

Article

Investigating the Link between Consumer Attitudes and Behaviour in the Context of Sustainable Clothing: The Role of Social Norms

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Abstract: This study investigates the sustainable clothing consumer attitude–behaviour link and identifies the role of social norms in this relationship. A total of 218 responses were collected in an online survey in one small European country. Findings reveal that sustainable clothing purchase behaviour is influenced by consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing and sustainable clothing purchase intention, which acts as a mediator between consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing and purchase behaviour. The findings uncover three types of social norms that could be represented among individuals in Lithuania, but no moderating effects were found. Unexpected results reveal that one type of social norms, that is, social order/commandment norms, influences both consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing and their intention to purchase sustainable clothing. These findings attempt to contribute to the sustainable clothing consumer behaviour field development. Managerial implications of how to induce a change in consumer attitude and sustainable clothing purchase intentions for business leaders and public policy makers have been offered.

Keywords: sustainable clothing consumer attitudes; sustainable clothing purchase intentions; sustainable clothing purchase behaviour; social norms



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1. Introduction

Context. The most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report that was published in April, 2022, for the first time, underlines the need to focus on the role of consumption in climate change, highlighting “. . .the potential of demand side strategies across all sectors to reduce emissions is 40–70% by 2050” [1]. However, the clothing industry, which is one of the most polluting industries in the world [2], presents a challenge for policy-makers and business leaders. Their focus is on reducing clothing overconsumption and increasing the purchase of sustainable clothing among consumers, which is defined as goods that not only offer economic value to a company, but also create environmental and social benefits to society [3].

Research gap. Although more and more consumers are becoming aware of the need to purchase sustainable clothing and, in this way, contribute to the reduction in pollution and waste, many are less inclined to do so [4] due to the attitude–behaviour gap [5,6]. Therefore, a situation where consumer attitudes and their sustainable clothing purchase behaviour actions do not match requires further research.

Aim of the study and contribution. This study aims to investigate the consumer attitude towards the sustainable clothing–sustainable clothing purchase behaviour relationship and the role of social norms in this relationship. Since social factors play an important role in consumer purchase behaviour e.g., [7–9] and cost-effectively contribute to behavioural change [10], the authors chose to investigate the role of social norms in the attitude towards the sustainable clothing–sustainable clothing purchase behaviour relationship. By doing so, this study attempts to contribute to the existing body of knowledge attempting to reduce

the attitude–behaviour gap and advance growing research on sustainable clothing purchase behaviour in the consumer behaviour and sustainable marketing fields.

Specifically, we use the social norms theory to theorise and justify the moderating role of social norms in the consumer intention–purchase behaviour relationship in our study. The theory of social norms posits that individuals are motivated to conform to the expectations of their peers. This is because doing so can help to avoid social sanctions and maintain positive relationships with others. The social norms theory suggests that social norms may influence consumer behaviour. By utilising the social norms theory and previous studies in the sustainable consumption field, we theorise that in the context of sustainable clothing, social norms moderate the relationship between consumer purchase intentions and purchase behaviour in two main ways: either by providing information about what other people are doing (i.e., descriptive norms) or by creating a sense of social obligation (i.e., social order/commandment norms). By doing so, we offer a new contribution to the consumer behaviour field.

Further, we also employ previous research to theorise the moderating effects of social norms on the consumer intention–purchase behaviour relationship. Previous studies in the context of sustainable consumption (i.e., [11]) call for further research to investigate the moderating effects of social norms on the consumer intention–purchase behaviour relationship, while other studies theorise and hypothesise the moderating effects of subjective norms on the consumer purchase intention–purchase behaviour relationship (i.e., [12]) but produce insignificant results. The call for further studies and insignificant empirical findings, hence, pave the way for additional studies that theorise and further empirically test such moderating effects on the above-mentioned relationship. We address this research gap by integrating the social norms theory and theorising the moderating effect of social norms on the consumer intention–purchase behaviour relationship in this manuscript.

2. Theoretical Background

In our study, we propose that the consumer attitude–sustainable clothing purchase behaviour relationship is mediated by purchase intentions. Moreover, the sustainable clothing purchase intention–sustainable clothing purchase behaviour is moderated by social norms. We discuss these constructs in greater depth and propose research hypotheses, along with the research context of the sustainable clothing industry, as indicated below.

2.1. The Context of the Sustainable Clothing Industry

The context of the sustainable clothing industry has been chosen due to its increasing importance for the world's economy and its high growth forecast for the coming years [13]. It has been predicted that over the next few years, the sustainable clothing segment in the clothing industry will generate \$1.71 billion, while the footwear segment will generate only \$488.3 million [13]. Also, overconsumption in the fast fashion industry has been criticised for introducing too many clothing collections (e.g., Zara and H&M retailers introduce 16–52 new clothing collections each year) within one year and encouraging clothing overconsumption with the aim of increasing retailers' profits [14] resulting in one- or two-times worn items and then being thrown away [15] to landfill.

Such consumer overconsumption has raised attention among researchers resulting in calls in the literature for action. For instance, Mukendi et al. [16] call to reconsider the benefits of clothing in the fast fashion industry, which encourages the overconsumption of clothing among consumers and negatively affects both social and environmental factors, and introduce the term “slow” and “sustainable” clothing. Slow and sustainable clothing is defined as a situation when goods not only are profitable for companies, but also offer social and environmental benefits [14,16–21]. The above definition highlights the interconnectedness of the three following factors. The first is an emphasis on profitability for companies: sustainable clothing must be profitable for companies to be sustainable in the long term. By earning profits, companies reinvest in their businesses to continue producing sustainable clothing. The second is creating social benefits: sustainable clothing

should also offer social benefits, such as fair wages and safe working conditions for workers throughout the supply chain. This is important because it ensures that everyone involved in the production of sustainable clothing is treated fairly and with respect. The third is suggesting environmental benefits: sustainable clothing should also offer environmental benefits, such as reducing water and energy consumption and minimising waste and pollution. This is important because it helps to protect the planet and ensure that future generations have access to the resources they need.

However, sustainable clothing consumption does not mean that consumers must abandon a more comfortable life [22]. On the contrary, this means that consumers need to reduce their consumption, reuse specific clothing items, and recycle everything that can be recycled [22] to benefit both society and environment. Such context requires the further investigation of sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.

2.2. Linking Consumer Attitudes, Purchase Intentions, and Purchase Behaviour in the Context of Sustainable Clothing

Previous studies suggest that consumer attitudes positively influence consumer intentions in the context of sustainability (e.g., [9]), while research on the attitude–intention–behaviour link is scarce in the context of sustainable clothing. For this reason, there is still insufficient guidance for practitioners as to how the attitude–behaviour gap can be reduced among consumers and how the purchase of sustainable clothing can be encouraged. For instance, Park and Lee [9] suggest that consumer behaviour can be oriented towards intention or action. “Intention to purchase sustainable clothing” depends on the influence consumers can have on others. The most important sub-component of intention refers to the “conscious attention” towards sustainable clothing when an individual understands and makes a conscious choice to purchase sustainable clothing. A component of “action” in sustainable clothing purchase behaviour refers to influencing others, that is, when individuals actively engage in various forms of activism, such as requesting companies to produce sustainable brands, supporting consumer rights in the market [9]. Such action-oriented behaviour of individuals may be linked to reduced overconsumption in the fashion industry while prioritising second-hand clothing [9] and aiming to contribute to circular consumption.

The sustainable clothing context has been given some attention by academics, e.g., [9,15,23,24]. Until now, the most attention has been dedicated to consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing and their intention to purchase sustainable clothing. Table 1 provides an overview of studies on consumer sustainable clothing attitudes and intentions to purchase sustainable clothing.

Table 1. Consumer sustainable clothing attitude and purchase intention studies and their findings.

Author	Research Question	Research Method	A Summary of Research Findings
Magnuson, Reimers and Chao [25]	To identify clothing attributes influencing consumer purchase intentions	Survey	The attitude towards seven clothing attributes and external factors was examined and its effect on purchase intentions was confirmed.
Saricam and Okur [26]	To explain consumer intentions to purchase sustainable clothing brands	Survey	Effects of attitude, subjective norms, and subjective control on purchase intentions were confirmed.
Kong, Ko, Chae and Mattila [27]	To explore sustainable knowledge effects on consumer purchase attitudes and intentions	Survey	Sustainability knowledge sources and sustainable knowledge types and their influence on attitude and intentions in light of sustainable clothing were confirmed.
Okur and Saricam [28]	To identify effects of environmental knowledge on attitudes and intentions	Survey	The influence of knowledge about environmental and social challenges, as well as motivation, on attitudes towards the ecological brand and attitude effects on purchase intentions were confirmed.

Table 1. Cont.

Author	Research Question	Research Method	A Summary of Research Findings
S. Jung and Jin [29]	To identify factors of clothing in the slow fashion industry affecting perceived consumer value and purchase intentions	Survey	Clothing attribute effects on consumer perceived value and how the latter affects purchase intentions and willingness to pay higher prices were confirmed.
Park and Lin [5]	To identify the intention–experience gap in the second-hand clothing context	Survey	Factors, including the subjective norms, were examined to better interpret discrepancy. The perceived ethical clothing role and expectations regarding ethical clothing brand importance, as well as the social influence on consumer willingness to purchase ethical clothing brands, were confirmed.
Ciasullo, Maione, Torre and Troisi [30]	To identify specific factors and their influence on consumer willingness to purchase ethical clothing brands	Survey	Effects of attitude, subjective norms, subjective behavioural control, and willingness to pay higher prices on consumer purchase intentions to buy environmentally friendly clothing were confirmed.
Kumar, Prakash and Kumar [17]	To identify effects of several attributes on consumer purchase intentions	Survey	Effects of attitude, subjective norms, subjective behavioural control, and willingness to pay higher prices on consumer purchase intentions to buy environmentally friendly clothing were confirmed.

Magnuson et al. [25] examined sustainable clothing attributes and their influence on consumer attitudes and intentions. To identify the effects of seven attributes of ethical clothing on purchase intentions, their study conducted a survey. Findings suggest that consumers assess both practical and ethical attributes of clothing before making their purchase. However, when making their final decision to purchase ethical clothing, practical attributes often become the key criteria for decision-making. It has been concluded that physical and external practical factors are the strongest influencers on consumer attitudes towards ethical clothing, while a sustainability attribute is among the ethical factors that has the strongest effect on positive-attitude-formation among consumers. Findings suggest that the lower the perceived ethical clothing value cost, the more positive attitude towards the brands exists. Neither the fauna nor environment had any significant effect on consumer attitudes towards ethical clothing. The same study has also confirmed that attitudes significantly and positively influence ethical clothing purchase intentions [25]. Further, Saricam and Okur [26] examined consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing and determined the effects of different types of beliefs, subjective norms, and behavioural control on purchase intentions. Their findings confirmed that beliefs and subjective norms are useful in explaining consumer attitudes and intentions towards sustainable clothing [26]. Since behavioural control was least affected by beliefs, thus, these authors suggest including a factual consumer behaviour construct when examining consumer behaviour towards sustainable clothing [26]. Although consumers hold positive beliefs about sustainable clothing brands, they tend to avoid purchasing these brands because they perceive them as poor quality, highly priced, not fashionable, and stylish [26]. Also, Kong et al. [27] examined attitude effects on purchase intentions in light of various antecedents, such as different levels of knowledge sources and their effects on various knowledge types. These authors found that educating society has a positive effect on consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing. Moreover, their findings revealed that attitudes positively affect purchase intentions. Thus, if companies and public policy-makers will attempt to convey knowledge about sustainability, consumers will better understand the role of sustainable clothing for the environment and will more effectively form positive attitudes and purchase intentions towards them [27]. A study by Okur and Saricam [28] examined the relationship among the knowledge, attitudes, and intentions of consumers. Their study established that knowledge about the environmental challenges and responsibility for these challenges significantly influences consumer attitudes, while the latter influences consumer purchase

intentions. These authors suggest conducting further research with specific categories of consumers who would enable researchers to better understand barriers to purchase sustainable clothing [28].

Another study by S. Jung and Jin [29] examined clothing attributes in the slow fashion industry. These authors suggest that such attributes create perceived consumer value, which subsequently influences consumer purchase intentions and their willingness to pay higher prices for clothing brands in the slow fashion industry. As the study was limited mainly to USA consumers, the authors call for further studies to test their findings in other countries for further generalisability. Further, Ciasullo et al. [30] investigated whether ethical brands, expectations about the ethicality of brands, and social influence affect consumer willingness to purchase ethical brands. Their findings reveal that an ethical brand does not influence consumer decision-making, but expectations and social influence significantly affect consumer willingness to purchase such ethical brands. Finally, Kumar et al. [17] investigated consumer intentions, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and willingness to pay higher prices, as well as the influence of these attributes on purchase intentions to acquire environmentally friendly clothing. Their findings demonstrated a significant and positive effect on consumer intentions [17].

Concluding on the above overview of research with a focus on the attitude–purchase intention relationship, it can be stated that physical, external, and ethical factors [25], beliefs [26], social knowledge [27], knowledge about the environment, and motivations of the responsibility for the environment [28] exert the largest influence on consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing brands. When discussing the purchase intentions of consumers, such factors as subjective norms and perceived behavioural control [17,26], perceived consumer value of clothing in the slow fashion industry [29], expectations about the sustainability of brands, as well as social influence [30], and willingness to pay higher prices for sustainable brands [17] have the strongest effect on intentions to purchase sustainable clothing brands. It is important to note that findings of the above studies confirm that attitude significantly and positively influences purchase intentions to acquire sustainable clothing brands. However, the major drawback of the above studies is that these studies are based on data from specific cultural contexts that may not be directly applicable to other countries or cultures. This raises concerns about the universality of the proposed models and their ability to capture diverse consumer attitude–intention patterns. Further, these studies also present models that may oversimplify the complex process of consumer decision-making. Consumers are often influenced by a multitude of factors, both internal and external, and the models may not fully capture the complexities in this process. Finally, as it has already been mentioned, these studies offer limited practical applications to real-world marketing strategies, which may be limited. The models do not provide specific guidance for marketers of how to effectively influence consumer purchase behaviour in various contexts.

Thus, in the context of sustainable clothing, a similar influence is expected:

H1: *Consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing positively influence consumer intentions to purchase sustainable clothing.*

We now introduce studies where a dependent variable examined by previous studies was actual consumer purchase behaviour. Table 2 offers an overview of studies on sustainable clothing consumer attitudes, their intention to purchase sustainable clothing, and actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour. Earlier research on consumer behaviour and sustainable marketing fields suggests that consumer intentions positively affect actual consumer purchase behaviour in the context of sustainable consumption, e.g., [31]. For instance, Rathinamoorthy [32] examined the influence of specific factors, such as knowledge, lifestyle, and attitude towards environmentally friendly clothing purchase behaviour. Findings reveal that although consumers were aware of the negative influence of clothing manufacturing processes on the environment, they were not inclined to purchase ethical brands. Further, it was found that consumer attitudes have a stronger

influence on consumer purchase behaviour as compared to knowledge about the environment. Although consumers possess relatively high levels of knowledge, this does not affect their actual behaviour [32]. Additionally, Lundblad and Davies [33] attempted to identify personal values that underpin sustainable clothing consumption with actual sustainable clothing consumers. Although consumers value their health, environment, and reduced clothing purchase frequency, their motivations to purchase sustainable clothing brands remained unclear.

Table 2. Consumer sustainable clothing purchase behaviour studies and findings.

Author	Research Question	Research Method	A Summary of Research Findings
Rathinamoorthy [32]	To identify influence of specific factors on purchase behaviour	Survey	The influence of internal (lifestyle) and psychological (knowledge, attitude) factors on sustainable clothing purchase behaviour was confirmed.
Lundblad and Davies [33]	To identify effects of personal values and end results on sustainable clothing consumption	Interviews	Personal values and motives to purchase sustainable clothing items were uncovered, but no clear value–motivation relationship was confirmed. The effects of descriptive and social order/commandment norms, as well as the influence of consumer attitude towards purchasing sustainable clothing, were confirmed. Also, consumer intention had a positive and significant effect on actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.
Dewanto and Belgiawan [31]	To identify effects of factors on sustainable clothing brands	Survey	The effects of environmental knowledge about clothing, perceived value, price sensitivity, and assortment on actual purchase behaviour were confirmed.
Brandão and da Costa [34]	To identify factors influencing purchase behaviour of sustainable clothing	Survey	The effects of self-transcendence, self-enhancement, personal values, and barriers on actual purchase behaviour were confirmed.
Jacobs, Petersen, Hörisch and Battenfeld [35]	To identify factors influencing purchase intentions for sustainable clothing	Survey	The effects of factors (i.e., price, limited availability, etc.) influencing the attitude–behaviour relationship were confirmed.
Wiederhold and Martinez [6]	To identify specific factors influencing attitude and behaviour of environmentally friendly clothing	Interview	

While some of the studies reviewed in the first paragraphs of this section examined how consumer attitudes and social norms influenced intentions to purchase sustainable clothing, Dewanto and Belgiawan [31] investigated the influence of both attitudes and social norms on actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour. The authors identified two types of social norms, that is, descriptive and social order/commandment norms, and analysed their influence on intentions, as well as on the intention–actual purchase behaviour relationship. Their study concluded that consumer attitudes and both types of social norms have a significant and positive influence on purchase intentions, while the latter also influences actual consumer purchase behaviour. Based on this finding, these authors suggest that strengthening social norms and enhancing positive attitudes towards sustainable clothing would increase the consumption of sustainable brands [31]. Further, Brandão and da Costa [34] examined barriers to sustainable clothing purchase behaviour and identified the influence of both subjective norms and attitudes on purchase intentions, which, subsequently, influenced actual purchase behaviour. Their findings confirm that attitude and subjective norms significantly influence consumer intentions to purchase sustainable clothing and that the latter significantly affects actual purchase behaviour [34].

In the previous studies, not only actual consumer behaviour, but also the attitude–behaviour discrepancy, has been researched. For instance, Jacobs et al. [35] examined value–attitude–behaviour link and identified barriers to actual purchase behaviour. Their study demonstrated

that consumer attitudes influenced the actual purchase behaviour of sustainable clothing but explained only 11.5% of the actual purchase behaviour. The authors concluded that this discrepancy may explain the attitude–behaviour gap [35]. Moreover, the fact that clothing consumers care about the environment, but seldom translate their intentions into actions, was noticed by Wiederhold and Martinez [6]. In their study, seven barriers were identified that prevented individuals from purchasing sustainable clothing brands. Although these authors concluded that the intention–behaviour inconsistency among consumers cannot be explained by employing only rational behavioural models as they base their studies on Theory of Planned Behaviour, these authors call for further studies on the attitude–behaviour gap [6]. Also, since the earlier studies assume that consumers primarily engage in rational decision-making, which may not always be the case. Consumers are often influenced by emotional factors and social cues, which these studies do not adequately address. Further, these authors focus on a single-product category, which may not be generalisable to other product categories or industries. This limits the broader applicability of the findings and may not fully capture the diversity of consumer behaviour across different product domains.

Given the significance of the above factors influencing attitudes, intentions, and the relationship between the two variables, it is important to highlight that even though these factors influence purchase intentions, they do not always translate into actual purchase behaviour in the context of sustainable clothing. For this reason, we include a construct of actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour, which is expected to contribute to the existing knowledge on the attitude–behaviour gap.

Further, previous literature, e.g., [31,34], not only suggests that consumer purchase intention directly influences actual consumer purchase behaviour, but also states that purchase intention indirectly influences actual consumer purchase behaviour [36]. The direct effect of attitudes on purchase intentions is the most straightforward relationship. Consumers with a positive attitude towards sustainable clothing are more likely to have an intention to purchase it. This is due to their attitudes that reflect their overall evaluation of sustainable clothing. However, the literature also suggests an indirect effect on the intention–behaviour link. In other words, the indirect effect of attitudes on purchase intentions is mediated by other variables (e.g., consumer involvement, perceived value, subjective norms). Due to this inconsistency in findings in the literature, we raise the following hypotheses that will be tested in the context of sustainable clothing:

H2: *Consumer purchase intention positively influences sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.*

H3: *Consumer intention to purchase sustainable clothing mediates the attitude–actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour relationship.*

Concluding on the second group of the studies focusing on factors influencing the attitude–intention–behaviour link, as well as examining barriers widening the attitude–behaviour gap, it can be stated that consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing, their intentions to purchase such brands, and actual purchase behaviour are influenced by a wide range of factors, such as internal and social. However, it is important to note that the majority of previous studies examined mainly internal factors, while the influence of social factors was analysed only in one study. Although previous studies reveal that attitudes influence consumer purchase intentions, which, consequently, positively affect actual purchase intentions, research findings cannot fully explain why the attitude–behaviour gap forms. Given the fragmented nature of actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour research, the findings cannot be generalised and require further attention.

2.3. The Role of Social Norms and Decision-Making

Research suggests the increasing importance of social norms among the members of society. Social norms are used, among their group members [37], to shape consumer attitudes and induce behavioural change. Social norms convey certain rules of behaviour that are followed by specific reference groups, which consider specific behaviour to be

acceptable or desirable in certain contexts [10], i.e., in communicating what other members of the reference group do or what other people within that group should do [15,34].

Social norms are based on a mutual understanding among social actors within a certain reference group; thus, the need for the costly authoritative enforcement of attitudinal change is reduced [9]. This might also be explained by the need to belong to certain communities, as humans do not wish to be lonely; they also refrain from standing out from the group and, according to Lewin, show “the unwillingness to depart too far from the group standards” [38] (p. 273, [10]). Usually, social norms refer to the main consumer choices, which are formed and influenced by specific reference groups [11].

Social norms have been demonstrated as an important construct in the sustainable consumption context as they encourage such behaviour [35] or discourage and disprove socially unacceptable behaviour, such as environmental pollution [15]. Contrary to personal values, which have been the focus of sustainable consumer behaviour among academics (e.g., [11]) little has been done to investigate the role of social norms and their influence on purchase intentions and purchase behaviour in the context of sustainable clothing. In this study, social norms are defined as “rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behaviour without the force of laws” [15] (p. 98).

The literature suggests that social norms may differ due to different cultural aspects, such as different cultural contexts [39], cultural conformity [40], or observational learning and social cues [41], which are perceived in different ways in different contexts and different cultures. For instance, consumers from different cultures may perceive social cues that are conveyed by close family members and friends differently than cues coming from more distant members of society [41]. This can indicate that descriptive norms may not be perceived uniformly among different cultural groups of members of society. For instance, collectivistic cultures place a strong emphasis on group harmony, social cohesion, and maintaining positive relationships with others [41]. In these cultures, individuals are more likely to conform to the expectations of their reference groups, especially their friends and close family members, to avoid social disapproval. Individualistic cultures, on the other hand, emphasise personal independence and autonomy. In these cultures, individuals are more likely to make decisions that they favour, irrespective of opinions of their family or friends or even more distant member of their society. Further, cultural conformity refers to the tendency of individuals to adhere to the prevailing social norms and expectations with their culture. This tendency is more pronounced in cultures that place a high value on social harmony, collective identity, and maintaining positive relationships with others [40]. In other words, in cultures with strong cultural conformity, descriptive norms are likely to exert a significant effect on individual behaviour. This is because individuals in these cultures are more likely to conform to the expectations of their social groups to avoid social sanctions. In individualistic cultures, they will place lower emphasis on adherence to opinions of their close family circle and broader society rules.

The literature suggests that social norms may differ between females and males. For instance, previous studies reveal that female shoppers pay closer attention to what they wear, and this is linked with their personal style [42]. Women view fashion as a way to express their individuality, values, and social consciousness. Sustainable clothing choices may allow females to make a statement about their commitment to environmental responsibility and ethical practices. Other studies report that males are less concerned with environmental issues than to females [43]. Females tend to be more environmentally conscious and are more likely to adopt eco-friendly practices in their daily lives. Further, women are more likely to be sensitive to social issues and consider the ethical implications of their consumption choices. For this reason, they may seek out clothing brands that prioritise fair labour practices, the sustainable sourcing of materials, and ethical manufacturing processes. Also, females are usually responsible for the household purchases [44] and for this reason may be better informed about sustainable clothing options. They are also more active social media users where they are exposed to a growing body of information about sustainable clothing.

The literature usually distinguishes between two types of social norms: descriptive norms and social order/commandment norms [37], which will be the focus of our study. The descriptive norms are understood as perceptions of individuals about the factual behaviour of others (i.e., what others actually do), while the social order/commandment norms refer to the perception of an individual of what behaviour is considered acceptable among other members of the group [37].

Our study is rooted in the theory of social norms [45], which posits that individuals are motivated to conform to the social norms of their reference groups. Reference groups refer to people that other individuals identify with and compare themselves to [31,37]. These may include friends, family, colleagues, and social media followers. When an individual perceives that their reference group is engaging in certain behaviour, they are more likely to engage in that behaviour themselves [10]. This situation can be applied to the sustainable clothing context. When other individuals see their friends and colleagues wearing sustainable clothing, they are more likely to feel pressure to do the same. This happens because individuals wish to belong to a certain group, and they tend to avoid being judged or excluded from their reference group [10]. In addition to peer pressure, social norms can also be influenced by both media and businesses [10,15]. The media often portray sustainable clothing as being expensive, inconvenient, and unfashionable. This can create the perception that sustainable clothing is not the norm and can discourage individuals from buying it. Businesses can also play a role in shaping social norms by offering more sustainable options and by promoting sustainable clothing consumption [15].

The earlier studies also confirm that social norms are a powerful force that influences consumer behaviour even when their intentions are different [15]. This is known as the intention–behaviour gap, and it is particularly relevant to the sustainable clothing consumption context. While many individuals have good intentions to purchase sustainable clothing, they may not always do so in practice. This might partially be explained by social norms, which may create pressure to conform to what others are expected to do even if this is not what individuals believe in [31].

Since it has previously been acknowledged that social norms play an important role in the contemporary consumer behaviour and they have already been used in behavioural change among society members in various contexts [10,31], our study posits that social norms may play a moderating role in the intention–purchase behaviour relationship in the context of sustainable clothing. Moderating roles were demonstrated in very few earlier studies, which were also related to the sustainable consumption context. For instance, the moderating effects of norms were theorised in sustainable purchase intention–purchase behaviour decision-making among consumers in the beverage sector [12]. Natarajan et al. [12] theorised the moderating effects of norms on the purchase intention–purchase behaviour relationship and conducted a survey to test this relationship. However, the statistically significant moderating effects of social norms on the purchase intention–purchase behaviour relationship were not confirmed. Hence, these findings indicate the need for additional studies with a focus on the moderating role of social norms on the intention–purchase behaviour relationship. It also needs to be noted that a moderating role of social norms has already been investigated by Jung et al. [11], but only for the attitude–intention relationship and not for the intention–purchase behaviour link. By examining the attitude–intention link, Jung et al. [11] attempted to identify psychological intentions and barriers to acquire sustainable clothing. These authors theorise social norms as moderating variables influencing the attitude–intention relationship in the sustainable clothing context. Their study's results reveal that “consumers who adhere to higher social norms, have more positive attitudes and intentions toward sustainable apparel products” [11] (p.10). However, in their study, Jung et al. [11] did not theorise the moderating role of social norms for the purchase intention–purchase behaviour relationship, thus calling for more studies to test this relationship and paving the way for the need to conduct more studies theorising on and testing this relationship. Hence, in our study, we address this research gap.

Based on the above findings, our study attempts to examine the moderating role of social norms in the intention–purchase behaviour relationship. The strength of the relationship between intention and behaviour depends on social norms. In other words, if there is a strong social norm to purchase sustainable clothing, then individuals are more likely to turn their intentions into actions due to the following reasons: (a) social norms may influence perceptions of what a desirable and acceptable behaviour of an individual is. If an individual perceives that sustainable clothing is the norm, they are more likely to purchase and wear sustainable clothing, even if it is more expensive or less comfortable than traditional clothing; (b) social norms may create social pressure to conform; consumers may be more likely to purchase and wear sustainable clothing if they believe that their friends, family, and colleagues expect them to do so; (c) social norms may provide a sense of identity and belonging; individuals may feel like they are part of a community of people who are committed to sustainability if they purchase and wear sustainable clothing [43,44]. Conversely, if there is a weak social norm for purchasing sustainable clothing, then individuals are more likely to engage in the intention–purchase behaviour gap. Thus, it is imperative to understand how social norms work and how they can be used to promote sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.

Based on the above, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: *Descriptive social norms moderate the relationship between consumer purchase intentions and sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.*

H4b: *Social order/commandment norms moderate the relationship between consumer purchase intentions and sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.*

The above hypotheses are further empirically tested among regular sustainable clothing consumers in one European country and a research model is created.

We propose a research model and test it in the context of sustainable clothing in Lithuania. Based on studies highlighted in the above Sections 2.1–2.3, we propose that social norms act as moderating constructs, which may strengthen the behavioural change through the purchase intention–purchase behaviour link (Figure 1). By examining this relationship, the findings aim to contribute to the existing knowledge about the consumer attitude towards the sustainable clothing–sustainable clothing purchase behaviour gap.

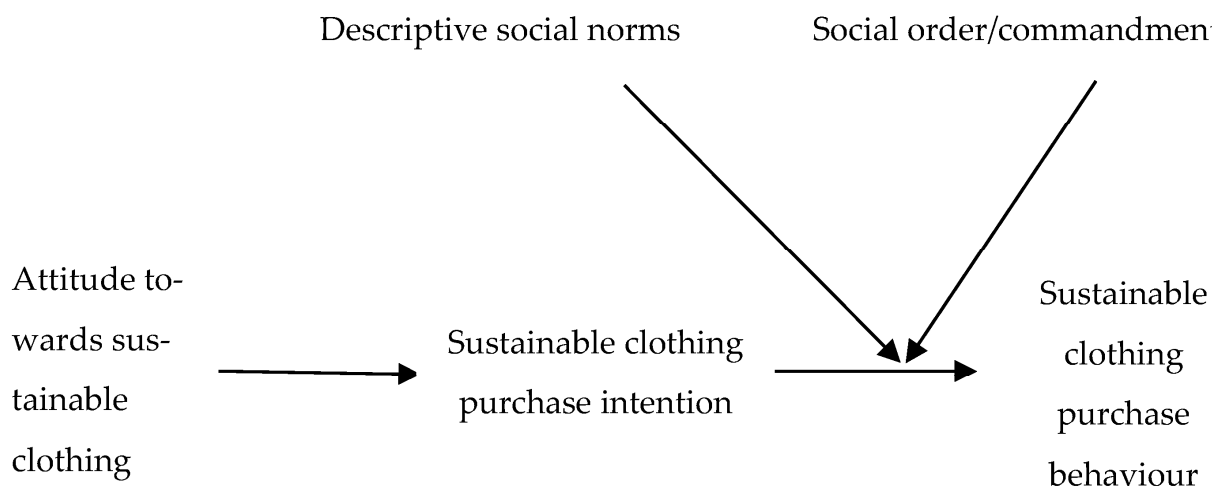


Figure 1. Research model.

3. Research Design

Method, Sample Selection, and Data Collection Procedures. Lithuania was chosen as the target country to test our research model due to the relatively new concept of “sustainable clothing” in this country and the rather recent sustainable clothing target segment formation period in the region of the Baltic States. Figure 2 represents the research design of the study.

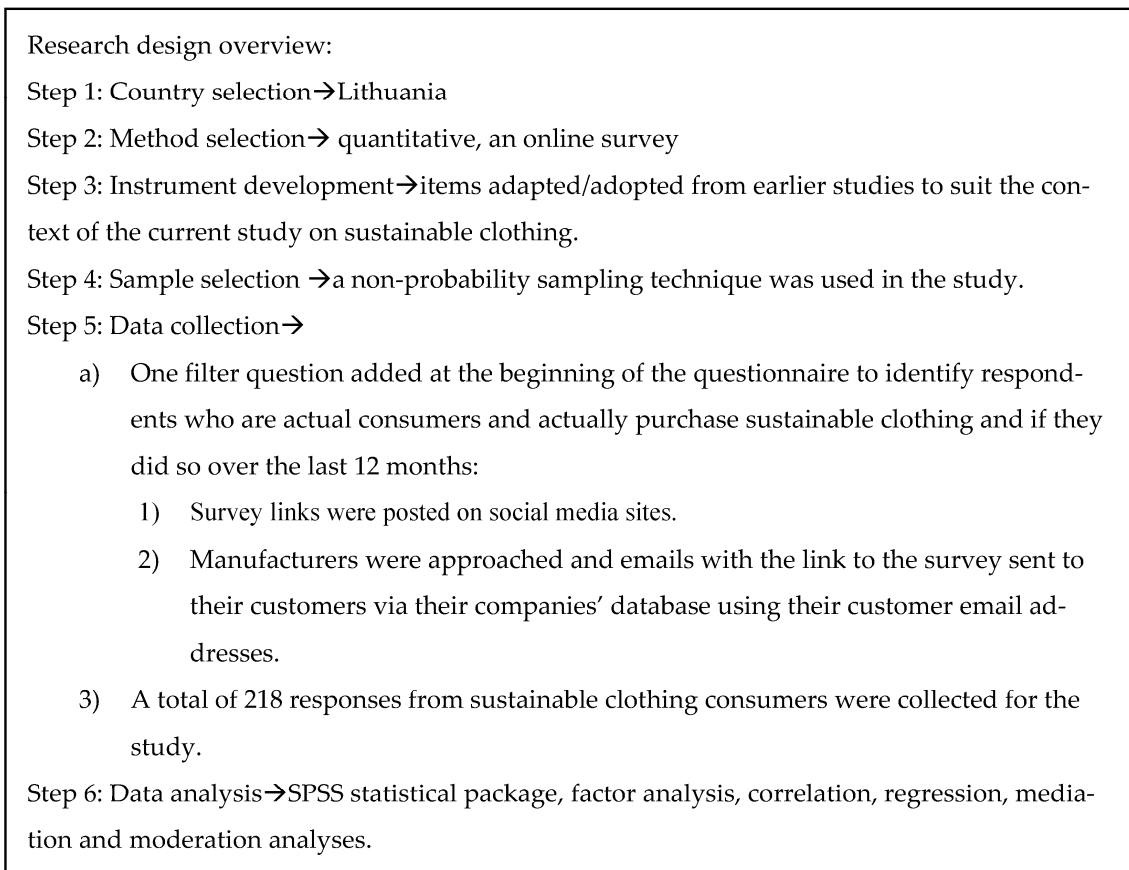


Figure 2. Research design of the study.

An online questionnaire was designed to carry out an online survey. To measure constructs in the consumer intention–purchase behaviour relationship that has been moderated by social norms, we adopted items from previous studies [11,34,36]. Since, our selected (and provided below) items were used by previous studies in the context of sustainable clothing purchase behaviour, they were deemed to be suitable to be adopted in our study due to the items being already pre-tested by previous studies and demonstrating high reliability and validity measures. The use of these items in earlier research also suggests that these items have already been successfully employed in previous studies and have demonstrated their effectiveness of capturing the nuances of social norms, consumer intentions, and their attitudes and purchase intentions.

Consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing were measured using seven items (e.g., I am interested in sustainable clothing; In my opinion, sustainable clothing purchase is a wise decision) (items were adopted from [11,34]), while intention to purchase sustainable clothing was measured using six items (e.g., I have an intention to purchase sustainable clothing; I am making an effort to purchase sustainable clothing) (items adopted from [11,34]). Next, three items were used to measure sustainable clothing purchase behaviour (e.g., I think of myself as a consumer of sustainable clothing) (adopted from [34]). Another 10 items were adopted from [36] to measure two types of social norms (e.g., The majority of my family members purchase sustainable clothing; My close friends, who are important to me would support my decision to purchase sustainable clothing). The remaining questions were dedicated to finding out about the age, sex, and education levels of the respondents. Also, additional information about the most popular sustainable clothing brands and lines was collected (see Table 3 below). Items in the questionnaire were measured on a 7-point Likert scale where “1” indicated “totally disagree/very unlikely” and “7” meant “completely agree/very likely”.

Table 3. Profile of survey respondents.

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Sex		
Female	201	92
Male	17	8
Age		
>23	40	18
24–45	165	76
46<	13	6
Education		
Primary education	3	1
Secondary education	19	9
College education	3	1
Higher education	193	89
The most popular brand chosen by respondents		
“ABOUT Wear”	66	30
“Babe Universe”	28	13
“Undress”	22	10
Regularly selected product line		
Shirts	103	47
Dresses	76	35
Cardigans/Jumpers	75	34

To achieve the aim of the study, only those respondents who were sustainable clothing consumers were recruited for this study. At the start of the questionnaire, a filter question was introduced to enquire respondents if they purchased sustainable clothing brands over the last 12 months and if they were current sustainable clothing consumers. The questionnaire was distributed among 285 respondents via different social media platforms. Also, local sustainable clothing manufacturers and retailers were approached and asked if they could share the link with the online questionnaire among their sustainable clothing clients.

To select the sample size, a non-probability convenience sampling was utilised in the study. The sample size was determined by using a comparative analysis with previous research. Earlier studies in the context of sustainable consumption reveal that only two studies [31,35] were conducted with actual sustainable brand consumers. Sample sizes of those studies ranged from 210 to 1085 respondents. This allowed us to make a presumption that 210 responses would be the minimal sample size that would be required for our study in the sustainable clothing context. Given the research phenomenon, the relatively small population of Lithuania (2.8 million), and an ongoing war conflict in the region, the number of responses collected for the study was considered sufficient. In the study, 285 participants were recruited, but 67 did not purchase sustainable clothing over the last 12 months. For this reason, they were excluded from further data analysis. Hypotheses were tested using the IBM SPSS Statistics 27 package. Factor analysis, correlation, regression, mediation, and moderation analyses were used to analyse the findings.

4. Results and Discussion

This section will present research findings and provide the discussion of these findings.

4.1. Results of Factor Analysis

Prior to hypotheses testing, factor analysis (principal component analysis with varimax rotation) was first performed (Table 4) for items measuring the attitude, intention, sustainable clothing purchase behaviour, and two types of social norms. As the literature suggests [46], Cronbach alfa suggests high levels of reliability ($\alpha > 0.7$), as indicated by [46], in this study, ranging from 0.809 to 0.957 for each factor. The KMO result was higher than 0.5 for each factor, except one (which was 0.37 and was removed from further

analysis); factor loadings for all items within three factors of social norms were higher than 0.75, except one (which was 0.5). Findings suggest that Bartlett's test of sphericity is lower than 0.01 for each of the six factors for consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing (Factor 1), purchase intentions (Factor 2), sustainable clothing purchase behaviour (Factor 3), and three types of social norms (Factors 4–6).

Table 4. Results of factor analysis.

Items	Mode	Mean	S.D.	Factor Loadings
F1: Attitudes toward sustainable clothing (<i>n</i> = 7)				
I am interested in sustainable clothing	7	6.14	1.117	0.59
I think that sustainable clothing suits me	7	6.22	1.117	0.61
I think that to purchase sustainable clothing feels good	7	6.57	0.883	0.88
In my opinion, a sustainable clothing purchase is a wise decision	7	6.56	0.889	0.86
I think of sustainable clothing positively	7	6.56	0.915	0.84
I find sustainable clothing attractive	7	6.17	1.078	0.74
I would like to find out more about sustainable clothing	7	6.08	1.191	0.51
F2: Sustainable clothing purchase intentions (<i>n</i> = 7)				
I have an intention to purchase sustainable clothing	7	6.03	1.302	0.82
I have an intention to use sustainable clothing	7	5.87	1.402	0.85
I am ready to purchase sustainable clothing	7	5.89	1.368	0.74
I am making an effort to purchase sustainable clothing	7	5.87	1.382	0.68
I am planning to wear sustainable clothing	7	6.11	1.281	0.73
I have an intention to recommend sustainable clothing to others	7	5.99	1.307	0.55
F3: Sustainable clothing purchasing behaviour (<i>n</i> = 2)				
I think of myself as a consumer of sustainable clothing	5	5.09	1.511	0.88
I often buy sustainable clothing	5	4.77	1.692	0.80
I purchased clothing in the past	-	-	-	0.37
Social norms (<i>n</i> = 10)				
F4 Public social descriptive norms (<i>n</i> = 2)				
Purchasing of sustainable clothing is popular in the city where I live	5	4.52	1.672	0.78
Purchasing sustainable clothing is popular in Lithuania	4	4.17	1.484	0.77
F5: Close social descriptive norms (<i>n</i> = 3)				
The behaviour of the majority of members within my family is based on sustainable consumption principles	5	4.01	1.549	0.85
The majority of my family members purchase sustainable clothing	4	3.67	1.604	0.91
Most of my friends whom I value purchase sustainable clothing	5	4.03	1.516	0.54
F6: Social order/commandment norms (<i>n</i> = 5)				
My family members whose decision is important to me would support my decision to follow sustainable consumption principles	6	5.50	1.317	0.82
My family members whose decision is important to me would support my decision to purchase sustainable clothing	7	5.64	1.345	0.87
My close friends, who are important to me, would support my decision to purchase sustainable clothing	7	5.76	1.195	0.90
Members of my community would support my decision to purchase sustainable clothing	7	5.52	1.314	0.85
Members of society would support my decision to purchase sustainable clothing	7	5.56	1.387	0.80

It is worth noting that the results of factor analysis returned three types of social norms, although only two types of social norms were initially theoretically predicted. The social order/commandment norms were returned as one factor, but descriptive social norms were split into two factors: these three types of social norms were labelled by the authors of this study as (Factor 4) "public descriptive social norms", (Factor 5) "close descriptive social norms", and (Factor 6) "social order/commandment norms". Although descriptive norms were split into two factors using statistical methods, such separation of social norms can also be explained logically, as well as by using cultural aspects, cultural conformity, and observational learning and social cues among Lithuanian respondents, as a basis to explain

such findings. In our study, the split of descriptive norms into two distinct types can be partially attributed to the cultural context of Lithuania. Lithuanian society is characterised by strong family ties and a sense of collectivism [39], where individuals place high value on the opinions and behaviours of their close social circles, thus representing “close descriptive social norms”. Also, Lithuanians tend to be keen observers of their surroundings and are receptive of social cues, especially separating these cues between close family group members and society members [41], again representing “close descriptive social norms”. This cultural inclination to observe and follow the actions of others reinforces the influence of prevalence norms on their attitudes towards sustainable clothing. In addition, cultural conformity is also very important among Lithuanians; they place a high value on conformity and adherence to social expectations, thus representing “public descriptive social norms”. Such cultural emphasis on fitting in and avoiding social disapproval contributes to the strength of “public descriptive norms” among Lithuanian consumers [40]. In other words, it means that Lithuanian consumers differentiate between the expectations of their immediate circle and the broader expectations of their society about what is acceptable behaviour and what behaviour is not desirable among their close family members and society. In other words, Lithuanian society has relatively strong social ties and a high level of social conformity, which could lead consumers to be influenced by “public social norms”, while the emphasis on “close social norms” likely contributes to the importance of specific descriptive norms in influencing Lithuanian consumers’ perceptions of sustainable clothing consumption. Understanding this nuanced relationship among three different types of social norms and consumption patterns is crucial for effectively promoting sustainable clothing practices among Lithuanian consumers.

4.2. Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis was used to test the relationship strength among variables (Table 5). The Spearman correlation coefficient was calculated, and the results revealed that there is a strong statistically significant relationship between consumer attitude towards sustainable clothing purchase behaviour and intentions to purchase sustainable clothing ($r = 0.733$, $p < 0.001$), as well as between the attitude to purchase sustainable clothing and actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour ($r = 0.485$, $p < 0.001$). The findings also suggest a statistically significant relationship between the intention to purchase sustainable clothing and actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour ($r = 0.687$, $p < 0.001$). In other words, consumers with a positive attitude towards sustainable clothing will be more inclined to purchase sustainable clothing. Also, the higher the intention to purchase sustainable clothing, the higher the likelihood that such consumers will purchase sustainable clothing.

Table 5. Results of correlation analysis.

	Attitude	Intention	Purchase Behaviour
Attitude	-	0.733 ***	0.485 ***
Intention	-	-	0.687 ***
Public descriptive norms	0.154 *	0.173 **	0.215 ***
Close descriptive norms	0.183 ***	0.293 ***	0.449 ***
Social order/commandment norms	0.502 ***	0.449 ***	0.413 ***

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Further, a correlation analysis was performed among three types of social norms and the attitudes, intentions, and actual purchase behaviour of sustainable clothing. The correlation produced statistically significant results. That is, close descriptive norms are statistically significantly linked to attitude ($r = 0.183$, $p < 0.01$), purchase intentions ($r = 0.293$, $p < 0.001$), and actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour ($r = 0.449$, $p < 0.001$). These results confirm a positive relationship between the sustainable clothing purchase behaviour of close family friends and relatives and sustainable clothing purchase behaviour of an individual.

Further, public descriptive norms are statistically significantly linked to attitudes ($r = 0.154, p < 0.05$), intentions ($r = 0.173, p < 0.01$), and actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour ($r = 0.215, p < 0.001$). The weak correlation suggests that a relatively small impact can be anticipated if public's descriptive norms shift regarding consumer intentions, attitudes, and actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.

Finally, social order/commandment norms are statistically significantly linked to attitudes ($r = 0.502, p < 0.001$), intentions ($r = 0.449, p < 0.001$), and actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour ($r = 0.413, p < 0.001$). That is, changes in social order/commandment norms will increase or decrease consumer attitudes, intentions, and sustainable clothing purchase behaviour among members of society.

4.3. Regression Analysis: Testing H1 & H2

For hypothesis H1, regression analysis results suggest that the attitude towards intention to purchase sustainable clothing is statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.536, F(1, 216) = 249.809, p < 0.001$) and explains 53.6% of variance in the intention to purchase sustainable clothing. Thus, H1 is supported. It can be concluded that consumer attitude becomes an important factor in strengthening intentions to purchase sustainable clothing.

For hypothesis H2, regression analysis was also performed. The findings suggest that the purchase intention towards sustainable clothing is statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.461, F(1, 216) = 185.029, p < 0.001$) and explains 46.1% of the variance in sustainable clothing purchase behaviour among consumers. Thus, H2 is supported. It can be concluded that it becomes crucial to further study factors that influence sustainable clothing purchase behaviour, as over 50% of variance in this relationship remains unexplained.

4.4. Mediation Analysis: Testing H3

Mediation analysis was conducted to test the mediating effect of sustainable clothing purchase intentions between the attitude and purchase behaviour link using the PROCESS macro for IBM SPSS Statistics 27 with the mean composite scores for each construct [47]. The direct, indirect, and total effects were calculated; that is, the attitude influence on sustainable clothing purchase behaviour has been identified via two regression models (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6. The influence of attitude on sustainable clothing purchase behaviour through sustainable clothing purchase intentions.

Regressors	Dependent Variable							
	M: Purchase Intention				Y: Purchase Behaviour			
		β	SE	p		β	SE	p
Constant	i_m	0.000	0.042	1.000	i_Y	0.000	0.0498	1.000
X: Attitude	a	0.7323	0.046	0.000	c'	-0.0650	0.0734	0.376
M: Purchase intention	-	-	-	-	b	0.7268	0.0734	0.000
		$R^2 = 0.536, p < 0.001$				$R^2 = 0.463, p < 0.001$		

Table 7. Direct, indirect, and total effect of attitudes on sustainable clothing purchase behaviours.

Pathway	EF	95% Confidence Interval	
		LLCI	ULCI
DIRECT effect:			
Attitude–purchase behaviour	-0.0650	-0.2096	0.0796
INDIRECT effect:			
Attitude–intention–purchase behaviour	0.5323	0.3634	0.7558
TOTAL effect:			
Attitude–purchase behaviour	0.4673	0.3487	0.5859

Overall, the intention to purchase sustainable clothing acts as a mediating variable between consumer sustainable clothing purchase behaviour and their attitudes towards sustainable clothing ($c = 0.4673$). Results of the regression analysis suggest that observed mediation is full. That is, the findings suggest that consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing influence intentions to purchase sustainable clothing ($a = 0.7323$), which subsequently influence sustainable clothing purchase behaviour ($b = 0.7268$). The indirect influence of consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing on sustainable clothing purchase behaviour is equal to 0.5323 ($a \times b$) (Figure 3).

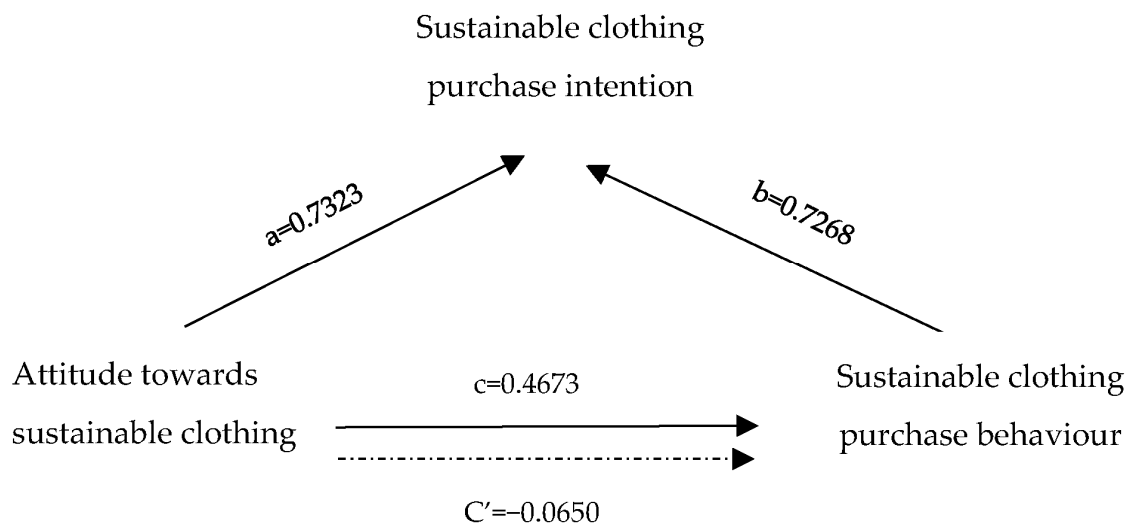


Figure 3. Findings of the mediating role of sustainable clothing purchase intentions between attitudes and sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.

4.5. Moderation Analysis: Testing H4

To test hypotheses H4a, H4b, and H4c (not previously hypothesised in the theoretical part of the study), initially, factor analysis was performed, and findings are reported in Table 3. As indicated in Table 3, three and not two types of social norms represent the social norms of Lithuanian respondents in the context of sustainable clothing: “public descriptive social norms”, “close descriptive social norms”, and “social order/commandment norms”. Further, if attitude, intention, and social norms influence the purchase behaviour of sustainable clothing was tested (Table 8).

Table 8. Effects of social norms and sustainable clothing purchase intentions on sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.

Variables		Dependent Variable: Sustainable Clothing Purchase Behaviour					
		R	R ²	F	df1	df2	p
Public social norms	Purchase intention	0.695	0.482	66.447	3	214	0.000
Independent variable	Public social norms						
Private social norms	Purchase intention	0.756	0.53	79.525	3	214	0.000
Independent variable	Private social norms						
Social order/commandment norms	Purchase intention	0.690	0.476	64.741	3	214	0.000
Independent variable	Social order/commandment norms						

Further, all three types of social norms and their moderating effects on the intention–purchase behaviour link were tested. Overall, the results suggest no statistically significant

results regarding the moderating effect of social norms. That is, the result is not statistically significant for the moderating effect of all three types of social norms on the intention–purchase behaviour relationship. In terms of the moderating effect of public descriptive social norms (H4a), the reported result was insignificant ($\beta = -0.07$, $t = -1.62$, $p = 0.107$). For the moderating effect of social order/commandment norms (H4b), the reported result was insignificant ($\beta = 0.065$, $t = 1.77$, $p = 0.078$). Finally, for the moderating effect of close descriptive social norms (H4c, not hypothesised in the theoretical part of the study, but added later after performing the factor analysis), the reported result was insignificant ($\beta = -0.46$, $t = -1.12$, $p = 0.268$). Thus, it can be concluded that all three hypotheses, H4a, H4b, and H4c, in relation to the moderating effects of social norms on the intention–sustainable clothing purchase behaviour link have been rejected.

4.6. Additional Findings

Although not initially hypothesised, results suggest that social order/commandment norms ($R^2 = 0.330$, $F(1, 216) = 106.598$, $p < 0.001$) influence consumer attitudes and explain 33% of consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing. The next finding, also not hypothesised, suggests that social order/commandment norms ($R^2 = 0.208$, $F(1, 216) = 56.65$, $p < 0.001$) influence consumer intentions to purchase sustainable clothing and explain 20% of consumer intentions to purchase sustainable clothing. Thus, further studies need to be conducted to identify other variables that may contribute to the explanation of attitudes and sustainable clothing purchase intentions.

4.7. Discussion

The findings in Table 3 reveal that female respondents are more engaged in sustainable clothing consumption than male respondents since the majority of our respondents who took time to partake in our study were females (92%). There are some possible reasons why females may do so. First, they are more likely to be interested in clothing. A study by Statista [42] found that 70% of females are interested in clothing, which may lead to females being more interested in learning about sustainable clothing as they look for different ways to express their personal style in a way that is also environmentally friendly. Second, females are more likely to be concerned about the environment [43] since more females than males are interested in environmental protection. The concern for the environment may lead females to be more interested in learning about sustainable clothing, as they might be looking for ways to reduce their environmental impact. Third, females are more likely to be the primary shoppers for their households as more than 70% are the primary clothing shoppers for their households [44]. This role as primary shoppers may make females more likely to be interested in learning about sustainable clothing as they may be looking for ways to make more informed and sustainable purchasing decisions for their families. Fourth, females are more likely to be aware of sustainable clothing options. The greater awareness of sustainable clothing options among females [43] may make them more likely to be interested in participating in a survey on the topic.

Further, results in Table 4 suggest that females are interested in sustainable clothing and think that sustainable clothing is the right purchase decision for them ($M = 6.14$; $S.D. = 1.17$). Consumers tend to evaluate sustainable clothing positively ($M = 6.56$; $S.D. = 0.89$) and think that sustainable clothing is attractive ($M = 6.17$; $S.D. = 1.08$). This finding is in line with previous literature (e.g., [11,34]). Such a positive attitude towards sustainable clothing can be explained by the adequate understanding and knowledge that consumers have about the polluting effects that the fast fashion industry causes. Further, in terms of their intention to purchase sustainable clothing, consumers plan to purchase ($M = 6.03$; $S.D. = 1.30$) and use sustainable clothing in the long term ($M = 5.87$; $S.D. = 1.40$). Consumers are also willing to recommend sustainable clothing to others ($M = 5.99$; $S.D. = 1.37$). This finding is similar to previous studies in the consumer behaviour field (e.g., [11,34]). Finally, regarding actual sustainable clothing consumption, individuals hold themselves as consumers of sustainable clothing ($M = 5.09$;

S.D. = 1.51) and regularly purchase sustainable clothing for themselves ($M = 4.77$; $S.D. = 1.69$). This finding is in line with previous research in the context of sustainability (e.g., [11,34]).

Social norms have been used to investigate their role in sustainable consumption and identify whether social norms can aid in strengthening the consumer intention–actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour link. The results suggest that two types of social norms, originally proposed by the literature [10,15], are not suitable to represent the social norms of consumers in Lithuania in the context of sustainable clothing. Instead, based on the data analysis, three types of social norms have been discovered: public descriptive norms, close descriptive norms, and social order/commandment norms. This is a novel finding that has not previously been reported in the consumer behaviour and sustainable marketing literature and would require further research to establish reasons for such an item distribution across factors in the factor analysis. As it can be seen from the results in Table 4, an unexpected and a very interesting finding among Lithuanian consumers refers to close social descriptive norms. We understand that these types of social norms may explain the perceived behaviours of others in a close family or extended family cycle.

As it has been mentioned, descriptive norms are social norms that reflect the actual behaviour of others. They are based on individuals' observations of what other people around them are doing. In our study, we divide descriptive norms into two groups: public and close social norms. Public social norms refer to descriptive norms reflecting the behaviour of people in the public. Close social norms refer to descriptive norms that reflect the behaviour of people in close social circles of an individual, such as family and friends. Splitting descriptive norms into two groups can be useful in the context of sustainable clothing purchase behaviour because these two types of norms may have different effects on consumer attitudes, intentions, and behaviour relationships.

We use two theories to support our justification: the social norms theory [45] and social comparison theory [48]. As a reminder, the social norms theory suggests that individuals are motivated to conform to social norms to be accepted and liked by others. Individuals are more likely to conform to public social norms when they believe that conforming to those norms will be rewarded. Individuals will more likely conform to close social norms because they value the relationships they have with the people in their close social classes. Similarly, social comparison theory suggests that individuals compare themselves to others to evaluate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours [48]. Individuals are more likely to compare themselves to individuals who are like them in terms of age, gender, social status, and other factors. Therefore, individuals are more likely to be influenced by the close social norms of their peers and family members than by the public social norms of the public. Given that sustainable clothing is a novel phenomenon in the Baltic States region, close social norms might have a stronger influence than public social norms on individuals' intentions and behaviours related to sustainable clothing purchase behaviour.

It has further been tested if these norms have any moderating effect on purchase intention–actual purchase behaviour decisions. Findings did not find statistically significant moderating effects of social norms on the intention–purchase behaviour relationship in the sustainable clothing context. The following paragraphs explain potential reasons for this finding.

Social norms can play a role in the sustainable clothing context: if individuals perceive that in their society it is socially acceptable to wear sustainable clothing, they are more likely to do so. If individuals perceive that their close friends and family wear sustainable clothing, then they are even more likely to purchase such clothing as well. Around the globe, there is a growing social norm to purchase and wear sustainable clothing because of an increasing awareness of the negative environmental and social impacts of the fast fashion industry. However, our study suggests that social norms may not play a moderating role in the intention–purchase behaviour link when it comes to sustainable clothing purchase behaviour. This might be due to several reasons.

First, Lithuanian consumers may not be aware of the social norms around sustainable clothing consumption, especially because this concept is very new to Lithuanians and the

entire Baltic States region. Individuals may not know that their friends and family members value sustainable clothing, and they might not know that sustainable clothing is becoming increasingly popular in other parts of the world.

Second, even if individuals are aware of the social norms around sustainable clothing, they may not be willing to adhere to them if their acquisition costs outweigh benefits. Consumers may think that sustainable clothing is more expensive than clothing in the fast fashion industry, or they might see it as less fashionable or of lower quality than clothing in the fast fashion industry. Also, sustainable clothing options might not always be available or accessible to consumers. This might be due to their belief that sustainable clothing is not as durable and stylish and it is not worth wearing.

Third, competing social norms might also play an important role in the sustainable clothing context. There are many social norms that may influence consumers' clothing consumption behaviour, such as the norm to dress for success or the norm to keep up with the latest trends in clothing. These competing social norms can make it difficult for consumers to adhere to the norm of sustainable clothing consumption.

Fourth, personal values may not always align with the social norm to purchase sustainable clothing. Some consumers may value price, convenience, or style over sustainability.

The above reasons may all contribute to explaining the above research finding. It is important to note that research on the relationship between social norms and sustainable clothing purchase behaviour is ongoing. It might be possible that social norms will play a stronger moderating role in the intention–behaviour link for sustainable clothing in the future, as it becomes more widely available, accessible, and affordable. For this reason, it is important to focus on other factors that influence consumer purchase behaviour, such as personal characteristics and consumer awareness about the potential benefits of sustainable clothing and making sustainable clothing more affordable and accessible for consumers to purchase.

Our final results (presented in Section 4.6) suggests that social order/commandment norms influence consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing, as well as consumer intentions to purchase sustainable clothing. Such results infer that close family members would support the decision of an individual to purchase sustainable clothing. It also means that a positive opinion about sustainable clothing among certain community members exists, and they have a positive and significant impact on the attitudes and sustainable clothing purchase intentions of individuals who are close to them. The findings also revealed that members of the community, as well as members of wider society, positively contribute to both attitude and intention formation towards sustainable clothing purchase behaviour. Further, it needs to be reiterated that social order/commandment norms indirectly influence sustainable clothing consumption behaviour via a strong attitude–sustainable clothing purchase behaviour relationship.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be stated that the sustainable clothing purchase behaviour is influenced by the attitudes and intentions of individuals, which, in turn, are impacted by social order/commandment norms.

It can be concluded that the sustainable clothing purchase behaviour is one of the latest developments in the industry with positive effects on society and the environment. Moreover, sustainability in the fashion industry is not possible without consumer efforts to reduce overconsumption; thus, consumer behaviour research and factors influencing sustainable clothing consumption behaviour are timely and important for a more successful development of the sustainable clothing industry.

Since previous studies mostly researched individual and psychological (i.e., internal) factors and how these factors influenced consumer attitudes towards sustainable consumption, the role of social norms (i.e., external social factors) in sustainable clothing purchase behaviour among consumers remains unclear and requires further research. Researchers (e.g., [34,35]) call for more studies on the influence of social norms on behaviour in the

context of sustainable consumption, so that public policy makers and practitioners are provided with clearer guidance of how to encourage behavioural changes among sustainable clothing consumers and contribute to reducing the attitude–behaviour gap.

This study investigated effects of social norms on the intention–sustainable clothing purchase behaviour link. The study introduced a research model comprising consumer attitudes, intentions, and sustainable clothing purchase behaviour, along with moderators, such as social norms, which were proposed to influence the relationships between intentions and sustainable clothing purchase behaviour. Findings of this empirical study suggest that the consumer intention to purchase sustainable clothing acts as a mediator between consumer attitudes towards sustainable clothing and sustainable clothing purchase behaviour. This finding contradicts the previous finding of Jung [11] who found no statistically significant differences between the attitude and intention of consumers in their study. Further, the link between consumer intention and their actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour, as well as the impact of the former on the latter, was rarely tested (but see [35]) in earlier studies. This study finds that consumer intentions to purchase sustainable clothing positively influence the actual consumer purchase behaviour of sustainable clothing.

Although two hypotheses were not supported, some interesting and unexpected findings were uncovered. That is, the results of factor analysis suggest three (not two) types of social norms: two types of social norms refer to those occurring among public members, while one type of social norm refers to social norms occurring among close family members in a private environment. Another unexpected, but statistically significant and interesting finding, reveals that only one type of social norm (i.e., social order/commandment norms) influences consumer attitudes towards sustainable consumption and their intention to purchase sustainable clothing. This finding might be due to the introduction of new technologies that have significantly changed the way consumers communicate with each other in the society. For instance, more than 51% of consumers use social media to communicate with their friends and colleagues [13], indicating that the lives of individuals became very public, and this influences their consumption behaviour.

Based on these findings, implications, limitations, and future research directions have been suggested as provided below.

5.1. Contributions and Recommendations for Public Policy-Makers and Business Leaders

Contributions. Research findings suggest important theoretical and methodological contributions regarding sustainable clothing consumer purchase behaviour. The key theoretical contribution is that the findings of the study reveal that social norms in the context of Lithuanian sustainable clothing are represented by three types of social norms and not two types of social norms, as some other studies in the consumer behaviour field suggest (e.g., [15]). Further, in this study it was discovered that only one type of social norm (i.e., social order/commandment norms) directly influences consumer attitudes and intentions to purchase sustainable clothing. That is, individuals consider opinions of their family members, as well as opinions of members of the public/society, when making their decision to purchase sustainable clothing. Also, this study answers calls in the literature [34,35] for more studies on the role of social norms in the context of sustainable consumption, so that public policy-makers and practitioners are provided with clearer guidance of how to encourage behavioural change among sustainable clothing consumers. By doing so, we expect to contribute to the existing knowledge on the attitude–behaviour gap in the consumer behaviour and sustainability fields.

In terms of methodological contributions, (a) respondents of this study were actual adult consumers who actually purchase and use sustainable clothing and not students. For this reason, it was possible to measure actual, although self-reported, sustainable clothing purchase behaviour; (b) this study answers a call in the literature [26] to include a factual purchase behaviour construct in further studies on sustainable clothing. In our study, only actual sustainable clothing consumers were investigated, and their attitudes and intentions

towards actual sustainable clothing purchase behaviour were examined; (c) this study also addresses a call in the literature [28] for more research to investigate a specific segment of consumers. In our case, we conducted a study with a sample comprising mostly highly educated females. Thus, our findings provide further insights into the attitudes, intentions, and behaviours of this specific consumer segment in the context of sustainable clothing. This leads to recommendations for public policy-makers and business leaders.

Recommendations. It has been acknowledged that policy-makers can impact both (a) consumers and (b) business leaders [24]:

Public policy-makers and consumers (a). First, since the study findings confirmed that social norms influence both consumer attitudes and intentions to purchase sustainable clothing, it is recommended that public policy-makers use one type of social norm to influence positive attitudinal change towards sustainable clothing among members of the public. They could do so by using effective communication strategies. For example, public policy-makers may use social media sites to cost-effectively influence a consumer attitude change towards sustainable clothing where they could express their personal opinions about the need to reduce waste to the individuals of the society. Public policy-makers should feature social order/commandment norms rather than other types of norms (i.e., the focus should be on “what their friends and relatives do” rather than on what they “should do”) to influence change in both the attitudes and sustainable clothing purchase intentions of individuals. Second, it is recommended that public discussions about sustainable clothing be encouraged, creating sustainable clothing purchase consumer groups and encouraging individuals to join such groups, as in these groups, individuals would feel that their decision-making regarding sustainable clothing purchase decisions is supported by the group members who are also members of other groups, as well as members of society.

Public policy-makers and business leaders/companies (b). The findings of this study suggest that social norms have a positive effect on consumer attitudes and sustainable clothing purchase intentions and thus indirectly can influence behavioural changes among consumers. To encourage this change, public policy-makers need to support companies to do more when producing sustainable clothing. Companies may not only be encouraged to seek economic benefits, but also assisted with pursuing environmental and social benefits for their businesses. Thus, public policy-makers should reward and support sustainable companies (e.g., social enterprises) that aim to reduce the production of clothing in the fast fashion industry and, subsequently, discourage over-purchasing and encourage sustainable clothing purchase behaviour among their customers. This, again, could be achieved in their communication campaigns. However, this can only be achieved with the economic support from public policy-makers, especially for small and medium-sized companies.

Recommendations for business leaders/companies are as follows. First, managers can use social media marketing communications campaigns to raise awareness about sustainable consumption challenges and encourage consumers to share their own stories and experiences on a company’s social media platforms. Companies may also create a dedicated space for individuals to share their experiences.

Second, clothing influencers have a significant impact on the purchasing decisions of their followers. Brands and retailers can partner with clothing influencers to promote sustainable clothing products to educate their followers about the benefits of sustainable clothing.

Next, celebrity culture can also be used by company managers to promote sustainable clothing. Celebrities are often seen as clothing icons, and their clothing choices can influence the clothing choices of others. Brands and retailers can dress celebrities in sustainable clothing products and can promote those products on social media and in the media.

Finally, managers can organise peer-to-peer education programs that they may use to train their consumers on how to live a more sustainable life and how their brands can contribute to sustainability. By doing so, retailers can encourage more consumers to purchase and wear sustainable clothing. This may aid in reducing both the environmental and social impacts of the fast fashion industry.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Based on the limitations of this study, we offer further research directions. First, the results of this study may be interpreted with caution as only a relatively small-sized sample size in the context of one relatively small country was used to test research hypotheses. Further studies may utilise a larger sample size and use respondents from a different region/country to test the moderation effects of the social norms proposed in this study.

Second, the study mainly investigated highly educated females as sustainable clothing consumers as the sample was not proportionate. Further studies may consider a more proportional sample size to incorporate males as sustainable clothing consumers and compare attitudes and behaviours between genders. Also, further studies may expand their research with a focus on highly educated females to investigate their preferences in terms of style, price and sustainability features, challenges, and barriers that they face when purchasing sustainable clothing and potential implications for the sustainable clothing industry. By investigating highly educated female consumers, researchers can gain a better understanding of purchase behaviours within this important market segment.

Third, since the study did not provide evidence that social norms moderate the purchase intention–sustainable clothing purchase behaviour link, it is advisable to search for other external factors, such as cultural factors, which may moderate this relationship among sustainable clothing consumers. Further research may integrate both social and cultural factors into one study to test their moderating effects with a larger sample in the context of sustainable clothing. Also, such findings may also require further qualitative research to identify reasons as to why the three groups of social norms that were discovered in this empirical study are perceived by the respondents in greater depth and repeat the quantitative study to confirm the findings of this study.

Fourth, the study did not test the beliefs and knowledge among consumers on sustainable clothing. It has been acknowledged that knowledge and beliefs influence consumer attitudes towards environmental and social problems [9]. Thus, further studies might consider expanding our model to incorporate knowledge and beliefs and test how they may contribute positively to their behavioural changes regarding social and environmental challenges.

Finally, this study did not test any specific sanctions or rewards associated with social norms, but it has been acknowledged that these influence behavioural changes among consumers [31]. For this reason, further studies may consider investigating the effect of sanctions and rewards in relation to social norms and subsequent consumer behaviour in the context of sustainable clothing purchase behaviour to reduce the attitude–behaviour gap.

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