

Exploring Online Sustainable Fashion Buying Behaviour Antecedents. A Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Sustainable fashion is gaining interest from consumers. However, when buying apparel, individuals look for benefits and try to circumvent or lower barriers. This study aims to document motives and barriers in online buying of sustainable apparel, exploring the tendency of buying from online second-hand vendors, as well as platform features, and information deemed necessary when considering buying such products. The research employed a qualitative methodology, combining in-depth interviews with focus groups. A sample comprising 20 Romanian consumers for the in-depth interviews and 16 for the focus groups was used. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data. The study indicates sought-after benefits and envisaged barriers when buying online sustainable apparel, displaying perspectives particular to online second-hand vendors, provides evidence about online platform features considered important by consumers when buying sustainable fashion, clarifies what information is important in the buying decision of sustainable clothes and indicates reasons for using second-hand platforms to purchase clothes. The study expands the literature by investigating consumer behaviour constructs in a broad manner, by employing a dual-qualitative methodology and by providing information about the Romanian market. Practical recommendations are made to vendors and online platforms.

Keywords: online sustainable fashion; buying benefits and barriers; second-hand vendors; platform features and information; in-depth interview and focus group

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1. Introduction

Sustainable fashion is a concept attracting a growing attention from buyers and sellers. Buyers often declare that they are preoccupied by environmental issues related to apparel manufacturing and transportation, but studies show that in many instances consumers are rather price-oriented when they purchase clothes (Shrivastava et al, 2021). Moreover, frequently, consumers do not comprehend whether a particular type of garment is sustainable (Hill & Lee, 2012) or if a particular brand is sustainable (McNeill & Moore, 2015). On top of these, consumers may not trust brands to be sustainable (Strahle et al., 2015). Companies attempt to respond through actions performed in three areas, environmental issues, social considerations

and consumer-related perspectives (Strahle et al., 2015). Regarding environmental issues, businesses advocate using ecological constituents, and employing environmentally-adequate production and distribution processes (LeHew & Patwary, 2018). Social aspects are addressed through endeavours towards alleviating working conditions, the sector being blamed for precarious labour contexts (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020). When it comes to consumers, manufactures and retailers prompt strategies encouraging longer-usage or recycling (Strahle, 2015). In fact, sustainability goes beyond, LeHew and Patwary (2018) referring to the phase in which the consumer preserves the clothing item by washing, drying and ironing it. Furthermore, the same authors underline that sustainable fashion should refer to all lifecycle stages, sustainability transcending through product manufacturing, channelling, using and discarding, such a perspective being rather theoretical than practical.

As there is a growing consumer interest in sustainable fashion (LeHew & Patwary, 2018), the literature exhibits a number of motives based on which consumers contemplate of choosing sustainable clothing. Blas Riesgo et al. (2023) underline that consumers valuing sustainable fashion choose apparel based on considerations pertaining to environmental care, fashion apprehension, influence of other people and effectiveness perceptions. Furthermore, Camacho-Otero et al. (2020) stresses innovative motives as triggers for consumers to embrace sustainable fashion in a study focusing on apparel swapping. Additionally, the increasing preoccupations of individuals to transform existing clothes for fitting and statement purposes, as well as repairing them due to emotional and/or budgetary purposes complete the triggers that support sustainable consumption.

The growing consumer interests in buying second-hand apparel, swapping clothes, renting and recycling (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020; Sardianou & Briana, 2025; Shrivastava et al., 2021; Vladimirova et al., 2024) expand the concept of sustainable fashion. These interests are fostered by the online environment. Online platforms selling second-hand apparel, mediating garment renting or swapping, as well as online communication, especially social media one pertaining to sellers or influencers, are examples of how the online environment is supporting sustainable fashion.

The current literature focuses on specific aspects of sustainable fashion, such as the impact of social media (de Lenne & Vandenbosch, 2017; Kim et al., 2020; LeHew & Patwary, 2018, Shrivastava et al., 2021; El-Shihy & Awaad, 2025), reasons behind apparel consumptions (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020), facilitators and obstacles in sustainable consumption (Blas Riesgo et al., 2023), the impact of e-commerce on recycling consumer behavior in fashion (Sardianou & Briana, 2025). Furthermore, the online sustainable fashion literature exhibits a need for more qualitative studies to understand consumer behaviour constructs (Sardianou & Briana, 2025; Vladimirova et al., 2024).

This study aims to expand the literature by investigating motives and barriers behind online sustainable fashion consumer behaviour, with a focus also on online second-hand vendors, platform features, and information considered important in the buying decision through a blend of qualitative research techniques, specifically semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups.

2. Literature review

2.1 Online sustainable fashion consumer behaviour

Sustainable fashion consumption is closely linked with ethical manufacturing and environmental concern (Vladimirova et al., 2024). Although many consumers choose apparel

based on how and where the items are produced, and manufacturing processes and/or product constituents, consumers are paying increasing attention to other aspects with a significant positive impact on the environment, such as apparel maintenance, creating, repairing or styling existing garments (Valdimirova et al., 2024), swapping (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020), renting (Shrivastava et al., 2021) or recycling (Sardianou & Briana, 2025). These aspects gained traction due to behavioural changes sparked by features and content found in the online environment. Online renting platforms (Shrivastava et al., 2021) or second-hand apparel selling platforms (Sardianou & Briana, 2025) are examples of e-commerce usage in sustainable fashion, while social media is deemed a suitable example of a medium exposing sustainable fashion content (El-Shihy & Awaad, 2025; de Lenne & Vandenbosch, 2017; Kim et al., 2020).

Two major advantages of the online environment are exposure and accessibility, consumers being introduced to a wealth of information displayed in a medley of forms, having access to more information if they need or want. LeHew and Patwary (2018) determined that the most communicated themes by sustainable fashion bloggers were about manufacturing processes, fabrics, local manufacturing, handmade, ethical production, slow fashion and recycled items. Shrivastava et al. (2021) underlined that social media communication had an effect on stimulating people to wear different attire regularly, and this had an important impact on second-hand apparel purchases. In 2024, globally, the second-hand apparel market represented 9% of the total market, recording an increase of 15% compared to the previous year, consumers buying second-hand in order to acquire at a smaller price, because of the pleasure of product searching, to afford more expensive brands, for environmental purposes, or for a specific design (ThredUp, 2025). Another kind of sustainable fashion platform is the renting one. Such a platform provides consumers with clothes and brands to wear at specific events at economical rates (Shrivastava et al., 2021). 56% of individuals that purchased second-hand apparel, purchased them online in 2024 (ThredUp, 2025). This figure can be partially explained by the fact that some platforms are peer-to-peer-centred, buyers and sellers being individuals, and partially due to platform functionalities, such as AI-incorporated or AR (augmented reality) features (Sardianou & Briana, 2025), which provide a thorough customer experience.

Although the interest in sustainable fashion behaviour is growing, and the online apparel buying is soaring, there are barriers deterring consumers from accessing these platforms, some pertaining to the platform, such as lack of trust or fear of not knowing how to use various functionalities, others related to the sold products, such as fear about product authenticity, condition or size (Shrivastava et al., 2021).

This study aims to explore both motives and concerns pertaining to online sustainable fashion buying, including also consumer views on platform features and information deemed necessary in the buying decision-making. Valdimirova et al. (2024), and Sardianou & Briana (2025) underline the need of exploring sustainable fashion behaviour through qualitative approaches for a more insightful understanding. This study responds to this recommendation by employing a research methodology including two qualitative techniques, specifically in-depth interviews and focus groups, to meet the research goals.

2.2. Buying motives and barriers in online sustainable fashion buying behaviour

Among the buying motives emphasized in existing studies, the financial conditions attached to buying sustainable apparel online are often mentioned. Affordability is underlined either in connection with expensive brands (ThredUp, 2025), or acquiring second-hand, or renting clothing items (Shrivastava et al., 2021), or recycled garments (Sardianou & Briana, 2025). Furthermore, by renting attire, consumers put in less effort in storing and preserving the items, and they can keep up with the latest trends (Philip et al., 2015). Other benefits come from the diversity and wealth of information displayed by platforms or by other parties related to selling platforms, such as influencers or bloggers (de Lenne & Vandenbosch, 2017; McKeown & Shearer, 2019), facilitating faster access to information about the assortment, such as design, fabric or size, manufacturing, or delivery time, and reviews and comments posted by other consumers (Sardianou & Briana, 2025). Additionally, platform features could also render benefits in the buying experience, easy access, augmented and virtual reality or 3D functionalities being suitable examples (Sardianou & Briana, 2025).

Barriers related to online sustainable fashion buying behaviour refer, first of all, to consumer consciousness about sustainable fashion, as a concept, and platforms selling second-hand apparel or renting clothes (Shrivastava et al., 2021). Other barriers, when it comes to the above-mentioned platforms, as well as those that sell recycled items, are peer acceptance or lack of trust in selling platforms or their assortment (Shrivastava et al., 2021). Additionally, barriers pertaining to the online environment should be considered, such as the impossibility to try on or touch the garment (Sardianou & Briana, 2025).

This study aims to respond to five questions:

RQ1: What are the motives of online sustainable fashion buying?

RQ2: What are the barriers in online sustainable fashion buying?

RQ3: What are the reasons for buying or not from online second-hand vendors?

RQ4: What platform features are used and/or considered necessary to make informed online buying decision of sustainable fashion?

RQ5: What information is deemed necessary in the buying decision process?

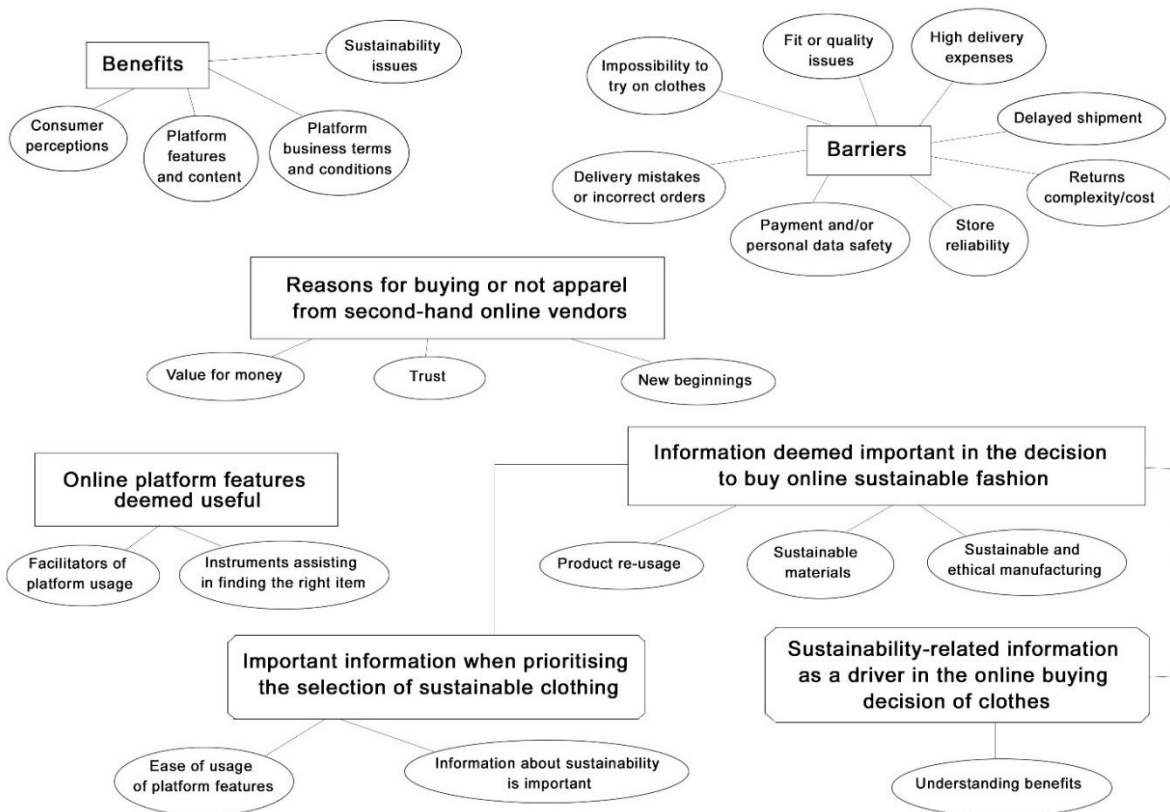
3. Research methodology

This study made use of a research methodology combining in-depth interviews with focus groups (this study received the ethics approval from the Research Ethics Subcommittee of the University Ethics Commission of The Bucharest University of Economic Studies). The logic behind this approach is to discuss further in focus groups findings delineated in previously-conducted in-depth interviews. This research implemented views of Geampana and Perrota (2025), and discussed in focus groups the themes uncovered in the in-depth interviews. A sample of 20 individuals aged between 18 and 45, living in Bucharest, who have purchased apparel online, considering also sustainable aspects, in the previous 12 months were individually interviewed. Subsequently, two focus groups, including 8 members, meeting the same conditions, were conducted. These two groups included 6 members that were previously interviewed. The research topics were derived from the study of Sardianou and Briana (2025). The data analysis was performed based on Thematic Analysis by employing the 6-step framework posited by Braun and Clarke (2006), specifically data comprehension, code generation, theme determination, theme revision, theme definition, and report delivery.

4. Results and discussion

First of all, apriori themes were determined based on the literature review. Subsequently, inductive codes and themes were determined from the collected data and integrated together with the apriori themes (Zhou et al., 2021). The in-depth interview respondents were coded from A1 to A20. The identified codes and themes are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Themes and codes



Source: own research

Factors influencing the decision to purchase sustainable fashion items from online stores

Regarding the factors deemed important when buying clothes online, the following codes were identified for the preestablished themes:

Price and discounts

- The internet environment is proper to find cheaper products.
- Consumers find online better deals than in physical stores. A15 mentioned that online the prices are smaller than in the physical stores for the same products

Product constituents' quality and trust in brand

- Product constituents are important as consumers desire to feel comfortable
- Product constituents are important for durability
- Trust in brand is connected to trust in product and store
- Trust in brand is connected to expectations. A17 underlined that trust in brand was connected to quality and formed expectations.

Consumer reviews and ratings

- They are important to build ideas about product options
- They are important because they are trustworthy, coming from users. A11 emphasized that reviews and ratings were important because he/she trusted the opinions of other people, while A15 underlined their support in understanding the quality and whether the products fit.

Size and fitting guides and product presentation

- Size and fitting guides are important in product selection. A10 underlined that such guides would be essential in choosing the right size and A15 mentioned that sizes differed from one brand to another.
- Size and fitting guides are important in expediting the purchasing process.
- Size and fitting guides are connected to product fitting and building trust in the product. A11 mentioned that purchasing a piece of clothing was connected to trust on the size.
- Product presentation is connected to ease of comparison and search
- Product presentation is important in product description. A15 connected product presentation to imagining how well the product would fit.

Delivery cost and time, and product returning terms

- Delivery speed is important when there are time constraints. A17 underlined delivery speed in connection to attending a particular event.
- Delivery speed is emphasized as an expected benefit as in online purchases a short delivery time is expected. A15 mentioned that he/she did not want to wait too long for an order.
- Product returning terms are important in connection with the possibility of the product not to fit
- Product returning terms are important in lowering costs with the platform and building trust. A10 pointed out that free shipping and returns would remove extra costs and build confidence in the store

Sustainability and ethical manufacturing

- They are connected to caring about the nature and planet, but are not always important in the buying decision

The themes identified in the in-depth interviews were confirmed in the focus groups, thus, strengthening the findings.

Product price is deemed pivotal in apparel selection by consumers (Sardianou & Briana, 2025; Shrivastava et al., 2021). This research strengthens the idea that consumers seek good deals and low prices when they shop online for apparel. On the other hand, sustainability issues are of interest when buying apparel online, but often they do not take precedence. The finding is in

line with previous works underlining the gap between positive attitudes toward sustainable clothes and the actual purchasing behaviour (McKeown & Shearer, 2019). Consumer perceptions are formed around product quality and trust in brand. These perspectives are determined to a certain extent by the barriers of the online environment, specifically the impossibility to touch the product. The importance of consumer trust in brands and companies has been emphasised in studies on sustainable fashion (Blas Riesgo et al., 2023; Sardianou & Briana, 2025). The reviews and ratings displayed by consumers were emphasised as important determinants of trust and sources of inspiration regarding product usage, strengthening the findings of Sardianou and Briana (2025). Platform features and content are deemed important in decision-making, size and fitting guides, and product presentations leading to building trust in the purchase and expediting the buying process, the findings being convergent with the views of Shrivastava et al. (2021). Platform business terms and conditions, specifically delivery terms and product returning conditions, have been mentioned as being important in relations to time and the possibility of returning items if they do not fit. The findings consolidate the results uncovered by Sardianou and Briana (2025).

Concerns/barriers in online sustainable fashion buying

Regarding the concerns or barriers deemed important when buying sustainable clothes online, the following codes were identified for the preestablished themes:

Impossibility to try on clothes

- One of the most important concerns as clothes may not fit
- Sometimes it is difficult to assess the quality

Fit or quality issues

- Closely connected to inability to try on clothes
- Important as sometimes clothes may look different in reality, especially the dye

High delivery expenses

- They represent a barrier if the overall cost of the product is high. Respondent A15 emphasized that such costs could make a product too expensive.

Delayed shipment

- Concerns drawn from not being able to have the product on time. A8 pointed out that delayed delivery could be frustrating if clothes were not delivered on time to attend an event.

Returns complexity/cost

- They are deterrents in purchasing apparel when they are complicated and expensive
- Sometimes, returning items could be difficult or time-consuming

Store reliability

- Knowing and trusting the store are very important
- Reliability is connected to store size. A7 mentioned he/she would choose big stores.

Payment and/or personal data safety

- Big stores provide a safer environment

- Personal information must be secured in online transactions

Delivery mistakes or incorrect orders

- They represent obstacles because of the fear of not receiving the expected item
- They can be alleviated by reliable return policies. A17 pointed out the importance of reliable return policies to offset potential wrong or defective orders.

The concerns and barriers identified in the in-depth interviews were also determined in the focus groups, thus reinforcing the findings.

Perspectives pertaining to consumer perceptions and attitudes concerning purchasing barriers are found in previous works. Concerns pertaining to the impossibility to try on items or issues about fitting or item quality are underlined in the form of lack of insurance by Shrivastava et al. (2021), and as very important barriers by Sardianou and Briana (2025). Returns complexity or costs, and delivery mistakes or incorrect orders are highlighted by Shrivastava et al. (2021) in the form of effort anticipation, and also emphasised by Sardianou and Briana (2025) as deterrents. Concerns about services delivered by platforms, such as payment and/or personal data safety, delayed shipment or high delivery expenses are identified by Sardianou and Briana (2025) as well and could be raised from improper regulations (Shrivastava et al., 2021). Most importantly, store reliability could be triggered by both groups of deterrents, lack of trust being, rather, a conclusion of previous experiences (Shrivastava et al., 2021).

Reasons for buying or not apparel from second-hand online vendors

This question was unstructured in the in-depth interviews. Based on the identified codes, three themes were delineated, namely better value for money (good-looking product for a cheaper price; a brand for less money; affordable and unique clothes while supporting sustainability; supporting circular fashion); trust and new beginnings (no previous problems; openness to wear second-hand clothes; selling used apparel).

The initially identified codes are:

- Good-looking product for a cheaper price; A9: I used to buy a brand because it was cheaper
- Trustworthy: A6: I have never got scammed. I actually recommend
- Unique items: A10: I sometimes use second-hand platforms to find affordable and unique clothes while supporting sustainability
- Ease of use and good quality of products received
- Possibility to sell items: A14: I love giving pieces a second life; A20: I use such platforms to sell
- Circular fashion A19: They promote circular fashion

As this question was an unstructured one in the in-depth interviews, the themes identified in the interviews were presented to the groups. These themes are better value for money, affordable and unique clothes while supporting sustainability, and trust and new beginnings. The group discussions revolved around these themes. Moreover, the discussion unveiled that such platforms are even used for selling used clothes. Vinted was called out in this regard.

Thus, the conclusions derived from the in-depth interviews were strengthened with a new perspective, that of selling used clothes.

Better value for money is a concept marked by divergence in the literature. High prices are often called out as a barrier in buying sustainable clothes (Blas Riesgo et al., 2023; Shrivastava et al., 2021). However, there are situations in which the price level is not deemed a barrier. For example, Murtas and Pedeliento (2024) determined that affordability was a trigger in buying luxury fashion items from second-hand stores. Stankevičiūtė and Jarmalavičiūtė (2025) underlined Vinted, a high-rising second-hand apparel item, as a shopping venue frequently used for purchasing apparel. Trust in online sustainable fashion has been explored from two major perspectives, one pertaining to sustainability and the other one focusing on the platform. Lack of trust in companies about their sustainable actions has been delineated as a very important obstacle in buying sustainable clothes (Blas Riesgo et al., 2023). Additionally, trust has been investigated in connection with product or brand authenticity, doubts in this regard being considered significant barriers in buying clothes online (Murtas & Pedeliento, 2024). Lack of trust has been determined to be a deterrent in buying from particular online vendors (Shrivastava et al., 2021). Furthermore, Sardianou and Briana (2025), posited that platform functionalities can build consumer trust in products by making them more visible. New beginnings can be linked with a growing openness toward buying second-hand apparel (Murtas & Pedeliento, 2024; Sardianou & Briana, 2025) and the possibility to buy but also to sell clothes on various platforms, such as Vinted (Stankevičiūtė & Jarmalavičiūtė, 2025).

Online platform features deemed useful when buying online sustainable fashion

Regarding the app features found useful when buying sustainable clothes online, the following codes were identified for the preestablished themes:

Platform tailored apparel suggestions

- Useful in recommending options. All mentioned that such functionalities could help me identify items matching a particular style and specific preferences
- Useful in saving time

Barcode scanning for similar items

- Useful to find quickly other items similar in style and price
- Useful to find better deals
- Useful to find alternatives if/when a particular item is out of inventory

Virtual and augmented reality tools

- An interesting tool to check how well items fit without going to the store

Interactions with professionals for advice

- A useful tool for receiving advice on items and trends
- A tool especially connected to high-end value brands

Image capturing to identify other options

- A useful tool for swift identification of similar and/or matching items
- A useful tool to find cheaper options
- Such a tool allows for quick and convenient website browsing
- Such a tool could recommend options deemed better. Respondent A19 underlined that recommendations could be better than his/her initial choice.

The group discussions underlined the same themes, confirming that these features are important to users.

Having as starting point the features exhibited by Sardianou and Briana (2025), the findings display two major categories of platform features deemed useful. The first group was underlined for facilitating platform usage, accessibility, finding an item and quick experience being the most common views about this group, including features such as virtual and augmented reality, and image capturing tools. Such features cater for consumers' desires to be able to compare options to make informed decisions (Murtas & Pedeliento, 2024). The second group referred to instruments assisting in finding the right item. Thus, features offering tailored apparel suggestions and interactions with professionals were deemed important in identifying satisfying options. Schiaroli et al. (2025) underlines the importance of receiving advice about matching items and extending product usage in order to build confidence in buying second-hand apparel.

Information deemed important in the decision to buy online sustainable fashion

This topic was chosen to overlap consumer sustainable considerations with the priority given to sustainable clothing items when prospecting the market. Three themes on sustainable considerations were delineated. The identified themes are: product re-usage (reusing), sustainable materials (sustainable or recycled materials, natural and organic fabrics), sustainable and ethical manufacturing processes (avoidance of brands with harmful production practices, to reduce carbon footprint, avoidance of buying clothes manufactured in sweatshops)

Six codes were identified based on which themes were delineated:

- Reusing
- Sustainable or recycled materials
- Natural and organic fabrics
- Avoidance of brands with harmful production practices
- To reduce carbon footprint
- Avoidance of buying clothes manufactured in sweatshops

Interesting are the reasons for which people do not prioritize sustainable motivation in their buying decision:

- A3: It is not my concern
- A7: I am more price-oriented
- A9: I don't find sustainability respected anyway by sellers
- A12: Top companies pollute more than I will ever pollute
- A13: The mentality of pushing sustainability guilt and responsibility onto the consumer can also be used as a cash grab, by simply marketing products as recycled when not more than 30% of a product is recycled or carbon neutral as a misleading label.

The identified themes in the interviews were presented in the focus groups. The group discussions reinforced the three themes, namely product re-usage (reusing), sustainable materials, sustainable and ethical manufacturing processes. However, the participants underlined that sustainability seldom refers to one or two of these three themes, but rather to all three considered together. This finding strengthens the conclusions drawn from the in-depth interviews.

Regarding the priority given to sustainable clothing items when prospecting the market, three themes were identified pertaining to the information displayed by a platform: ease of usage of platform features, information on sustainability being important; facilitator to identify specific products; sustainability is a selection criterion (not necessarily using filters but paying attention to them if sustainability is a selection criterion; using filters to select environmentally friendly clothes and/or clothes that are ethically produced). Initially, a number of codes were identified based on which the themes were concluded:

- Using filters to ease platform usage, sustainability being important- A2- I do use filters, all the time. Makes everything so much easier especially when you are looking for a very specific item. It narrows it down for you so easily. As for the sustainability part I try to pay attention as much as I can.
- Using filters to identify sustainable products
- Not necessarily using filters but paying attention to them if sustainability is a selection criterion.
- Using filters to select environmentally friendly clothes and/or clothes that are ethically produced.

This unstructured question in the in-depth interviews led to the configuration of three themes. These themes were confirmed in the focus group discussions, hence reinforcing the findings uncovered in the in-depth interviews.

The results display that consumers show interest in sustainability when looking to buy clothing items online. Consumers' interests in product re-usage (reusing), sustainable materials, and sustainable and ethical manufacturing processes reinforce well-established engaging factors (Schiaroli et al., 2025; Vladimirova et al., 2024). These positive views appear to influence consumers when prospecting to buy apparel. Sustainability, as an overarching concept, is underlined as being important when looking for product options. This finding is in line with the conclusion of most studies (McKeown & Shearer, 2019; Sardanou & Briana, 2025; Stankevičiūtė & Jarmalavičiūtė, 2025).

Referring to sustainability-related information as a driver in the buying decision process of buying online sustainable fashion, one theme was derived in the in-depth interviews, specifically understanding benefits (informing about choices; understand buying options). This theme was delineated based on the following codes:

- Informing about choices- A11: Yes, I am interested in sustainability information because it helps me make responsible and eco-friendly fashion choices; A16: Yes, it helps me make informed and ethical choices while reducing environmental impact; A19: Yes, I am really interested. I do want to contribute to our environment.
- To understand buying options- A13: It can help my purchase, for example i prefer natural fibres to synthetic but not for all garments

Furthermore, in the in-depth interviews, an interesting finding is that respondents consider informing themselves in the future about sustainability issues to decide upon options to purchase. The theme delineated in the in-depth interviews, understanding benefits, was discussed within the groups. The focus groups reinforced the findings. However, in the discussion it was pointed out that sustainability-related information, although deemed essential in some instances, it was often difficult to be comprehended, entailing a significant effort from the prospect. Based on the focus groups, the conclusions pertaining to this topic were expanded. However, sustainability is deemed important but after price and quality. This perspective is

quite common when it comes to understanding the buying behaviour of sustainable clothes (Sardianou & Briana, 2025; Shrivastava et al., 2021; Stankevičiūtė & Jarmalavičiūtė, 2025).

By comparing the findings about information and benefits, this study consolidates the pervasive attitude-behaviour gap that describes the buying behaviour of sustainable products in general, and apparel in particular (McKeown & Shearer, 2019; Park & Lin, 2020; Sardianou & Briana, 2025).

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to respond to five questions, namely: what are the motives of online sustainable fashion buying? what are the barriers in online sustainable fashion buying? what are the reasons for buying or not from online second-hand vendors? what platform features are used and/or considered necessary to make informed online buying decision of sustainable fashion? what information is deemed necessary in the buying decision process?. To this aim this research combined in-depth interviews with focus groups, to explore to greater depth the findings uncovered in the in-depth interviews. A sample of 20 individuals between 18 and 45 years old, living in Bucharest, who have purchased apparel online in the previous 12 months were individually interviewed. Subsequently, two focus groups, including 8 members, meeting the same conditions, were conducted. The study reveals sought-after benefits and envisaged obstacles when buying online sustainable apparel, probes into the specificities of online second-hand fashion vendors, uncovers online platform features deemed important by consumers when buying sustainable products, and clarifies what information is important in the buying decision of sustainable clothes.

Theoretical implications

Firstly, most studies on online sustainable fashion buying cover particular aspects, namely the effect of social media on sustainable fashion (de Lenne & Vandenbosch, 2017; Kim et al., 2020), buying motives (Camacho-Otero et al., 2020), drivers and barriers (Blas Riesgo et al., 2023), or e-commerce and recycling (Sardianou & Briana, 2025). This study provides a broader picture of online sustainable fashion consumer behaviour by probing into buying motives and barriers, information deemed necessary when buying sustainable apparel, online platform features considered important for an adequate consumer experience, and the tendency of buying second-hand apparel through the usage of online platforms. Secondly, this study acknowledges the need for qualitative studies in online sustainable fashion consumer behaviour (Sardianou & Briana, 2025; Vladimirova et al., 2024) for a more thorough comprehension and employs a combined qualitative methodology, using in-depth interviews and, subsequently, focus groups to test for consistency and enrich the findings. Thirdly, the study collected data from a sample of 20 Romanians in the case of the in-depth interviews and 16 for the focus groups. Thus, the study enriches the literature by offering a Romanian perspective about online sustainable apparel buying behaviour.

Practical implications

The results indicate that consumers show interest in sustainability issues when they buy clothes. Thus, businesses should display information about fabrics and product constituents,

manufacturing processes, brand preoccupations regarding sustainability, or labour conditions. Secondly, companies should try lowering barriers in buying online sustainable apparel. Hence, online platforms should implement features that could improve consumer experience to compensate for the impossibility to try on items on one hand, and update their policies to mitigate concerns about data protection, payment safety, delivery time or product returns, on the other hand. Moreover, they should try to find ways to build confidence on the platform and products, one way being through the display of certifications. Thirdly, considering the growing interest toward second-hand apparel buying, such platforms should try to diversify their assortment, facilitate easy navigation and stimulate consumers not just to buy, but also to sell.

6. Research limitations and future research directions

This research is not without limitations. First of all, sustainable fashion is assessed in general terms. Future studies should segment the category, as different types of garments could render different results. Secondly, the study collected data only from Romanian consumers. A comparative study, probably, would have displayed different ideas. Thus, future research should focus on other countries. Thirdly, this research employed a qualitative methodology. Hence, the results cannot be generalized to the whole population. Future studies should integrate a quantitative stream.

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