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Educating for change?: An investigation into consumers' perception of sustainability and the educational drivers needed to support sustainable consumption

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ABSTRACT

The research focused on consumer perceptions of sustainability within the fashion industry and how influential education is in changing consumer habits and increasing the likelihood of sustainable consumption. The research, using a mixed-method approach, also asks what drivers are needed to support this transition. Using a quantitative survey widely distributed (varied sample) and qualitative semi-structured individuals with fashion students, results show that education on what sustainability means for fashion is largely gained through mainstream social media and documentaries with no formal compulsory education in place. It shows that many consumers saw sustainability as a motivating factor in purchasing; however, price was still a barrier for most. Respondents believed that intervention in school curricula was the best way to educate future generations about sustainability and that having the skills to maintain longevity in clothing use was a key factor to a more sustainable fashion future.

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Fashion sustainability; education; consumer; consumption; COVID-19

1. Introduction

In 2019, the fashion brands and retailers' biggest challenges were to remain profitable in a challenging market (Geoghegan, 2019), competition from large companies who could meet the needs of the newest generation of consumers, and the challenge of sustainability (Martinez, 2019; Suhrawardi, 2019). By 2021, much of those challenges remained (McKinsey & Company, 2020) and the industry now faced the unique challenge of realigning post-coronavirus pandemic, and putting further emphasis on those issues previously named as a priority (Bianchi et al., 2020). Sustainability cannot simply be defined as it is considered a holistic term in which social, economic, and environmental factors must be equally considered (Karpova, Kunz, & Garner, 2021; Shephard & Pookulangara, 2021). However, meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the future is a vital aspect of its role (SanMiguel, Perez-Bou, & Teresa Sadaba, 2021). In a global effort for change, the United Nations introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, highlighting the notion of shared value and responsibility with regard to ending poverty, improving lives and protecting the planet (United Nations, 2022) (SDG Data, 2022). It has thus highlighted the need for further change and improvement in the fashion industry with regard to supply chains, business models and consumption (Cai & Choi, 2020).

In 2020, The BFC and CFDA released a statement emphasising the urgency for the industry to slow down, highlighting how the pandemic had further stressed the need to address the overdue problems (British Fashion Council, 2020). A focus on creativity and quality was highlighted to support this change and to appeal to the consumer, but the question remains, despite the apparent demand for more sustainable options by the customer, would long-term sustainable behavioural changes be achieved (McKinsey & Company, 2020) and are consumers equipped with the education to be ready for that commitment to the cause?

The rising consumer interest in sustainability has not slowed down the popularity of fast fashion, and many consumers are still unclear about what sustainability is and what makes a brand or product sustainable (Nazir, 2021). Even with the apparent demand for more environment-friendly options by consumers, only 34% would be willing to pay more (Statista, 2020). A study carried out by Crowe and Williams (2020) revealed that while 30% of consumers expressed interest in purchasing ethical products, this only

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translated to a 3% capital (Crowe & Williams, 2020). Collectively by researchers known as the 'attitude-behaviour gap' (Wielerhold & Martinez, 2018), this price perception and barrier could suggest limitations in consumer understanding of the cost involved in making a garment sustainable and how impactful the fast fashion system is (Arnett, 2020; Lundblad & Davies, 2015; Wielerhold & Martinez, 2018). To make this change, consumers would need to have a deeper understanding of the complexity of the supply chains, and the reasons why sustainable products warrant higher price points than what the consumer is used to, because of the hidden factors that allow fast fashion to be so affordable (Hergarten, 2015). Likewise, the fashion industry needs to have a deeper understanding of the reservations held by the consumer to participate in sustainable consumption.

2. Literature review

The fashion industry is one of the most resource-consuming businesses due to its fast cycles, vast consumption, and global supply networks (Hur & Cassidy, 2019), so the practice of sustainability within such an industry is proving difficult. Every stage of a garment's life cycle has an impact on sustainability (Olofsson & Mark-Herbert, 2020), and whilst it is not always possible to embed sustainability into larger, more complex supply chains, a growing awareness of sustainability and efforts to tackle this can lead to outcomes being set that will bring capital long term, particularly with positive changes being made to business models (Olofsson & Mark-Herbert, 2020).

Fashion is one of the biggest global industries (Fashion United, 2021), and every effort needs to be made to 'adopt business strategies and activities that meet the needs of the enterprise and its stakeholders, while protecting, sustaining and enhancing human and natural resources that will be needed in the future' (Development, Touche, & Development, 1992, p. 11) whilst also positively influencing the consumers to make better choices with regard to their consumption and how to improve the longevity of their garments (Yang, Song, & Tong, 2017).

2.1. Influencing the consumer

There are several factors that can influence consumer behaviour, in their purchasing decisions and overall attitudes towards a particular product or movement (Parry, 2017). These factors are cultural, social, personal, and psychological (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). Psychological factors are made up of motivation, perception, and attitude (Noel, 2009). Social factors are particularly pertinent to this research as under this bracket sits reference groups such as online social networks (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). Social media is the primary source of information and a great way for brands and individuals to use their influence on others to increase awareness and recognition due to the increased traffic (Dennis, 2019). Communication between brands and consumers is key to allow the consumers to understand the company's impact on the planet and its workers, giving consumers the knowledge to potentially influence behaviours (SanMiguel et al., 2021; Yang, Song, & Tong, 2017) which was highlighted in a report by McKinsey in 2020 stating that 66% of consumers surveyed said that brands promoting sustainability was an important factor in their purchasing decisions (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Another powerful tool is documentaries, which can be of great importance in promoting social change and shaping the behaviour and attitudes of individuals (Boissat, Thomas-Walters, & Verissimo, 2021). There is a profound better level of communication engagement with society using imagery and video (SanMiguel et al., 2021). Since the popularity of streaming services such as Netflix, documentaries have been more readily available and a key source of information for individuals to understand new topics (Guerrasio, 2017). Although some research suggests that documentaries can promote a biased viewpoint and are not seen as academic sources (Belk, 2011), the global reach of such educational tools cannot be denied. Netflix has over 207 million paid subscribers (Stoll, 2021), allowing filmmakers a global reach that was not previously possible. The documentaries educate consumers about various topics in a modern and effective way (McAlone, 2016).

In 2013, a Netflix documentary titled 'Blackfish' was released, which highlighted the on-going issues with the breeding of whales in captivity, particularly focusing on Sea World in Florida. A recent study found that the documentary induced negative publicity for the company itself and had a damaging impact on the perceptions of captivity, resulting in a decrease in the market value of the company, as well as fewer visitors to the attraction, proving that the widespread reach and the emotive topic was a catalyst in the change in consumer opinion and behaviour (Boissat et al., 2021).

Experts also believe that government intervention is required to support the sustainable fashion industry, whether by means of recycling or imposing positive incentives to companies to introduce sustainable measures. In 2017, following the government's indoor smoking ban in 2007, the number of smokers in the UK had fallen by almost two million, and public health

figures had improved (Cancer Research UK, 2017). Similarly, in 2003, the Household Waste Recycling Act was passed in parliament, meaning that the government was required to provide a doorstep recycling service under the impression that if the public were given the easier opportunities to recycle their household waste, they would. As a result, home recycling increased from 11% to 60%. (Admiraal, 2021)

Whilst all the evidence suggests that education is prevalent in supporting an understanding of sustainable fashion practices, it does not necessarily impose changes in behaviour for most of the population, and the factors that influence this need to be further explored.

2.2. Sustainability and education

In 2015 the United Nations announced the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, introducing 17 goals with the purpose of meeting the future needs of the planet. This urgent call of action was recognised by the United Nations leaders with the view of tackling poverty, climate change and inequalities, increasing economic growth, all the while preserving life on the earth (United Nations, 2021a). The United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) works based on inspiring responsible management education, research, and a sustainable framework on a global scale, in higher education institutes (Florencia Librizzi, 2015; United Nations, 2021b). The goal is that by 2030 the sustainable development goals will be taught in every classroom (United Nations, 2021c).

Education has been placed at the heart of the strategy to promote sustainable development in all aspects of business, including organisations and the media (Annan-Diab & Molinari, 2017). Through education, values and behaviours can change, which supports sustainable lifestyles (Takemoto, 2011). However, most current education reinforces unsustainable values where students are taught to 'compete and consume' rather than to 'care and conserve' (Sterling, 2001).

The Sustainable Schools was a framework developed by the Sustainability and Environmental Education charity (SEEd) founded in 2008 to encourage the delivery of environment-friendly learning as a core practice in primary schools (SEEd, 2021). This included several topics, such as waste, energy, water, and biodiversity, and was rolled out in the UK. However, this was formally abandoned by the coalition government in 2010, leading to a setback in this type of formal inclusion of sustainable education (NAEE, 2016). The government's failure to alter frameworks to include sustainability as a core practice has come under scrutiny because of increasing evidence that environmental studies have a positive effect on children's learning experience (Portilla, 2013) and on the younger generation (gen Z) being increasingly concerned about the planet. This failure is being recognised and campaigned against (Burlet, 2019). With a significant decline in the number of schools offering arts subjects taught by specialist teachers, there is an overall lack of understanding of sustainable issues that surround these subjects (BBC, 2015), especially as sustainable practices are not yet the focus of primary education, and are only touched on at secondary school (CDEC, 2019). With no formal legislation in place, there are only the Sustainable Development Goals to aspire to, and as these are not embedded into core curriculum practices, there is a gap in the education of sustainability within the fashion industry for the youth. Also SDGs are implemented as part of core practice, education in garment construction and repairing of clothing is something that needs further attention. Since the introduction of EBACC (European Baccalaureate) qualification, limited options above KS3 in the UK were made available in schools past 2018, meaning textiles subjects were merged with Art and Design and Technology, leaving fewer options for young people to acquire these vital skills needed to upcycle or repair clothing (Smallwood, 2021).

Previous research has shown the challenges of connecting to consumers and influencing their fashion behaviour towards being more sustainable, in particular, their lack of awareness of the impact of the industry. Based on cultural shifts that have happened through education, there is a clear requirement for awareness and understanding of sustainable fashion to move forward and influence the consumer.

3. Methodology

To investigate the impact of education on perceptions of sustainability, this research adopted a mixed-methods approach by interviews and a survey. This approach was used as an effective way to gain insight and understanding from various perspectives (consumer and fashion/industry educated) (Leavy, 2017).

Primary data were collected using an online survey. A total of 150 people responded to the online questionnaire. The quantitative method was used to collect valid information, avoid bias that the researcher might have surrounded the topic, and provide definitive answers to questions. The questionnaire contained a series of fixed choice questions (with a variety of possible answers) to establish the most popular opinion with regard to relevant topics related to the research aim. The non-probability, convenience sampling was cost- and time-effective, allowing larger samples to be

obtained (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The questionnaire was distributed online over two weeks during April 2021.

In addition to the questionnaire, purposive (theoretic) sampling (Saunders et al., 2009) was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with individuals. These individuals were chosen due to their experience in fashion (gained through a university degree) or fashion industry experience through work. The interviews were carried out to explore (1) if having a fashion education had influenced their consumption habits, (2) if they had a different attitude towards sustainability and (3) to find out what they believed would influence others to shop more sustainably and what the barriers might be. The inductive approach was used to provide credibility and deeper understanding into opinions, behaviour, needs, emotions, and motivations (Madrigal & McClain, 2012). Using a purposive sample of six semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to probe for further information and the participants to answer honestly and freely, without bias from other participants (Saunders et al., 2009).

The demographic profile of the respondents can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

4. Results

To understand the findings fully, the first step in the analysis was to understand the respondents' understanding of the word 'sustainability'. The insight from the quantitative survey/questionnaire resulted in the response options seen in Table 3, and further in-depth conversations with the interviewed participants are discussed below.

The responses show an overwhelming majority focus on the repair, reuse, and recycling as their interpretation of fashion sustainability. There was very little consideration of ethicality/social injustice involved in sustainability and the impact that raw materials and resources (water, energy, etc.) had on the planet. This links to the potential barriers of consumption around price – consumers lack awareness of the environmental impacts that enable fast fashion to be so cheaply priced, but even more so, the social injustice prevalent in the industry. Without education about what goes into the whole system and enables fair treatment throughout the supply chain, it is unlikely consumers will fully appreciate the price differential.

The interview participants had a broader understanding of sustainability due to their education and experience within the fashion industry. These responses showed more of an emphasis on ethicality and environmental factors, as shown in the quotes below.

> I think it's about maintaining life on earth and the ecosystem to support it. And greater integrity environmentally and looking for social justice, like environmental, economic and social factors that we need to look forward to when thinking about sustainability and find inequality in those. (Jenny)

> The main thing I think about is consumption and overconsumption … that is what I'm thinking of – the amount that people buy. How much is ordered, where it comes from and what happens to it. I know sustainability covers many different aspects, so you've got, how the products are made, the ethical conditions around workers and things, but the main one, I focus on is the consumption side of it. (Jessica)

Participants in the qualitative research were also asked what they would like to see improve the most in the fashion industry in the next five years, to which there was a multitude of responses. These included less greenwashing by brands, reduction in consumption, government legislation/intervention, and an overwhelming need for the industries 'coming together and/or working together', suggesting that it was not solely the responsibility of one factor. There is a high correlation here to the Sustainable Development Goals – namely around 'Responsible production and consumption – Goal 12', and 'Partnership for the goals – Goal 17', which shows that those with industry awareness are focusing on the right areas to foster change.

Regarding awareness of sustainability, the quantitative research revealed that consumers have an overwhelming perception of sustainability being focussed mainly on recycling. There were limitations in the participants' understanding of the complexity of

Table 1. Demographic profile of quantitative participants.

Gender	Count	%	Age	Count	%	Employment	Count	%	Education	Count	%
Female	131	87	16–25	21	14	Employed	107	71	No formal education	3	2
Male	18	12	26–35	68	45	Self-employed	10	7	GCSE's	11	7
Non-Binary	1	1	36–45	21	14	Unemployed	4	3	AS and/or A-level	16	11
			46–55	16	11	Student	14	9	Level 3 (HNC/HND)	10	7
			56–65	20	13	Retired	15	10	Degree	71	47
			66–75	3	2				Master's degree	35	23
			75+	1	1				Doctorate	1	1
									Other	3	2

Table 2. Demographical profile of qualitative participants.

	Gender	Age	Occupation	Sustainability subject focused on within their degree course
Jenny	Female	22 years	Full-time student and retail worker	Yes
Jessica	Female	34 years	Full-time student	No
Andrew	Male	26 years	Full-time student and retail worker	Yes
Katie	Female	21 years	Full-time student	No
Stacey	Female	24 years	Full-time student	Yes
Briony	Female	31 years	Fashion merchandiser	No

Table 3. Participants interpretation of sustainability.

	%	Count
Reuse, repair or recycle	17.90%	87
Recycling materials	17.08%	83
Reduced consumption	13.58%	66
Waste management – minimising the disposal of unwanted products	13.37%	65
Climate change	8.44%	41
Reducing carbon emissions	8.23%	40
Ethics surrounding workers	5.35%	26
Reducing fossil fuels	4.53%	22
Energy reduction	3.91%	19
Reduced production	3.29%	16
Reducing the amount of water used	2.47%	12
Something else	0.82%	4
Use phase – the use, care and storing of products	0.62%	3
Poverty reduction	0.41%	2
Total	100%	486

sustainability, apart from those within the interviews who had a fashion education or experience. Greenwashing was discussed in the interviews as an issue for consumers as there is a lack of education and misleading marketing carried out by brands that confuses the consumer on what sustainability means, mirrored in the findings of (Hur & Cassidy, 2019). Qualitative participants felt that education had positively impacted their understanding of sustainability and their consumption habits.

4.1. Clothing use and disposal

According to the quantitative data, 58% of respondents believed that sustainability refers to 'repairing and recycling'. They also believed that the biggest challenges were overconsumption and disposal of garments. When asked if they had the skills, would they repair/upcycle their clothes themselves, 91% of all respondents said yes. This overwhelming response could suggest one of the ways of influencing consumption habits could be by supporting consumers to gain the skills to lengthen the lifecycle of their garments through simple repairs to avoid disposal.

Within the qualitative sample, participants also believed that consumers would comply more willingly with upcycling/repairing if they had the skills to do so. The overwhelming response was that further education was needed through skills training, which supports recent findings by Kurutz (2020) that individuals learning to sew would help to support a sustainable lifestyle (Kurutz, 2020) and that the limitations of this in the curriculum was a contributing factor for fashion waste as consumers were unable to repair items of clothing if required.

> I think that everyone should be taught a strong enough level of sewing skills, because it's a life skill. I don't think it would change everyone, but it would make an impact. We need to look at how we can increase the life our clothing and … teaching skills on how to look after our clothes. (Andrew)

> I think if they aren't given the option (to learn how to sew), then they haven't got the option to even try and repair something. (Briony)

Overall, participants believed that doing 'something' was better than nothing, and there was a strong indication that increasing the life cycle of garments was imperative, through whichever means necessary.

4.2. Impacts of previous behavioural interventions

Participants showed great enthusiasm about recycling, and of the quantitative data, 88% said that they would continue with household recycling even if the law were abolished. A theme that emerged in the qualitative data was focused on recycling facilities being made

Table 4. Participants who would still comply with recycling if laws were lifted.

		Age						
	Total	16–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56–65	66–75	75+
Yes (count)	129	18	54	18	16	19	3	1
Yes %	86%	85.70%	79.40%	85.70%	100%	95%	100%	100%
Maybe (count)	12	1	8	2	0	1	0	0
Maybe %	8%	4.80%	11.80%	9.50%	0%	5%	0%	0%
No (count)	6	2	3	1	0	0	0	0
No %	4%	9.50%	4.40%	4.80%	0%	0%	0%	0%

available for textile waste by incorporating it into household recycling, removing a barrier for consumers to recycle (Table 4).

> We have recycling at home, so I don't see why we can't have it so that we recycle garments. I think if this was brought in people would be more likely to do that because people can't be bothered to go to the tips or the clothing banks. (Stacey)

The Household Waste Recycling Act 2003 passed was government-mandated, with households provided with information and resources to be able to achieve this (The National Archives, 2022). The nature of the compliance to this and the evidenced behaviour change highlights the need for partnership to achieve more sustainable consumption and disposal of fashion and highlights the complexity of factors coming together to achieve any meaningful change.

Interview participants also held a strong view on government legislation being introduced to support a more sustainable industry. The United Nations sustainability goals highlight a need for a more sustainable planet; however, in 2019, UK Government's Environmental Audit Committee published *Fixing Fashion*, their report on the sustainability of the UK fashion industry, and ministers rejected every single recommendation that had been suggested, showing a disregard for the fashion industry issues in the UK and its future (Fashion Relovlution, 2019). In 2020 a study showed that 65% of adults (3000 surveyed) thought that government intervention was required to reduce the impact of fashion on the environment (Whelan, 2020), which correlates to the views of the participants.

> Government intervention needs to happen to get it (sustainability) on the map, even if its local governments … it needs to be recognised within local councils, schools, and communities. (Katie)

> I think there needs to be some sort of government intervention to make laws on the amount of maximum unstainable materials we can use … there should be a little tax on the materials that aren't sustainable, like the sugar tax on drinks, to make people think why are paying more for this? (Jenny)

The hidden cost of the fashion industry has skewed the perceptions of the consumers through the cheap costs of fashion, so if such behaviour was punished through tax, such as the sugar tax on soft drinks, this could have the potential to level the industry, informing consumers of why garments have been unsustainably affordable (Nooan, 2019).

Participants also felt that brands and influencers held some responsibility for this and would be the best way to influence the consumer into making a change; however, in the questionnaire, only 2% said that this was an important influence on purchasing decisions. 'Working together' was discussed by all participants at different stages of the interview, suggesting that whilst there are more prominent factors, it is the responsibility of everyone to ensure that this does, in fact, change (mirrored in SDG 17 – partnership for the goals). One cannot expect to thrive if the other factors don't support each other (Mondalek, 2018).

> I'd like to see the brands taking a more active role in educating their consumers … Whilst we do have social media, to be a big influence on that, I think influencer culture takes a massive precedent over that and not many influencers are sustainable. (Katie)

4.3. Sustainability education

Questionnaire participants were asked how much education they had about sustainability in fashion, and the majority answered, 'I know some' (49%), followed by 'none' (24%) and 'I have studied this at an academic level' (13%). The high level of participants who have studied this at an academic level is due to the survey also being distributed within a university setting, suggesting that even among well-educated individuals, the understanding of sustainability was poor, further emphasising an importance of a broader understanding and value shift in consumers. When asked what the main sources of information had been, the top three answers were 'documentaries/TV' (22%), 'social media' (19%) and 'news' (15%). A breakdown in the data showed that 'documentaries' were popular throughout all generations, 'news' was popular with the over the over 56 years categories and under 45 years, and unsurprisingly, social media was most popular with the under 55 years, which showed that larger number of people older than the 'digital age' were now using social media as a source of information (Table 5).

Previous research has shown documentaries on platforms such as Netflix, can have power and impact on people's purchasing decisions and/or attitudes towards particular topics (Boissat et al., 2021; Gregory, 2019) and the result of this research suggests that they appeal to all age groups overall, more so than any other category. This was mirrored in the qualitative research, where participants felt that documentaries had a significant impact on their understanding of sustainability and thus altered their attitudes towards the subject and, consequently, their purchasing habits.

> I watched The True Cost, and it had that shock appeal. I think if people are exposed to it and they see what is happening, then they will want to become more sustainable. (Stacey)

Table 5. Main sources of Information regarding sustainability.

		Age						
	Total	16–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56–65	66–75	75+
Word of mouth	32	2	17	4	5	3	0	1
	21.30%	9.50%	25%	19%	31.30%	15%	0%	100%
News	48	4	19	7	3	11	3	1
	32%	19%	27.90%	33.30%	18.80%	55%	100%	100%
Magazines/newspaper	35	3	12	3	5	10	2	0%
	23.30%	14.30%	17.60%	14.30%	31.30%	50%	66.70%	0%
Social media	63	12	32	7	7	4	1	0
	42%	57.10%	47.10%	33.30%	43.80%	20%	33.30%	0%
Documentaries/TV	70	10	26	9	11	10	3	1
	46.70%	47.60%	38.20%	42.90%	68.80%	50%	100%	100%
Fashion brands	31	6	17	3	3	2	0	0
	20.70%	28.60%	25%	14.30%	18.80%	10%	0%	0%
Academic journals	19	9	7	2	1	0	0	0
	12.70%	42.90%	10.30%	9.50%	6.30%	0%	0%	0%
Studies	24	8	9	5	2	0	0	0%
	16%	38.10%	13.20%	23.80%	12.50%	0%	0%	0

Questionnaire participants were asked what two ways they believed would be the most effective way to educate others about sustainability, and the majority (24%) answered 'education in schools' (Table 6).

The data suggest that consumers want to be educated by brands to know if they, as a customer, are being sustainable. As more consumers look for that education and confirmation, they will grow an understanding of *if* that brand is genuinely sustainable (Townsend, 2018).

With the qualitative results, unanimously, the participants felt that education and raising awareness would be the most important factor to consider. The participants were also asked about how they would implement this education, and all participants referred to schools. Participants believed that this should be implemented from a young age and should be incorporated into the core practice of curriculums so that this behaviour is embedded within a normal practice.

> If the educational system had a compete re-write and sustainability was taught as a core practice for everything, you would probably see a change. (Katie)

> I think it (sustainability) needs to be taught in a way that its applicable in all sorts of aspects that can be integrated into all subjects … it shouldn't just be considered sustainability; it should just be considered the new normal. It shouldn't be its own separate topic; it should be the underlying practice in everything. (Andrew)

Table 6. Effective ways to educate others about sustainable fashion.

	%	Count
Education in schools	24.48%	83
Education by the fashion brands (marketing campaigns, etc.)	17.99%	61
Social media campaigns	16.22%	55
Using influencers/celebrities to promote the message	15.93%	54
Education through documentaries and TV	15.63%	53
Government/political campaigns	9.73%	33
Something else	0.00%	0
Total	100%	339

Participants of the interviews were asked if they felt that having knowledge of the industry through experience or education had influenced their attitudes towards sustainability; and five participants said yes, and one said 'not as much as it should have' (this was the participant who worked in the industry but had no formal fashion education).

> I think it has yes, because it's definitely opened my eyes to that side of the industry. I think if I wasn't a fashion student I wouldn't be as aware of the disciplines and practices that happen and especially the effects of it, you realise that there's a lot more to sustainability than just purchasing clothes in a mature or appropriate way. (Katie)

It was also addressed that the fashion system was outdated and needed to change, which was in direct correlation with the statements released by BFC in 2020 (British Fashion Council, 2020). Fashion education was discussed and how the outdated system is being taught and is not helpful for the new strategies that the industry is trying to impose (Sherman, 2017).

> They (fashion institutions) say that they have sustainability in mind, but they don't really. It's still teaching the traditional design to capsule collection methods so it's not thinking about sustainability long term, or about sustainable practices, it's just relying on a dated fashion system. (Andrew)

Most participants from both data sets agreed that there was a lack of awareness and understanding of sustainability. The majority of participants believed that education in schools was the most important way to raise awareness for sustainability, laying the foundations for

fundamental change – as recycling other materials such as plastic is embedded.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The data were analysed in response to the following research questions.

5.1. Are there limitations to the consumers' understanding of what it is to be sustainable, and is further education on the complexity of this needed to alter their mindset?

Based on the data collected, it was apparent that a more rounded knowledge of the negative impacts of the fashion industry can and does affect consumer attitudes towards sustainability. However, there are gaps in consumer knowledge more generally. The participants of the qualitative study showed a positive attitude towards sustainability based on an increased awareness of the negative impacts. This showed that by having a deeper understanding of the complex nature of sustainability, those participants were more likely to think about their purchasing decisions. By helping the consumer understand the complexity of the supply chain, rather than simply focusing on the recycling and the end phase of the garment cycle, this allows them to comprehend the reasons for sustainably sourced products being more highly priced and the unfair factors that allow fast fashion to be so 'affordable'. Consumers of the quantitative study felt that there was not enough information and wanted to see more information from brands on how the consumer could be sustainable, which fell in line with the literature (White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019). It was apparent that although the consumer holds power regarding purchasing, it is a joint effort required by the industries to help support the transition to a sustainable future (Graham & Marci, 2020).

5.2. What are the areas that consumers feel would be most effective in educating and influencing themselves and others with regard to sustainability and complying with sustainable practices?

The research provided two main areas of interest with this question. Firstly, the implementation of education in schools. Participants felt that incorporating sustainability into core practice was the most effective way to educate the future consumer. The embedding of fundamental sustainable practices from a young age was what participants felt would be the most successful – the participants of the qualitative study based this on their knowledge they acquired at school that formed lasting habits. They believed that knowing the negative impacts of fashion and/or how to partake in sustainable practices would provide the future consumer the power to decide on their purchasing decisions, which ultimately affects the cycle (Amed et al., 2019).

The second area of interest was documentaries. The growing trend of Netflix documentaries has become popular among all ages (McAlone, 2016), and when the data were broken down, it suggested that all age groups find these useful tools for raising awareness, with some participants putting these documentaries as the sole reason for their consumption changes. Campaigns were also discussed, with examples given about the rise of veganism based on increased awareness and the rise in products available to the consumer, which correlated with the literature that supported this claim that increased awareness *does* make positive changes (Hancox, 2018).

The qualitative study provided good insight into this question. Due to the respondent's fashion education, there was a positive connection between those who knew how to sew/repair clothing and the longevity of their garments. Participants who had the skills to repair clothing had increased the lifecycle of their garments. For the quantitative research, 91% of individuals said that if they knew how to sew, they would repair garments rather than dispose of them. This is a significant finding that highlights the importance of formal education in sewing and a clear demand for education. With the creative art subjects being less important within the current curriculum (BBC, 2015), there is a risk of further eroding these skills and knowledge. All the participants of the qualitative study who have a formal education believed that it had influenced their consumption habits and attitudes towards sustainability, and whilst they understood the complexity of being truly sustainable in an industry that struggles with this (Freeman, 2018), they felt that it had had a positive effect.

5.3. Does the consumer believe that education alone is enough to influence their consumption habits, and has the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had any impact on this?

The coronavirus impacted all consumer spending behaviours, and from the study, it was apparent that most participants had shopped less as a result. Whilst some believed that they would shop the same, most participants felt that they would shop less. This varied in reasons for both studies, but there was some evidence to suggest that consumers had used the lockdown to

have a 'clear out' and ultimately discovered new respect for what they already owned. This supports the literature that suggested that although consumers had disposed of clothes over the lockdown, they also had bought less, resulting in reduced consumption (Petter, 2021). Forty per cent of quantitative participants admitted to upcycling since the lockdown, which had been a big social media trend in 2020 (Chan, 2020), but there were no significant correlations made between age or employment status and upcycling. Most individuals (19%) said that they upcycled to 'be more creative' and due to 'having more free time' (15%). However, as this research was carried out during the unprecedented event, it is not clear if this alteration in consumption and/or upcycling has/will revert following the return to 'normal life'. Whilst education on sustainability has proved to have a positive effect on some consumption habits; the research shows that there are still other factors that the public believes to be important such as price and quality, which far out weigh their desire to shop sustainably long term. Consumers have an unrealistic expectation of what they believe to be 'fair pricing', which is currently based on fast fashion prices, which is an issue, with clothing being one of the only commodities that have become cheaper over the last two decades, despite the rise in inflation (Clark, 2021). The table below highlights the factors that consumers believed to be the most influential points with regard to influencing them to purchase products that were sustainably sourced (Table 7).

6. Recommendations

Based on an overwhelming response to Government intervention and awareness of recycling, there should be a further emphasis placed on the ease of textiles recycling within the household. As the data showed, 88% of people would continue to recycle household waste even if laws were abolished, and the majority of participants (82%) felt that recycling was very important; however, with most participants using recycling banks, incentive companies or charity shops, this could be made easier by introducing textiles waste into household collections. Emphasising the importance of recycling textiles to the consumer could make the consumer question existing practices and seek out further information on the subject. Textile's waste should be equal to other materials, and it should be made as easy as possible to recycle for the public.

Secondly, there needs to be further emphasis on education in schools, not only with core sustainability practices, but also with clothing care and repair. The research showed that 91% of participants would upcycle or repair garments if they had the skills required to do so. Eighty-one per cent of respondents said that they had had clothes repaired or repaired themselves. Further research would need to be carried out to find out how many of those individuals had repaired themselves and how many had relied on someone else to do this for them. Given the high number of respondents with a fashion background, it seems likely that the actual amount of people who had repaired their clothes would be far less, and this would need to be investigated with further research. Those with a formal fashion education did value clothing more, supporting the longevity of their items. Education should be widespread throughout the curriculum with regard to sustainability, and it should be embedded as a core practice. Education should focus on consumer participation rather than just awareness, as it is the embedding of behaviours that form good habits (Burt, 2019). As per the data, this leads to positive associations with sustainability and does alter the attitudes of consumers with regard to consumption.

Finally, based on the research findings, consumers are seeking further education from brands with regard to sustainability, which should result in brands taking a more active role in increasing that awareness for consumers. Brands should be using their social media platforms and introducing incentives (that are supported by honesty and authenticity) to help the consumer increase their awareness. Whilst there are organisations that do promote campaigns whereby consumers are encouraged not to consume, this has a limited audience (sustainable consumer), so brands and/or influencers should be encouraging further sustainable spending/reduced consumption as a way of bringing this to the attention of the mainstream.

Table 7. Factors that consumers believed would influence their own consumption habits to shop more sustainably?

	%	Count
If the price was right	24%	105
More choice of products (better designs)	19%	83
More information about the positive impacts of sustainability	15%	63
More education on the negative impacts of the current lifestyle	15%	63
Laws being implemented to that clothing has to be made a certain way	13%	58
More encouragement/influence from brands	7%	32
More encouragement from social media influencers	4%	17
More encouragement from celebrities	1%	5
I am not interested in buying sustainably	1%	3
Total	100%	339

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