

Article

What about Sustainability? An Empirical Analysis of Consumers' Purchasing Behavior in Fashion Context

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Abstract: In recent times, the concept of sustainability has gradually taken on a leading role, particularly because of its potential ability to influence consumers' view and, consequently, their buying choices. Based on this consideration, the work, by means of an empirical analysis, pursues two research questions: (i) is it possible to imagine a theoretical model in the fashion world able to show whether "importance", "expectations" and "social influence" effectively affect consumers' willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand via their purchasing behavior? and (ii) how much are consumers willing to pay to get a sustainable item of clothing? In order to answer these two research questions, a Multiple Linear Regression Model is tested, which offers an interesting result: consumers attach little relevance to the importance accorded to a brand's sustainability, since they orient themselves on the basis of their expectations and their own group's thoughts. Another finding is that consumers state that they are willing to pay a price not higher than 20% to get a sustainable item of clothing. However, the paper presents two limitations, which are linked to the use of the questionnaire for the understanding of the respondents' opinions and to the small reference sample, composed of 271 people with a high level of education.

Keywords: sustainability; fashion brand; purchasing behavior; purchasing choice; Multiple Linear Regression; premium price

1. Introduction

The belief that socio-environmental dynamics play a decisive role in influencing individuals' behavior is widely shared [1–3]. In this regard, the concept of sustainability has gradually taken on a leading role, particularly because of its potential ability to influence consumers' view and, consequently, their buying choices [4–7]. This attitude towards sustainability seems to have captured the interest of scholars and professionals belonging to several sectors [8–11]. Among these sectors, the fashion industry has paid particular attention, with an increasingly heated debate around the economic impact of "sustainable products" on fashion companies [12].

In fact, some authors [13] believe that in the current—increasingly unpredictable and mutable—competitive environment, sustainability represents one of the most effective levers for attracting fashion customers. Moreover, it is not only effective on customers who are particularly active in environmental protection, but also those who simply prefer products realized through the adoption sustainable practices, all other variables being equal [14–16].

This study, by means of an empirical analysis, pursues two research questions:

1. Is it possible to imagine a theoretical model for the fashion world which is able to show whether "importance", "expectations", and "social influence" effectively affect consumers' willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand via their purchasing behavior?

2. How much are consumers willing to pay in order to get a sustainable item of clothing?

In order to answer these two research questions, this paper is structured into five parts. Initially, the theoretical background of the work is presented in order to justify the construction of the conceptual model hypothesized. Subsequently, after describing this construction and the assumptions underlying it, we describe our methodology, present the results of our analysis, and discuss the emerging empirical evidence. Conclusions, theoretical and practical implications, limitations of the work, and ideas for future research are then discussed.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Sustainability

In our current globalized culture, people pay great attention to claims of sustainability by products and brands, which companies make in order to meet customer expectations [17]. Such attention is increasingly shifting market demand toward goods and services capable of ensuring respect for the environment and public health [18]. An increasing number of scholars [19–23] have focused their studies on the existence of a possible gap between consumer attitudes to the adoption of sustainable behaviors and the behaviors actually adopted by them, also emphasizing the mechanisms necessary for reducing this gap. According to Biddle [24], every individual in society has a significant role in explaining behaviors guided by respect for the environment. Solomon et al. [25] argue that the role played by either an individual or a group of people in society, considering also their various duties and responsibilities, represents an important stimulating factor for the adoption of purchasing behaviors aimed at better preserving the environment. Stern and Hicks [26] believe that pro-environmental purchasing behavior arises from a growing desire to promote the respect of sociability. Consistent with these considerations, Mendez-Picazo et al. [27] identify sustainability as a decisive driver for guaranteeing an adequate synthesis of economic and environmental needs. That statement suggests that awareness about the benefits of adopting sustainable behaviors is in itself an important encouragement for their adoption. In fact, consumers who tend to engage in sustainable practices are generally better informed about the consequences of their pro-environmental behavior [28]. Moreover, this consideration emphasizes that consumer buying behavior can no longer be understood as conditioned by only individual wellbeing [29], but also by willingness to achieve overall results—consistent with the market logic—attentive to the respect of public health and environmental protection [30]. By assuming a significant role in consumers' purchasing decisions in this way, environmental and social factors also become decisive in defining business strategies [31]. Customers and companies, in fact, are even more aware that such high attention on sustainability is capable of influencing market decisions and results: In choosing products to purchase, people seem to select those which align with their needs and beliefs, especially in terms of sustainability [32]. Accordingly, companies are increasingly focusing on the development and communication of their sustainable behaviors [33] and this especially depends on the belief that consumers [1] are willing to pay a premium price [11] for preferring those products perceived as really sustainable.

2.2. Perceived Ethical Importance

Although some authors addressed issues related to “perceived ethical importance” in the twentieth century [34], the last two decades have seen this topic take on a significance apparent to consumers and companies, particularly in light of the hyper-competition that now characterizes every business scenario [35]. This growing attention has gradually led to affirmation of the concept of “ethical marketing” [36,37], aimed at inducing both consumers and companies to adopt behaviors to facilitate the improvement of collective well-being and quality of life, by means of an appropriate combination of moral and economic principles [38]. According to Kotler et al. [39], a more ethical vision of marketing can help achieve a threefold objective: ensuring greater user satisfaction; promoting more defensible business success; and, more generally, ensuring social welfare. Such a consideration

provides a plausible explanation for why ethical perceived importance has held an increasingly central position in the definition of marketing strategies [40], with an increased focus on consumers and their needs and preferences [41]. In this regard, Robin and Reidenbach [42] and Abratt and Sacks [43] state that the level of business engagement toward the adoption of ethical behavior is quite complex and varies according to several factors, including culture, education, experience, and deontological norms. Several scholars [44–46] have focused their attention on the role played by perceived ethical importance in effectively orienting behavioral choices of individuals. Haines et al. [47], for example, show that the greater the perception of the importance attached to ethics, the higher the level of individual involvement. Singhapakdi [48] defines perceived ethical importance as an individual state construct, very close to the behavioral intention, and hence capable of predicting decisions by individuals. This importance accorded to ethical issues shows that, in adopting behavioral choices, decision makers' perceptions play an increasingly crucial role [49]. Vitell and Hidalgo [50] argue that the greater the perceived importance of ethics, the higher the probability of adopting morally desirable practices. Similarly, Karandakatiya and Qiang [51] point out that only those who attach a high importance to ethics tend to implement certain behaviors, consistent with their beliefs, with regular occurrence. Such statements suggest that perceived ethical importance should be considered as a variable capable of directing individuals' behavioral choices. On the other hand, Sciarrelli [52,53] argues that despite the growing interest shown by academics and professionals to perceived ethical importance, demonstrated by the increasing use of terms such as “ethical consumer” [54–56] or “ethical company” [57–59], it is rather unusual to see the adoption of “completely” ethical behavior on the part of consumers and companies. In practice, these parties tend to consider other variables.

2.3. Expectations

In the managerial literature, the term “expectation” is generically interpreted as a set of forecasts performed by economic operators on the basis of their own information and intuitions about the trend of possible economic variables in the future. One of the first authors to highlight the role of expectations in influencing the current behavior of economic operators was Keynes [60], although without formulating an explicit theory of their training; instead, he compared them to irrational animal spirits capable of guiding individuals' actions and behaviors. Over time, many meanings have been attributed to the term “expectation” and a large number of studies have been dedicated to the topic. Vroom [61], for example, considers expectation as a temporary belief regarding the probability that a given action is followed by a specific result. Georgescu-Roegen [62] instead defines it as an individual's state of mind related to an affirmation, a future event, or any other issue on which knowledge does not necessarily exist. Olson and Dover [63] later elevated consumer expectations to “prepurchase beliefs or evaluative beliefs about the product”. Other scholars [64–70], in the attempt to explain the concept and—especially—the role played by expectations, define them as anticipations of future consequences based on prior experience, current circumstances, or other sources of information capable of affecting individuals' behavior. For example, when choosing investments, any individual acts by taking into account their future possible profitability. In this regard, Bridges [71] defines expectations as a possible point of reference for consumers, able to orient their opinion and influence their choices. Consistently, Atkinson [72], the proponent of Expectancy-Value Theory, believes that individuals' choices could be explained by their beliefs about how well they would have done on the activity. Bandura [73] distinguishes expectations in two categories: efficacy expectations, considered as people's belief about their capability to accomplish a task; and outcome expectancies, defined as the belief that a given action will lead to a given outcome. More specifically, the author points out that the former are more predictive of performance and choice than the latter. Eccles et al. [74] proposed an extension of the original expectancy–value model, stating that expectancies directly influence achievement choices, performances, efforts, and persistence. Therefore, based on advanced argumentation, expectation is a construct to take into account for studying the determinants of individuals' behavior [75].

2.4. Social Influence

Social influence can be interpreted as the degree to which an individual values what others think should be done [76,77]. Over the years, this concept has attracted the interest of several authors [78], although early studies [79,80] tended to describe the mechanisms underlying it, without actually highlighting the possible effects on individuals' behavior. In the field of social psychology, it can be defined as the pressure that a group exerts on individuals by altering their perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors [81]. In other words, it can be expressed as the way through which people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the presence of others, real or imaginary [82]. Social influence is a phenomenon that can occur in all situations where there are at least two "social entities": an influencer ("influence source") and a "target" (influence recipient) [83].

In this regard, Fishbein [84] defined a model representative of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), in which social influence (described through the concept of subjective norm) is considered as the result of a set of pressures exerted by some individuals on others, which is able to affect the behavior of the latter. Consistently, Ajzen [85] introduced and developed the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), highlighting the concept of the "subjective norm" to indicate the perceived social pressure capable of influencing or not influencing people's behavior. In more detail, both TRA and TPB models stress how people's actions and behaviors are constantly being affected by what others think and say. In a business context, this idea can produce an evident impact on corporate decision-making and on company conduct (manufacturers, contractors, sub-contractors, retailers, etc.), especially in terms of marketing strategies [86]. In this perspective, in order to face the turbulence of the market, fashion companies should rethink the way their business is run, adjusting, reconsidering and/or inventing business models complying with consumers' thoughts.

In this regard, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists, historians, and literary critics have paid attention to the role played by the concept of identity, in an attempt to understand "how people think they and others should behave; how society teaches them how to behave; and how people are motivated by these views, sometimes to the point of being willing to die for them" [83]. There are numerous studies highlighting the strong incidence of social influence on individuals' behavior, but other researchers have presented results which suggest the opposite. Armitage and Conner [83], for example, argued that in many cases it is not possible to demonstrate a causal connection between social influence perceived by individuals and the actions that they carry out. In fact, in order to hypothesize an effective impact of social influence on an individual's behavior, the "target" should make a cognitive or sentimental behavioral adaptation because of the ideas and thoughts expressed by the influencer [82]. Recent studies [87,88] have compromised by providing a social influence conceptualization which is oriented to give evidence of its potential for affecting human actions. Risselada et al. [89] define social influence as the set of external pressures able to influence an individual's perception and, consequently, their behavior. Similarly, Frink et al. [90] argue that, in general, social influence plays a critical role in guiding people's behavior in many contexts. Likewise, Takács et al. [91], attach to social influence a double ascendancy—positive and negative—on human behavior. According to this interpretation, every individual can be induced to perform specific actions or avoid other ones. Based on these arguments, social influence appears as a possible determinant of individuals' actions and behavioral.

3. Research Model and Hypothesis Development

The paper, starting from the contribution of Creyer and Ross [92], tries to test the hypothesis verified by the two authors in another context. It also proposes a possible extension, in order to present a conceptual model able to describe the different variables influencing consumers' willingness to reward sustainable brands through their purchasing behavior. Note that, rather than considering the concept of ethics, this paper focuses on sustainability, which, although strictly linked to the former, has a somewhat different meaning. The variables originally considered in the aforementioned paper are:

1. Importance of the ethicality of a firm's behavior (importance).
2. Expectations regarding the ethicality of corporate behavior in today's society (expectations).
3. Willingness to reward or punish an ethical firm via purchasing behavior (willingness to reward or punish).

Starting from these variables and adding another variable (represented by social influence on fashion brand sustainability), the paper aims to identify the determinants of willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand. However, as noted above, the present paper also attempts to present an extension, considering a further variable in the multiple linear regression. As the existing body of studies aimed at empirically assessing the real determinants of consumers' behavior is quite poor and fragmentary, the proposed theoretical model tries to identify the factors able to influence consumers' purchasing choices, verifying in detail the extent to which willingness to reward is affected by importance, expectations, and social expectations (defined as above).

A schematic depicting this analysis is shown in Figure 1.

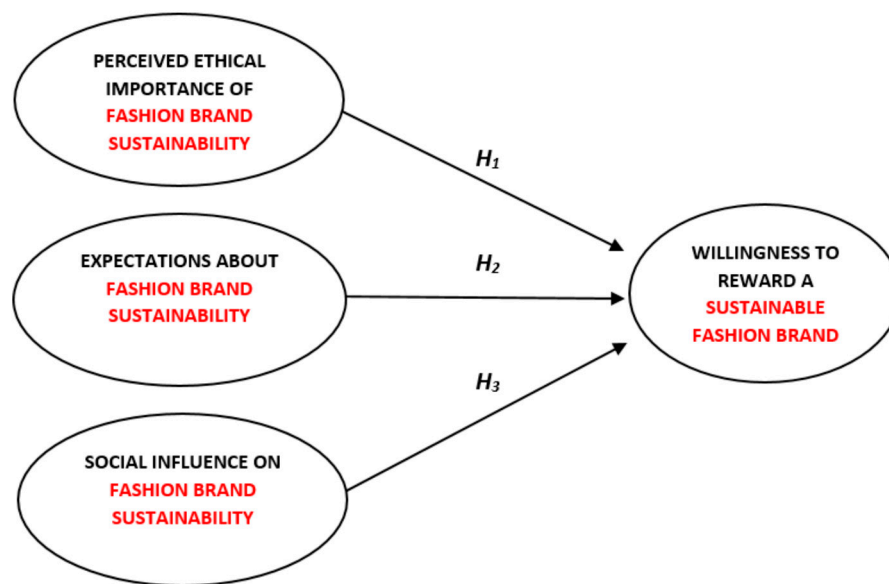


Figure 1. The theoretical model.

The roots of the proposed multiple linear regression model lie in theoretical studies concerning the purchasing behavior of fashion consumers [93–100]. Each variable has been chosen for study on the basis of a literature review.

Hypotheses Underlying the Model

The importance of perceived sustainability as a driver guiding consumers purchasing choices represents a widely-debated issue in the literature [23,101]. Several scholars [20] have shown the existence of a strong positive correlation between perceived ethical importance of sustainable practices and consumers behavior. Accordingly, other studies [1] point out that in recent years, the importance attached to sustainable practices on the part of consumers is conditioning the market and marketing strategies [102], especially because companies seeking new sustainability practices with which to gain competitive advantages over their current and potential competitors [103,104]. This trend seems to have fostered the development of an apparent virtuous circle: the increasing importance addressed to sustainable products and brands has stimulated companies to focus more attention on the adoption of sustainable practices, which have in turn attracted the interest of more consumers [103]. This importance is proposed to stem from circumstances in which consumers are not able to objectively

assess desired products before purchasing. In such situations, they base their purchasing choices on other variables, such as brand sustainability [105].

Other academics [104] demonstrate the exact opposite, highlighting that in most cases, although consumers may claim to value sustainable behavior, this is not associated with consistent shopping behavior. According to Weatherell et al. [106] and Carrigan et al. [56], this attitude is probably justifiable by considering that, in addition to sustainability, there are many other elements which consumers tend to take into account, such as, price, value for money, and comfort. Verbeke [107], instead, associates this result with the fact that few consumers have a concrete understanding of the real benefits arising from the adoption of sustainable practices, and instead receive their information via appropriate marketing strategies. In the light of this vivid, this paper considers the following hypothesis (which we refer to as H1): Perceived ethical importance of fashion brand sustainability positively influences people's willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand via their purchasing behavior.

According to Kakeu and Byron [108], expectations are one of the factors that can predict individuals' behavior, playing a decisive role in guiding consumers' purchasing choices. Likewise, Chang and Sanfey [109] state that this effect is explained by the fact that expectations act as facilitators of people's decision-making processes. Consistently, other studies [110–112] show that expectations play a primary role in orienting consumers' purchasing intent. With regard to fashion, many scholars and practitioners believe that every consumer's behavior is strongly oriented toward products about which they have previously formulated high expectations [113]. In other words, it seems that the higher the expectations about the intrinsic or extrinsic characteristics of a fashion good, the greater the likelihood that the product will be bought by the consumer. Accordingly, it is difficult to conceive of a consumer deciding to buy a garment concerning which they hold low expectations. However, not all scholars agree with this conceptual approach. LaTour and Peat [114], for instance, believe that a consumer might be induced to buy a certain good while considering its quality poor; this may occur in a number of circumstances, for instance when little time is available for making a purchase, when there is an urgent need to obtain a fashion product with certain functionalities, or when one is curious to compare an item with another product with better perceived quality. Indeed, according to the two authors, a consumer who buys a product for which they have low expectations is more likely to be satisfied with the purchase, considering the low initial expectations. On this basis, we make the following hypothesis (referred to as H2): Expectations about fashion brand sustainability positively influence people's willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand with their purchasing behavior.

According to Hiller Connell and Kozar [115], there is a possibility that a consumer's purchasing decisions are influenced by other people with whom they usually interact. In this regard, Lee [31] argues that consumers, and in particular young people, tend to be inclined to slightly modify or even totally change their behavior because of pressures arising from their membership group. Bartels and Hoogendam [116] show that social influence perceived by consumers attentive to environmental issues triggers the adoption of sustainable purchasing behavior. Berns et al. [117] and Loureiro et al. [118] state that individuals are strongly conditioned by society in choosing what to wear, insofar as it allows them to assert their professional position or demonstrate their social status, classify or differentiate themselves from others, or impress. Very often, buying and owning a socially-accepted product helps make consumers an integral part of their membership group: individuals who adopt a similar purchasing behavior by orienting themselves towards products bought by other people close to them might feel they have elements in common and this sensation could increase the sense of identity and belonging to a particular social group. Some authors [118,119] believe that social influence is capable of affecting consumers in the purchase of hedonic or luxury products, while others [81,97,98] believe that the pressure exercised by a social group on its members affects their purchasing behavior regardless of the kind of product. Therefore, we propose the following third hypothesis (H3): Social influence on fashion brand sustainability positively affects people's willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand via their purchasing behavior.

In summary, we have the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Perceived ethical importance of fashion brand sustainability positively influences people's willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand via their purchasing behavior.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Expectations about fashion brand sustainability positively influence people's willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand with their purchasing behavior.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Social influence on fashion brand sustainability positively affects people's willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand via their purchasing behavior.*

4. Data Collection

4.1. Sample Description

To test the research hypotheses, data was collected through the administration of paper questionnaires to a sample of students at the University of Salerno. The decision to engage students was based on the consideration that they represent a quite homogeneous segment, which is useful in studies aimed at understanding salient aspects in the fashion consumption context [120,121].

At the end of the administration phase, 310 questionnaires were returned, with 20 incomplete (6.45% non-response rate) and 19 with response-set problems (6.13% response bias). The elimination of these 39 left 271 suitable questionnaires remaining (87.42% response rate), with 124 completed by males and 147 by females. The overall average age of the sample was 21.97 years (22.49 years for males and 21.62 years for females).

4.2. Procedure and Instruments

The study, by means of a multiple linear regression, aimed to investigate the relationship between the variables of the model shown above. In particular, as previously noted, the purpose was to investigate whether and to what extent importance, expectations, and social influence affect consumers' willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand via their purchasing behavior.

The questionnaire was developed with both multiple choice and open-response questions. In order to ensure the questions were clear, the questionnaire was administered to a small sample of students at the University of Salerno before the final administration.

After the pre-test, necessary amendments were made, and the final administration was realized between April and May 2016 with students attending degree courses run by the Department of Business Management at the University of Salerno. After the objective of the survey was explained, each student's willingness to participate in research was verified and the questionnaire was administered.

All constructs involved in the model were measured using multiple indicators adapted from previous studies, with particular regard to the work of Creyer and Ross [92], which contains the initial model to which this extension was proposed. In particular, for the construct "importance", the 5 items scale used by Creyer and Ross [92] was reproduced, with minor adaptations reflecting the research goals. Also from Creyer and Ross, 7 items were adapted for the construct "expectations". 3 items were adapted from Venkatesh et al. [76] to measure the construct "social influence", while a 4 items scale, originally proposed by Creyer and Ross [92], was employed to measure the willingness to reward sustainable fashion brands. As suggested by Bastian et al. (2005), all variables were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

5. Results

The findings emerging from the administration of questionnaires were processed with the program IBM SPSS Statistics 23, by means of which, in accordance with the suggestions described in the study conducted by Rieke et al. [122], the authors have firstly identified the factors best able to explain the selected constructs by carrying out, as suggested by Churchill [123], a Principal Component Analysis (PCA). Subsequently, as recommended by Jolliffe [124], the reliability of each measurement scale resulting after realizing PCA has been verified.

The checking of the scales validity and reliability was performed by means of an iterative process, which finally provided all values higher than the minimum acceptance threshold, with particular regard to the KMO test ($>.5$ [125]), Bartlett's test of sphericity (Sign. $< .005$ [126]), the explained variance of the phenomenon ($>.50$ [125,127]) and Cronbach's Alpha ($>.70$ [125]) (Table 1):

Table 1. Sampling.

Administrated Questionnaires	Response Rate	Non-Response Rate	Response Bias
310	271 (87, 42%)	20 (6, 45%)	19 (6, 13%)

Subsequently, in order to examine the explanatory power of the model, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. With few exceptions, which will be discussed, below, in line with the argumentations proposed by Hu et al. [128], the regression analysis presents acceptable values with reference to both the Adjusted R-square and coefficients, such as the standardized Beta and the collinearity statistics (VIF and Tolerance), as shown in Tables 2–4:

Table 2. Validity and reliability of the measurement scales.

Variables	Scales Validity			Scales Reliability
	KMO Test	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Sign.)	Total Explained Variance	Cronbach's Alpha
Importance	.500	.000	90.469	.895
Expectation	.781	.000	55.429	.794
Social influence	.716	.000	83.548	.901
Willingness to reward	.716	.000	75.513	.819

Table 3. Model summary.

Model	R	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.812	.660	.656	.721	1.802

Table 4. Coefficients.

Variables	Standardized Beta	Sign.	Collinearity Statistics	
			VIF	Tolerance
Importance	.050	.281	.602	1.660
Expectation	.392	.000	.486	2.057
Social influence	.491	.000	.674	1.484

Table 3, in fact, shows that the independent variables of the model (expectations, importance and social influence) are cumulatively able to explain more than 65% of the dependent variables (customers' willingness to reward the adoption of sustainable practices through their purchasing behavior), in consistency with the results emerging from other studies aimed at responding to a similar research question [47,129].

However, Table 4 deserves further examination, since not all of the variables exhibit suitable values. In fact, while expectations and social influence satisfy the acceptance thresholds, importance, on the contrary, presents positive values only for the collinearity statistics and not also for the standardized Beta nor for significance, indicating that it may not be a particularly decisive predictor of customers' willingness to reward sustainability through purchasing behavior.

6. Discussion

In this multiple linear regression (see Figure 2), importance seems to exert a totally negligible influence on consumers' willingness to reward sustainable fashion brands, contrary to the initial model proposed by Creyer and Ross [92]. This result, though not fully generalizable, suggests that consumers are often unable to prioritize to their own thoughts in adopting a specific purchasing behavior [130,131]. In other words, hypothesis H1 was rejected by our analysis.

Moreover, the analysis appears to confirm the hypothesis H2, highlighting the significant influence exercised by consumers' expectations about sustainability on their willingness to reward brands that adopt friendly environmental practices. This result is perfectly in line with the arguments raised by Kakeu and Byron [108], who argue that expectations play a decisive role in influencing consumers towards more conscious and deliberate purchasing decisions (see also Umbach [110]).

The hypothesis H3 is also confirmed. In fact, social influence appears to be the variable with the greatest impact on consumers' purchasing choices. In line with the viewpoint presented by Bartels and Hoogendam [116], consumer buying decisions appear to be significantly influenced by the opinions of people with whom they maintain relations. This was previously foreseen by Berns et al. [117]: "in particular, a consumer's tendency to purchase a product is influenced by the choices made by his associative reference group". More specifically, the authors believe that young people's behavior is affected by perceptions of popularity in their group of reference. Likewise, Lee [31] highlights that in some cases, a consumer can be so concerned with what people think about a specific topic that they can neglect their own personal taste by making purchases on the basis of the interest shown towards that product by the community.

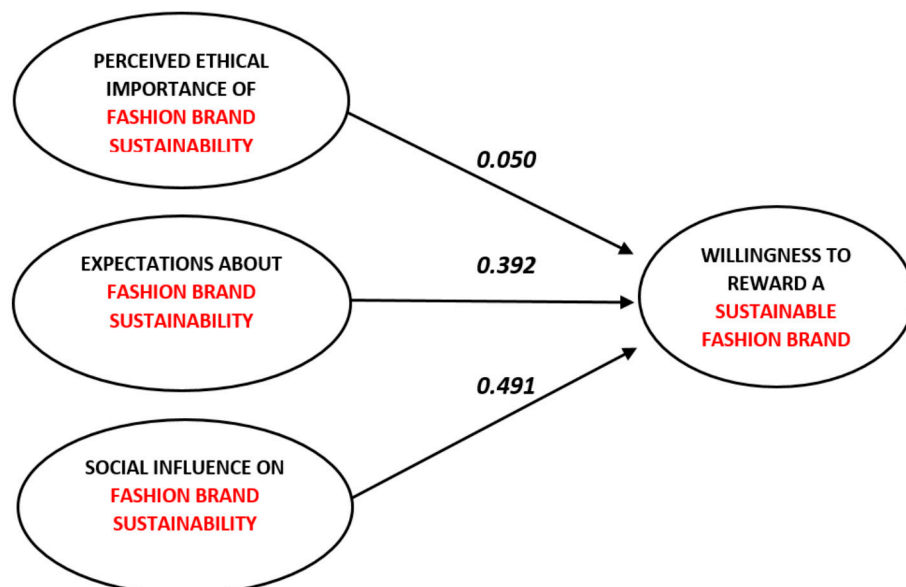


Figure 2. The multiple linear regression model.

Besides multiple-choice questions and those related to gender (masculine or feminine), the questionnaire also included some open-ended questions, as previously mentioned, which were

aimed at allowing for a better understanding of the perception of sustainability with reference to fashion brands.

In particular, respondents were asked how much they would have been willing to pay to have an item of clothing made through the adoption of sustainable practices by companies operating in the fashion sector. The responses highlighted the customers' tendency to consider aspects that go beyond the mere use of a product, looking toward a more sustainable dimension of socio-economic development, as depicted in Figure 3.

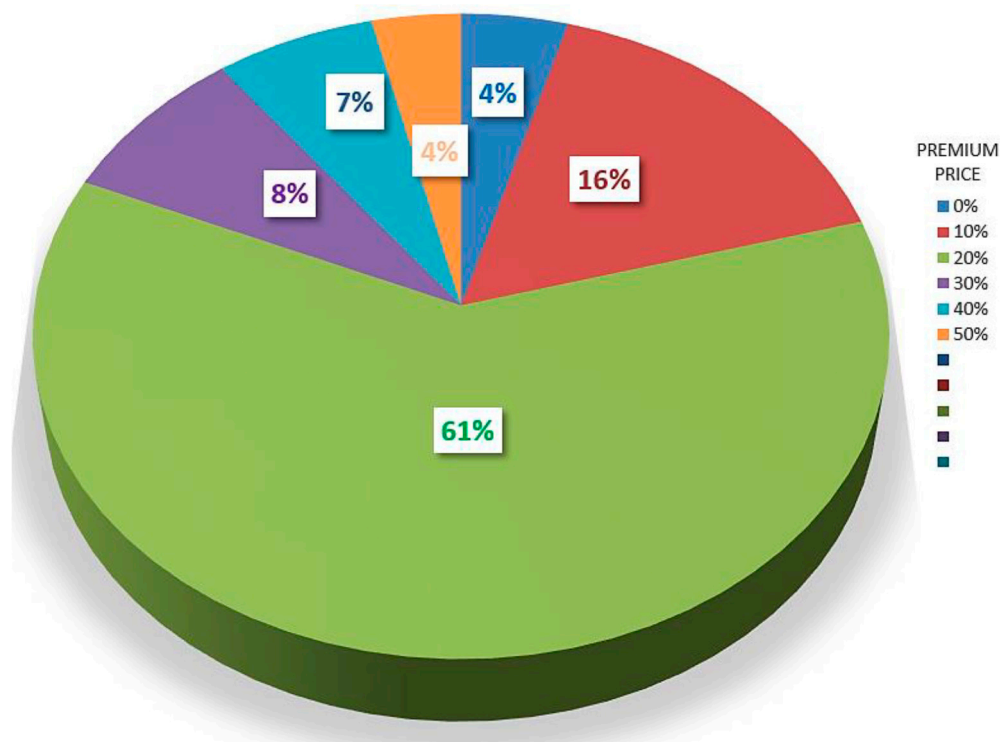


Figure 3. Respondents' willingness to pay a premium price for a sustainable fashion product.

In more detail, the responses were as follows (see Table 5). 10 people (about 4% of the sample) pointed out that they would not be willing to pay any premium price to get a sustainable item of clothing, since they care about other features of products. Another 10 people (about 4% of the sample) declared that they pay enough attention to sustainability to be willing to support a 50% increase in price. Nineteen people (about 7% of the sample) said they would be willing to pay 40% more for apparel with a sustainable brand, while 22 (about 8% of the sample) revealed that the highest price increase they would support for a sustainable item of clothing is 30% on the base price. Forty-three people (about 16% of the sample) stated their willingness to pay a 10% increased price for a sustainable fashion product. One-hundred and sixty-five people (about 61% of the sample) pointed out that they would pay no more than 20% than the basic price to get a sustainable item of clothing. No one declared a willingness to support a premium price increase of more than 50% for buying a fashion good produced through sustainable practices.

Table 5. Respondents' willingness to pay a premium price for a sustainable fashion product.

People (% of the Sample)	Maximum Premium Price Willing to Pay
10 (4%)	0%
43 (16%)	10%
165 (61%)	20%
22 (8%)	30%
19 (7%)	40%
10 (4%)	50%
0 (0%)	60%
0 (0%)	70%
0 (0%)	80%
0 (0%)	90%
0 (0%)	100%

7. Theoretical and Practical Implications

In the light of the considerations so far expressed, which highlight the relevance of social and environmental aspects for consumers' purchasing behavior, this study could be considered a useful instrument for both scholars and managers interested and/or engaged in fashion sector.

In fact, the paper offers both theoretical and practical implications, emphasizing that, on one hand, expectations [113] and social influence [115] seem to play a significant role in influencing consumers' willingness to buy sustainable items of clothing, while, on the other, the selling price continues to represent a significant factor, at least up to a certain threshold, beyond which, in fact, an adverse effect on brand appeal could occur.

This statement should lead, concerning theoretical implications, marketing scholars to investigate new scenarios in the fashion industry, potentially capable of driving consumers' interest toward aspects different from the "classic" ones (such as product quality, image, value for money, etc.). In this regard, this work could contribute to giving an impulse to the development of the scientific debate about a particularly salient topic in the social and politic context.

In particular, the results emerging from the analysis stress the need to deepen the various aspects leading to the growing interest in the theme of enterprise sustainability and, consequently, to the constant increase in dedicated investments. Among them, the sensitivity of businesses, the need for adaptation to regulatory developments (which have been more and more strict in recent years), the need to enhance the quality of products, and the simultaneous reduction of costs needed for their production, the improvement of image and reputation in the eyes of consumers (increasingly sensitive to environmental evolution and new market opportunities), etc.

To this end, greater attention of scholars in every sector (especially business management) seems indispensable to showing companies the future evolution of the global and local agenda with regard to sustainability issues.

A significant challenge for scholars interested in the theme of sustainability is the pursuit of three specific medium- and long-term objectives: intercepting new market trends; exploring and, possibly, predicting how sustainable practices can turn into effective purchasing behavior; and, ultimately, making the concept of sustainability a concrete resource for companies.

In other words, future research could be directed to the qualitative and quantitative identification of the competitive advantage that a company would be able to get if it started undertaking actions and carrying out sustainable interventions.

regarding practical implications, this work invites managers of fashion companies to reflect on the fact that, in order to maximize business volume, it is necessary to focus both on current issues (such as environmental sustainability) and on the maximum increase capable of attracting and retaining customers attentive to certain aspects, since the variable "price" seems to keep on playing a not insignificant role in consumers' purchasing choices.

This means that the consideration of the results emerging from the present analysis allows us to more quickly and effectively understand the social variables (such as sustainability, social influence, price, etc.) in order to facilitate better business management and improve the economic and financial performances of companies.

Business managers should be well aware that most companies that have undertaken sustainable initiatives have greatly benefited in terms of regulatory compliance, brand reputation enhancement, customer relationship betterment, improvement and/or consolidation of the market position, etc.

In this regard, corporate ownership (especially with reference to medium-sized companies, but not only) could assess the idea of introducing, in addition to the traditional managerial figures, a Chief Sustainability Officer, investing in this position the responsibility of taking advantage of the adoption of sustainable practices.

This choice could be justified by the fact that, in the main industrialized countries, the concept of sustainability is progressively gaining importance for consumers and, consequently, for companies. In fact, many business realities are increasingly aware of the existence of a causal link between business sustainability and performance: to date, many managers do not wonder whether it is advantageous to define and implement sustainable market policies but, rather, they attempt to identify, among different available alternatives, the best ways to direct consumers' attention to sustainability with real benefits for company.

A business oriented towards or, at least, focused on the theme of sustainability can ensure a competitive position with stable returns over time, although some actions do not bring direct benefits in terms of profitability but contribute, in the medium and long term, to the formation of intangible capital, especially in terms of expertise and image. However, this approach requires a lot of time, so it will be possible to see the first fruits and avoid the strategic and operational risks that could compromise the relationship with the various categories of stakeholders (customers, employees, distributors, suppliers, local communities, environment, etc.).

8. Conclusions: Final Remarks, Limits and Future Research

As previously indicated, this study attempted to respond to two distinct but related research questions:

1. Is it possible to imagine a theoretical model for the fashion world that is able to show whether "importance", "expectations", and "social influence" effectively affect consumers' willingness to reward a sustainable fashion brand via their purchasing behavior?
2. How much are consumers willing to pay in order to get a sustainable item of clothing?

To achieve the research objectives, paper questionnaires were administered to 271 students enrolled in Master's degree courses at the Department of Business Management at the University of Salerno. The data from the questionnaires was analyzed using the program IBM SPSS Statistics 23, which allowed for the construction of a multiple linear regression model based on four constructs: Importance, expectation, social influence, and willingness to reward.

With regard to the first research question, the analysis showed that consumers attach little relevance to the importance accorded to brand sustainability, orientating themselves most on the basis of their expectations and, above all, on the opinions of society or, more specifically, of their own group (relatives, friends, co-workers, acquaintances, and so on).

As for the second research question, the analysis found that consumers claim to be absolutely committed to promoting environmental protection by means of purchasing choices more focused on the adoption of sustainable practices. The majority of the questionnaire respondents expressed a willingness to pay a 20% increase in price in order to buy a product made and offered on the market by a sustainable fashion brand.

However, the findings emerging from this analysis were subject to two limitations. The first concerned the use of the questionnaire for the understanding of the respondents' opinions. Indeed,

although the questionnaire offered several advantages (such as the efficient dispersal of poor economic and temporal resources for its administration), it did not allow for responses of great depth, as the questions only asked the respondents to provide numbers representative of their general agreement level with various statements. The second limitation was related to the use of a small reference sample, composed of 271 people with a relatively high level of education. For future research, it could be appropriate to repeat the analysis by using a different technique (for instance, an economic experiment) and including more people, with various levels of education.

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