Buy now, cry later

Examining factors influencing "flexible" consumers' fashion choices and the extent of conflict

between ethical intentions and actual consumption choices

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Bachelor Thesis in Communication Science (BSc)

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July 1, 2022

Abstract

Objectives: Increasingly aware of environmental and social problems related to the fashion industry, consumers show a growing demand for alternative, more ethical ways of consuming fashion. However, literature states that ethically-minded consumers have difficulties, despite ethical consumption intentions, translating these into actual behavior. Many consumers show 'flexible' consumption patterns by occasionally purchasing ethically (f.e. secondhand) but still sometimes fast fashion. This study explores the dimensions of the attitude-behavior gap of so-called 'flexible consumers' by understanding how fashion-related choices are motivated by ethical considerations and identifying factors blocking ethical consumption intentions. Also, this research analyzed how ethically-minded consumers experience a potential post-purchase conflict due to attitude-behavior discrepancies, what feelings are evoked, and how people resolve this conflict.

Method: To achieve the research's aim, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted. Hence, 19 participants were interviewed who showed 'flexible consumption patterns' by purchasing both secondhand and fast fashion apparel. Through convenience sampling, the sample was composed of 11 women and eight men with an average age of 22, whereby most of them were students with a higher education degree.

Results: Data analysis shows that participants were highly aware of ethical considerations in fashion-related choices. However, economic and institutional factors (f.e. price & availability) often block consumers' ethical purchasing intentions. For most participants, the extent of post-purchase conflict was great, resulting in feelings of guilt or regret. The most common method to resolve this conflict was identified as 'future intentions' referring to participants' willingness to change consumer behavior in the future. Also, it was found that when consumers have less belief in their impact, they are likely to deny their responsibility and feel little conflict after an 'unethical' purchase.

Conclusion: In conclusion, although 'flexible consumers' show a high level of ethical considerations, they still show attitude-behavior discrepancies as economic and instrumental factors

are outweighed by ethical considerations. However, if these factors could be minimized, for instance, by providing more affordable secondhand shopping opportunities, ethically minded consumers would often choose the ethical alternative. In this way, they could implement their intention to consume more ethically in the future, reducing conflicting feelings and closing the attitude-behavior gap. Responding to ethical consumers' demand for available and fair-priced ethical products also provides economic advantages to marketers. Also, as a practical implication of this study, corporations should enable consumers to have more transparency about apparel production conditions. Therefore, policymakers are called to introduce laws protecting the environment and people in textile-producing countries. These measures would encourage people to believe in their impact with which they are more likely to consume ethically and will pave the way for more sustainable businesses focusing on ethical and fair production conditions.

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1. Introduction

Due to legitimate accusations of environmental degradation, exploitative labor conditions, and the production of social and economic inequity, the fashion industry is facing increased global scrutiny and abundant criticism by climate activists and the public (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Nonetheless, the industry continues to grow, and clothing consumption experiences drastic increases. Nowadays, fashion brands are producing almost twice the number of clothing collections compared to the years before 2000, which leads to an estimated global increase in clothing production to 2% yearly (Niinimäki et al., 2020). This can be explained by the emergence of the business model of "fast fashion" which relies on "recurring consumption and impulse buying, instilling a sense of urgency when purchasing" (Niinimäki et al., 2020, p.198). According to Bick et al. (2018, p.1), the term "fast fashion" is used to describe the "readily available, inexpensively made fashion of today". With the rise of fast fashion, retailers were required to be more flexible and responsive by trying to keep up with consumers' constant demand for more products and adapting to new trends set by the fashion world (Bick et al., 2018). Within a short amount of time, retailers copy current catwalk designs and supply cheap versions to all classes of consumers (Bick et al., 2018).

As designer trends became accessible to all groups of consumers regardless of income, the fast fashion trend, sometimes heralded as the "democratization" of fashion, had changed the way people buy and dispose of clothing. However, the easy access to large quantities of cheap clothes leads to the problem of overconsumption, which has significant negative environmental and social impacts (Kozlowski et al., 2012).

Due to overproduction, millions of tons of textile waste are created by fast fashion production sites ending up in landfills and unregulated settings, mainly occurring in low and middle-income countries (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Furthermore, in a global context, the

fashion industry is responsible for 20% of industrial water pollution from textile treatment and dyeing and contributes to the production of 190.000 tones of microplastic a year (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Nevertheless, not just environmental but also the social costs involved in textile manufacturing are high. According to Madsen et al. (2007), workers' rights, poor working conditions, long hours, low wages, child labor, and health and safety issues are problems of concern in the garment industry.

Hence, many consumers have begun to criticize the practices of fast fashion companies. In several countries, a shift in consumer values towards more socially and environmentally responsible products and services is observable (Freestone & McGoldrick, 2008). Already in 2019, the "Top 10 consumer trends" lists the "conscious consumer" who makes "positive decisions about what to buy" and „looks for a solution to the negative impact consumerism is having on the world" (Cerchia & Piccolo, 2019, p.2). Thus, a new group of consumers emerged associated with the terms 'aware' and 'ethical' opposing the so-called "fashion victims" who obsessively purchase fashion without recognizing consumption's consequences (e.g., Strong, 1996; Shaw Shaw & Clarke, 1999; Hendarwan, 2002; Harrison et al., 2005).

According to Cerchia and Piccolo (2019, p.3), 'ethical consumers' want the "entire production chain oriented toward minimizing environmental impact and its carbon footprint" and "share a general sentiment that they want the workers who produced their clothes to be protected". This consumer activism shows itself, for instance, through boycott activity, pressure groups, or selective or reduced consumption (Auger et al., 2003; Harrison et al., 2005).

Also, as an alternative to fast fashion, recycled clothes or clothes incorporating fair trade principles are favored by ethical consumers. Especially the rise of secondhand clothing consumption, mainly observable in western societies and among younger generations, indicates ethical consumers' rejection of conventional fashion channels (Lo et al., 2019; Stanescu, 2021). The trending process of upcycling, in which clothes are redesigned into new unique styles, provides new

business opportunities to sustainable designers. Thus, in both the marketplace and the literature, interest in the issues surrounding ethical fashion has increased (Carrigan et al., 2004).

However, in the context of ethical consumption, many scholars have identified an attitude-behavior gap, also known as the ethical consumption paradox, which describes consumers' incongruency between ethical purchase intentions and actual consumption behavior (Carrigan & Atalla, 2001). To illustrate the phenomena, a study by Lazzarini and de Mello (2001) found that out of 89% of UK consumers reporting concern for ethical issues, only 3% purchase ethical products. Nevertheless, despite a growing body of research in ethical purchase decision-making, it remains poorly understood how ethical intentions are translated to buying behavior.

To close the research gap, this study will focus on the specific group of so-called 'flexible ethical consumers' who are identified by showing 'flexible' consumption patterns in terms of not exclusively purchasing secondhand but occasionally also fast fashion. As specifically, this group shows discrepancies between purchasing behavior and moral standards, indications of an attitude-behavior gap can be observed. Thus, this research aims to explore the ethical intentions of these 'flexible consumers' when purchasing new fashion items regarding social and environmental considerations and how they translate these intentions into actual purchasing behavior. Also, this study examines how 'flexible' consumers experience a post-purchase conflict when deciding on a non-ethical alternative and how they resolve it.

Main research question:

RQ1: *What factors lead 'flexible consumers' to not translate ethical intentions into consumption choices?*

Subquestions:

SQ1: *What are the considerations of 'flexible consumers' when making fashion-related choices?*

SQ2: *To what extent do 'flexible consumers' experience a conflict between their ethical standards and consumption choices?*

SQ3: *How do 'flexible consumers' resolve conflicts between their ethical standards and consumption choices?*

By gathering detailed information through qualitative interviews, ethical intentions, attitudes, and possible post-purchasing discrepancies of the participant group of 'flexible' consumers will be analyzed. The results will give insights into the dimensions of complex consumer behavior and provide an approach to explaining the phenomenon 'attitude-behavior gap' and possible post-purchase conflicts. The results will offer strategic implications for marketing managers seeking to reach ethical consumer groups. Thus, profiling ethical consumer groups and analyzing prioritizations of purchasing values, indicated ethical consumers' needs on which the markets must respond. Advertising campaigns should be created to address consumers' post-purchase feelings by using positive or negative emotions to encourage ethical purchase choices. Hence, implementing these measures will contribute to positive developments in environmental sustainability and social justice.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Fashion industry's impact on environmental and social ills

At a time when climate change poses ever greater threats to the environment, animals, and people, countries are increasingly marked by social injustices, and capitalist structures ensure greater social cleavage, the fashion industry is held responsible for being a significant contributor to precisely these growing global problems. In large part, textile production leads to major environmental destruction and unethical social conditions such as sweatshop labor and poor worker rights, particularly in developing countries such as Bangladesh or India, where most clothing items are produced. The rising social and environmental threats are a result of the substantial global increase in clothing consumption and textile production. Over the period 1975–2018, the global per-capita textile production has increased from 5.9 kg to 13 kg per year (Niininmäki et al., 2020). An explanation for this drastic increase in textile production and clothing consumption is the emergence of the fast fashion business model in the late 1980s. As a "high-responsiveness concept," fast fashion is an "approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Whereas traditionally, fashion apparel retailers made predictions about consumer demands and fashion trends long term before actual consumption, in recent years, the increased speed and competition of markets requires retailers to provide fashion trends revealed by fashion shows and designers rapidly. Hence, fashion apparel retailers became increasingly forced to follow "the 'speed to market approach" to capitalize on fashion that is not in the stores of their competitors" ensuring their profitability in the industry (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Constantly offering consumers new, low-priced, and cheaply produced fashion items led to a change in consumer purchasing behavior characterized by a sense of purchase urgency, recurring consumption, and impulse buying (Niininmäki et al., 2020). Also, rising consumption and increased efficiency in apparel production

caused a fall in prices, making the accessibility of new fashion products easier for all consumer groups.

Although social and environmental threats caused by the fashion industry and the rise of fast fashion are emphasized in the literature, it is also stated that consumers often have low levels of knowledge regarding apparel production's environmental effects (Hill & Lee, 2012). Bearing the burden for developed countries, environmental ills become unevenly distributed in developing countries, where most fashion apparel is produced. However, at the end of the production chain, it is difficult for many consumers to reconstruct the environmental impact when holding the finished product. The often-not-transparent, negative impacts on the environment can be found at all stages of the apparel life cycle, starting from fiber growth and manufacturing, dyeing and printing, transportation to stores and selling, to the end of the garment life disposal (Hill & Lee, 2012). Accusing fashion apparel consumption of being unsustainable and "detrimental to natural environment", Bernades et al (2018, p.4) state that the current modes of textile production entail "renewable and non- renewable natural resources depletion, emits dangerous substances into the air, water and land through toxic chemicals used in the production of fibers and textiles and creates unmanageable quantities of postconsumer solid waste sent to landfills." Also, Meyer and Höbermann (2021) list the textile industry's contribution to overshoots, such as the production of 1458 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions, 43 million tons of chemicals, and 92 million tons of waste, with a drastic increase in these figures expected in the next few years. Another problem is the limited reuse option of fast fashion items since many secondhand stores reject fast fashion items due to low quality and poor resale value (Wicker, 2016).

Not just from the environment but also a social perspective, the emergence of fast fashion caused considerable problems, especially for those at the end of the production chain. Currently, 60 million people are working in the garment industry, of which 27 million are concerned with occupational diseases (Meyer & Höbermann, 2021). Working conditions such as in Bangladesh,

with one of the cheapest labor costs, 30 euros per month compared to 150 or 200 in China, have significantly deteriorated (Ayatullah Hosne Asif, 2017). A tragic case happened in April 2013 in Bangladesh when a fire outbreak in a structurally unsound and illegally constructed garment factory costs the death of 1200 garment workers, resulting in worldwide outrage. This accident is just one example of the dangers to which the workers in textile manufacturing are exposed and which is driven by the growth of the fast fashion industry

2.2 The growing trend of ethical consumerism

As environmental and social impacts associated with apparel production lead to ever-increasing dangers for all living beings and the environment, there is rising consumer demand for environmentally and socially sustainable practices in the apparel manufacturing industry. Based on the viewpoint that consumption can be the problem as well as the solution to capitalism's ills, Carrington et al. (2016, p.4) state that there is a growing segment of consumers "who integrate notions of ethics, social justice, and environmental sustainability into their consumption practices." As emphasized by Hill and Lee (2012), growing awareness of the environmental impacts of apparel production among consumers is crucial since the earth does not have infinite natural resources that could sustain the current production and disposal of apparel.

The greater urgency and growing consumer demands for change in the fashion industry have brought scholars and marketeers' increasing interest in ethical consumption questions. Nevertheless, despite the growing body of literature in this field, definitions and concepts of ethical consumption vary among scholars. According to Muncy and Vitell (1992, p.298), the term' ethical consumption' covers a "set of moral principles and standards that guide the behavior of individuals or groups as they obtain, use, and dispose of goods and services. " A similar definition is provided by Cooper-Martin and Holbrook (1993, p.113), who describe ethical consumer behavior as "'decision-making, purchases and other consumption experiences that are affected by consumer's ethical concerns." In the ethical decision process, an individual must, as stated by Rest (1979), go through four stages first, recognizing a moral issue, then making moral judgment followed by resolving to place concerns ahead of other concerns, and finally act on the moral concern. According to Mintel (1994), these moral concerns in purchasing can include assumptions about the predominance of oppressive regimes, bad working conditions, and severe environmental pollution in textile-producing countries. Whereas many scholars relate ethical consumption to selective consumerism based on personal beliefs about what is ethical, Barnett et al. (2005) associate the

concept with the reduction of consumption which concerns the ethics of capitalist market systems. Later in 2010, the authors provided a more general definition of ethical consumption with 'control over consumption itself' (Barnett et al., 2010). This control over consumption can be expressed through various ethical consumption practices such as preventing unlawful activities, activities intended for contemporary mankind, and activities for future generations (Hong & Shin, 2010). A more concrete conception of behavioral realms in ethical consumption is given by Harrison et al. (2005). According to the authors, ethical consumption can be expressed through boycotting products of unethical firms, promoting the active use of ethical products, buying products that maintain ethical standards, avoiding unsustainable products, and engaging in sustainable consumption. Besides boycotting unethical products, Clark and Underberger (2007) highlight the importance of selective buying in the form of fair-trade products and local goods as an activity of ethical consumption. Another concept is presented by Hong and Song (2008), who classify ethical consumption into ethical resource allocation, pro-environmental behavior, ethical use of energy, waste recycling, and disposal, and voluntary simplification of consumption.

2.3 Secondhand as an alternative to fast fashion

As an alternative response to problems associated with the fashion industry, particularly fast fashion, a growing group of consumers considers secondhand clothing consumption. Secondhand buying can be defined as "the acquisition of used objects through often specific modes and places of exchange" (Roux & Guiot, 2008, p.66). Due to processes of reuse and upcycling, there is a clear linkage between secondhand purchasing and ethical consumption, which seems taken-for-granted among young consumer groups. To avoid conventional fashion channels and reduce social and environmental ills, especially consumers belonging to younger generations like Gen Z are showing increasing interest in secondhand shopping. Thus, there is a growing market with a current value of $43 billion of traditional secondhand retailers like thrift and vintage stores trying to fulfill the demand for ethical consumption (Statista, 2022). Also, the online secondhand market is predicted to expand, with a market value of $7 billion, growing to $36 billion by 2024 (Masige, 2020). Particularly in Western societies, an expansion of the secondhand clothing industry is to be recognized with a growing number of stores reselling worn garments and more companies incorporating upcycling in their businesses (Hansen, 2010; Park & Lin, 2020).

2.4 Consumer motivations to buy secondhand clothing

To understand the rise of secondhand clothing consumption, many studies try to identify consumers' motivations to purchase secondhand apparel. Understanding consumers' motivations can provide reasoning behind purchasing behavior, although there might be multiple motivations depending on situational and external factors. Nevertheless, Guiot and Roux (2010) state that psychological motivations such as environmental and responsible concerns play a crucial role in secondhand purchasing intentions.

As a result of their study, secondhand clothing consumption motivations are economic, critical, and recreational. For economic motivations, the assessment gratification role of a fair price is of high importance. In contrast, critical motivations are guided by the demand for distancing from the system and ethics. Recreational motivations can include intentions like treasure hunting, originality, social contact, and nostalgic pleasure (Guiot & Roux, 2008). Zaman et al. (2019) point out similar factors, who provide six types of orientation, including frugality, style- and fashion-consciousness, ecological consciousness, materialism, and nostalgia-proneness.

Regarding intentions for secondhand shopping, Xu et al. (2014) highlight the importance of differentiating between "need" and "choice" factors since, besides the necessity for some consumers to shop on a small budget, secondhand shopping is also considered a lifestyle choice, a way of self-expression and a form of anti-consumerism. As secondhand consumers feel less constrained by trends and brands, shopping in secondhand stores provides opportunities for uniqueness and creativity in creating outfits. Thus, the elements of novelty, creativity, and aesthetics are found as critical elements for considering secondhand apparel shopping (Bly et al., 2005). Additionally, the element of nostalgia is of high importance as it gives consumers a feeling of "longing or fondness for the past, and possessions associated with earlier times" (Holbrook, 1993, p.245).

2.5 The intention-behavior gap of 'flexible consumers'

Although ethical issues have increasingly become important in the consumption decision-making process and consumers are beginning to question unsustainable and socially unacceptable practices in the fashion industry, literature states that ethical consumption intentions are not always manifested in actual behavior. However, despite a growing body of research trying to understand ethical decision-making in purchasing processes, it remains poorly examined how these intentions are translated to actual buying behavior (e.g., De Pelsmacker et al., 2005, Shaw & Clarke, 1999, Shaw & Shui, 2002, Shaw et al., 2006). By applying cognitive modeling approaches, many studies tend to assume that ethical consumption intentions determine actual purchasing behavior. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence of attitude-behavior discrepancies in ethical consumption (Carrigan & Atalla, 2001). For instance, Bernardes et al. (2018) found in a study of the Millennial generation that consumers' positive attitudes towards sustainability and green products are not reflected in actual purchasing behavior. Similar results are found by Futerra Sustainability Communications (2005), who report that out of 89% of UK consumers showing ethical concerns, only 30% convert these concerns into intentions to purchase ethically, and 3% purchase ethical products. This phenomenon is referred to in literature as "the ethical consumption words–deeds, attitude-behavior or intentions–behavior gap, and the ethical consumption paradox" (Carrington et al., 2014, p.3).

Nevertheless, less is known about factors blocking ethical intentions and impacting individuals' decision-making and consumers' justification of attitude-behavior discrepancies (Holland et al., 2002). However, seeking to fill the literature gap, Carrington et al. (2010) try to conceptualize the intentions-behavior gap by combining three separate insights from literature, including implementation intentions, actual behavior control, and situational context. Thus, these different insights should serve as mediators for understanding the relationship between intentions and behavior of ethically-minded consumers. As a result of their study, Carrington et al. (2014)

found that the gap between consumers' perception of control and actual control underpins the attitude-behavior gap. Also, the situational context in which consumers decide to realize ethical intentions plays an important role. Hence, external factors such as physical and social surroundings, temporal perspective, task definition, or antecedent states could impact cognitive processes that block ethical consumption intentions (Carrington et al., 2014).

The previously mentioned attitude-behavior discrepancies, particularly observable among young apparel consumers, pose a challenge in identifying a pattern behind the buying behavior of ethically-minded consumers. On the one hand, many consumers do not want to continue supporting the environmental and social ills of the fast fashion industry and long for alternatives. On the other hand, weighing the perceived advantages of fast fashion with moral values makes it difficult for many to implement ethical intentions in purchasing behavior. Thus, various barriers block consumers' intentions to choose alternative fashion consumption. In the context of secondhand clothing consumption, external factors such as price are the primary mediators that discourage consumers from choosing this alternative. Next to price, lack of access or infrastructure, social or cultural norms, lack of styles or sizes, and poor product presentation in secondhand stores are identified as barriers to secondhand apparel consumption (Paco et al., 2016).

However, while consumers feel dissonance regarding price assessments, feelings of remorse referring to ethical intentions are often minimalized using post-rationalization strategies. Thus, a lack of cognitive dissonance between an individual's moral values and consumer behavior can be determined, which reduces post-purchase feelings of guilt or regret (Carrington et al., 2014). Also, retrospective feelings of regret when not choosing the ethical variant are minimized when self-interested and instrumental concerns are considered more valuable. In terms of secondhand purchasing, consumers tend to prioritize their self-interested concerns instead of responding to moral values when not perceiving any benefit. These concerns about lowered purchase advantage include low perceptions of quality and cleanliness of secondhand products and concerns about the

modernity of fashion styles (Hur, 2020). Additionally, some consumers are unsure about the provenance of products and are afraid of deteriorated social acceptance when wearing used clothes.

Due to this observable phenomenon, an emerging consumer group of 'flexible' or 'inconsistent' ethical consumers can be identified as exhibiting attitude-behavior discrepancies of inconsistent ethical consumption choices (Costa Pinto et al., 2020). Also, among this consumer group, it can be observed how ethical aspects such as social and environmental consequences are considered when consuming fashion apparel products and to what extent ethically buying is crucial to them. In the further context of this study, consumers showing these characteristics are referred to as 'flexible consumers' who are distinctive for their non-exclusive purchasing behavior of ethical products such as secondhand apparel. Thus, the purchasing behavior of 'flexible consumers' is recognized as a combination of fast fashion purchases as well as secondhand consumption which can be seen particularly among young apparel consumers of Gen Z. According to Carrington et al. (2016, p.12), individuals show complex and multiple consumption identities in which the "green consumption identity is only one of many dimensions of the individual's overall sense of self".

As the ethical identity of a consumer is not just socially embedded but also influenced by instrumental concerns, a flexible consumption behavior of contravening ethical and non-ethical purchasing choices occurs. Belk (2005), for instance, found that consumers are influenced by personal costs and rewards, which is why the nature and price of a product affect the choice to implement ethical behavior. Due to this inconsistency in ethical purchase choices, precisely in this group, attitude-behavior discrepancies can be investigated, and factors blocking ethical consumption intentions in the context of secondhand clothing identified.

2.6 Post-purchase conflict

As previously stated, ethically minded 'flexible' consumers show a significant inconsistency between their moral standards and ethical intentions and their actual consumption behavior. According to Carrington et al. (2016), this contradiction of consumption choices with an individual's moral framework evokes a conflict for the individual, requiring specific strategies to resolve it. Thus, to holistically understand the complex dimensions of consumers' attitude-behavior discrepancies, it is necessary to investigate what feelings are evoked when ethical intentions are not translated into buying behavior and how consumers resolve a potential conflict.

As stated by Carrington et al. (2016, p. 12), to resolve this conflict, many people use post-rationalization strategies as it "allows the bypassing of feelings of guilt or regret and assists individuals in continuing to purchase products at odds with their ethical concerns".

This is also confirmed by Belk (2005), who found that consumers use a series of justifications to explain and rationalize conscious unethical consumption behavior. Also, techniques of neutralization such as denial of responsibility or injury are used as 'guilt reducing mechanisms' to temporarily neutralize and reduce the consequences of inconsistent moral behavior. Nevertheless, less is known about how 'flexible' consumers showing attitude-behavior discrepancies in ethical consumption use neutralization techniques. Thus, to understand the dimensions of complex consumer behavior, it first needs to be investigated to what extent 'flexible' consumers experience a post-purchase conflict when deciding on a non-ethical fashion item. Secondly, it is analyzed how consumers resolve this conflict, for instance by using rationalization or neutralization techniques.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Previous literature in the context of ethical consumerism mainly used quantitative methods, often in the form of self-reported surveys (Carrington et al., 2015). However, scholars in ethical consumption state that using a quantitative approach fails to capture the complexity of consumers' decision-making processes and the translation between ethical purchase intentions and actual shopping behavior (Szmigin et al., 2009). Thus, to gain deep insights into this complex consumer behavior in the context of ethical consumption, a qualitative approach was more suitable for the explorative nature of this study. Using a qualitative approach enabled profoundly analyzing and deeply identifying underlying motivations, intentions, attitudes, and values of 'flexible' consumers.

Hence, semi-structured interviews were conducted by following a basic interview guide but still providing an open interview environment. Due to the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews, participants could express new ideas and opinions, which provided useful information about their ethical consumption behavior. Furthermore, it allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions outside the interview guide without losing focus on the discussion. Also, actively engaged participants who showed strong awareness of social and environmental issues could be reached. By encouraging participants to build upon different ideas and opinions more in-depth views of the interviewees could be explored.

3.2 Procedure

To collect relevant data for this study, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The participants were contacted via the common messenger platforms, mainly WhatsApp and Instagram. In this way, the informed consent papers were also sent out to the participants, which they had to sign before conducting the interview. Thus, the participant's consent of participation and the agreement on the interview's recording could be ensured. Furthermore, the participants were informed about the confidential treatment of personal data, voluntariness of participation, freedom of information legislation, possible risks, the anonymization of interview statements and the possibility to withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason. Also, the informed consent document asked about general demographics, including age, gender, job, highest education, and nationality, to avoid unnecessarily extending the interview time for the participants.

Depending on the participant's location, the interviews took place on the one hand in an online environment using the established video call platform Zoom and on the other hand in the form of face-to-face interviews. After obtaining the participant's consent, the interviews were recorded as audio files, which allowed the subsequent transcription of the audio files into text form. The duration of the interviews amount depending on participant's elaboration around 13-15 minutes.

To first avoid ambiguity, the participants were asked if they were familiar with the term fast fashion. If the answer was yes, the interview continued. If the question was answered with no, the interviewer provided a brief explanation of the term fast fashion. After asking about participants' awareness of the procedures of the fast fashion industry, participants were asked to elaborate on what they think about environmental and social aspects related to the fashion industry to measure whether they held relatively positive or negative attitudes towards the industry. After that, about 13 questions were asked to answer the research questions (see Appendix A). The first five questions aimed to measure the overall attitudes of participants towards the fashion industry and their ethical considerations in their general consumption choices. Also, to collect data about participants' self-

perceptions as ethical consumers, the interviewees were asked to assess if they would describe themselves as such. Based on this assessment, it was possible to determine participants' perceptions about their individual impact on the problems associated with the fashion industry and their capacity to contribute to a change.

After that, six questions followed, which focused more on the fashion consumption behavior of participants and their consumption choices regarding fast fashion and secondhand clothing. For instance, this included the question: *What are important values to you when shopping for new clothes,* or *Where do you usually purchase your clothes?*

To examine reasons for fast fashion consumption as well as for secondhand consumption, participants were asked to elaborate on the reasons and most important values of their clothing purchasing decisions. This way, reasons for fast fashion and secondhand consumption and the correlation to ethical considerations could be determined. Also, factors blocking ethical purchasing intentions could be identified, which are presented in the results section of this paper. After that, a set of questions followed asking about the extent of conflict, participants experiencing in their fashion-related choices, their feelings related to this conflict, and possible methods to resolve it.

3.3 Sample composition

The sample was composed of participants belonging to Generation Z, which includes people born between 1995 and 2010. Nevertheless, for ethical reasons, this study only allowed for participants older than 18, which is why the age group of this study covered participants between 18-27 years old. The average age of the participants was, therefore, 22 years old. This composition of participants was chosen as particularly people from Generation Z show strong positive attitudes toward ethical consumerism and awareness of social and environmental issues (Bejan et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite Generation Z's desire for ethical issues, it is stated by literature that the frugality they are experiencing in their current life stage limits them to exclusively purchase ethically (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). Thus, it can be stated that participants belonging to this target group show 'flexible' consumption patterns and indications of an attitude-behavior gap regarding ethical consumption choices.

Hence, the only inclusion criteria were that participants show ethical intentions in the form of social and environmental awareness in their consumption choices and do not exclusively purchase secondhand or fast fashion apparel. In order to find participants belonging to the target group of 'flexible consumers' in the preciously described age group, interviewees were approached through the researcher's contact using convenience sampling.

Furthermore, it was ensured by the researcher that an equal distribution of male and female participants took part in the study. Thus, the sample consisted of 11 female and eight male participants. Regarding further demographics, one can say that most of the participants were German, with one Italian, one British, and one Brazilian participant. Concerning educational background, the sample mainly consisted of students with a high school degree as their highest education and who expect to graduate with a bachelor's degree in the near future.

3.4. Data analysis

After the data collection was finished, the process of qualitative analysis started by segmenting and reassembling the data through coding. According to Boejie (2010), the aim of the analysis is to transform data into findings using the tool of coding. Lewins and Silver (2007, p.81) define the process of qualitative coding as one by "which segments of data are identified as relating to, or being an example of, a more general idea, instance, theme or category." According to Strauss and Corbin (2007), qualitative coding can be distinguished into three types of coding, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. As the standard first step of the analysis, open coding is described by the authors as the "process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 2007, p.61). Thus, all data were reviewed and divided into fragments in this open coding process.

Following an inductive coding approach, a set of codes were developed through the coding process to conceptualize and categorize the data. By orientating on the interview guide, it was possible to compare the fragments and group them into categories discussing the same subject. Thus, general codes have been developed and applied to the transcripts. In this process of open coding, a codebook was created that assigned general codes to fragments and categories involving the same subject. Based on the participants' statements, general codes have been further divided into subcodes that measured sentiments, attitudes and contents addressed belonging to the general code.

The codebook of this study thereby consisted of 14 main codes that were further divided into subcodes. Thus, the first five codes, "awareness of fashion industry's ills", "attitudes towards environmental damages", "attitudes towards social damages", "perceived self-identity" and "perceptions about individual impact" were supplemented into the two subcodes positive and negative to measure participant's sentiments and attitudes towards each specific category. Hence, if a participant showed strong ethical intentions in his purchasing behavior and assessed himself as an 'ethical consumer', "perceived self-identity" was coded as positive. On the contrary, statements in

which participants strongly criticized environmental damages caused by the fashion industry, the main code of "attitude towards environmental damages" was coded as negative.

In the second step of axial coding, connections were drawn between the codes, and codes were grouped into categories. Thus, further nine codes with several subcodes have been added to the codebook, which emerged from the interview statements. As these codes with their associated subcodes turned out to be more complex as categories, the other nine main codes were not, compared to the first five codes, sub coded into positive and negative:

- Ethical considerations in consumption

- Methods for ethical consumption

- Actual fashion consumption

- Reasons for secondhand consumption

- Reasons for fast fashion consumption

- Factors blocking secondhand consumption

- Extent of conflict

- Feelings related to conflict

- Resolving conflict

Various subcodes were determined based on what had been addressed by the participants concerning the main codes. By classifying participants' statements, for instance, the categories of 'Reduced consumption', 'Recycling', and 'Boycott' has been identified as subcodes of 'Methods for ethical consumption'. Thus, during the coding process, several subcodes were added to the principal codes, which finally amounted to 14 codes in the final codebook (see Table 1) or 40 codes when including subcodes. Using this codebook, all interview transcripts were coded using the common qualitative coding platform Atlas.ti.

To ensure the reliability of the findings, 10% of the overall data was peer coded by a second coder. Hence, intercoder reliability was calculated with a Cohen's Kappa of .74. As Cohen's

Kappa results exceeding .7 indicate a high level of agreement between the coders, the codebook can

be recognized as reliable.

Table 1

Final codebook

Code	Subcodes	Definition	Example
1. Awareness of fashion industry's ills	1.1 Positive 1.2 Negative	People's knowledge and understanding of environmental and social issues caused by the fashion industry	"Damages of everything, the natural environment, the humans that work for it, and yeah, transportation, getting all of that stuff over here from Asia and wherever that is produced. "
2. Attitudes towards environmental damages of fashion industry	2.1 Positive 2.2 Negative	Participants' attitudes towards environmental concerns caused by the fashion industry	„But still, there were so many pictures that are so concerning, like the, um, the pollution of the water next to the factories. I think like is growing concern."
3. Attitudes towards social damages of fashion industry	3.1 Positive 3.2 Negative	Participants' attitudes towards social damages caused by the fashion industry	"So, people actually also use that water and then they get intoxication and all of that kind of stuff. So if people really have bad conditions afterwards and cancer."

4	Perceived self-identity	4.1 Positive	Self-identity refers to the self-concept of an individual. Individual's perception of evaluating oneself as ethical consumer.	„I mean, like, it's not just being worried about the stuff, it's also like putting and putting it to, like, actual actions. " (Participant 13)
		4.2. Negative		„I mean, I'm not the good, good, good person, you know? I think, like, I'm aware I'm kind of ethical, but in the end, I'm also not the saint, you know? "
5	Perceptions about individual impact	5.1. Positive	Individual's perception about how he can contribute to change	"But I think if everybody does a little bit for the environment, and it may have an impact."
		5.2. Negative		„And I don't have that much of an impact on the whole matter."
6	Ethical considerations in consumption	6.1. High	The extent to which people consider ethical values in their consumption choices	"I reduced it like in the past I went shopping, I said, no, I don't do it as much."
		6.2. Low		"I have already ten others in my closet, but then I'm like, Oh, I want it, I have it. And then I buy it."
		6.3. Unsure		„That's important to me as a person but at the same time you can't consume as much ethically if you earn as little as I do."

7	Methods for ethical consumption	7.1. Reduced consumption	As an alternative to fast fashion consumption, there are other methods to shop ethically.	„ I think I pay attention in terms of how often I buy something "
		7.2. Recycling/ Upcycling		„You know, like sometimes you like exchange clothes with a friend."
		7.3. Boycott		„So, for example, I know they are especially some brands or like not brands, but just stores where you really know, you should not go there. So I, I prevent I don't go there."
8	Actual fashion consumption	8.1. Secondhand consumption	Consumer's preference of where to buy clothes	„Clothes with a better origin or second hand. Yeah we did that." (Participant 6)
		8.2. Fast fashion consumption		„And so usually I think in those shopping miles where it's like H&M, Zara (…)"
9	Reasons for secondhand consumption	9.1.Need for uniqueness	The desire to express a unique personality through clothing (Zaman et al., 2019)	"For example, that you can like just like get unique things like nobody can buy anymore or that like vintage (…)"

	9.2. Fashion-consciousness	Seeking out new clothes to keep up with current fashion trends (Zaman et al., 2019)	„And yeah, I like to have yeah, I do like the style a lot."
	9.3. Ethical considerations	An awareness of the impact of clothing manufacture and consumption on the environment (Zaman et al., 2019).	„Like most, most important is the part of the environment"
	9.4. Price-sensitivity	The degree to which the price of a product affects consumers' purchasing behaviors	„It is as cheap as a fast-fashion store, sometimes even cheaper, which is really, really nice"
	9.5. Shopping experience	The extent of which consumers experience the shopping situations as favorable	„And it's also a more pleasurable experience in itself. Just, you know, looking around and getting something."
10. Reasons for fast fashion consumption	10.1. Need factor	The factor that describes when consumers really need an item which makes the purchase necessary	"I think I only go if I really need something."

	10.2. Availability	The availability of sufficient quantities of clothes	„So there's the shopping mall that I know. And 20 kilometers from my hometown, there are only the fast fashion stores.“
	10.3. Price-sensitivity	The degree to which the price of a product affects consumers' purchasing behaviors	„Yeah, probably price at first. Because you kind of run on the budget as a student. So price“
	10.4. Ease of purchase/ Time constraints	The state of being able to proceed with something without difficulty.	"It's way faster than going to the thrift stores and seeking for something which is really a seeking process because the sizes are different and the conditions “
	10.5. Utiliatrian value	Possibility for consumers to possess a product that is close to what they want (Dellaert & Stremersch, 2005).	„I think it's convenient. You. You know what you get, you know, I don't know, because I think they're really basic, convenient things to to get“
11. Factors blocking secondhand consumption	11.1. Availability	The availability of secondhand shops in the local area of people	"For quite some time I never went to vintage stores just because I know that where I lived there was nothing nice“
	11.2. Price sensitivity	The degree to which the price of a product affects consumers' purchasing behaviors	„(..) not the ones like you pay 100 bucks for a sweater, like what the fuck?“

	11.3. Product-related concerns	Participants' perceptions about the state of the product (f.e. quality, hygienic concerns etc.)	„Not appealing at all. I don't know. And some clothes and also like stains. Then I was like, okay, no, come on, this is even too much for me."
	11.4. Fashion-related reasons	Individuals' perceptions whether a fashion item is fashionable	"There are no modern things, but sometimes only very old things that you might not necessarily want to wear."
	11.5. Size selection	The possibility for consumers to find fashion items that fit them	„And then you have to just to be lucky and find your size is actually my problem. So I rarely buy there, but I like to look into the stores though."
12. Extent of conflict	12.1. High 12.2. Low	The extent of conflict consumers experience consumption choices do not meet ethical values	„That was not necessary at all. Did I really need this product? No. Did I buy it? Yeah. And like, still you did it and still you do it again."
13. Feeling related to conflict	13.1 Guilt	People's feelings when experiencing a conflict between their moral framework	"Mhh my feelings, don't know, I feel kind of guilty for not sticking to my ethical values."
	13.2. Negative self-perceptions		„So definitely I go in with a bad feeling. I go out with an even worse feeling. I have like a lot of negative thoughts. So yeah, there's definitely a dilemma."

	13.3. No negative feelings		"Sounds selfish now, but then I didn't feel that guilty. But it is a bit difficult for me to recognize."
	13.4. Regret		"About that, regretfully: why did you go to that stupid shirt again?" (
14. Resolving conflict	14.1 Rationalization	Methods people use for resolving their conflict	"I don't need because I have already ten others in my closet, but then I'm like, Oh, I want it, I have it. And then I buy it." "Next time you say, okay, I don't buy this thing like okay, I already bought last week"
	14.2 Future intentions		„Yeah, I had some kids t shirts that I used to know you wore, and they're so tight and they used. They're so perfect. This crop tops. Now and then I can tie dye."
	14.3 No solution		"I think even though I have so many negative thoughts, there's not many solutions going on in this brain."

4. Results

As a result of the coding process, this section will present the overall findings of the data collected from the interviews. Thus, in each section, the sentiments, attitudes, and concepts corresponding to the main code will be discussed and the frequency of how often each concept was mentioned by the participants presented.

4.1 Awareness of the fashion industry's impact

According to awareness of the fashion industry's impact, the interview results indicate that the majority of participants have high levels of knowledge about the impact of the fashion industry on environmental and social issues. Almost every participant was familiar with the term fast fashion and able to elaborate on issues related to the fashion industry. Thus, 13 participant statements were coded as 'high level of awareness', whereas only 4 statements could be coded as low levels of awareness. For instance, by getting educated on the topic by a family member, one participant showed a high level of knowledge of fast and sustainable fashion: "*My sister is actively against it. She has even my Instagram page about sustainable fashion, to support sustainable clothing and everything. So she really like went through with the whole speech for me (..). So yeah, I'm very familiar with it.*" (Participant 13, female)

4.2. Attitudes toward environmental damage in the fashion industry

Analyzing participants' attitudes towards environmental problems related to the fashion industry, it can be stated that almost all participants criticize the industry for being environmentally damaging. 23 statements were coded as negative attitudes towards environmental damages of the fashion industry considering the fashion industry's impact on the environment as problematic:

"*I think it has a huge impact. I mean, the fashion industry is one of the most polluting industries in the world, especially with fast fashion.*" (Participant 4, female).

The participants described that the industry creates huge environmental problems at all levels of the product life cycle including production, transportation, and disposal processes. On the subject of transportation, for example, one interviewee stated:

"*That sucks extremely as well. The clothes all come from far away (..) and that is associated with a lot of greenhouse gases when the clothes need to be transported first.*" (Participant 5, male).

Another point of concern was the amount of waste resulting from the industry's overproduction which leads to dire environmental consequences in manufacturing countries:

"*I think the high textile consumption and poor quality create a lot of waste. Synthetic, for example. That is difficult to dismantle in the countries where fast fashion is produced.*" (Participant 10, male).

Nevertheless, it was repeatedly mentioned by participants that it is often hard for the end consumer to trace the production and working conditions behind fashion items. Thus, many participants criticize the industry for being non-transparent about production chains and working conditions:

"*(...) sometimes it's also really hard to trace it back and to have the insides as a consumer, how it got produced or how were the working conditions.*" (Participant 4, female).

Furthermore, the industry is often recognized by participants as dishonest and hypocritical. This is due to the use of greenwashing as marketing strategy to promote a more sustainable image among the public contradictory to the actual conditions:

"And because of course some brands show it to the outside and try to make marketing with it, but sometimes it's greenwashing, sometimes not. And I think for consumers, it's always not that easy to evaluate what is real and what is fake." (Participant 4, female)

4.3 Attitudes towards social damage in the fashion industry

In addition to examining participants' sentiments towards environmental problems related to the industry, also attitudes towards social conditions in the industry such as working conditions or human worker rights were measured. Again, it was found that the majority of participants consider the social conditions in the fashion industry as damaging and harmful. The most frequently addressed points of concern related to poor working conditions, unfairly low wages, and long working hours for the people working in fashion manufacturers. One participant for instance stated:

"(…) *there are huge social problems with it, especially the workers in the manufacturers, who are paid too less. And that's not fair. So, it's coming to a social divide*." (Participant 9, female).

Many participants were concerned about the social injustices in particular countries such as Bangladesh, China, and India. These countries, where most clothing manufacturers have their production, are associated with few governmental regulations and weaker laws in terms of working conditions and human rights. Especially, the concern of child labor was an often-addressed topic by participants. Speaking more ironically, one participant said for example:

"*Well. I mean, it does create a lot of opportunities in the child labor market.*" (Participant 7, male).

Hence, many participants criticized emerging social injustices that result from the industry's exploitative practices in the manufacturing countries:

"*they are made in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan or India and sometimes also even made by children. And this labor overall, I don't think is very save for them. I think in many, many companies, they still neglect human rights.*" (Participant 14, female).

Additionally, there was a growing concern among participants regarding health-related issues for the workers in manufacturers. For instance, one participant is concerned that workers are often exposed to toxins and chemicals used in the materials of cheaply produced clothing:

"I think it's very damaging and harming for the people employed in the industry because they have all of these toxins and chemicals around that they should not have around them. And also they, I heard, put all of this chemical stuff into the rivers and then they use that water and then they get intoxication. So people really have bad conditions afterward and cancer." (Participant 2).

4.4 Perceived self-identity

Perceived self-identity refers to the self-concept of an individual and "labels people use to describe themselves" (Biddle, Bank, and Slavings, 1987, p. 326). In this study, this relates to an individual's perception about how he assesses himself as an ethical consumer for example 'I think of myself as a green consumer'. As result, out of 25 codings related to this scheme, most participants (12 codes) not perceived themselves as ethical consumers. On contrary, 5 statements were considered as showing positive perceptions of being an ethical consumer, whereas 8 codes show participants' uncertainty about calling themselves an 'ethical consumer'.

Thus, most participants were critical of themselves by stating that their consumption choices, although they show a strong awareness of social and environmental issues, do not always meet their ethical values. Because of not being consistent in taking ethical considerations in consumption choices into account, many participants stated that they are willing to consume more ethically but have problems in the actual implementation. Thus, they remain more carefully calling themselves 'ethical consumers':

"*I mean, I'm not the good, good, good person, you know? I'm aware I'm kind of ethical, but in the end, I'm also not the saint, you know?"* (Participant 16, male).

Nevertheless, many participants intend to change their consumption behavior in the future: "*I try to pay more and more attention to it and try to give my best to not support this so much anymore in the future*" (Participant 15, female). Similarly, another participant called himself a 'trying ethical consumer' by considering his process:

"*I try to be an ethical consumer and I want to be in the future. But I think it's a process and it's a step-by-step thing. So, I always have to keep in mind, that I do consider myself as a trying ethical consumer."* (Participant 14, female).

4.5 Perceptions about individual impact

Another concept relates to participants' evaluation of how their individual impact can contribute to change. Thus, depending on how much interviewees assess that their behavior has an impact on the whole matter, 'perceptions about individual impact' was either coded as positive or negative. The results indicate that the majority of participants (15 codes) perceive their impact as low by being unable to contribute to change. For instance, one participant has less belief in the power of an individual:

"*But I have no idea how to change this with my purchase decision. Of course, you can have an influence on this if the general public would change their mind. But I don't know, as an individual, you don't really have such a big influence on that, I think.*" (Participant 10, male).

On contrary, some participants hold the belief that "*if everybody does a little bit for the environment it may have an impact*" (Participant 3, female). Also, one participant highlighted that it is especially important for the younger generation to contribute to more sustainable and ethical developments in society:

"(..) *nowadays, especially in our generation, it's necessary to do so because we can make an effort. Our grandparents or parents are not really able to make an effort, but we are now in charge to do something, so we should make our close friends, family, and whatever, aware.*" (Participant 9, female).

4.6 Ethical considerations in consumption

Another point of analysis was how participants consider ethical values such as environmental or production conditions in their consumption choices. As result, it was found that the level of how ethical values were considered in consumption was high for most participants which was expressed through different types of intentional behavior. For example, intentional behavior can be executed by an individual's reflection on his shopping behavior such as participant 17 (female) stating

"(..) *but since I am older now, I started reflecting on that. And also when I go into a shop, I yeah, I think maybe I don't buy a lot anymore.*" or participant 3 (female) saying "*(..) if you reflect on that and you think you don't really need that, you have like a wardrobe full of stuff and you don't wear it. So I was reflecting on that, and now I think I am a little bit better than before.*"

Also, some participants stated that they pay attention to where items are produced as they consider the production conditions in certain manufacturing countries as bad:

"*So I'm already paying attention to where it comes from or at least how it was produced. I would say, for example, that if it is produced in Bangladesh for instance, you should pay attention to that.*" (Participant 17, female).

Nevertheless, it was also stated that even when paying attention "to the country of origin of the clothes, it's always hard to see (..) because you don't see it at first glance, whether it's produced good or not" (Participant 19, male).

Although many participants consider ethical values in their consumption choices, this does not determine how intentions are translated into behavior. Thus, many participants highlighted their considerations of social and environmental issues in purchasing choices but admit difficulties in translating these into behavior. Participant 9 (female) for instance stated that

"(..) *sometimes it's hard for me to have the same behavior as my attitude, I'm totally aware that fashion and especially fast fashion consumption has big negative impacts on social and environmental factors. I want to buy green products but sometimes I am not able to.*"

4.7 Methods for ethical consumption

To closely understand how ethical intentions are translated to purchasing behavior, participants were asked about which methods they implement to consume more ethically and how they pursue alternative ways of consumption. Thus, 'reduced consumption', 'recycling', and 'boycott of unethical brands' was identified as the most common practices participants mentioned when asking about alternative ways to act on ethical considerations.

Thus, a common practice for participants was to reduce their consumption to be more sustainable and not support the practices of the fast fashion industry. To reduce consumption, it was repeatedly stated that participants increasingly reflect in a shopping situation if a purchase is necessary. Participant 3 (female), for instance, elaborated:

"*When I go into a shop, I yeah, I think maybe I don't buy a lot now. Maybe I buy only stuff that I really need. And yeah, right now I try to not buy anything new.*"

To ensure the longevity of a product, participant 16 suggests mending clothes instead of throwing them away:

"(..) *I think it's important to care for your clothes and not throw them away just because you have a small hole in them. Then you could just like mending or then continue to use it.*"

Similarly, participant 12 (male) tries to use clothes as long as possible:

"*I'm a person, if I paid for it, I'm going to try to get the maximum value out of it (…), I'm a fan of using things until they break.*"

This also relates to the method of recycling which is considered by many participants as a good option to reuse old clothes and even creates opportunities for being creative. For instance, participant 13 describes options to reuse old shirts:

"*I had some kids t-shirts that I used as crop tops. They're so perfect now as I tie-died them and also you can change the color.*" Also, some participants found other use for their old clothes: "*I still use it for a sleeping shirt or whatever.*" (Participant 12, male)

Additionally, many participants mentioned that they exchange clothes with their friends and family as an alternative to buying fast fashion:

"*to get the clothes from your friends or parents or whatever. And, I mean, they all have cool clothes too, as we know, so we can exchange clothes. And then it's so much more environmentally friendly instead of buying directly a new one*" (Participant 9, female). Another method often raised by the participants was the boycott of certain stores that they consider as particularly ethically questionable due to bad working conditions and severe environmental pollution related to these companies:

"*So there are certain shops, I don't even look at because I know about backstories of it and how it works*" (Participant 8, male). Often addressed examples were the ultra-fast fashion brands Primark and Shein, who are known for producing masses of cheap throw-away clothing "manufactured from synthetic materials and potentially toxic chemicals in unmonitored supply chains" (Willow, 2021). Thereby, also the poor quality of cheaply produced clothing was criticized which leads to the fact that clothes of huge chains like Primark or Shein usually do not last long. Thus, many participants stated that, due to ethical considerations, they avoid purchasing or going to certain kinds of stores:

„*I do very much like the quality of clothing, so I don't like to buy from stores like Primark*" (Participant 14, female), "*at Primark, where you can get a T-shirt for 2.99€. I wouldn't do that now.*" (Participant 16, male) or "*I would never buy Shein or stuff like that*" (Participant 15).

4.8 Actual Fashion consumption

To examine the actual fashion consumption of 'flexible consumers', it was measured if participant purchase their clothes more frequently in fast fashion stores or secondhand. To not make assumptions, participants were generally asked where they buy clothes. Subsequently, the statements were sub-coded with 'fast fashion' or 'secondhand' depending on the participant's mention of a fast-fashion or secondhand store. As result, the main coding gave 54 findings of which 32 were determined as 'fast fashion' and 35 as 'secondhand'. Thus, it can be stated that the actual fashion consumption of participants is almost an equally distributed mix of fast fashion and secondhand consumption:

"(…) *I would say that for me that is 50:50, whether I buy it new or second-hand*" (Participant 10, male).

Whereas some participants mainly purchase fast fashion such as participant 7 stated "*75% are fast fashion. Well, I mean, you could buy three things and then one I bought secondhand.",* other participants changed their consumption to mostly secondhand: "(…) *I switched mostly to second-hand then yeah.*" (Participant 19, male). On the contrary, for some participants secondhand shopping is "*more like an opportunity. If there's an opportunity to shop second-hand clothes and things like this, then I also go for it or at least have a look at if I can find something*" (Participant 8, male).

4.9 Reasons for fast fashion consumption

As reasons for fast fashion consumption, the main factors that make participants decide on fast fashion stores were determined as availability, ease of purchase, need factor, price sensitivity, and utilitarian value. In total 49 codes related to 'reasons of fast fashion consumption' whereby 'price sensitivity' was the most addressed factor with 24 codes. Thus, it can be stated that economic reasons are the most important factor that let consumers decide for purchasing fast fashion clothes. In this regard, many participants stated that they purchase fast fashion because of the cheap offer of clothes:

"*I think because it's cheaper, so I have to look at the price because I don't have so much budget to spend but I also like to buy new clothes, so that's a bit problematic.*" (Participant 15, female).

Similarly, most participants are students living on a relatively small budget. Therefore, many interviewees stated that they first pay attention to price when buying new clothes:

"*I just wouldn't spend more money. And since I'm a student I'm broke*" (Participant 12) or "*I'm a student without as much as a budget so I can get nice clothes there for a small price.*" (Participant 15, female).

Next to price, the second most important reason that let participants decide on fast fashion was determined as the 'need factor'. This relates to the circumstance of when a person needs a certain fashion item and thus, specifically searches for this item in a shopping situation. As considered more convenient, many participants stated that they go to fast fashion stores when they require a specific fashion item:

"(…) *if I know exactly what I want and I'm like 100% sure that I'm not going to get it in the secondhand store. So then if I know I can't find it there, I go to the normal fast fashion store and buy it there.*" (Participant 14, female).

This so-called need factor also stands in relation to the other relevant factors for fast fashion consumption. Referred to as 'ease of purchase', many interviewees stated that purchasing fast fashion is an easy way of buying clothes, especially when buying under time constraints:

"*So you are quite successful, quite fast.*"(Participant 2, female), "*You can get it quickly. Yes, as the name 'fast fashion' suggests.*" (Participant 18, female) or participant 15 (female) stating "(…) *sometimes it is just easier and faster to go to Zara or H&M and so on because you know what you get.*".

Therefore, it is often emphasized that it does not require much effort to purchase in fast fashion stores: "*So that's just people's laziness, I'd say. Partially, for me it's laziness.*" (Participant 17, female).

Thereby, the easy availability of fast fashion also plays a major role. Participant 5 for instance highlights that "*there is almost a monopoly position of these companies*". Also, participant 19 (male) cites a reason to purchase fast fashion: "*because it is quickly available in the pedestrian zone*". Similarly, participant 12 (male) states that that especially in smaller cities it is almost only possible to buy fast fashion:

"*So there's the shopping mall that I know, 20 kilometers from my hometown, there are only the fast fashion stores. So, I don't really have a choice.*"

Another reason mentioned by participants was that, when buying in fast fashion stores, it is more likely that the available products are close to what they want. This is referred to as 'utilitarian value'. Hence, it was often stated that it is easy in fast fashion stores to find sizes and pieces that suit:

"*there's a bigger chance that I buy still in one of these fast fashion stores where you know, okay, they have got the same jeans that suit me or in every size or any color.*" (Participant 18, female).

4.10 Reasons for secondhand consumption

Despite reasons for fast fashion consumption, also the factors that let people decide on secondhand consumption were examined. Thus, the five factors of 'ethical considerations', 'fashion-consciousness', 'need for uniqueness', 'price sensitivity', and 'shopping experience' were identified as the most important reasons for participants to purchase secondhand. Ethical considerations were thereby found as the most crucial factor that let participants decide on secondhand. Participant 9 (female) for instance emphasizes the environmental aspects of purchasing secondhand:

"*So, yeah, I really want to make an effort towards being more environmentally friendly, and that's why I'm purchasing secondhand clothes*".

Similarly, participant 13 (female) underlines: "*it makes me feel a little less bad because it's more sustainable*". The feeling of being more environmentally friendly with secondhand is related, for example, to the fact that fewer resources are consumed: "(…) *it's a bit more fair and less consuming of resources because it's already been used*" (Participant 7, male). Also, social aspects were considered when deciding on secondhand, which participant 1, for instance, expresses a bit sharper: "*when shopping secondhand, you know, okay, that's just the grandma smell on it, not the blood of the workers.*"

Next to ethical considerations, the price was often mentioned by participants as a reason to purchase secondhand. For instance, participant 10 (male) argues "*the main reason is really that it is cheaper*" and participant 6 (male) states "(…) *in terms of secondhand shops when you really discover retailers that are cheap for me that's good*". Nevertheless, regarding price the opinions among the interviewees differed a lot. Some of the participants consider secondhand purchasing cheap whereas others complain about high prices. Participant 1 (female) for instance, considered the prices in vintage stores often as very high:

"I go quite often to some vintage stores, but only the ones that are, you know, nice vintage stores, not the ones like you pay 100 bucks for a sweater, like what the fuck?".

Thus, the value of 'price sensitivity' is on the one hand coded as a reason for but also as a factor blocking secondhand consumption. The latter will be discussed in the next section.

Further reasons for secondhand consumption were identified as fashion-consciousness, need for uniqueness, and shopping experience which are slightly related. Fashion consciousness for instance is related to whether a consumer considers a clothing item fashionable. In the case of secondhand clothing, many participants stated that they like the vintage style of secondhand pieces and assess them as trendy and stylish:

"I really like the vintage style" (Participant 15, female), *"I do like the style a lot"* (Participant 3) or *"I think one of the main reasons is just that this kind of vintage style is becoming very trendy and they offer lots of things that I visually like as well"* (Participant 8, male).

Especially, it was mentioned often that secondhand pieces represent a certain uniqueness in comparison to fast fashion stores where everyone can get the same pieces:

"(…) it's more individual. Because sometimes I bought a new shirt and afterward, I saw 100 people who had the same T-shirt too and with secondhand, there is less chance that the same shirt has someone else" or similarly *"often individual pieces, where you don't somehow see the things every 5 meters further in the pedestrian zone"* (Participant 19, male).

Hence, many participants emphasized that secondhand clothes show more of an individual character which provides opportunities to feel more individualistic and create one's style:

"I think I also love secondhand because they have a lot of different stuff in the stores like everything's so different and they don't have like one style there" (Participant 3, female).

Another but less frequently mentioned reason was the special experience that secondhand shopping brings with it: *"it's also a more pleasurable experience in itself. Just, you*

know, looking around and getting something" (Participant 2, female). Also, for some participants

the secondhand shopping experience erases feelings of joy and achievement:

"*You can find some like pearls around. And then, you feel more satisfied at the end and*

have this feeling of achievement" (Participant 13, female)

4.11 Factors blocking secondhand consumption

Although participants stated many reasons why they purchase secondhand clothes, also factors that block secondhand purchasing intentions were identified. Thereby it was found that the factor of availability was most influential in keeping people from buying secondhand. Here, it was often described that a lack of available secondhand stores in the vicinity of participants was the decisive factor for many to not purchase secondhand despite their intentions. Especially in smaller cities like Enschede it is difficult for participants to find secondhand shops as described by participant 8 (male):

"(…) *here in Enschede there is, as far as I know, not that much going on and there's just not the opportunity to shop secondhand so well."* In comparison, bigger cities would have a larger selection of secondhand shops: "*In other cities like Amsterdam or Berlin, when you're there, I always like to have a look at secondhand shops* (…)" (Participant 8, male).

Therefore, many participants wish for more options to purchase secondhand:

"*I wish the secondhand market overall would grow and there would be more options available because that's also a reason why I don't go there that often in my city. It's not possible because we only have one store."* (Participant 14, female).

As one solution to this problem, many participants switch to online secondhand platforms such as eBay or vinted: "*I love vinted also because there you have a lot of secondhand clothes online*" (Participant 4, female).

As previously mentioned, 'price sensitivity' was coded as a reason for purchasing secondhand but also a factor blocking secondhand consumption. Although this seems contradictory, many participants stated that prices for vintage pieces increase drastically due to the current hype about secondhand clothing. Thus, participant 16 (male), for example, criticizes overprized secondhand shops:

"*But there are also bad secondhand stores, I was in Berlin now and there they wanted too much money for the items. I found that a bit cheeky just because it is on trend right to make so much profit from it. That is also the problem. It's so expensive because it's trending right now*."

Another less mentioned concern was the rare selection of products and sizes available in secondhand stores. So, it is difficult for some participants to find their right size as described by participant 13 (female):

"*And with secondhand, sometimes it's really hard that they have my size or something like specifically, you know*".

Further less often addressed aspects related to fashion- and product-related concerns of secondhand clothing such as poor perceptions of quality, the modernity of clothing, or hygienic conditions of secondhand pieces:

"*And some clothes also had stains. Then I was like, okay, no, come on, this is even too much for me*" (Participant 13, female).

4.12 Extent of conflict

To answer the research question, it was also analyzed to what extent 'flexible consumer' purchasing not exclusively secondhand but also fast fashion apparel experience a conflict when reflecting on their consumption choices. The results of the data collection indicate that most of the participants experience a high level of conflict when ethical intentions are not translated into their purchasing behavior. Out of 32 codings that were found concerning the main code 'extent of conflict', 22 codes resulted in a 'high level of conflict' whereas only 10 codes indicated lower levels of conflict. It was found that many participants were aware of their inconsistent shopping behavior which often leads them to an inner conflict such as described by participant 2 (female):

"*There's always a huge dilemma. Like, as I mentioned before, when I go into the store and I search for something, I'm nearly continuously having very negative thoughts. Like I'm super angry about myself at this moment. So I go through it and I'm like, okay, yes. It's just like one or two things. It should be okay, right? No, it's not.*".

Although the interviewees are strongly aware of environmental and social aspects, the extent of conflict remains high when it comes to consumption choices:

"*And I don't know why, but then at this moment, I don't think about this ethical consumerism, and I just buy the product because I like it. And that's not fair. And I know that I'm aware of my problem myself, that it's not good for the environment and people and me as well. But I don't know, I'm still doing it.*" (Participant 1, female).

On the other hand, however, some participants feel less or even no conflict when purchasing fast fashion. This is the case, for instance, when participants have the feeling that there is no alternative option:

"*I feel like since it got even worse and worse and worse, like by now, you can't find any other label than made in Vietnam or Bangladesh in like H&M was zero, for instance. So you kind of got rid of the thinking, okay, should I rethink my choice just because it's made somewhere? But*

since it's all made there, you're like, well, if I go into that store, I kind of stop with the ethical

thinking since I'm already in it" (Participant 12, male).

Another explanation for low levels of conflict is given by participant 5:

"*I don't believe that such ethical consumption can exist. And I believe that you just*

actually do something like that for yourself". Other participants do not see it as their responsibility

to change something and therefore do not feel conflict: "*So, yeah, the individual can't do as much*

as these companies, so. No, I don't feel guilty because it's the company's fault" (Participant 7, male).

4.13 Feelings related to conflict

Although not all participants, most of the participants felt a certain dilemma between ethical intentions and actual consumption choices. To understand this conflict even closer, the interviewees were asked to elaborate on their feelings related to this conflict. Analyzing the results showed that most of the participants stated that they often feel bad and guilt when purchasing in fast fashion stores. Thus, 'negative self-perceptions' and 'guilt' was found as the most frequent concepts concerning the main code 'feelings related to conflict'. Participant 1 (female) for instance describes his feeling like this:

"*Then I'm like, come on, that's like, not cool. Why do I need this to buy this right now? So no, it's not a good feeling. I feel kind of ashamed, kind of guilty*".

Corresponding to this are post-purchase feelings of regret as emphasized by participant 11 (female):

"*Regret sometimes, even because some purchases are maybe more out of the moment and impulse decisions. And then in the end, like a month after, you kind of think about that, regretfully: why did you buy that stupid shirt again?*".

Contrary to this, only a few participants do not experience any negative feelings:

"*But I wouldn't say right now that I have a super bad conscience afterward*" (Participant 18, female) or similar: "*Sounds selfish now, but then I didn't feel that guilty*" (Participant 19, male).

Nevertheless, only three participants' statements were coded as 'no negative feelings'.

4.14 Resolving conflict

To examine if participants use methods to resolve their conflict, they were asked about how they deal with potential conflicting feelings that the so-called attitude-behavior gap brings with it. As result, three possible concepts related to the main code 'resolving conflict' were identified: 'Future intentions', 'Rationalization', and 'No solution' to resolve conflict. The category resulting in most codes was thereby 'Future intentions' which is described with participants' intentions to further change their consumption behavior towards more ethical directions in the future. For instance, some participants stated that they would buy more sustainable pieces in the future when they would earn more money:

"(…) *if I once, when I start to earn a little bit more money, that I can choose what I want to buy and then I also will go for more environmentally friendly things"* (Participant 8).

This also includes participants' suggestions about how they choose other ways of consuming which helps to resolve conflicting feelings. Thus, it was often suggested to reduce consumption or avoid certain shops:

"*Really keeping an eye on that and trying to avoid fashion brands. I would say I think that's the best thing you could do."* (Participant 4, female).

Another coded concept was the one of 'Rationalization'. This is for example described by rationalizing an 'unethical' consumption choice with the previously described 'need-factor'. Hence, it was examined that when participants need a certain fashion item and therefore choose a fast fashion store, they rationalize their choice to resolve an ethical conflict:

"*So if I like really need new shoes and I bought it, I'm like, Yeah, okay, that's fine*" (Participant 1, female).

Furthermore, some participants use methods of rationalization by shifting the focus on their individual impact to the responsibility to companies and higher institutions:

"But I think it's weird to shift the the focus from the companies that actually do that shit to the consumers, to the end consumers just saying, well, if they want to, they would buy secondhand and fair trade, because that's just not the reality because fast fashion is everywhere and living is expensive" (Participant 7, male).

In comparison to that, a small minority of participants see no solution to resolve this conflict such as described by participant 3 (female):

"I don't really know if there's a solution" or participant 2: "If I say I would go less to special shops, that would be a lie or something. Yeah. So, I feel like there are not many solutions that I've generated, like in my head."

5. Discussion

This section will discuss and evaluate the previously described results to draw conclusions from the data findings. This interpretation of the results will provide insights into the complex consumption behavior of the experimental consumer group of ethically-minded 'flexible' consumers. To gain a deep understanding of the attitude-behavior gap in the context of ethical consumerism, the results are placed in relation to previously discussed studies of the theoretical framework. Additionally, limitations of this study, recommendations for future research, and practical implications will be given. Finally, the most relevant findings and main conclusions will be summarized.

Regarding fashion-related choices, younger generations show a strong awareness and desire for environmental and social issues. It was found within this study that when people are more educated and informed, they tend to be more critical about how the industry treats people and the environment. Due to unlimited internet and social media access, Gen Z is highly informed about global issues, and makes them socially aware and justice-minded (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). Nevertheless, the abundance of online information can also lead to confusion and overwhelm (Wiederholz & Martinez, 2018).

In addition, the fashion industry is often considered non-transparent about production conditions, making it difficult to trace the apparel life cycle holistically. Also, using ethical claims for marketing purposes, consumers often have the feeling that companies promote a "green" picture that does not reflect actual production conditions and sustainability measures. Bly et al. (2010) state that through "greenwashing," companies often forge an ecologically responsible image among the public to increase profit, which does not display the reality. In fact, however, the industry is contributing to severe environmental damages, and the working conditions in textile manufacturers are poor. Especially in countries like Bangladesh or India, unmanageable amounts of waste deploy

surrounding nature, and toxic substances enter groundwater swell where they pose a health risk to the people.

Furthermore, many people, such as the participants of this study, raise a concern about poor human worker rights in textile-producing countries. As confirmed by various studies, many companies use few regulations to their advantage as paying low wages for long working hours brings economic profit (Ayatullah Hosne Asif, 2017).

However, with increasing knowledge about these practices, the rejection of the industry grows. Hence, many people, including the participants of this study, want to protect the environment and promote social responsibility. Characteristic of people of Gen Z, the participants increasingly incorporate sustainability in their lifestyle (Dabija & Bejan, 2017; Saarelainen, 2021). In their consumption choices, they integrate considerations of ethics, social justice, and environmental sustainability, which identifies them, according to Carrington et al. (2016), as ethical consumers. Regarding fashion-related choices, the most important reason for purchasing secondhand was the assessment as environmentally friendlier and socially more justifiable than fast fashion. This is also confirmed by Guiot and Roux (2010), who identified psychological motivations such as environmental and responsible concerns as crucial determinants in secondhand purchasing intentions.

However, not only ethical values were important in fashion purchasing decisions. An interplay of various values caused the inconsistent purchasing behavior of 'flexible' consumers. Especially the juxtaposition of ethical values with the price factor tempts many to a fast fashion purchase. It is stated by Djafarova and Foots (2022) that Gen Z, in particular, is minded about their savings since they experienced several financial crises in their lifetime and often live on a budget. Also, they align their spending often with individual values (Djafarova & Foots, 2022).

Nevertheless, in terms of secondhand, the perception of price often differs. Some consider shopping secondhand cheap, whereas others express concern about the high prices of vintage

clothing. It is confirmed by literature that when individuals do not understand the justification for higher prices, they are less willing to decide on the ethical alternative (Bly et al., 2010). According to Guiot & Roux (2010), assessing a fair price is critical in fashion-consumption choices and can even take a gratification role. Similarly, the interviewees experienced achievement and joy when finding secondhand pieces for a fair price.

In contrast to secondhand, fast fashion is almost exclusively considered to be inexpensive . As personal benefits in purchasing decisions often drive individuals, they, especially on a small budget, favor low prices despite their care for ethical values (Wiederholz & Martinez, 2018). Thus, when people are less dependent on budget, have access to affordable secondhand stores or see a justification for higher prices, they are more likely to choose for ethical alternatives.

Next to ethical considerations and price, many people pay attention to fashionability and trendiness when purchasing new clothes. Regarding secondhand, the vintage style appeals to many and encourages purchases. Compared to fast fashion, secondhand pieces are assessed as unique and individual, providing opportunities to be creative with style. Also, a previous study by Bly et al. (2005) identified individuality, creativity, and aesthetics as critical elements for considering secondhand apparel shopping.

Although numerous motivations for consumers to purchase secondhand were identified, next to the price, availability plays a crucial role in keeping people from purchasing secondhand and instead deciding for fast fashion. According to Wiederholz and Martinez (2018), availability is essential in consumers' purchasing criteria. Similarly, Papaoikonomou et al. (2010) found that when consumers have limited options to follow ethical purchasing intentions, they end up buying unethical brands as they are, on the contrary, immediately available. Also, the participants of this study criticized the lack of available secondhand apparel stores, especially in smaller cities like Enschede.

On the contrary, in their almost monopoly position, fast fashion stores can be found in nearly every city and are immediately available. Thus, many feel not to have an option and therefore choose fast fashion. Therefore, to avoid fast fashion, there is an increasing demand for secondhand shopping opportunities.

However, shopping secondhand is not the only way to oppose the industry. Critical to rising overconsumption and the production of apparel waste, many people try to reduce their consumption constantly. Primarily, so-called 'ultra-fast fashion' stores like Primark or Shein, who constantly increase the offer of new styles, are held responsible for normalizing overconsumption. Thus, many participants stated that they boycott these kinds of stores. Previous literature confirms that boycotting is a common practice that people consider when they no longer want to contribute to the damages caused by the fast fashion industry (Harrison et al., 2005). As some participants stated, this also includes avoiding products from certain textile-manufacturing countries such as Bangladesh or India.

Also, recycling and upcycling were favored alternatives to extend clothes' lifespan and find new purposes for old clothing. Creating new styles of used clothing offers opportunities for being creative, brings joy, and is also sustainable.

Nevertheless, these methods will not be sufficient to stop fast fashion purchases and close the gap between intentions and actual behavior. Still, it is difficult for many to choose ethical alternatives consistently. For instance, when people need a particular fashion item, they often choose the fast-fashion alternative as it is perceived as more convenient and readily available. Prioritizing instrumental values can be related to the concept of rationalization. To rationalize conscious unethical consumption behavior, a fast-fashion purchase is justified when consumers need a specific fashion item. According to Carrington et al. (2016), people could continue their inconsistent moral behavior without having negative feelings about it through rationalization.

Also, people feel less conflict after an 'unethical purchase' when they assess their contribution to significant problems as low. In previous studies, such as Bly et al. (2010), the perception of how an individual purchase would make a difference refers to the degree of locus of control. Hence, when people have a high external locus of control, they do not believe that their purchase would make a difference and, therefore, are less likely to purchase ethically (Wiederholz & Martinez, 2018). In this case, responsibility is shifted to companies and higher institutions. Shifting responsibilities is also a form of rationalization technique that helps bypass conflicting feelings (Carrington et al., 2016).

Additionally, literature states that individuals often experience a lack of cognitive dissonance between their moral values and consuming behavior, which decreases uncomfortable feelings about themselves. Cognitive dissonance is a term describing a psychological conflict resulting from incongruous beliefs and attitudes held simultaneously (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Although many scholars agree on the use of post-rationalization strategies and a lack of cognitive dissonance, the results of this study are only partly consistent with the findings of previous literature. On the contrary, it proved to be true for most people that they showed a high level of cognitive dissonance and experienced conflict and mental discomfort after an 'unethical' purchase. Due to this mental discomfort, participants stated that they have feelings of guilt and regret when a purchase contradicts their ethical considerations. Many people constantly reflect on their contradictory consumption choices to resolve this dissonance and reduce negative feelings. They show great willingness to change it towards a more ethical direction in the future. Thus, ethically minded consumers aim to reduce consumption further or often choose alternative ways of consumption such as recycling or secondhand. However, no predictions about how these intentions will be applied can be drawn as many factors still lead to an ethical consumption paradox.

5.1 Limitations

Like any study, also this study has some limitations, which provide implications for future research. Reflecting on the chosen research method of semi-structured interviews, deep insights into the complex consumer behavior could be gained, and different ideas related to the topic could be discovered. On the contrary, in a quantitative study, participants are restricted in their answers which would have given less insightful information.

Nevertheless, choosing this method also brought some limitations to this research. These limitations, for instance, include the risk of biases due to the researcher's subjectivity. Questions may be unconsciously devised to confirm previous views when having a particular bias. However, this risk was partly reduced by following a semi-structured interview guide that was designed in a way that the researcher could reinitiate as little as possible. This risk could have been reduced by choosing a mixed model approach. Adding quantitative data would have ensured more generalizable and valid results and benefits to this study. By combining the strengths of both data types, a broader and more complete analysis could have been executed.

Another limitation of this study is the relatively homogenous sample composition. The sample was composed of primary students of the same age, cultural background, and income group. This sample composition was intently chosen to ensure that the participants belong to the consumer group of 'flexible consumers.' However, interviewing participants with different backgrounds would have given a more far-reaching view of the topic.

5.2 Implications for future research

One limitation of this research is the relatively homogenous participant group. For future research, studying the phenomena of the attitude-behavior gap in different consumer groups is recommended. The subject may have been examined from different viewpoints by having a sample from different cultural backgrounds, ages, and income groups. For instance, choosing different age groups as samples might have given different results on the acceptance of secondhand clothing consumption as the current secondhand trend is somewhat observable among younger generations. Due to different concerns, older generations might show less acceptance of purchasing secondhand apparel, which would have given different results in factors blocking secondhand consumption. Also, as stated by literature, younger generations show higher awareness of environmental issues compared to older generations (Lopez-Fernandez, 2020). Hence, it would be interesting to examine to what extent fashion-related choices of consumers belonging to older generations are motivated by ethical considerations.

Furthermore, examining how considerations in fashion-related choices vary among different income groups would expand the research field. In this study, it was found that price was the most influential factor blocking ethical purchasing intentions. Nevertheless, it must be stated that the sample was composed of students who usually have low income and, therefore, only a small budget available for purchasing clothing. Thus, future research needs to investigate if people belonging to higher income groups are similarly influenced by economic considerations or motivated by other values in fashion-related purchasing decisions. Thus, it is recommended for future research in the field of ethical consumerism to study the behavior of diverse participant groups belonging to different cultural backgrounds, ages, and income groups. Thereby, indications of the attitude-behavior gap in ethical consumerism could be compared among different groups, providing a broader and more complete vision of the phenomena.

5.3 Conclusion

Unlike previous studies, this study focused on consumers' ethical purchase intentions and actual consumption behavior by focusing on the unique group of 'flexible consumers'. This consumer group could be characterized by a strong awareness of social and environmental problems and strong antipathy towards the fashion industry's practices. Thus, many want to oppose the industry through alternative apparel consumption, boycotting, or reducing consumption.

However, despite these intentions, other essential values make it difficult for people to translate these to actual consumption. Thereby, the factors of price and availability were found as most crucial in fashion-related choices of 'flexible consumers,' which sometimes leads to fast fashion purchases. In particular, the availability factor was in favor of the fast fashion industry and to the disadvantage of the secondhand market. Consequently, there was a remarkable consensus among participants wishing for more opportunities to purchase secondhand and thereby being able to pursue their moral framework. Thus, ethically minded consumers show a growing demand for an expanding secondhand market.

To conclude, the 'flexible' consumption behavior of consumers who occasionally choose the non-ethical variant of fast fashion and sometimes the opponent secondhand is mainly influenced by economic and situational factors. Nevertheless, it is an interplay between different mediating factors that are decisive for the attitude-behavior gap of eco-conscious 'flexible consumers.' Thus, when people recognize the gap between intentions and behavior, this leads to conflicting post-purchase feelings, including guilt and regret. To resolve conflict, many people are increasingly reflecting on their consumption behavior and are willing to change it towards more alternative ways of consumption. Nevertheless, closing the attitude-behavior gap requires a constant and not always easy process of self-reflection and improvement, which cannot be implemented from one second to another. Also, various factors influence purchase decisions and should be seen in their complexity.

However, the individual with his purchasing decisions stands on the one side of the clothing cycle facing the enormous problems caused by the fast-fashion industry. Hence, individuals often think they do not have the power to oppose such a vast industry, making them less motivated to buy ethically. Thus, responsibility should not only be placed on the individual but also on companies and policymakers. Corporations must ensure better working conditions and less environmental pollution, which governments in textile-producing countries should regulate. If we all act now, we do not have to cry later.

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Appendix

Interview questions

      Demographics:

1. How old are you?

2. What is your job?

3. What is your highest education?

4. What is your gender?

5. Where do you come from?

Further questions:

6. Are you familiar with the term fast fashion?

    - *Yes*: Continue

    - *No*: Explanation of fast fashion: Fast fashion is a business model where inexpensive clothing are produced rapidly by mass-market retailers in response to the latest trends.

7. What is your view on the impact of the fast fashion industry on environmental ills?

8. What is your view on the impact of the fast fashion industry on social ills?

9. Do you pay attention to ethical values such as social and environmental concerns in your consumption choices?

    - To what extent is buying ethically important to you?

10. So, would you describe yourself as an 'ethical consumer'?

11. What are important values to you when shopping new clothes?

12. Do you also pay attention to ethical values such as sustainable production or worker rights when purchasing clothes?

    - How is this reflected in your purchasing behavior?

13. Where do you purchase you clothes usually?

  - *When fast fashion stores*: What are your reasons to you purchase there?

14. Do you also shop secondhand clothes?

15. Why do you purchase secondhand?

  - Are social and environmental issues reasons for you to buy secondhand?

  - What are other reasons for you to buy secondhand?

16. Would you say you purchase your clothes more often in secondhand stores or more often

   fast fashion stores (such as H&M, Zara,…)?

  - Or is it equally distributed?

  - How could you explain that you sometimes shop secondhand & sometimes

   fast fashion?

17. Do you experience a conflict between your ethical values and actual consumption?

18. How would you describe this conflict?

19. What are your feelings when experiencing this conflict?

20. What do you do against the conflict when your fashion purchase does not fit your ethical

   standards?