware of sustainable initiatives.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to take an empirical approach and explore the attitude and purchasing behaviour of female consumers towards fast fashion from their point of view and whether the SBS of fast fashion companies influence them. The research question addressed in this study was '*How do sustainable business strategies influence female consumers' attitudes, awareness and purchasing behaviour towards fast fashion companies?*'. Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis, it can be concluded that the SBS of fast fashion companies influence the attitude and purchasing behaviour of female consumers. Our study shows that female participants' attitudes were negative toward fast fashion due to the negative impact on the environment and the employees within the supply chain. The attitude–behaviour gap is confirmed when only the attitude concerning purchasing behaviour is studied without introducing the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies yet, as most participants still purchase items from fast fashion companies. Nevertheless, the results indicate that female consumers are aware and have knowledge of SBS and that their attitude and purchasing behaviour are influenced. They are influenced consciously and unconsciously by advertisements, word of mouth, social media and past experiences.

5.1 | Theoretical and practical contributions

This study contributes to the limited empirical literature focusing on the sustainable behaviours of female fast fashion consumers. The

main theoretical contribution is that the study explores the influences from a business strategy point of view and not from a marketing viewpoint, as this has been researched before (Noh & Johnson, 2019; Sun et al., 2014). The study provides fresh insights into the attitude–behaviour gap of female consumers in purchasing fast fashion products. Aligning with Apaydin (2011), we proved that female consumers' attitudes positively relate to purchasing behaviour. While H2 and H3 are confirmed, the weak correlation coefficient hints that female consumers might have doubts about the motivation of fast fashion companies for sustainability programmes. It might be because of some greenwashing practices in the fashion industry, in which companies claim to be more sustainable but only improve a minor part of their business (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022). Such greenwashing practices could reduce the trust of the customers in the company's sustainable programmes. Moreover, the results show that females have a high awareness of sustainable products of companies that have clear SBS. Therefore, fast fashion companies should develop programmes to regain the trust of the customers and consider customers' awareness of their sustainable programmes.

The contribution to practice is the insight given to fast fashion companies on how female fast fashion consumers receive their sustainable initiatives. For fast fashion companies, it can be interesting to see how their sustainable initiatives and strategies influence the female consumer in terms of attitude and purchasing behaviour. Fast fashion companies can anticipate this by adapting their SBS by looking at the research results and recommendations from participants and respondents. The main findings of interest to fast fashion companies are that the participants and respondents doubt the real intention and purpose of the sustainable initiatives and whether they are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable. Furthermore, female consumers indicate a lack of transparency, information and communication from fast fashion companies, influencing their attitudes and purchasing behaviour. Blazquez et al. (2020) indicated that an effective communication strategy in which fast fashion companies communicate what they mean by sustainability and how they meet the triple bottom line components would be of great value. Because this transparency positively impacts consumers' brand trust and attitude (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014), thus, this study indicates that fast fashion companies should pay more attention to their communication strategy about sustainability to optimise the influence of their SBS.

5.2 | Limitations and future research directions

This research has some limitations. First, some differences are shown in the age groups of the interviewees. It could be interesting to investigate if there are any similarities and differences between the female age groups regarding awareness, knowledge attitude and purchasing behaviour. In addition, men were not included in the sample of this study. It may be interesting to explore whether there are possible differences between female and male consumers as has been reported in previous literature. Second, some participants and respondents

have stated that they experience the sustainable initiatives of fast fashion companies as a marketing tool for the company. It may be interesting to carry out this research focusing on how the different sustainable marketing messages of fast fashion companies influence the attitude and purchasing behaviour of the fast fashion consumer. Third, the sample size of the survey (155 responses) and interviews (six) further impose limitations and generalisation of our findings. Future research studies should therefore aim to expand data collection from broader geographically dispersed audiences to generalise the findings. It would also be interesting to conduct a cross-comparative study sample population from developed and developing countries.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General questions of attitude and purchasing behaviour of fashion products

A. What sources influence your buying decision?
B. What are the most important purchasing considerations when buying clothes?
C. What are the last three companies where you bought clothes (online or in a store) from?

Questions about knowledge, attitude and purchasing behaviour of fast fashion:

1a What comes to mind when you think of fast fashion?
1b What is your attitude towards fast fashion in general?
1c To what extent does your attitude towards fast fashion influence your purchasing behaviour?

Question about sustainability in general:

A. What does the term sustainability mean to you?

Sustainability combined with (strategies of) fast fashion questions:

2a. How sustainable do you think fast fashion companies are?
2b. Are you aware of any sustainability initiatives of any fast fashion companies? If so, which sustainability initiatives from which fast fashion companies?
3a. What impact do you think sustainable business strategies and/or initiatives have on fast fashion consumers?
3b. How do sustainable business strategies and/or initiatives of fast fashion companies affect your attitude and awareness towards these fast fashion companies?
3c. To what extent do sustainable business strategies and/or initiatives of fast fashion companies influence your purchasing behaviour?