

Clicking Responsibly: A Mixed-Methods Study of Sustainable Fashion Consumption in the Philippines

Analyn I Diola, MSc, LPT, PhD¹, Jesy V. Domingo-Echanes² and Jeanlyn V. Domingo, CPA, LPT, DBA³

1Pangasinan State University, Philippines

adiola.asingan@psu.edu.ph

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2012-5420>

2Pangasinan State University, Philippines

jdomingo@psu.edu.ph

3Pangasinan State University, Philippines

jdomingo.asingan@psu.edu.ph

Abstract

The rapid growth of online fashion retail in the Philippines has expanded access to clothing but intensified environmental and ethical concerns. This mixed-methods study examines how Filipino online shoppers understand and practice sustainable fashion, and how e-commerce platform design shapes their choices. A structured survey of 300 adult consumers and 10 semi-structured interviews were analyzed using an integrated framework drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior, Value–Belief–Norm theory, and Circular Economy concepts. Results show high awareness of “sustainable” or “ethical” fashion and generally positive attitudes: most respondents agree that brands should be environmentally responsible and report feeling personal responsibility to reduce clothing waste. However, only about one-third had intentionally chosen a sustainable brand in the past six months, and respondents estimated that sustainable items comprised roughly one-fifth of their clothing purchases, highlighting an intention–behavior gap. Qualitative themes—“convenience vs. conscience,” “price and practicality,” “skepticism and trust,” and “social influence”—explain how cost constraints, addictive platform convenience, and distrust of “green” claims inhibit sustainable choices. The paper argues that consumer awareness is necessary but insufficient; platform governance, credible green claims regulation, and circular business models (resale, repair, take-back) are needed to make sustainable options visible, trustworthy, and affordable in Philippine e-commerce.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, online retail, e-commerce, consumer behavior, mixed-methods, Philippines, environmental awareness, ethical consumption, circular economy, environmental governance

INTRODUCTION

Online fashion retail in the Philippines has grown rapidly, driven by rising internet penetration, mobile payment systems, and platforms such as Shopee, Lazada, TikTok Shop, and cross-border retailers like Shein. Clothing is now cheaper and more convenient to purchase than ever, but this growth is embedded in a “fast fashion” model characterized by overproduction, short garment lifespans, and rising textile and plastic waste.

At the same time, public concern about environmental issues and labor ethics is increasing. Surveys suggest that many Filipino consumers claim to care about eco-friendly products, yet fast-fashion purchasing and clothing discard after only a few wears remain widespread. This “sustainable fashion paradox” reflects a broader ethical consumption intention–behavior gap: people endorse sustainability in principle but struggle to act accordingly in daily purchasing.

In the Philippine context, sustainability issues include synthetic textile use and microplastic pollution, single-use plastic packaging from e-commerce, carbon emissions from last-mile deliveries, and opaque supply chains that can obscure poor labor conditions. Recent policy initiatives—such as the Philippine E-Commerce Roadmap, the Internet Transactions Act of 2023, and forthcoming “Green Claims” guidelines—signal growing attention to environmental integrity and consumer protection in digital markets.

This study investigates how Filipino online fashion consumers navigate this context. Specifically, it examines (1) awareness and understanding of sustainable fashion, (2) current purchasing and disposal behaviors, (3) the influence of platform features on sustainability-related decisions, and (4) perceived barriers and motivators for sustainable fashion consumption. A mixed-methods design allows us to connect statistical patterns with lived experiences and to generate actionable insights for consumers, platforms, and policymakers.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study integrates three lenses:

- Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB): attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) shape intentions and behaviors.
- Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) Theory: values and ecological beliefs influence awareness of consequences and ascription of responsibility, activating personal norms to act.
- Circular Economy (CE): emphasizes design and governance that reduce waste and extend product lifecycles via repair, reuse, resale, and recycling.

In the online fashion context, many Filipino consumers hold pro-environmental attitudes and experience social encouragement to be “eco-conscious,” yet PBC is constrained by affordability, limited availability of credible sustainable options, and friction in platform interfaces (e.g., weak filters, lack of verified eco-labels). Personal norms are activated by concern about waste and pollution but are dampened by skepticism about “green” marketing and the immediacy of flash sales and free-shipping promotions.

We conceptualize platform design and governance as moderators of the intention–behavior link. Features such as verified eco-badges, trustworthy filters for sustainable products, default consolidated shipping, and integrated resale/repair services can lower the cost and effort of sustainable choices, helping to translate intentions into actual purchases and circular practices.

METHODS

Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. A quantitative online survey captured patterns in awareness, attitudes, and self-reported practices among Filipino online fashion consumers (N=300). Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 10 survey volunteers provided in-depth narratives to explain and enrich the survey findings.

Sample

Survey participants were Filipino residents aged 18–45 who had bought clothing, footwear, or accessories online at least once in the past six months. Using purposive and volunteer sampling, the survey was distributed via social media, university mailing lists, and online fashion communities. The final sample (N=300) was 68% female, predominantly aged 18–29, and skewed toward urban and educated respondents—typical of heavy online platform users.

Ten interviewees were selected for maximum variation by sustainable behavior level, gender, age, location, and platform usage (Shopee/Lazada heavy users and those using Instagram, Facebook Marketplace, or thrift platforms). Interviews were conducted online (30–45 minutes), recorded with consent, and transcribed.

Instruments and Measures

The survey included sections on demographics, online shopping frequency and platform use, awareness and knowledge of sustainable fashion, TPB and VBN constructs (attitudes, norms, perceived behavioral control, personal responsibility), and self-reported behaviors (e.g., buying secondhand, selecting sustainable brands, choosing eco-shipping, donating or discarding clothes).

Likert-type scales were used to construct composite indices for awareness, sustainability attitudes, and sustainable behaviors. Reliability was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.78$ – 0.85). An open-ended question invited suggestions on how e-commerce could better support sustainable fashion.

The interview guide explored:

- participants' understanding of sustainable fashion,
- concrete examples of purchases and disposal decisions,
- influence of platform features and social media, and
- perceived barriers and motivators for sustainable consumption.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlations, and group comparisons. Correlations tested relationships between awareness/attitudes and behavior indices; t-tests and ANOVA examined demographic differences.

Interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Coding identified recurring patterns related to convenience, cost, trust, platform design, and social influence. Themes were then integrated with quantitative trends to explain the intention–behavior gap.

RESULTS

Awareness and Attitudes

Awareness of sustainable fashion was high: 85% had heard of “sustainable” or “ethical” fashion, and many correctly associated it with eco-materials, reduced waste, and fair labor. Self-rated knowledge averaged 3.7 on a 5-point scale, indicating moderate familiarity.

Attitudes were strongly pro-sustainability. Approximately 88% agreed that fashion brands should be environmentally responsible, and 75% felt a personal responsibility to reduce clothing waste. A composite attitude index averaged 4.1/5, with little variation by age or gender.

However, only 45% agreed that they would consistently choose a more expensive sustainable item over a cheaper conventional option, foreshadowing tensions between values and budget constraints.

Behaviors and Practices

Despite high awareness, sustainable actions were uneven:

- Only ~34% had intentionally chosen a sustainable or eco-friendly fashion brand in the past six months.
- Respondents estimated that sustainable items accounted for about 21% of their clothing purchases; half reported that 10% or less of their wardrobe was “sustainable.”
- 48% had bought at least one secondhand or thrift item, 58% had donated or resold unwanted clothing, but 29% admitted to discarding clothing after only a few uses.
- Only 18% always selected eco-friendly packaging or consolidated shipping when available; 38% never did.

These patterns confirm a notable intention–behavior gap: many care about sustainability but practice it only occasionally.

Platform Use and Perceptions

Shopee and Lazada dominated fashion purchases (used by about 90% and 78% of respondents respectively), with Shopee named as the primary platform by two-thirds of users. TikTok Shop, Facebook/Instagram sellers, Zalora, and Shein occupied smaller but significant niches.

Only a small minority felt that major platforms made sustainable options easy to find. Most respondents perceived platforms as optimized for low prices, flash sales, and fast delivery rather than for sustainability. Trust in product claims was moderate: many doubted that items labeled “eco” or “organic” were genuinely sustainable, particularly from smaller marketplace sellers.

Intention–Behavior Relationship

Awareness and pro-sustainability attitudes correlated moderately with sustainable behavior ($r \approx 0.45$, $p < 0.001$). Higher-awareness respondents reported more sustainable actions but still purchased mostly conventional fashion. Women and higher-income respondents reported slightly more sustainable behaviors (e.g., choosing sustainable brands, buying secondhand), but effect sizes were modest.

DISCUSSION

The findings reaffirm the “sustainable fashion paradox” in the Philippine online retail context: high awareness and positive attitudes co-exist with modest adoption of sustainable practices. Awareness is a necessary but insufficient condition; economic realities, platform architectures, and trust issues are equally decisive.

The integration of TPB and VBN clarifies that attitudes and personal norms are present but often blocked by low perceived behavioral control and situational cues that favor fast fashion. Circular behaviors (repairing, donating, buying secondhand) are common but partial and not yet mainstreamed within platform ecosystems.

Given Shopee and Lazada’s dominance, their design choices and policies are pivotal. Current interfaces foreground price, speed, and volume. Without stronger sustainability filters, verified eco-labels, and support for circular services, even motivated consumers struggle to act on their values.

CONCLUSION

Philippine online fashion consumption is at a crossroads: platforms have unlocked unprecedented access and affordability but have also intensified fast-fashion dynamics and their environmental and ethical costs. This study shows that Filipino consumers are increasingly aware of sustainable fashion and express strong concern about waste and

environmental harm. Yet cost constraints, platform designs optimized for speed and volume, and distrust of sustainability claims constrain the translation of intention into action.

Bridging this gap requires more than individual goodwill. It calls for platform governance that makes sustainable options visible, trustworthy, and competitively priced; for regulations that curb misleading “green” claims and address packaging waste; and for cultural shifts that normalize thrift, repair, and circularity. If these levers are activated together, the Philippine online fashion market can move toward a model where profitability aligns with environmental stewardship and social responsibility, rather than standing in tension with them.

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