CONSUMER BEHAVIOR TOWARD ECO-FRIENDLY APPAREL IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract
This review consolidates research on consumer attitudes towards eco-friendly clothing in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), situating its findings within overarching global trends. Despite swift economic development and rising consumer wealth, CEE markets face unique challenges such as notable price sensitivity, insufficient awareness of sustainability issues, and skepticism regarding green marketing claims. Consumers are driven by ethical values, perceptions of quality, social influences, and practical benefits; however, they encounter significant obstacles, including higher prices, limited availability, cultural preferences for fast fashion, and established consumption habits. Demographic analyses indicate that younger, educated urban consumers are the most open to sustainable clothing, suggesting opportunities for targeted marketing. Effective approaches to increasing the adoption of eco-apparel in CEE focus on integrating sustainability with essential product characteristics—style, quality, affordability—and building consumer trust through transparent branding and readily available information. The review highlights the urgent need for multi-faceted interventions, such as educational initiatives, clearer labeling, and strategic pricing, to address the ongoing attitude–behavior gap in these emerging European markets.

Key words: *Eco-friendly apparel; sustainable fashion; Central and Eastern Europe; marketing; environmental economics.*

JEL Classification: *M31, Q56, L67, D12*

I. INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry is a major source of environmental damage, accounting for up to 10% of global carbon emissions and approximately 20% of annual wastewater generation (Niinimäki et al., 2020). This sector also significantly contributes to textile waste and water consumption, surpassing even international aviation and shipping in emissions. As a result, both researchers and policymakers emphasize the importance of consumer-driven change. Scholars argue that transitioning toward conscious consumption and "slow fashion" is essential to mitigating environmental harm (Niinimäki et al., 2020; McNeill & Moore, 2015). If more consumers opt for high-quality, long-lasting garments, it can incentivize brands to embrace sustainable practices (Niinimäki, 2010).

Over the past decade, sustainable apparel consumption has evolved from a niche concern to a major research focus (Olivar Aponte et al., 2024). Earlier work highlighted the limited appeal of eco-fashion and the disconnect between attitudes and actions (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). However, recent studies explore a broader range of drivers, barriers, and behavioral patterns. Despite this progress, geographical gaps persist. Most research centers on Western contexts, while Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) remains underexplored (Nistor & Bálint, 2022; Rahman & Koszewska, 2020).

CEE countries present a unique backdrop, shaped by rapid post-socialist market transitions and rising consumer affluence. Yet, consumers in this region are often price-sensitive and unfamiliar with eco-fashion concepts, and many remain skeptical of green claims (Popowska & Sinkiewicz, 2021).

This literature review focuses on CEE to fill an important research gap, aiming to synthesize consumer motivations, attitudes, and barriers to sustainable fashion adoption while evaluating demographic patterns and marketing strategies. By analyzing peer-reviewed studies up to 2024, this review contributes to a fuller understanding of sustainable apparel consumption in emerging European markets.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Growth of Research and Key Themes

Research on sustainable or "eco-friendly" apparel consumption has expanded significantly since the early 2000s, paralleling the rising awareness of the fashion industry's environmental impacts. Early studies from the mid-2000s were often exploratory, highlighting an attitude–behavior gap in ethical fashion purchasing (Joergens, 2006). By the 2010s, the literature grew exponentially, with a marked increase in publications after 2010 (Olivar Aponte et al., 2024). Recent bibliometric reviews identify over 200 relevant studies on sustainable fashion consumer behavior up to 2023 (Busalim et al., 2022; Schiaroli et al., 2024). These works span diverse regions and adopt various theoretical lenses, indicating a maturing field with several key themes.

Key thematic focuses have emerged across this body of work. A primary theme is understanding consumer motivations and preferences that drive interest in eco-friendly apparel—for example, environmental concern, ethical values, quality perceptions, and social influences (Kang et al., 2013; Jung & Jin, 2016a). Complementing this, substantial literature examines the barriers that hinder green apparel purchases, such as price premiums, lack of availability or information, and cultural or psychological obstacles (Connell, 2010; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018). Another important thread explores demographic factors (age, gender, income, education) and cross-cultural differences in sustainable fashion attitudes (Hill & Lee, 2012; Popowska & Sinkiewicz, 2021). Broadly, scholars seek to explain why an environmentally conscious consumer may or may not translate that mindset into actual clothing purchase decisions—often invoking established behavior theories to do so.

From a theoretical standpoint, many studies build on frameworks like the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) and the related Theory of Reasoned Action to predict green purchase intentions. TPB's core constructs—attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control—are present in numerous sustainable apparel studies (Chang & Watchravesringkan, 2018). For instance, Chang and Watchravesringkan (2018) confirmed that attitudes toward eco-fashion and social norms significantly influence the intention to buy sustainable clothing. Other models have been applied to incorporate personal values and moral norms: the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory (Stern, 2000) has informed analyses of ethical apparel choices (Jung & Jin, 2016a), and Behavioral Reasoning Theory has been used to explore consumers' justifications for (not) buying sustainable apparel (Diddi et al., 2019).

A recent trend is the use of holistic frameworks like the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model to categorize drivers and barriers across the consumption process (Schiaroli et al., 2024). Methodologically, the field is dominated by quantitative surveys and experiments (often analyzed with regression or SEM) to test these models, though qualitative approaches (interviews, focus groups) have provided deeper insight into consumer mindsets (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Bly et al., 2015). The expansion of research to different geographic contexts—including Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)—has further enriched the literature by highlighting how cultural and market conditions mediate sustainable apparel behavior (Koszewska & Rahman, 2020; Popowska & Sinkiewicz, 2021).

2) Consumer Motivations and Preferences

Consumers are drawn to eco-friendly apparel due to a combination of ethical convictions, practical needs, and social influences, as evidenced by a broad body of research. Environmental and ethical concerns are foundational drivers; consumers with pro-environmental attitudes or awareness of labor and sustainability issues are more likely to choose sustainable fashion (Kang et al., 2013; Chi, 2015; Cosma, 2024). This aligns with the Values–Beliefs–Norms framework, where altruistic values promote environmentally responsible behavior (Stern, 2000; Jung & Jin, 2016a).

However, sustainability alone is not enough. Product-related qualities such as durability, design, and comfort are essential, as consumers often reject "green" garments that lack style or quality (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018; Koszewska & Rahman, 2020; Achabou & Dekhili, 2013; Hong et al., 2024; Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; Henninger et al., 2016; Niinimäki, 2010; Joy et al., 2012). Self-expression is also a key motivator; eco-fashion allows wearers to signal identity and values and even serve as a form of social status (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Legere & Kang, 2020; Cervellon & Carey, 2014; Khare & Sadachar, 2017; Grubor & Milovanov, 2017).

Social norms further shape choices: when sustainable fashion is endorsed by peers or influencers, consumer interest increases (Ajzen, 1991; Chang & Watchravesringkan, 2018; Jain et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2018). Practical benefits like cost-efficiency and health also matter; durability is seen as economic value, and organic fabrics appeal for safety and skin health (Armstrong et al., 2015; Hustvedt & Dickson, 2009).

Motivations vary across cultures: Western Europeans often prioritize ethics (Joy et al., 2012), while consumers in Central/Eastern Europe and emerging markets respond more to quality, style, or economic value (Popowska & Sinkiewicz, 2021; Koszewska & Rahman, 2020; Khare & Sadachar, 2017; Hong et al., 2024). Ultimately, eco-apparel appeals when it blends ethical value with the tangible and emotional benefits consumers expect.

a)   Demographic Factors

Consumer behavior toward eco-friendly apparel varies significantly by demographic group, influencing both attitudes and purchasing habits. Gender is a major differentiator: women consistently show more concern for ethical and environmental fashion and are more willing to pay extra for sustainable items (Joy et al., 2012; Popowska & Sinkiewicz, 2021).

However, men—especially younger and well-educated—are increasingly open to eco-fashion if framed around quality, innovation, or status (D'Souza et al., 2015), suggesting a need for gender-sensitive marketing, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where fashion is still culturally feminized. Age is another key factor: Gen Z and Millennials are more vocal about sustainability and engage in activism and alternative consumption models (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Jain et al., 2020), yet they also exhibit an attitude-behavior gap due to fast fashion habits (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009).

Older consumers may implicitly support sustainability through quality-focused, low-volume shopping, despite having less explicit concern (Carey & Cervellon, 2014; McNeill & Moore, 2015; Jung & Jin, 2016b).

Education and income levels also shape engagement: higher-educated, wealthier consumers are more informed and able to afford ethical products (Straughan & Roberts, 1999; Chekima et al., 2016).

In CEE, sustainable apparel consumers are typically young, urban, educated, and financially stable, while rural and low-income groups remain underserved. Cultural and infrastructural factors further shape behavior: while sustainability awareness is growing in CEE, levels of adoption still lag behind Western Europe due to historical and systemic differences (Iran et al., 2019). Understanding these demographic dynamics is key to tailoring strategies that broaden sustainable fashion's appeal.

3) Barriers to Eco-Apparel Purchase

Despite growing awareness and interest in sustainable fashion, significant obstacles prevent many consumers from acting on their ethical intentions. Research frequently documents a gap between intention and behavior in this context, where consumers express strong support for eco-friendly apparel but rarely follow through with purchases (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018; Han et al., 2017).

These barriers are broadly categorized into three groups: price sensitivity, availability and awareness, and cultural or psychological resistance—each playing a critical role in hindering adoption, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where such challenges are often intensified (Popowska & Sinkiewicz, 2021).

a)   Price Sensitivity

Price is the most consistent and pervasive barrier globally. Sustainable clothing typically carries a higher price tag due to ethical sourcing, organic materials, and environmentally responsible production. While consumers may support sustainability in theory, many are unwilling or unable to pay a premium, particularly in low- to middle-income contexts like CEE (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018; Chekima et al., 2016).

For example, over half of surveyed Polish consumers indicated they would only consider eco-fashion if prices were comparable to conventional clothing (Rahman & Koszewska, 2020). Romanian consumers echoed similar views—many supported the idea of sustainability but balked at the higher costs.

Moreover, price becomes a barrier when the perceived value for money is unclear. Consumers expect higher durability or better quality to justify the cost, and without visible benefits, they often revert to cheaper fast fashion (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013; Popowska & Sinkiewicz, 2021).

Effective communication about the long-term economic and ethical value of sustainable garments is key, yet it remains underdeveloped in many markets (Harris et al., 2016). This price resistance is exacerbated by economic uncertainty and the historical normalization of low-cost fashion in CEE, where decades of limited consumer choice have made affordability a dominant shopping norm.

b)   Availability and Awareness

Even consumers with strong sustainable values encounter logistical barriers—sustainable apparel is often hard to find, particularly outside urban hubs. Limited product availability deters purchases; if eco-fashion is not integrated into mainstream retail or e-commerce platforms, it simply gets overlooked (Connell, 2010; Joergens, 2006). In CEE countries, sustainable fashion remains a niche offering. Many consumers don't know where to buy it, and local sustainable brands are relatively scarce (Popowska & Sinkiewicz, 2021).

Awareness gaps further compound the problem. In countries where sustainability education or media coverage is minimal, consumers may not fully understand what "eco-fashion" means or why it matters (Connell, 2010). Even those interested often lack knowledge of which brands are truly sustainable, especially in a marketplace crowded with misleading claims and greenwashing (Evans & Peirson-Smith, 2018).

Eco-labels and certifications are intended to guide shoppers, but in CEE, recognition of such standards remains low. Without clear, trusted guidance, ethical choices are harder to make. Compounding this, sustainable fashion is under-promoted in CEE media and marketing channels compared to Western Europe, further stalling awareness and demand.

c)   *Cultural and Psychological Barriers*

Beneath practical constraints lie deeper psychological and cultural hurdles. The attitude–behavior gap is a major issue: consumers often profess sustainable values but succumb to the short-term appeal of cheap, trendy clothes (Hanss et al., 2016). The immediate gratification of fast fashion can override abstract environmental concerns, especially when shopping habits are entrenched. Niinimäki (2010) noted that fashion purchasing is often emotional and impulsive, disconnected from deeper ethical beliefs.

Old habits and social norms reinforce these behaviors. Many consumers stick to familiar brands and seasonal buying patterns. Transitioning to slower, more conscious fashion habits—such as buying second-hand or investing in fewer high-quality items—requires breaking long-standing consumption routines (Verplanken & Whitmarsh, 2021). In CEE, social pressure and status-driven consumption can conflict with sustainability.

Fashion is linked to modernity and economic progress, especially in post-communist cultures where scarcity once dominated. Wearing second-hand clothing, for instance, may still carry a stigma outside younger subcultures, despite its ecological benefits.

Skepticism adds another layer of resistance. Consumers are increasingly wary of greenwashing, and in the absence of trustworthy brands or regulations, many doubt the authenticity of sustainability claims (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). In Eastern Europe, this cynicism is heightened by limited exposure to transparent sustainability efforts, making consumers reluctant to pay more for uncertain benefits. This trust gap must be closed for sustainable fashion to gain broader traction.

Lastly, aesthetic concerns are important. If eco-friendly clothing is seen as unattractive or inconsistent with personal style, consumers will overlook it, even if they support the concept (Joergens, 2006). In CEE markets, style continues to be a top priority—sustainable options that fail to meet fashion standards are unlikely to succeed (Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; McNeill & Moore, 2015).

Overcoming the barriers to eco-apparel adoption requires more than raising awareness; it involves addressing structural market gaps, shifting cultural perceptions, and reshaping consumer habits. In Central and Eastern Europe, these challenges are heightened by economic limitations, underdeveloped retail infrastructure, and lingering cultural attitudes.

III. THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND FRAMEWORK

Consumer behavior toward eco-friendly apparel is influenced by interconnected economic, psychological, informational, and socio-cultural factors. Using frameworks like the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the Value–Belief–Norm model (Stern, 2000), researchers have mapped how attitudes, perceived norms, and values influence purchasing, and why intentions often fail to translate into action. This attitude–behavior gap, observed across Europe, is particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where lower income levels, limited product availability, and weaker sustainability norms exacerbate the problem.

Economically, price sensitivity is a significant barrier. Many consumers, particularly in CEE, are reluctant to pay a premium for eco-fashion unless it clearly offers value—quality, durability, or style. Sustainable products perceived as inferior or overpriced are rejected (Niinimäki, 2010; Popowska & Sinkiewicz, 2021).

Psychologically, while pro-environmental attitudes exist, fashion identity, habits, and skepticism—especially due to greenwashing—often take precedence (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2018). Informationally, low awareness about sustainable options and misunderstanding of eco-labels impede informed choices (Žurga & Tavčer, 2014). This issue is particularly pressing in CEE, where many consumers do not fully understand what sustainable fashion entails or where to find it.

Social and cultural dynamics further shape behavior. In Western Europe, sustainability is more normalized; in CEE, fast fashion still dominates social norms, though younger generations are slowly shifting the culture through thrift trends and digital influencers (Joy et al., 2012). The gap between sustainable attitudes and real-world action often arises when economic and cultural factors overwhelm good intentions. Bridging this gap in CEE will require making sustainable apparel affordable, trustworthy, accessible, and aspirational. Multilevel strategies—from education and labeling to pricing policies and local brand development—are crucial to align consumer behavior with sustainability goals across all of Europe.

IV. DISCUSSION: MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

Sustainable apparel in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) must deliver on core product values—style, comfort, quality, and price—in addition to ethical credentials. Consumers in CEE, much like those in Western markets, are unwilling to sacrifice aesthetics or functionality simply for environmental benefits (Rahman & Koszewska, 2020; Niinimäki, 2010).

For example, a study in Poland found that many consumers would not purchase a "green" garment if it did not meet their expectations for design, comfort, and durability (Rahman & Koszewska, 2020). Similarly,

research across Europe shows that quality and style remain essential purchase drivers, with sustainability only adding value when these fundamental attributes are satisfied (Niinimäki, 2010; Schiaroli et al., 2024). Sustainable fashion brands should therefore avoid positioning their products as "worthy but dull" alternatives. Instead, the branding must emphasize how eco-friendly apparel can enhance value—for instance, through superior craftsmanship, unique style, or longer wear life—rather than implying a compromise (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018; Koszewska, 2013). Consumers respond positively when sustainability is an added bonus to a garment that is already attractive based on traditional merits (Koszewska, 2013).

Price sensitivity is another crucial consideration in CEE. Many emerging CEE markets have average incomes below those of Western Europe, so a significant price premium for sustainable clothing can deter purchases (Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018).

Surveys indicate that while CEE shoppers express support for ethical fashion in principle, they often balk at higher price tags in practice (Joergens, 2006; Žurga & Tavčer, 2014). In Slovenia, for example, consumers reported being willing to pay only about 10% more for apparel with an eco-label, reflecting a limited tolerance for price increases (Žurga & Tavčer, 2014). This implies that sustainable brands must strive for cost parity with conventional fashion or clearly communicate superior value for money. Strategies such as highlighting a garment's durability (thus lower cost-per-wear) or timeless style can justify a moderate premium by framing it as an investment in quality (Bianchi & González, 2021). Additionally, local production in CEE can potentially reduce costs related to long supply chains and appeal to regional pride. Some consumers already check labels for country of origin and favor European-made apparel for perceived quality and ethical labor practices (Koszewska, 2013). Emphasizing a "Made in Romania/Poland/etc." brand identity – coupled with sustainable practices – could simultaneously tap into patriotism and assurance of standards, strengthening the product's overall value proposition for CEE audiences. In sum, product strategy should integrate sustainability as a plus, not a trade-off: eco-friendly apparel must be fashionable, comfortable, and affordable.

Marketers and designers in CEE should innovate to combine ethical materials with appealing design, ensuring that sustainability enhances the product offering rather than constraining it (Niinimäki et al., 2020). This alignment of ethical and conventional value is fundamental to broadening consumer adoption of sustainable apparel in the region.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that a persistent attitude–behavior gap exists in sustainable apparel consumption across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). While consumers increasingly express environmental concern and positive views toward sustainable clothing, these sentiments often do not translate into actual purchases. Research shows that financial limitations, style preferences, low availability, and skepticism toward green claims are key factors that inhibit follow-through, particularly in price-sensitive CEE markets (Harris et al., 2016; Wiederhold & Martinez, 2018).

Psychological habits, limited product awareness, and weak cultural norms around sustainable fashion also contribute to inertia. Consumers often shift responsibility to producers, indicating underdeveloped personal norms and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991; Stern, 2000).Not all consumers are alike. Demographic segmentation reveals a small but growing eco-conscious cluster, mostly young and educated, alongside larger segments that are aware but unengaged or constrained.

Marketing must address these divisions by tailoring strategies: lowering economic barriers, enhancing style and availability, building trust through transparency, and reshaping perceptions of sustainable apparel as fashionable and accessible. Communication campaigns, influencer marketing, and policy interventions like tax incentives or stronger labeling standards may help activate both internal motivation and external conditions to close the gap.

The insights from the study reinforce theoretical models such as the TPB and VBN by emphasizing the importance of perceived control, social norms, and personal responsibility in sustainable fashion behavior. As sustainable apparel becomes increasingly visible, affordable, and normalized, consumer engagement in environmentally-friendly (CEE) markets may shift from latent interest to consistent action. Bridging this gap necessitates a systemic, multi-stakeholder effort.

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