

# A CHALLENGE TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE FASHION CONSUMPTION: FAST FASHION AND IMPULSIVE PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR

Nurhidayah Rosely<sup>1</sup>  
Sharifah Faridah Syed Ali<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Business Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, (UiTM), Malaysia,  
(E-mail: nurhidayahrosely@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>2</sup>Department of Business Studies, Faculty of Accountancy, Management and Economics, New Era University  
College, Malaysia, (Email: faridah.s@neuc.edu.my)

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**Abstract:** *The issue of overproduction and overconsumption of fashion goods has become critical since both manufacturers and consumers feel that the purchase and consumption of such goods do not create any harmful effects on society or the economy's well-being. Consumer demand has been a leading cause of the mushrooming fast fashion market; thus, this unsustainable consumption poses the greatest challenge for the government in promoting the green economy and achieving one of the sustainable development goals, responsible consumption practices. The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) foregrounds the fact that consumers have inner needs and are capable of altering their cognition to seek consistency between attitudes and behaviours. Consumers are motivated to minimise the discrepancy between cognition and discomfort through several rationalisation strategies to justify their impulsive, excessive, and overconsumption of fast fashion goods. This review paper is intended to explore the role of social media, impulsive purchase behaviour, and cognitive dissonance in fast fashion consumption. Following the literature review, consumers' involvement in fast fashion consumption is driven by social motivation. Although consumers are aware of the nature of fashion goods, which are easily faded and have a short life cycle that promote continuous purchase, which leads to waste and overconsumption, the role of social media and social factors motivate consumers towards impulsive purchase behaviour on fast fashion goods. This conceptual paper provided a basis to further explore consumers' cognitive and affective states in order to rationalise their excessive consumption patterns, which could impede sustainable fashion consumption practices.*

**Keywords:** *Fast Fashion, Cognitive Dissonance, Social Media, Impulse Purchase*

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## Introduction

Consumption-related behaviours play a subtle but essential role in developing, constructing, and forming self-identity. Lavish and extravagant material ownership always being perceived as having the "magical power" to bestow one's social position (Amaral & Loken, 2016; Geiger-Oneto et al., 2013). As a result, throughout the process of constructing identity, this material thing becomes a "mark and mask" (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010). In a nutshell, the choice of material things should be "conspicuous", "logofication," and "loud" enough to communicate one's wealth and riches (Bagheri, 2014; Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006; Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). According to Galehbakhtiari and Hasangholi (2015), this behaviour shows that consumers think of their consumption as a way to demonstrate their status and prepare the way for them to advance to the desired social classes. Consumers then become more materialistic and attempt to fulfill extrinsic goals by accumulating possessions that serve as markers of their financial success (Grotts & Johnson, 2013; Segev et al., 2015).

Consumers often use the acquisition of material goods to convey the intended meanings they want to communicate about themselves. Consuming material goods symbolises one's identity, worth, and appearance. This causes consumers to engage in symbolic or existential consumption, in which they use material objects to "stand out" and be visible in society (Hudders et al., 2013; Kauppinen-räsänen et al., 2018; Latter et al., 2016). Due to the belief that material objects are social status instruments, consumers tend to avoid or approach things that could damage or boost their self-esteem (Banister & Hogg, 2004). In reality, the luxury brand market created by the "keeping up with the Joneses" phenomenon (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014) encourages consumers to want to "own" more individuals nearby because fashion denotes social identification.

Fashion goods become a medium and tools for consumers to project their self-identity and esteem, personality, and social position, thus leading to a tremendous demand on fashion goods and brands. Fashion is defined as a result of ever-changing cultural shifts in preferences, tastes, and choices (O'Cass & Frost, 2002). In response to this promising market for fashion goods, fashion goods manufacturers, particularly apparel manufacturers, are looking for an opportunity to cater to this market with the idea of mass-production of fashion apparel and goods linked with low-cost production. This production orientation enables the consumers to own the fashion goods at a low price, engage in impulse buying behaviour, and splurge on consumption, which leads to the phenomenon of overconsumption and unsustainable consumption behaviour. Prior literature pointed out that consumers needs and demand are the key factors that create the fast-fashion phenomenon, whereby a fashion-conscious consumer puts pressure on the industry to be innovative in producing the latest and newest styles (Ramos et al., 2020).

In contrast, with sustainable fashion consumption that promotes mindful consumption behaviour (Quoquab & Mohammad, 2020), consumers need to think about the "cause and effect" of their consumption practices, as any purchase decision will have implication for society, nature, and other living creatures. Hence, the concept of sustainable consumption encourages consumers to avoid wasteful and splurge consumption as well as impulse buying behaviour, which leads to overconsumption (Brydges et al., 2021; Ertekin and Atik, 2020). As sustainable consumption practices promote modest consumption and encourage slow fashion consumption, which has high longevity (Hassan et al., 2022), they contradict fast fashion, which promotes irresponsible consumption. A prior study found that consumers who engage in sustainable fashion consumption incline toward satisfying their utilitarian needs instead of hedonistic values (Razzaq et al., 2018).

Realising the promising market for fashion goods due to tremendous consumer demand, fashion goods manufacturers are looking for an opportunity to cater to this market with the idea of mass-production of fashion apparel and goods linked with low-cost production. This production orientation enables the consumers to own the fashion goods at a low price, engage in impulse buying behaviour, and splurge on consumption, which leads to the phenomenon of overconsumption and unsustainable consumption behaviour. Indeed, the quick pace of fast fashion development has negative consequences for sustainability issues such as sweatshop labour, overconsumption of natural resources, waste management, and pollution problems. Hence, the mass production of fashion goods also creates a waste consumption phenomenon as consumers spend their money excessively and engage in splurge buying behaviour due to the low price, which enables them to afford to change their styles and keep up with a trend. Fashion goods such as clothing and apparel were previously meant to be durable goods, but when not purchased regularly, turn into an "everyday" purchase (Brydges, 2021), which creates a clothing culture. Additionally, factors such as easy access to the market through the existence of e-commerce and digital platforms, social media marketing, and mobile retailing motivate consumers towards impulse purchases and emotional buying behaviour.

The fashion, apparel, and textile industries have been widely identified as a major cause of environmental degradation (Rume & Islam, 2020), making them responsible for ecological and social problems such as climate change, the scarcity of natural resources, and the overuse of chemicals (Ertekin and Atik, 2020; Ertekin and Ozdamar, 2016). Additionally, the challenge is how to achieve sustainability through fast fashion as the industry strives to achieve economies of scale through the mass production of fashion goods. According to Eco-Stylist (2022), fast fashion consumers purchase 60 percent more clothes compared to 20 years ago, and the consumption only lasts less than one year, meaning over 50% of the clothes end up in landfills. Therefore, under the Sustainable Development Goals 12, the lifestyle and fashion industries have been urged to collaborate and engage in any activities particularly to protect the climate and promote responsible production and consumption along with sustainable innovation (United Nations, 2020).

## Literature Review

### Social Media and Impulse Purchase

According to preliminary surveys, young consumers utilise social media platforms, namely Instagram, to seek fashion inspiration, which affects their purchasing decisions (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Krause et al., 2019). Accordingly, the social media platform encourages users to exhibit their material possessions, which breeds envy (Wang et al., 2017) and, thus contributes to social comparison (Krasnova et al., 2015; Krause et al., 2019; Wenninger et al., 2019). Additionally, previous research has shown that social media promotes conspicuous consumption, a tendency among society's members, by raising consumers' self-esteem (Widjajanta et al., 2018). Fan and Gordon (2014) propose that people may be influenced by a "mob" attitude when acquiring products, leading to an urge or need to buy based on the behaviour of others. As a result, individuals may purchase items not out of genuine need, but rather as a reaction to the buying habits of those around them.

Due to the disclosure of users' lifestyles, the social media landscape enables users to be "aspired and inspired". Social media provides a platform for consumers to publicly display their loyalty to a brand in their daily lives, revealing their opulent lifestyles, encouraging status-based consumption, and a culture of display that signifies a glamorous lifestyle and status (Efendiolu,

2019). Consumers are therefore lured to the premium brand that best represents their social standing and position. The purchase of luxury products consequently promotes ostentatious, status consumption and compulsive buying behaviour (Otero-lópez & Villardefrancos, 2015; Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012; Razmus & Pal, 2017; Shao et al., 2019; Truong et al., 2010; Truong & McColl, 2011). In fact, the anticipation of social rewards from the possession of material objects, which consumers believe improve self-esteem (Goldsmith et al., 2011), denotes non-autonomous behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Otero-lópez & Villardefrancos, 2015; Truong et al., 2010). People often use material possessions that project their social identity to brag about their accomplishments in life, which boosts self-esteem (Hudders et al., 2013; Oxoby, 2003; Truong et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2015) and explains why they engage in this material consumption activity.

Consumers, on the other hand, think that social media are self-enhancement tools that allow them to "filter" and retain positive self-views while shielding them from any damaging and unpleasant ones that would put their self-views in danger (Zheng et al., 2020). Consumers select the "loud brand" because it is more noticeable to others and they believe social media platforms allow them to boost their self-esteem and hope to earn tremendous attention from others through it. This encourages them to consume publicly (Widjajanta et al., 2018). Status-seeking consumers prefer a "loud brand" that has the element of conspicuousness, enhancing consumers' social position, status, and sense of self-identity, self-esteem, and self-worth because it is noticeable and can be seen by other members of the social group (Bagheri, 2014; Janssen et al., 2017; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2018). Consumers thus confirmed that "loud brands" are responsible for their psychological advantages, thus social media networks act as an instrument to attain those psychological rewards. Thus, it is evident that the presence of social media networks aids in nurturing and encouraging consumers to behave ostentatiously, which has previously been criticised as illogical and senseless consumption patterns (Efendiolu, 2019; Thoumrunroje, 2014) and has been identified as a medium of fashion inspiration and current trend by Generation Z (Vitelar, 2019).

In the same vein, the rise of social media influencers contributes a significant impact on human daily lives and influence consumers' consumption of fast fashion as they are more engaging, authentic, and relatable (Nouri, 2018). Apparently, the content that created by this social media influencer drive consumers to incur debt by causing them to make frequent impulsive purchase which lead to splurge consumption practice (Revlon et al., 2020). According to Chen et al. (2016), using Facebook can make people buy things impulsively because it's easy to buy stuff on the website, they can shop while hanging out with their friends, and the ads they see in Facebook are personalised to them. While, Instagram has interactive visual element, enhance user's satisfaction while browsing the advertisement lead consumers towards impulsive purchase on a fashion goods (Casaló et al., 2017; Aragoncillo & Orus, 2018; Venus Jin et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2016; Khan, 2018). Hence, Instagram has been found stimulate impulsive buying high (Xiang et al., 2016), deliver user's satisfaction while using the app, which causes customers to skip the evaluation phase of the decision-making process (Aprilia & Setiadi, 2017; Prakash et al, 2017).

Generation Z now acknowledges that social media is an essential component of marketing since they have grown up in a highly commercialised culture (Vitelar, 2019). Fernandes and Panda (2019) asserted that girls of Generation Z are more sensitive to social influence from their peers than males. Hence, User Generated Content which also known as social media celebrity or influencer was observed to impact the impulse purchases of females of this generation



(Djafarova, Elmira and Bowes, Tamar, 2021). Gunawan & Iskandar (2020) indicate that social media influencers possess significant influence over thousands of followers and can recommend products that lead to impulse buying. Consequently, individuals may purchase items they did not originally plan to buy. Zafar et al. (2019) also found that social media influencers have a positive effect on people's tendency to buy impulsively.

Fashion goods has been found as the most likely to drive impulsive purchase which is unexpectedly made without a prior plan. It also occurs when a customer responds to a combination of internal and external marketing stimuli by making a snap decision to purchase fashion things without considering the repercussions (Rook, 1987). Impulsive purchasing is unplanned, careless, haphazard, and complexly hedonistic. The consumer's willingness to make unintended, hasty, spur-of-the-moment purchases based on internal and/or external cues is known as impulsivity. Specifically, impulse buying is tied to searching, both from a hedonistic and psychological perspective when it comes to apparel and accessories (Park et al., 2006; Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). According to Madhavaram and Laverie (2004), the Internet encourages people to explore products for hedonic, or pleasure, searching reasons as well as informational, or utilitarian, searching purposes, thus, demonstrating the importance of the hedonistic factor in driving consumer behaviour during online shopping (Lee et al., 2009). Many studies in the field of material consumption lend support to the idea that making impulsive purchases can reduce feelings of stress and other unfavourable emotions (Atalay and Meloy 2011), heighten feelings of excitement and pleasure (Verplanken and Sato 2011), and elicit hedonistic feelings of high-arousal pleasure (Ramanathan and Menon 2006). Consequently, the hedonic values enable consumers to keep up with the newest fashion and trend contribute towards some detrimental effect on sustainability and harms the environment. Hence, prior literature investigates and identified credit card usage, shopping for immediate satisfaction, and shopping for novelty have a significant impact on impulsive purchase (Secapramana et al., 2021).

### **Cognitive Dissonance, Impulsive Purchase and Fast Fashion Consumption**

The fast fashion business model offers low-cost premium fashion imitations with a limited shelf life. The sensation of urgency that comes with purchasing fast fashion is based on recurring consumption and impulse purchases. Apparently, rapid fashion consumption reinforces the consumer behavioural trend of purchasing more while using products less frequently, raising concerns about its social and environmental implications. Hence, fast fashion consumption has a negative impact on the environment, where the trash of obsolete or undesirable clothing amounts to around 17 million metric tons, according to Environmental Protection Agency estimates (Geyer & Law, 2017). As a result, fast fashion is one of the most polluting businesses, requiring a large number of raw materials, causing water pollution, and accounting for 10% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions through its "just-in-time" production strategy and supply chain (Brewer, 2019). According to prior studies, fast fashion products are hedonistic and might drive impulsive purchasing behaviour due to their high degree of symbolism (Gawior et al., 2022). Emotions produced by the act of shopping for fashion, emotional pleasure, the development of positive mood states, and fashion participation are all internal variables involved in impulsive buying of quick fashion. Indeed, fashion consciousness was found to affect impulse buying positively (Wiranata & Hananto, 2020).

Festinger (1962) asserted that humans have inner drives. They hold attitudes and beliefs in harmony while trying to prevent disharmony or dissonance. This theory upholds the capability of humans to alter their cognition in seeking consistency between attitudes and behaviour (Gawronski, 2012). Humans are motivated to minimise the discrepancy between cognition and

discomfort through several rationalization strategies (George & Yaoyuneyong, 2010; Jeong et al., 2019). Cognition is composed of prior knowledge, information, beliefs, and perceptions that are disrupted due to internal conflict. The mental inconsistency between actual individual action and cognition causes psychological discomfort, such as guilt, as one thinks that he is violating his own existing belief (Gawronski, 2012; Telci et al., 2011). As a result, the person is motivated to make "excuses" to rationalise his actions and behaviour. In the context of fashion goods, which have been characterised as quickly fading and having a short lifecycle (Juggessur & Cohen, 2009), a feeling of deprivation arises when consumers notice any new design or collection of fashion goods in the social media network or at physical stores. Consumers are experiencing "a feeling of lacking" if they could not purchase, signifying the internal tension that urged them to keep fashion goods. This 'inadequate' state describes consumers' insufficient feelings, which can turn into "a must" for them to purchase "new styles" immediately to overcome their negative emotions such as anger, sadness, anxiety, and regret (Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020). The desire to "keep up with the Joneses" reflects the need to be connected and affiliated with others (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012, 2014).

Consequently, consumers intense emotional feelings towards fashion goods lead to repetitive purchasing episodes so as to create their desired "wardrobe, which drives them to wasteful and irrational consumption practices. Although consumers are aware that the cycle of fashion goods is short and keeps changing, they are unable to resist the temptation that urges their material needs, which leads to impulsive purchase behaviour due to low price factors (Cook, S.C., & Yurchisin, J., 2017). According to Rook (1987), behaviour is defined as "behaviour appearing in consideration of conflict between emotions that are triggering," and this behaviour is brought on by an immediate, powerful, and persistent impulse to purchase. In fact, buying behavior is unplanned, relies on snap decisions, develops as a result of exposure to a stimulus, and incorporates emotional responses. Indeed, impulsive purchases are influenced by a variety of elements, including psychological and personal aspects in addition to the product and brand. Consumers' impulsive purchasing inclinations are determined by factors of personality, leading to the conceptualization of impulsive purchasing as an individual difference (Verplanken and Herebadi, 2001). In a different vein, consumers engage in impulse buying when they experience a sudden, intense, and persistent need to buy something instantly, which may lead to obsessive and compulsive purchase behaviour. Compulsive purchasing is a troublesome behaviour in which impulsive purchases are repeated and frequently have poor outcomes (Kwak et al., 2006).

The rationalisation strategy enables individuals to reduce the inconsistency, which offers opportunities to modify their actions and behaviours, thus enabling them to rectify dissonant, unpleasant, and guilty feelings (Telci et al., 2011). Individuals attempt to resolve mental discomfort either by changing behavioural cognitive elements, changing environmental cognitive elements, or by adding a new cognitive element (Festinger, 1962). Materialist consumers that engage in impulse purchases believe possession of material objects contributes to life happiness and satisfaction, which enable them to overcome their sadness, anger, distress, frustration, regret, and anxiety (Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020). This rationalisation strategy allows consumers to justify their impulsive buying behaviour through shopping enjoyment and hedonistic experiences that enable them to gain happiness (Jaunky et al., 2020). The literature similarly depicts that Millennials love to spend more quickly than other generations, place an emphasis on work-life balance, spend more on experiences, and are concerned about the purchasing process as they seek pleasant shopping experiences (Moreno et al., 2017).

Seligman (2002) outlined the three possible routes to happiness: a life of pleasure, a life of engagement, and a life of meaning (Gilovich et al., 2015). Instead of the other two routes that demand individuals satisfy their intrinsic needs, the life of pleasure is mediated by the pursuit of extrinsic goals and enables the consumers to enhance their hedonic well-being. Hence, shopping is an effort to make oneself happy, and consumers who are under stress are more likely to make impulsive purchases online (Moran, B., 2015). Given that impulsive purchasing is a way to deal with sadness, it stands to reason that cheerful people would not be as likely to do so. As a result, people who have a propensity for making impulsive purchases would be influenced by their level of life satisfaction, or their level of happiness (Ata, S., 2021).

The cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) suggests that when individuals hold two or more contradictory cognitions, they feel psychologically uncomfortable (cognitive dissonance) and tend to resolve this situation by changing their cognitions (Festinger, 1962). Consumers cope with their discomfort by adopting strategies to reduce dissonance, justifying their overspending and impulsive purchases on fast fashion goods as rational choices, "worth it," and possessing the best deal that they have. The consumers justifying the cheap price that has been offered by the new collections and designs are making the best and most reasonable choice, which could not be resisted in order to keep up with the trend while gaining enjoyment from the shopping activity (Gawior et al., 2022). By adding these beliefs, the consumers could compensate for their own feelings and dissuade discomfort, thus giving importance to a certain cognition called affective behaviour (Cooper, 2007; Gawronski, 2012). People may choose to change their attitudes, behaviours, or beliefs to reduce dissonance so as to enable them to "excuse" their contradictory behaviour to compensate for their own feelings and resolve any discomfort (Jeong et al., 2019; A. McGrath, 2017). Additionally, through the lens of CDT, the study is able to reveal how fast fashion consumers resolve the uncomfortable psychological state when they engage in impulsive and excessive purchase behaviour.

### **Rationale of a Study**

Malaysia is one of the countries that is joining hands with the others participating in the Sustainable Development Goals, a global call to action to end poverty, protect the earth's environment and climate, and ensure that people everywhere can enjoy peace and prosperity. The mandate of the United Nations in Malaysia is to help the country in its vision of achieving developed nation status via the 2030 Agenda, which charts a development path that balances economic growth with social inclusion and environmental sustainability based on solid institutional foundations, conditions for peaceful societies, and the realisation of human rights (United Nations, 2020). One of the goals of this sustainable development is to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns that emphasize the efficient use of natural resources and reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling, and reuse, which encourage consumers to be mindful in their purchase and consumption behaviour.

However, the quick pace of fast fashion development has negative consequences for sustainability issues such as sweatshop labour, overconsumption of natural resources, waste management, and pollution problems. Hence, the mass production of the fashion goods also created a waste consumption phenomenon as consumers spent their money excessively and engaged in splurge buying behaviour due to the low price, which enabled them to afford to change their styles and keep up with a trend. Fashion goods such as clothing and apparel were previously meant to be durable goods, but when not purchased regularly, turn into an "everyday" purchase (Brydges, 2021), which creates a clothing culture. Additionally, factors such as easy access to the market through the existence of e-commerce and digital platforms,

social media marketing, and mobile retailing motivate consumers towards impulse purchase and emotion-driven buying behaviour. This is in line with prior studies that found cashless payment methods drive consumers' enjoyment and gratification toward impulse purchases and lead towards unsustainable overconsumption practices (Gawior et al., 2022).

Consequently, the phenomenon of overproduction and overconsumption becomes a barrier for Malaysia to achieve SDG 12, as both manufacturers and consumers are not concerned with their actions, as they only care to satisfy their material needs and wants. Factors such as an inexpensive price motivate consumers to keep purchasing and consuming the latest design and collection of fashion goods, and consumers are able to replenish their wardrobe instead of thinking about how to discard or dispose of the existing fashion goods without creating a harmful effect on the environment. According to Kloth Cares, the first textile-recycling movement in Southeast Asia, Malaysia dumped a staggering 195,300 tonnes of fabric into landfills, and the amount of textile waste that ends up in landfills has doubled from 2.8% in 2012 to 6.3%, contributed by the development of the fast-fashion industry (Malay Mail, 2019). They also reveal that the youth are a major market segment for fast fashion, and the fashion industry itself is the second largest polluter after oil and gas. Apparently, consumers themselves are not aware of how their overconsumption practices contribute to the major destruction of the environment and also to an individual's wellbeing. Therefore, consumers themselves need to change their attitudes and consumption patterns to save the environment instead of relying on the initiative taken by the government or a non-governmental organization. To date, a lot of initiatives and campaigns have been implemented, such as the bin adoption program, recycling and upcycling clothes, and turning waste into other products, but they are still not enough to solve this environmental problem.

In response to this alarming issue, one question that needs to be addressed is: are Malaysian fashion consumers aware their current consumption practices and behaviours lead to major destruction not only to the planet but also to us, the human? Although Malaysia is a developing country and consumers are becoming more knowledgeable in their purchase decisions, Malaysia is still in the infancy stages of the practice of sustainable fashion consumption (Hasbullah et al., 2020). A prior study on sustainable fashion consumption, specifically in Malaysia, found that regardless of whether consumers believe sustainable fashion delivers high value and are willing to invest in it, they are contradictory in their actual purchase behaviour (Hasbullah et al., 2022). Hence, past literature has discovered that consumers' lack of understanding of how their consumption and disposal behaviours affect the environment (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009) explains why their awareness of sustainable fashion consumption needs to be enhanced to address this responsible consumption issue. Yet to date, there have been few if any studies investigating the underlying motives and causes that impede Malaysian consumers from engaging in sustainable fashion consumption. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the motivation, influencing factors, predicting and determining the intention and behaviour of consumers who practice sustainable fashion consumption. However, not much research has focused on fashion consumers motivations and rationalisation strategies in purchasing fast fashion goods, which describe unsustainable consumption, particularly through the lens of consumers lived experiences. Prior literature discovered that the development of the fast fashion industry contributed to the phenomenon of overconsumption among consumers, which led to unsustainable consumption (Hasbullah et al., 2020).

To conclude, this fast fashion that promotes overproduction and overconsumption has detrimental effects on the economy and society's well-being, which deter the accomplishment



of a green economy and responsible consumption and production as stated in Malaysia's Key Economic Growth Activities and Sustainable Development Goals. As impulse buying and hedonic motivations are a buying trigger for fast fashion goods, there is a need for changes in the fast fashion business model to focus on sustainable practices (Gawior et al., 2022), as this industry inadvertently causing the opposite effect: excessive purchasing and consumption (Revlon et al., (2020).

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