Consumer Behavior and Sustainable Marketing Practices in the Ready-Made Garments Industry

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Abstract: The ready-made garments (RMG) industry is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy, but its rapid expansion has raised significant concerns about environmental and social sustainability. As global consumer preferences shift toward more eco-friendly products, sustainable marketing practices have become increasingly important for businesses in this sector. This study investigates the relationship between consumer behavior and sustainable marketing in Bangladesh's RMG industry, exploring both consumer awareness and the challenges faced by businesses in adopting sustainability-focused strategies. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research incorporates quantitative data from a consumer survey and qualitative insights from interviews with industry stakeholders. The findings reveal that while a growing segment of consumers expresses a positive attitude toward sustainability, actual purchasing behavior is often constrained by higher costs and limited availability of sustainable garments. On the business side, financial and operational barriers prevent many companies, especially SMEs, from fully embracing sustainable marketing. However, the rise of digital marketing platforms and international demand for ethical products present significant opportunities for growth. The study concludes that businesses that effectively communicate their sustainability efforts and leverage digital tools can tap into a growing market segment, enhancing brand loyalty and long-term profitability.

Keywords: Sustainable Marketing, Consumer Behavior, RMG Industry, Bangladesh, Ethical Fashion, Sustainability, Digital Marketing, Brand Loyalty, Environmental Responsibility

1. Introduction

The ready-made garments (RMG) industry plays a pivotal role in the economic development of Bangladesh, contributing significantly to its GDP and providing employment for millions of people (Khondkar & Honey, 2022). As one of the largest textile producers globally, Bangladesh's RMG sector has gained international recognition. However, the rapid growth of this industry has also led to challenges, particularly concerning environmental sustainability and ethical business practices. With the increasing global demand for eco-friendly products, the need for sustainable marketing practices has become more apparent than ever (M. H. Uddin et al., 2023). Consumer behavior is evolving in response to growing awareness about sustainability. Modern consumers are not only concerned about the price and quality of the garments but are also increasingly conscious of the social and environmental impact of the products they purchase. This shift in behavior has urged businesses to adopt sustainable practices throughout their supply chain, from production to marketing. For companies in the RMG industry to remain competitive, understanding these changing consumer preferences is critical (Kumar et al., 2020). Despite the importance of sustainability, many businesses in Bangladesh's RMG sector face challenges in fully integrating sustainable marketing practices. Limited resources, lack of awareness, and a focus on short-term profitability often hinder the industry's transition to more eco-friendly operations (Honey, 2019b). However, those companies that successfully align their marketing strategies with sustainable practices can tap into a growing

segment of consumers who prioritize ethical and environmentally responsible products (Sarkar et al., 2020). This article aims to explore the intersection of consumer behavior and sustainable marketing in Bangladesh's RMG industry. By examining how consumers' growing emphasis on sustainability influences their purchasing decisions, the study sheds light on the potential for businesses to leverage sustainable marketing practices to drive both brand loyalty and profitability. Furthermore, it highlights the challenges and opportunities faced by the RMG sector in adopting sustainability as a core marketing principle, emphasizing the need for a strategic balance between profitability and ethical responsibility.

In the following sections, we will review the literature on sustainable marketing and consumer behavior, discuss the current state of the RMG industry in Bangladesh, and analyze the impact of sustainable practices on consumer purchasing behavior. Finally, recommendations for businesses looking to adopt more sustainable marketing strategies will be provided, with a focus on long-term success and industry growth.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Consumer Behavior and Sustainability

Consumer behavior, a well-established field in marketing research, refers to the decision-making processes of individuals and groups when selecting, purchasing, and using products or services. In recent years, sustainability has emerged as a key factor influencing consumer behavior across various industries, including the fashion and apparel sector. Studies suggest that consumers are increasingly motivated by environmental and social concerns when making purchase decisions, seeking products that align with their values (Salvetti & Nijhof, 2020). This trend, known as ethical consumerism, reflects a shift from traditional consumption patterns toward more sustainable and responsible practices. Numerous studies have demonstrated that consumers, particularly in developed markets, are willing to pay a premium for sustainable products (Khan et al., 2024). However, the relationship between consumer behavior and sustainability is complex and context-dependent. While some consumers prioritize sustainability, others remain driven by price, quality, and convenience (Rahuman et al., 2022). This behavior is often referred to as the "intention-behavior gap," where consumers express a preference for sustainable products but fail to follow through with actual purchases due to various barriers, including perceived higher costs or limited availability (Salvetti & Jeurissen, 2022). In developing countries like Bangladesh, the intention-behavior gap may be even more pronounced, as economic factors heavily influence consumer choices. However, a growing middle class and increasing awareness of environmental issues suggest that sustainable consumer behavior could become more prevalent in the near future (Ali et al., 2020). This evolution is particularly important for the RMG sector, where consumer preferences are rapidly shifting due to global trends in sustainable fashion.

2.2 Sustainable Marketing in the Fashion Industry

Sustainable marketing involves promoting products in a way that emphasizes their environmental, social, and ethical benefits. In the fashion industry, sustainable marketing strategies often focus on reducing the environmental impact of production processes, promoting fair labor practices, and encouraging responsible consumption (M. Uddin, 2023). These strategies are increasingly critical for businesses aiming to align with the values of ethically conscious consumers (Honey, 2019a). A growing body of literature suggests that sustainable marketing can enhance brand image, foster customer loyalty, and open new market opportunities. For instance, companies that emphasize transparency in their supply chains and commitment to ethical sourcing often attract a dedicated customer base (Shumon & Rahman, 2022). Studies on the success of global fashion brands, such as Patagonia and Stella McCartney, highlight the positive impact of sustainable marketing on brand perception and market share (Asad et al., 2022). In the context of the RMG industry, sustainable marketing practices can help brands differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive market. Sustainable brands often highlight their use of eco-friendly materials, reduced carbon footprint, and fair wages for workers as key selling points. However, implementing sustainable marketing in the RMG industry in Bangladesh faces challenges such as cost constraints, lack of infrastructure, and limited consumer awareness about sustainable products (Khan & Islam, 2021).

2.3 Sustainability in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garments Industry

Bangladesh is the second-largest exporter of garments in the world, with its RMG sector accounting for over 80% of the country's export earnings (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, 2022). However, the rapid expansion of the RMG industry has also raised concerns about its environmental and social impacts. Issues such as water pollution, excessive energy consumption, and poor working conditions have come under scrutiny from international stakeholders, prompting a need for sustainable practices in the industry (M. J. Uddin et al., 2023). Recent efforts by both the government and industry associations have led to improvements in sustainability within the RMG sector. For instance, the implementation of green factories, which focus on energy efficiency and waste reduction, has made Bangladesh a leader in green manufacturing (M. Rahman & Santayana, 2024). However, while strides have been made in sustainable production, sustainable marketing remains an underexplored area for many businesses in the RMG sector.

Sustainable marketing practices in Bangladesh's RMG industry can be seen in the form of ethical sourcing, promoting eco-friendly fabrics, and ensuring fair labor practices. International buyers, particularly from Europe and North America, are increasingly demanding transparency in supply chains and adherence to environmental standards (Alam et al., 2022). This has pressured Bangladeshi manufacturers to adopt more sustainable practices to maintain their competitive edge in the global market. However, domestic consumer awareness of sustainability remains low, posing a challenge for the widespread adoption of sustainable marketing strategies within the country.

2.4 Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Marketing in Bangladesh's RMG Industry

While the global demand for sustainable fashion is on the rise, Bangladesh's RMG industry faces several challenges in adopting sustainable marketing practices. One major barrier is the cost associated with sustainable production and marketing. Sustainable fabrics and processes are often more expensive than conventional methods, making it difficult for manufacturers to maintain competitive pricing (M. T. Islam et al., 2023). Furthermore, many businesses in Bangladesh are small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with limited resources, making it harder for them to invest in sustainable marketing initiatives (Rahman & Yeung, 2022). However, there are also significant opportunities for brands that successfully integrate sustainability into their marketing strategies. As consumer preferences shift towards ethical and eco-friendly products, businesses that position themselves as sustainable can tap into new market segments. Additionally, the growing awareness of sustainability in Bangladesh's middle class presents a domestic market opportunity for sustainable fashion brands (Haque & Anwar, 2021). The rise of digital marketing platforms provides a cost-effective way for Bangladeshi RMG brands to communicate their sustainability efforts to a broader audience. Social media and e-commerce platforms allow brands to engage with consumers directly, showcasing their commitment to ethical practices and environmental responsibility (Islam et al., 2020). By leveraging these digital tools, businesses can overcome some of the financial constraints associated with traditional marketing channels and build a strong brand identity around sustainability.

2.5 Theoretical Frameworks on Consumer Behavior and Sustainable Marketing

The relationship between consumer behavior and sustainable marketing practices can be understood through several theoretical frameworks. One such framework is the Theory of Planned Behavior (M. S. Islam et al., 2024), which posits that consumer intentions to engage in a particular behavior are influenced by their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the context of sustainable fashion, consumers with positive attitudes towards sustainability, a sense of social responsibility, and confidence in their ability to make sustainable choices are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption. Another relevant theory is the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory, which suggests that individuals' values and beliefs about environmental issues influence their norms and behaviors (Fahim et al., 2024). Consumers who prioritize environmental values are more likely to support sustainable businesses and make environmentally friendly purchase decisions. This theory is particularly useful in understanding how consumer values can drive the demand for sustainable products in the RMG industry. The literature on consumer behavior and sustainable marketing highlights the growing importance of ethical consumption in the fashion industry. While challenges exist, particularly in developing economies like Bangladesh, there is significant potential for the RMG sector to leverage sustainable marketing strategies. By

aligning their marketing efforts with the values of ethically conscious consumers, businesses in Bangladesh's RMG industry can not only improve their brand image but also contribute to global efforts toward sustainability. As the industry continues to evolve, further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of different sustainable marketing strategies in influencing consumer behavior, particularly in emerging markets like Bangladesh.

3. Objectives of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to explore the relationship between consumer behavior and sustainable marketing practices in the ready-made garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh. Specifically, the study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine consumer awareness and perception of sustainability in the RMG sector in Bangladesh;
2. To analyze the impact of consumer behavior on the adoption of sustainable marketing practices by RMG businesses in Bangladesh;
3. To identify the challenges and barriers faced by RMG companies in implementing sustainable marketing strategies;
4. To assess the effectiveness of sustainable marketing strategies in enhancing brand image and consumer loyalty;
5. To provide recommendations for the RMG industry in Bangladesh on adopting sustainable marketing practices

These objectives will guide the research in understanding the interplay between consumer behavior and sustainability in Bangladesh's RMG sector, providing valuable insights for both academic and industry stakeholders.

4. Methods and Procedure

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to gain comprehensive insights into consumer behavior and sustainable marketing in the RMG industry. A survey was conducted to gather data from consumers in Bangladesh regarding their awareness, perceptions, and behaviors related to sustainability in the fashion industry. The survey also assessed their attitudes toward sustainable marketing practices by RMG companies. In-depth interviews were conducted with RMG business owners, marketing professionals, and sustainability experts to understand the challenges and opportunities of implementing sustainable marketing practices from the industry's perspective. A structured questionnaire was designed, with questions focused on key areas such as consumer awareness of sustainability in the fashion industry, preferences for sustainable garments, purchasing behavior, and perceptions of brands using sustainable marketing practices. The survey was distributed online through social media platforms and email, as well as in person at shopping malls and garment stores in Dhaka and other major cities. A stratified random sampling method ensured a diverse and representative sample of consumers from various demographic groups in Bangladesh, with a minimum of 300 respondents targeted to ensure statistical validity and reliability. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants from the RMG industry, focusing on individuals with expertise in sustainable marketing and business operations, with approximately 10 to 15 in-depth interviews conducted until data saturation was reached. Data was analyzed using SPSS or Stata for accurate and efficient statistical analysis. Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis, where key themes and patterns were identified to gain insights into sustainable marketing challenges and opportunities from the perspective of RMG businesses. A coding framework was developed to organize the interview data into meaningful categories, and NVivo or similar qualitative data analysis software assisted in the coding and analysis process.

5. Results

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, followed by a discussion of their implications for sustainable marketing practices in the ready-made garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh.

5.1 Quantitative Results (Consumer Survey)

a. Demographic Profile of Respondents

The survey collected responses from 300 participants, with the following demographic breakdown:

- **Gender**: 61.2% male and 38.8% female
- **Age**: The majority of respondents (45%) were between 25 and 35 years old, followed by 30% in the 18–24 age range, and 25% aged 36 and above.
- **Income Levels**: 40% of respondents reported a monthly income of less than BDT 30,000, 35% between BDT 30,000–60,000, and 25% above BDT 60,000.
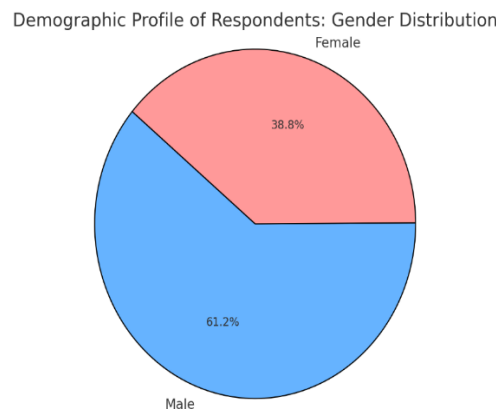-

Figure 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents: Gender Distribution

b. Awareness of Sustainability in the RMG Industry

The results showed that **only 42%** of respondents were familiar with the concept of sustainability in the fashion industry. Among those, 28% could specifically relate sustainability to environmental practices such as the use of eco-friendly materials, while 14% associated it with fair labor conditions. This indicates that although there is some awareness of sustainability, most consumers are not fully informed about the breadth of sustainable practices.
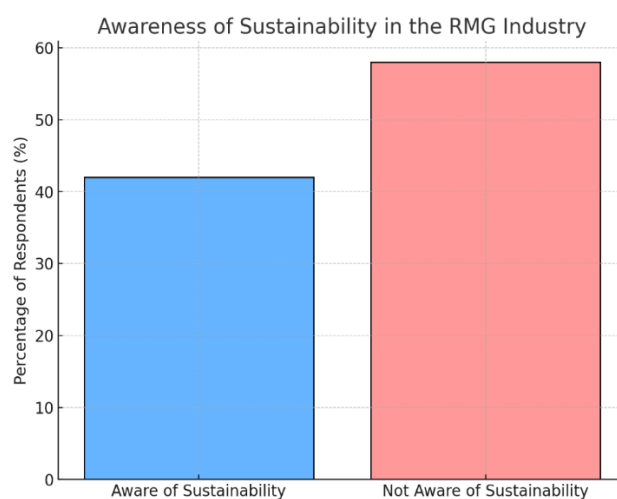

Figure 2: Awareness of Sustainability in the RMG Industry

c. Purchasing Behavior

When asked about their purchasing behavior, **35% of respondents** reported that they consider sustainability when buying garments. However, the intention-behavior gap was evident, as only **22%** consistently purchased from brands that promote sustainable practices. The main reasons cited for not purchasing sustainable products were higher prices (60%) and lack of availability (25%).
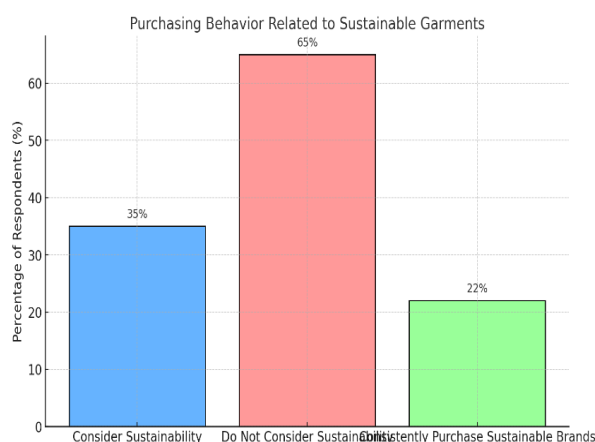

Figure 3: Purchasing Behavior Related to Sustainable Garments

d. Attitudes Towards Sustainable Marketing

The survey revealed that **60%** of consumers had a positive attitude toward brands that engage in sustainable marketing. Moreover, **45%** of respondents indicated they would be willing to pay more for sustainably produced garments if the price increase was within 10-15% of regular products. This suggests a growing market for ethically produced garments, although price sensitivity remains a key concern for many consumers.
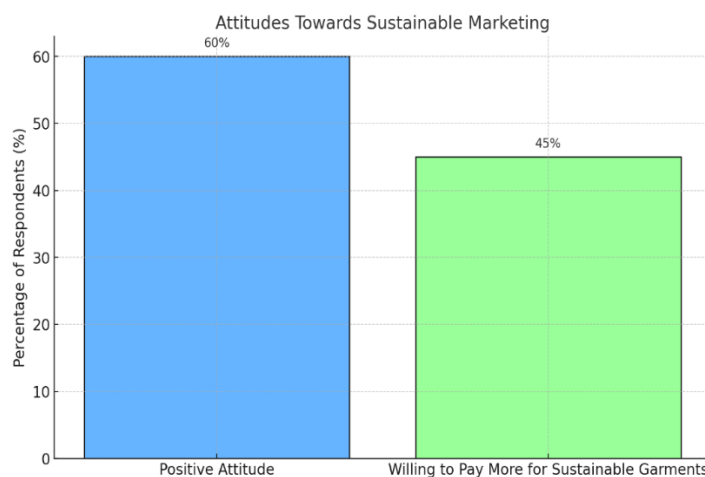

Figure 4: Attitudes Towards Sustainable Marketing

5.2 Qualitative Results (Interviews with RMG Industry Stakeholders)

a. Challenges in Implementing Sustainable Marketing Practices

The interviews highlighted several key challenges faced by RMG businesses in adopting sustainable marketing strategies:

- **Cost Barriers**: Most small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) reported that transitioning to sustainable production and marketing practices was cost-prohibitive. The cost of sourcing eco-friendly

materials and investing in energy-efficient technologies made it difficult to remain competitive in the price-sensitive Bangladeshi market (Au-Yong-oliveira & Sousa, 2022).

- **Limited Consumer Demand**: Although international buyers often require adherence to sustainability standards, the domestic market in Bangladesh shows relatively low demand for sustainable fashion. Many respondents pointed out that local consumers prioritize affordability over sustainability, which makes it difficult for businesses to justify higher prices for sustainably marketed products (Ray & Nayak, 2023).
- **Lack of Awareness and Expertise**: Several businesses acknowledged that their marketing teams lacked the expertise to effectively promote sustainability. Moreover, they expressed concern that consumers were often unaware of the benefits of sustainable products, limiting the effectiveness of their marketing efforts (Hashem Alsaqal & Ali Ahmed, 2021).

b. Opportunities for Growth

Despite the challenges, the interviews revealed several opportunities for RMG businesses:

- **Digital Marketing Platforms**: Stakeholders emphasized the potential of social media and e-commerce platforms to engage directly with consumers, educate them about sustainability, and promote ethical products. Many respondents highlighted that using digital tools could help overcome the cost barriers associated with traditional marketing channels.
- **International Markets**: Many RMG manufacturers are already capitalizing on the growing demand for sustainable fashion in international markets, particularly in Europe and North America. Respondents noted that compliance with international sustainability standards has helped enhance their brand image and secure long-term contracts with global buyers.
- **Green Factories**: Larger businesses reported success in using their investment in green manufacturing facilities as a unique selling point (USP) in their marketing campaigns. These businesses have seen increased interest from both domestic and international customers who prioritize sustainability.

6. Discussion

a. Consumer Awareness and the Intention-Behavior Gap

The quantitative data show that while a significant portion of consumers are aware of sustainability, there is still a gap between awareness and actual purchasing behavior. The qualitative findings confirm that this gap is largely due to the perceived higher costs of sustainable products and the lack of awareness about the long-term benefits of sustainability. This aligns with existing literature on the intention-behavior gap, which suggests that consumers often face barriers such as price and availability when trying to make sustainable choices (Kortam & Mahrous, 2020). Addressing this gap requires RMG companies to not only adopt sustainable marketing practices but also to invest in consumer education. Businesses that can effectively communicate the value of sustainability—both in terms of environmental impact and product quality—may be able to overcome price-related objections and encourage more sustainable consumer behavior.

b. Sustainable Marketing and Brand Loyalty

The survey results indicate that consumers are generally favorable toward brands that engage in sustainable marketing, with a significant portion willing to pay a premium for ethically produced garments. This finding is consistent with global trends, where sustainability is becoming a key driver of brand loyalty (K. S. Rahman, 2021). However, as noted in the qualitative interviews, the challenge lies in building awareness and understanding among Bangladeshi consumers. Businesses that can position themselves as leaders in sustainability, especially through transparent and consistent marketing campaigns, stand to gain long-term customer loyalty.

c. Challenges for SMEs in Adopting Sustainable Practices

The qualitative interviews highlighted that while larger RMG companies have the resources to invest in sustainable marketing and production, SMEs face significant challenges. The cost of sustainable materials and technologies, combined with low consumer demand, makes it difficult for smaller businesses to compete. This supports the

findings of previous studies that identified financial constraints as a major barrier to sustainability in developing markets (Chowdhury, 2023). However, the growing popularity of digital marketing platforms offers a potential solution. By leveraging these platforms, SMEs can reach a wider audience at a lower cost and communicate their sustainability efforts more effectively. This approach could help bridge the gap between consumer awareness and action, particularly among younger, digitally engaged consumers.

d. Opportunities for International Expansion

One of the key opportunities identified in this study is the growing demand for sustainable fashion in international markets. As noted in the interviews, RMG manufacturers that meet international sustainability standards are well-positioned to capitalize on this demand. This reflects the broader trend of global buyers seeking ethically produced garments and highlights the importance of aligning with international sustainability certifications to remain competitive (Moin et al., 2024). The results of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between consumer behavior and sustainable marketing practices in Bangladesh's RMG industry. While there are significant challenges, particularly for SMEs, the growing awareness of sustainability among consumers and the rise of digital marketing present opportunities for businesses to successfully integrate sustainable practices into their marketing strategies (Li et al., 2023). By focusing on consumer education, leveraging digital platforms, and aligning with international sustainability standards, RMG businesses can not only improve their brand image but also contribute to a more sustainable and profitable future for the industry.

7. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the relationship between consumer behavior and sustainable marketing practices in Bangladesh's ready-made garments (RMG) industry. The findings reveal a growing awareness and positive attitude toward sustainability among consumers, yet significant gaps remain between their intentions and actual purchasing behavior. While a considerable portion of consumers recognize the importance of sustainability, factors such as higher costs and limited availability of sustainable products hinder widespread adoption. Businesses in the RMG sector, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), face significant challenges in implementing sustainable marketing strategies. These include financial constraints, lack of expertise, and insufficient domestic demand for sustainable fashion. However, the increasing global demand for sustainable products presents a valuable opportunity for Bangladesh's RMG industry to capitalize on international markets by aligning with sustainability standards and leveraging digital platforms to reach ethically conscious consumers. The study highlights the importance of consumer education in bridging the intention-behavior gap. RMG businesses that can effectively communicate the environmental and social benefits of their sustainable practices are likely to foster brand loyalty and attract a growing segment of consumers who prioritize sustainability. In conclusion, while challenges remain, the integration of sustainable marketing practices presents an opportunity for Bangladesh's RMG sector to enhance its competitiveness both locally and globally. By focusing on consumer education, leveraging digital marketing, and aligning with global sustainability trends, the industry can contribute to long-term environmental responsibility and business growth. Further research could focus on identifying specific strategies for improving consumer awareness and measuring the long-term impact of sustainable marketing on business profitability.

8. Acknowledgements

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