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Research Article

Perceptions of Ethical and Sustainable Fashion in Japan: A Questionnaire Survey

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

Ethical and sustainable fashion has attracted increasing attention in discussions of the environmental and social impacts of the fashion-related industry. However, empirical evidence regarding Japanese consumers remains limited. This study conducted a questionnaire survey of 520 consumers (aged 18–69 years) in Japan to examine consumer awareness, practices, attitudes, and policy preferences related to ethical and sustainable fashion. The survey assessed familiarity with key terms, associated attributes, purchasing considerations, perceived barriers, and support for policy options. Only 12.1% of respondents were familiar with “ethical fashion,” and across the full sample, similar attributes (e.g., use of recycled materials, recyclability, and low environmental impact) were generally associated with both “ethical” and “sustainable” fashion. “Sustainable fashion” was strongly associated with environmental concerns, whereas “ethical fashion” encompassed broader issues such as transparency. Fewer than one-quarter of respondents reported considering sustainability or ethics when purchasing fashion items. Frequently cited barriers included high cost (35.4%) and lack of information (32.9%). More than 70% supported policies prohibiting the destruction of unsold or returned textiles, as legislated in France, while a majority preferred voluntary corporate initiatives over legal mandates. Despite limited overall awareness and active consideration, a substantial proportion of respondents had already engaged in related practices (e.g., only purchase the minimum necessary, use purchased items for as long as possible). Addressing key barriers and encouraging voluntary industry efforts may expand opportunities for consumer engagement. The study also identified a policy-preference asymmetry, with stronger support for voluntary corporate initiatives than for legal mandates. These findings provide novel quantitative insights from Japan, one of the world’s largest fashion markets, and may inform the design of policies that balance voluntary initiatives with legal regulation in ethical and sustainable fashion. They further highlight the importance of developing such policies through close collaboration with diverse stakeholders.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The significant burden that the fashion industry places on the environment has been a persistent concern since the 1960s (Gwilt, 2020). The industry produces over 92 million tons of waste annually, a figure estimated to increase to 148 million tons by 2030 (Kerr & Landry, 2017). It accounts for 8–10% of global CO₂ emissions and consumes approximately 79 trillion liters of water annually (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020). This sector also faces serious workplace safety issues, as exemplified by the Rana Plaza collapse (Barua & Ansary, 2017). Despite these well-documented challenges, the fast fashion industry continues to grow without adequate considerations of sustainable consumption practices (Garcia-Ortega *et al.*, 2023).

The advent of the Sustainable Development Goals, passed by the United Nations member countries, emphasizes the need to address the issue of sustainability in fashion (United Nations, n.d.). The European Commission (2022) also released the “EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles,” which has influenced global trends. In this strategy, the Commission describes a coherent framework and vision as follows:

By 2030 textile products placed on the EU market are long-lived and recyclable, to a great extent made of recycled fibres, free of hazardous substances and produced in respect of social rights and the environment. Consumers benefit longer from high quality affordable textiles, fast fashion is out of fashion, and economically profitable re-use and repair services are widely available. In a competitive, resilient and innovative textiles sector, producers take responsibility for their products along the value chain, including when they become waste. The circular textiles ecosystem is thriving, driven by sufficient capacities for innovative fibre-to-fibre recycling, while the incineration and landfilling of textiles is reduced to the minimum (European Commission, 2022).

In contrast, the adverse developments in the fashion industry involve not only environmental impacts but also broader ethical, legal, and social issues. These concerns underscore the importance of promoting ethical and sustainable fashion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In a meta-narrative systematic literature review exploring current and future research directions in sustainable fashion, Mukendi *et al.* (2020) defined sustainable fashion as a broader concept than ethical fashion, encompassing environmental, social, slow fashion, reuse, recycling, cruelty-free, anti-consumption, and production practices. Thomas (2017) highlighted the situational aspects of ethical fashion, reinforcing the need to continuously grasp public awareness across diverse populations.

In Japan, one of the largest fashion markets in the world (Statista, n.d.), “ethical consumption” is receiving growing political attention, including in both fashion and sustainable fashion (Consumer Affairs Agency [CAA], 2018, 2021). An outreach website managed by the Consumer Affairs Agency (CAA) of Japan stated as follows:

Although the boundaries between ethical and sustainable practices are not always distinct, the term “sustainable” is typically used to emphasize environmental issues and their broader ramifications, whereas “ethical” tends to imply that environmental concerns, working conditions, animal welfare, and local production/consumption are considered on an equal

footing (CAA, 2021). Shin *et al.* (2025) suggested that consumer perceptions of ethical fashion encompass vegan materials and animal welfare, based on Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) modelling of Korean documents. Meanwhile, recent studies have also suggested that sustainable fashion has remained a predominantly environment-focused concept, even after the COVID-19 pandemic, during which eco-friendly trends shifted toward a more practical orientation in consumption values (Henninger *et al.*, 2016; Joergens, 2006; Shin *et al.*, 2025).

As discussed above and in previous studies, the definition of ethical and sustainable fashion is fundamentally fuzzy and difficult to pin down (Niinimäki, 2015); hence, it must be considered within the broader social-ecological system (Palm, 2023). From the theory of planned behavior perspective, Saricam and Okur (2019) conducted a study in Turkey and reported that subjective norms and normative beliefs, treated as a single construct, influenced the purchase intention of consumers regarding sustainable fashion. In relation to this, Ramani *et al.* (2022) reported that social norms are associated with sustainable apparel purchases among Malaysian consumers. Brandão and Costa (2021) showed that perceived behavioral control plays a greater role than subjective norms in predicting intention. They also demonstrated that intention influences actual behavior and highlighted the importance of product attributes, product variety, and environmental apparel knowledge. It is also noteworthy that they identified regional differences among Europe, North America, and Asia.

In line with these trends, consumer perceptions across various settings still require further clarification. Practices in daily life, perceived barriers, and attitudes toward strategies for implementing ethical and sustainable fashion should also be considered. The CAA has conducted several related surveys of Japanese consumers; however, academic approaches remain limited (CAA, 2020–2023).

Therefore, this study aimed to clarify consumer awareness, perceived barriers, practices, and policy preferences regarding ethical and sustainable fashion through a questionnaire survey, to bridge the gap between policy trends and consumer readiness in Japan.

3. METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire survey was conducted in March 2024, with potential participants drawn from the survey panel members of Macromill, Inc. (<https://group.macromill.com/>), which had 1.3 million members as of the end of 2023. The study included participants aged 18 to 69 years who were representative of the demographic composition of the Japanese population. No additional eligibility criteria were set in order to ensure a diverse range of responses.

The 10-item survey covered the following topics: demographic background; awareness of ethical consumption and fashion; various aspects of ethical and sustainable fashion, with a focus on product supply; perceptions and practices related to these issues; and relevant trends (e.g., the French Anti-waste and Circular Economy Law; AGEC Law) and policy options based on the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (European Commission, 2022; France, 2020). Some of the topics were developed with reference to a survey conducted by the



CAA (2020–2023).

The number of participants was determined based on feasibility. A descriptive analysis of the responses was used for categorical variables (presented as *n* and percentages). The differences between the concepts of “ethical fashion” and “sustainable fashion” were analyzed using McNemar’s test, and the strategies for ethical/sustainable fashion were examined using a binomial test. Both tests were conducted at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Microsoft Excel 2021 and R version 4.4.2 (The R Foundation, Vienna, Austria) were used for statistical analyses. The survey received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of CiDER, The University of Osaka (approval no. 2024CRER0226-1; February 2024) and was conducted after obtaining the written informed consent of all respondents. During the preparation of this work, ChatGPT (OpenAI, CA, USA) was used to explore methods for analyzing our data and to proofread this manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the manuscript, and they take full responsibility for its content.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 520 individuals (260 men and 260 women) responded to the questionnaire. Among them, 130 (25.0%) reported knowing the term “ethical consumption,” and 63 (12.1%) reported knowing the term “ethical fashion” (Table 1).

After reading a Japanese description of the term “ethical” (i.e., “rinri-teki,” a common phrase), the respondents chose the aspects associated with the concepts of ethical and sustainable fashion, with a focus on product supply, from the questionnaire (Table 2). Regarding “ethical fashion,” the following three were

Table 1. Background information of respondents (*n* = 520).

Characteristics	<i>n</i> (%)
Gender	
Men	260 (50.0)
Women	260 (50.0)
Age	
-29	96 (18.4)
30-39	93 (17.9)
40-49	119 (22.9)
50-59	109 (21.0)
60-	103 (19.8)
Awareness of the term “ethical consumption.”	
Yes	130 (25.0)
No	390 (75.0)
Awareness of the term “ethical fashion.”	
Yes	63 (12.1)
No	457 (87.9)

most frequently selected by the respondents: “use of recycled materials,” “designed for easy recycling once no longer in use,” and “manufactured using processes designed to minimize environmental impact.” Regarding “sustainable fashion,” a term similar to “ethical fashion,” the three most frequently selected

Table 2. Aspects covered by the terms ethical and sustainable fashion included in the questionnaire (*n* = 520).

Aspects	Ethical <i>n</i> (%)	Sustainable <i>n</i> (%)	P-value*
Use of recycled materials	223 (42.9)	284 (54.6)	<0.001
Provision of detailed information on materials used	95 (18.3)	60 (11.5)	<0.001
Designed for easy recycling once no longer in use	183 (35.2)	251 (48.3)	<0.001
Manufactured using processes designed to minimize environmental impact	186 (35.8)	174 (33.5)	0.307
Use of organic cotton (cotton produced without pesticides or chemical fertilizers)	116 (22.3)	103 (19.8)	0.218
Meets fair trade standards (purchased at fair prices to support workers in developing countries)	119 (22.9)	96 (18.5)	0.027
Actively discloses information about the production process, including who produced it and how it was manufactured	86 (16.5)	50 (9.6%)	<0.001
Upcycles fibers or fabrics (transforms discarded materials into new products)	138 (26.5)	171 (32.9)	0.004
Offers rental, sharing, and subscription (flat-rate rental) systems	68 (13.1)	100 (19.2)	<0.001
Manufactured using local industries and traditional techniques	55 (10.6)	63 (12.1)	0.416
Implements a fitting app (an app that allows virtual try-on via smartphone, etc.) prior to purchase	39 (7.5)	44 (8.5)	0.583
Implements a made-to-order production system	57 (11.0)	77 (14.8)	0.036
Uses traditional dyeing and weaving techniques	46 (8.8)	41 (7.9)	0.568
Use of synthetic leather (an artificial material designed to mimic natural leather)	65 (12.5)	47 (9.0)	0.036

*McNemar’s test



aspects were identical to those for ethical fashion (above). However, environmental aspects were selected more frequently for sustainable fashion, with “use of recycled materials” and “designed for easy recycling” receiving significantly high endorsements ($p < 0.001$ each). A broader range of aspects for example, fair trade standards, detailed information on materials used, and production information were also more frequently selected in regard to ethical fashion (Table 2).

After learning that all aspects listed in the questionnaire items were related to ethical and sustainable fashion, the respondents proceeded to answer the subsequent questions. Regarding the extent to which they considered ethical and sustainable fashion-related aspects when acquiring fashion-related products, 114 respondents (21.9%) selected either “strongly consider” or “slightly consider” (Table 3). When asked about barriers to acquiring ethical/sustainable fashion-related items, the respondents most frequently cited “high prices” (184 respondents, 35.4%) and “lack of information on ethical and sustainable fashion” (117 respondents, 32.9%). Regarding post-purchase treatment, 210 respondents (40.4%) reported that higher-priced items were more likely to be passed down or repaired once they were no longer in use (Table 3). Regarding ethical and sustainable fashion-related practices, 229 (44.0%) respondents selected “use purchased items for as long as possible,” whereas 209 (40.2%) respondents selected “only purchase the minimum necessary.” Only 31 (6.0%) respondents selected “consider the production background when purchasing” (Table 4).

Table 3. Considerations regarding ethical/sustainable fashion, barriers, and price (n = 520).

	n (%)
When acquiring fashion-related products, do you consider aspects related to ethical and sustainable fashion?	
Strongly consider	24 (4.6)
Slightly consider	90 (17.3)
Do not consider much	210 (40.4)
Do not consider at all	196 (37.7)
Are there any barriers that impede the consideration of ethical and sustainable fashion aspects when acquiring fashion-related items?	
Lack of information on ethical/sustainable fashion	171 (32.9)
Lack of product-specific information	119 (22.9)
Excessive or ambiguous labeling and advertising	90 (17.3)
High prices	184 (35.4)
Inadequate rental, sharing, and subscription (flat-rate rental) options	31 (6.0)

Other barriers	2 (0.4)
No barriers	171 (32.9)
Does how you handle fashion-related products after purchase vary depending on their purchase price?	
High-priced items are more likely to be transferred or repaired when no longer used	210 (40.4)
The purchase price does not affect how I handle items	220 (42.3)
Low-priced items are more likely to be transferred or repaired when no longer used	90 (17.3)

Table 4. Practices of respondents (n = 520).

	n (%)
From the perspective of ethical and sustainable fashion, do you currently practice any of the following activities?	
Only purchase the minimum necessary	209 (40.2)
Consider the production background when purchasing	31 (6.0)
Consider the material when purchasing	74 (14.2)
Use purchased items for as long as possible	229 (44.0)
Repair damaged items and continue using them	96 (18.5)
Transfer items no longer in use to family or acquaintances, or sell them to a third party via flea market apps or reuse vendors	120 (23.1)
Purchase items through flea market apps or reuse vendors	72 (13.8)
Use rental, sharing, or subscription (flat-rate rental) services	32 (6.2)
Other activities	0 (0.0)
Do nothing in particular	129 (24.8)

Only 68 (13.1%) respondents were aware of the recent French law (France, 2020) prohibiting the destruction of unsold or returned textiles, while 382 (73.4%) believed that such a regulation should be promoted (Table 5). Among strategies related to ethical and sustainable fashion, “overproduction and overconsumption” and “destruction of unsold or returned textiles” attracted particular attention. The majority of respondents indicated that all strategies related to ethical and sustainable fashion should be implemented through voluntary efforts by companies rather than being mandated by law (Table 6). Meanwhile, no significant differences were observed between the “mandated by law” and “voluntary efforts” approaches for “information disclosure” and “stopping the destruction of unsold or returned textiles.”



Table 5. Awareness of the French law prohibiting the destruction of unsold or returned textiles and support for its promotion in Japan (n = 520).

	Should be promoted	Should not be promoted	Total
Aware	37 (7.1)	31 (6.0)	68 (13.1)
Not aware	345 (66.3)	107 (20.6)	452 (86.9)
Total	382 (73.5)	138 (26.5)	

Table 6. Strategies for ethical and sustainable fashion and how to implement them (n = 520).

	Especially important	How should it be implemented?		P-value*
		Mandated by law	Voluntary efforts	
Establish design requirements ensure durability, facilitate repair and recycling, and minimize environmental impact upon disposal	105 (20.2)	35 (33.3)	70 (66.7)	<0.001
Strengthen information disclosure use digital systems to provide clear information about each product's life cycle and set standards for using terms like "environmentally friendly."	94 (18.1)	44 (46.8)	50 (53.2)	0.606
Reversing overproduction and overconsumption shift business models away from rapidly changing trends, for instance, by reducing the number of collections released in a single year.	249 (47.9)	80 (32.1)	169 (67.9)	<0.001
Stopping the destruction of unsold or returned textiles	210 (40.4)	92 (43.8)	118 (56.2)	0.084
Review producer responsibility define responsibilities for collecting and recycling used products, and set targets for reuse and recycling	149 (28.7)	58 (38.9)	91 (61.1)	0.009

*Binomial test

In the current consumer survey (the questionnaire used in this study) on ethical and sustainable fashion in Japan, only 25.0% of respondents recognized the term "ethical consumption," and even fewer (12.1%) were aware of "ethical fashion." These findings confirm that Japanese consumers aged 18 to 69 years have limited familiarity with these concepts.

The observed differences in perceptions of ethical and sustainable fashion align with previous studies (Hill & Lee, 2012; Reimers *et al.*, 2016). The three most frequently identified aspects were the same for both terms. Environmental aspects, such as the use of recycled materials, were significantly more associated with sustainable fashion. Meanwhile, ethical fashion was associated with a broader range of considerations, including fair trade and transparency about materials and production processes.

The survey provided definitions of ethical and sustainable fashion, and fewer than one in four respondents considered these aspects when making purchasing decisions. This finding suggests that, for most Japanese consumers, criteria such as price, quality, and style remain paramount. This reflects the widely reported attitude-behavior gap in ethical consumption research, in which positive attitudes toward sustainability do not necessarily translate into sustainable behavior (McNeill & Moore, 2015; Park & Lin, 2020). Consistent with this interpretation, 35.4% of our respondents identified high prices

as a major barrier.

The respondents highlighted a lack of information regarding ethical and sustainable fashion as another salient barrier. A recent study identified "online" as an emerging theme in post-pandemic discourse on sustainable fashion (Shin *et al.*, 2025), suggesting that online platforms, which are increasingly integrated into our everyday lives, may help overcome information barriers by disseminating relevant information more widely.

Moreover, 40.4% of our respondents indicated that higher-priced items were more likely to be passed down or repaired once damaged. Given that the initial purchase price was noted as a key barrier, these findings suggest that consumers are more inclined to extend the lifespan of items they perceive as valuable. Thus, the availability of affordable repair services and transparency regarding the comparative costs between repairing and purchasing new items could play an essential role in influencing sustainable post-purchase behaviors. As Niinimäki (2015) emphasized, one of the ethical foundations of sustainable fashion is that designers, manufacturers, and companies are responsible not only for environmental impacts but also for unsustainable consumption patterns and increasing waste streams. Encouraging consumers to engage in repair and reuse behaviors can thus be seen as part of a broader ethical commitment: one that supports these foundational values and



fosters more reflective, sustainability-oriented choices after purchase.

Over 40% of our study respondents reported already engaging in specific behaviors aligned with ethical and sustainable fashion, such as using items for extended periods and limiting new purchases. While the explicit recognition of the terms under focus may be limited, these behaviors suggest a meaningful degree of practical engagement with the concepts among consumers.

Only 13.1% of our respondents were aware of the French law prohibiting the destruction of unsold or returned textiles; nevertheless, more than 70% supported promoting a similar policy in Japan. Concerning specific strategies from the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (European Commission, 2022), more than half of the respondents preferred implementation through voluntary efforts. Notably, voluntary and mandatory approaches regarding “strengthening information disclosure” and “stopping the destruction of unsold or returned textiles” showed no significant difference, indicating that these strategies could be considered relatively acceptable policy options. This result underscores a notable tendency among respondents to view ethical and sustainable actions as desirable recommendations rather than mandatory obligations.

These results have important implications for policymakers. In communications with consumers, policymakers should be mindful of consumer perceptions when choosing terminology. In particular, they can strategically emphasize aspects that are less frequently associated with ethical and sustainable fashion in order to promote a more balanced understanding among consumers. This implication is partly supported by a previous study in China that demonstrated the importance of knowledge and trust in ethical fashion consumption (Liu, 2021). These approaches can be further promoted in collaboration with industry partners (Brandão & Costa, 2021). Furthermore, when considering policy options, rather than simply emulating European or other regional policies, Japan should develop its own context-sensitive approach to ethical and sustainable fashion.

Despite offering novel insights into Japanese consumer perceptions, this study has several limitations. The survey was conducted using an online panel (Macromill, Inc.) with a quota sample of 520 respondents. Moreover, the data are based on self-reported awareness, attitudes, and behaviors, which may be subject to social desirability and recall biases. Nevertheless, the sample was stratified to reflect the population demographics, and the findings provide valuable information for elucidating general consumer perceptions. Future research should clarify how perceptions differ according to respondent characteristics and examine how these concepts are received as ethical and sustainable consumption and fashion become more widely discussed and consumers gain more opportunities to encounter practical initiatives.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights that consumer awareness of, and explicit consideration for, ethical and sustainable fashion remain limited in Japan. Nonetheless, a substantial minority of consumers

already adopt specific sustainability-aligned practices, such as prolonged use of items and restrained purchasing. High prices and insufficient information were identified as prominent barriers. Stakeholders seeking to expand consumer engagement should address these challenges. Additionally, Japanese consumers in this study were open to voluntary industry initiatives but more neutral toward specific regulatory measures, offering useful insights for future policy discussions. Given Japan's status as one of the world's largest fashion markets, these findings contribute valuable perspectives to international discussions on ethical and sustainable practices in the global fashion industry.

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