

Determinants of Sustainable Apparel Purchase Intention: A Study on Indian Consumers

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Introduction

Sustainable apparel (SA) has become a main topic in debates across the globe on environmental responsibility. In the ever-evolving landscape of the global fashion industry, the imperative to embrace sustainability has become increasingly pronounced, driven by mounting environmental challenges, international climate commitments and rising consumer consciousness (Abbate et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2023). The apparel sector, being the second-largest consumer of water and a significant contributor to global carbon emissions, coupled with its substantial generation of plastic and textile waste, has amplified calls for sustainable alternatives (Hoque et al., 2021). Within this context, SA is increasingly gaining traction, defined as apparel made from organically cultivated natural fibres and extending to practices such as recycled material integration, eco-friendly packaging, chemical-free production, second-hand usage and slow-fashion models (Su et al., 2023; Gil et al., 2024).

Despite growing awareness, the SA segment remains underdeveloped in emerging markets. For example, India's SA segment was valued at only \$1.31bn in 2022, representing approximately 1.04% of the total Indian apparel market (Globaldata Report, 2025). The present study examines the behavioural factors that influence sustainable apparel purchase intention (SAPI) among Indian consumers. The study is grounded on Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Sheth's (1991) Consumption Values framework (CVT), and the Engagement concept (Brodie et al., 2013). TPB is the meta framework and highlights the role of ATT, subjective norms (SN) and perceived behavioural control (PBC) in shaping SAPI. CVT comprises functional values (FV), social values (SV), emotional values (EV), epistemic values (EPV) and conditional values (CV) that consumers associate with products. These values influence ATT which subsequently influence the SAPI. The Engagement concept foregrounds consumers' interactions with online platforms which includes social online platform engagement (SOPE) and shopping online platform engagement (SHOPE) shapes perceptions and exposure to SA by influencing ATT, SN, and PBC.

The model includes two psychological moderators: cosmopolitanism (COSMO), representing a global outlook and receptiveness to international norms (Cleveland and Laroche, 2007), and brand dependence (BD), reflecting reliance on familiar and trusted brands (Bristow, Schneider and Schuler, 2002). The inclusion of these moderators helps explain why some consumers act on personal beliefs while others follow established brand choices or social cues.

The primary focus of the present work is to validate the key determinants that shape Indian consumers' purchase intention for SA. Specifically, the study examines how consumption values (functional, emotional, epistemic, conditional, social) and integrated online platform engagement (social and shopping platform engagement) influence ATT, SN and PBC; and how ATT, SN and PBC in turn influence SAPI. Finally, the study analyses how COSMO and BD moderate the relationships between ATT—PI, SN—PI, and PBC—PI. The research is focused on urban consumers in the Delhi NCR region and uses a quantitative design with data analysed through PLS-SEM to test the extended theoretical framework.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The global fashion and apparel sector has become a powerful driver of the world economy while at the same time being recognised as a major source of environmental pressure (Papamichael et al., 2022). SA refers to clothing designed and developed for the well-being of mankind and ecological balance, offering transparency in supply chains and practices such as recycled material integration, eco-friendly production, and slow-fashion models (Niinimäki, 2010; Betzler et al., 2022). SA addresses environmental concerns and aligns closely with Sustainable Development Goals such as SDG 12, SDG 14 and SDG 15.

Research on SA has drawn from a range of theoretical perspectives. Early studies relied on general models of consumer behaviour, but scholars increasingly combine frameworks to capture the layered nature of SA consumption (Niinimäki, 2010; Geiger and Keller, 2018). Among these, Ajzen's (1991) TPB is widely used: ATT, SN and PBC are central predictors of intention, and favourable ATT toward SA is consistently linked with stronger SAPI (Paul et al., 2016; Han et al., 2017). Yet TPB alone

has limitations to explain the ATT–behaviour gap, where positive intentions do not always translate into purchases (Dhir et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2020).

Geographically, most existing studies in SA have been conducted in developed economies such as the USA, the UK, South Korea, and Finland, while developing nations, including India, remain comparatively underexplored despite their dual role as major producers and growing consumer markets (Khare & Kautish, 2021). From a methodological perspective, research on SA is largely dominated by quantitative survey approaches, and particularly PLS-SEM to examine the relationships among ATT, consumption values, and purchase intentions (Han et al., 2017). Despite this progress, notable methodological gaps remain, and the literature still heavily relies on cross-sectional data, student or urban convenience samples, and limited experimental or longitudinal designs. Overall, we see that which bodies of literature review put forth three large scale issues that require more study. First out of the box is the issue of we must do more to include emerging economies like India which is corrective to the present geographical bias in SA research. Also of great note is the development of a more inclusive theory which puts forward a combination of rational, moral and identity based perspectives to account for which we have a better theory which does justice to the gap between what we know to work in terms of treatment and what we see in terms of consumer behavior. Also we see that there is a push for use of a variety of research methods which include experimental, longitudinal, and netnographic as well as more varied sampling which in turn will allow us to better present the stories of consumers and their online actions. In response to these gaps the present study we put forth an integrated framework which brings together TPB, CVT, and the Engagement concept which also we include COSMO and BD as moderators to put forth a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of SAPI among urban Indian consumers.

Research Methodology

A quantitative approach was employed in this investigation. Empirically, the study seeks to test the hypothesized relationships outlined in the conceptual framework, as well as the relationships between the variables. Data was collected via an online survey shared through emails, WhatsApp, and various social media platforms, from which a total of 350 responses were gathered. For this study, 325 of the

responses were found to be complete and of sufficient quality to be used in the analysis. The final sample size was confirmed to be sufficient for multivariate analysis and SEM, as the statistical power and robustness for testing the proposed structural model was guaranteed using G*Power 3.1.

Throughout the entire study, validated scales from existing literature were utilized and measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The consumption values (functional, social, emotional, epistemic, conditional) were adapted from Sheth et al. (1991), Koay et al. (2022) and Hasbullah et al. (2020). The TPB constructs (ATT, SN, PBC, PI) were rooted in Ajzen (1991) and other applicable studies on TPB. The SOPE and SHOPE scales were taken and adapted from the engagement literature proposed by Brodie et al. (2013). COSMO was measured with items adapted from Cleveland and Laroche (2007), and the items used to measure BD came from Brodie et al. (2013).

In our pilot study we had 30 respondents which we used to determine question clarity, readability and reliability. We made minor word changes based on the feedback we received which improved flow. Also, we coded and cleaned the responses out of which we removed incomplete and invalid ones. Also, we noted that we had minimal missing values which we dealt with via listwise deletion and also we went on to screen out outliers.

Results and Analysis

The measurement and structural models were verified using PLS-SEM. All indicator loadings were greater than 0.70 which indicates satisfactory reliability. Items dropped from FV. For all constructs, the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values were greater than the 0.70 benchmark which indicates internal consistency. The AVE values were greater than 0.50 which indicates convergent validity. The Fornell–Larcker and HTMT methods confirmed discriminant validity. All HTMT ratios were below 0.85. This indicates the constructs were empirically distinct. The model fit was adequate. The SRMR values were 0.061 (saturated model) and 0.067 (estimated model), both of which are below 0.08. Overall, the results confirm the constructs' reliability and validity.

The structural model assessment revealed that multicollinearity was not a concern, as all VIF values were below 5. The model's explanatory power was moderate, with R^2 values of 0.383 for ATT,

0.490 for SN, 0.472 for PBC, and 0.248 for SAPI. The findings demonstrated that all five consumption values—FV, SV, CV, EV, and EPV had significant and positive effects on ATT. Both SOPE and Shopping SHOPE showed strong positive relationships with ATT, SN, and PBC.

In alignment with the TPB, ATT ($\beta = 0.178$, $p = 0.014$), SN ($\beta = 0.174$, $p = 0.018$), and PBC ($\beta = 0.212$, $p = 0.027$) were found to have significant positive effects on SAPI. Moreover, COSMO (COSMO; $\beta = 0.102$, $p = 0.041$) and BD (BD; $\beta = 0.145$, $p = 0.032$) directly influence SAPI, highlighting that globally oriented and brand-loyal consumers demonstrate stronger intentions to buy SA. Moderation analysis further revealed that both COSMO and BD moderated key relationships. COSMO significantly moderated the effects of ATT, SN, and PBC on SAPI. BD also moderated the links between ATT and SN with SAPI. However, BD did not significantly moderate the relationship between PBC and SAPI.

In the study we found that out of 22 hypotheses 21 were supported. We saw that all direct hypotheses played out which in turn confirmed ATT, SN, PBC, BD, and COSMO's large role in SAPI. Also, we found that out of six moderation hypotheses five held true which we took as an indication that COSMO and BD are in fact very good moderators within the model. Also, we looked at the results of the Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) which reported that ATT (importance 0.31; performance 67.4) and PBC (importance 0.28; performance 70.2) to be the key predictors of SAPI. Also, we saw that while SOPE and SHOPE had medium importance (0.21 and 0.19) they did very well in terms of performance (74.1 and 72.3).

Discussion and Implications

The findings show that the framework successfully delineates the factors that determine SAPI. From the perspective of the TPB, ATT, SN, and PBC positively and significantly influenced SAPI. In the Indian context, ATT was the strongest, which implies that when consumers consider SA to be of good quality, fashionable, and morally/ethically responsible, they are likely to buy it. SN was also significant, as expected in collectivist cultures where families and social networks shape and influence the individuals' substantive and social decisions to the buy SA. More importantly, the influence of PBC

signified that perceived feasibility in terms of availability, affordability, and convenience of SA transforms positive beliefs to a readiness to action.

Understanding consumer behavior, particularly positive attitudes toward self-service, can be enhanced with the incorporation of CVT. Each of the five value types—functional, emotional, epistemic, conditional, and social—positively strengthened ATT. This suggests that evaluations of SA, or self-service, stem from several self-service functional, affective, and contextual. The provision of confidence rational, functional utility and durability. Emotional conditional gratification and and social contextual parameters, such as discounts, trends, or peer approval, provide evidence that consumers respond to both satisfiers and symbolic benefits.

Online engagement which in turn increased TPB's predictive value. We see that both SOPE and SHOPE played a large role in ATT, SN, and PBC which in term we note that digital ecosystems play a key in putting forth sustainability issues, in establishing their importance and in presenting them as doable. Social media interaction with influencers, peer groups, and sustainability reports increases social acceptance, also at the same time e commerce platforms improve what is put out there in terms of info, transparency and convenience.

In terms of what we found with COSMO and BD which is that they play a mediating role in terms of consumer diversity. COSMO which is the global orientation factor amplified the roles of ATT and PBC on SAPI but at the same time diminished the SN-SAPI relationship which means that global consumers tend to go by inner conviction and personal control rather than local social norms. On the other hand, we saw that BD which is brand dependency played into the fields of ATT and SN which means that the brand loyal consumers do in fact translate positive brand images and social signals into greater intent when it is a trusted brand that is putting out the sustainability message. Also, we noted that the non-significant result of the BD x PBC interaction tells us that brand loyalty does not in fact overcome issues of cost or product access which in turn points out the limits of the behavioral model we are working with.

All the observations prove that how individuals in India decide to purchase services from South Africa is formed through intersections of various lenses which include thinking, feelings, social digital

interactions, and online activity, tempered through individual traits. This amalgamation of findings further develops the Theory of Planned Behavior by incorporating dimensions of value and engagement, which richly account for the rational, emotional, and situational dimensions of intent and how they come together to form intent to sustain.

Global oriented consumers may react to international eco campaigns which on the other hand have little to do with the brand attached consumers who are out for legacy and trust. Also global thinking consumers may jump on international eco initiatives while that is not the case for consumers which prioritize brand history and trust. Global oriented customers may support international eco efforts but that doesn't play a large role with the brand loyal customers which in fact are more about brand's past performance and trust. Also, we see that the former does not apply to the later which rather goes after brands they can count on and that which has a proven track record. Global consumers may be into international eco programs but that isn't what we see from consumers that are tied to a brand which instead are after that which has a story and which they can trust. Also, we see that there is a divide between these two groups which is that the former is very much into global issues and the later which is more at home with known and trusted brands.

For policy makers, these findings stress the importance of eco-labeling standards, awareness campaigns, and the development of sustainability-focused infrastructure that is available outside big cities. For instance, educators may choose to incorporate sustainability into the fashion and management courses as a way to foster long-term ecological consciousness among consumers of the future. Finally, the broader conversation reiterates that the adoption of the SA in India hinges on the ATT formation, as well as the necessary systemic backing and identity congruence. The adapted TPB–CVT–Engagement framework brings a contextually grounded and theoretically solid approach to propelling sustainability in research and practice in developing nations, and also fills a pertinent gap in the literature.

Conclusion and Future Directions

With TPB, CVT, and the Engagement variable we looked at a study of 325 Delhi-NCR consumers which we analyzed via PLS-SEM. We found that which ATTs, social influence, perceived control, consumption values and online engagement as a whole play a role in determining SAPI.

The findings reconfirm that ATT primarily drives SAPI. This demonstrates that consumers perceiving SA as high-quality, ethically responsible, and emotionally fulfilling are more likely to intend to purchase. Here, SN significantly influences intention, as it underscores the significance of the collectivist social structure and peer validation in the Indian setting. Also, PBC prompted the translation of positive ATT into intention as the affordability of the product, accessibility, and ease of purchase facilitated transitioned intent. Functional, emotional, epistemic, conditional, and social value ascribed to SA all pointed to ATT, which denotes rational and affective appraisal. SA also appeals to positive environmental consciousness as well as to personal gratification, curiosity, and situational convenience. ATT, SN, and PBC are shaped by the engagement of consumers on online platforms. Visibility of these platforms, narrative of influencers, and seamless e-commerce experience, all turned sustainability from an abstract ideal into an actionable behaviour. The moderating influences of COSMO and BD depicted consumer diversity. COSMO amplified self-driven motivations and, to an extent, moderated social pressure. BD, on the other hand, amplified the influence of peer endorsements and trusted brand equity. BD did not have a meaningful impact on the PBC–SAPI association, indicating that even brand loyalty cannot surmount the insurmountable structural limits posed by price or the absence of a product. The findings hold strong theoretical and practical significance. It demonstrates that behaviour is not determined by cognition alone but also by affective, contextual, and identity-related forces.

While we see that the research has put forth strong results it also brings to light some issues which we must address in this case the fact that the study looked at a very specific group in Delhi-NCR and did not look at a larger geographically representative sample or use probability-based sampling which is a issue for future research. To that point we see that the adoption of Sustainable Apparel in India is a complex process which plays out through a series of beliefs, values, levels of engagement and personal disposition which in turn play out in a social digital environment. Also, we present in this study an extended TPB-CVT-Engagement model which we have empirically validated and which we put forth as an improvement to what is currently out there in terms of theory and practice related to sustainable consumption. By looking at the role of sustainability in choice which comes out of the interaction of

cognitive, emotional and social elements we in this study also put forth a framework which we think will help build a more responsible and environment conscious fashion community in India.

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